Gonzo Republic
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Hunter S. Thompson’s America

William Stephenson
To Richard Arnold, Bill Bevan, Sarah Lee, Deb Lowe, Alison Raven, Alyson Telfer, Sally Tottle and all those at Lake Terrace 1986–87, especially Dave ‘Boy’ Greene for giving me my first copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

‘At the top of the mountain, we are all Snow Leopards.’, *Kingdom of Fear*, p. 272
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Glossary of Abbreviations for Works by Hunter S. Thompson

For full details of works, see bibliography.

i. Books

*Better than Sex* (BS)
*Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (C)
*The Curse of Lono* (CL)
*Fear and Loathing in America* (FLA)
*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (LV)
*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* (CT)
*Generation of Swine* (GS)
*The Great Shark Hunt* (GSH)
*Hell’s Angels* (HA)
*Hey Rube* (HR)
*Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson: Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* (AGW)
*Kingdom of Fear* (KF)
*The Proud Highway* (PH)
*The Rum Diary* (RD)
*Songs of the Doomed* (SD)

ii. Articles

‘Dance of the doomed’ (DD)
‘The fun-hogs in the passing lane: fear and loathing campaign 2004’ (FH)
‘Hey rube! I love you. Eerie reflections on fuel, madness & music’ (LY)
‘Polo is my life: fear and loathing in horse country’ (PL)
‘The shootist: a short tale of extreme precision and no fear’ (TS)
‘Why boys will be girls’ (WB)

When referred to in citations, *Rolling Stone* magazine is abbreviated to RS.
1 Stepping into History: Values, Contexts, Influences

I clearly recall thinking: *Well, this is it. These are G-Men …*

WHACK! Like a flash of nearby lightning that lights up the sky for three or four terrifying split seconds before you hear the thunder – a matter of *zepto-seconds* in real time – […]. They had me, dead to rights. I was Guilty. Why deny it? Confess now, and throw myself on their mercy, or –

What? What if I *didn’t* confess? That was the question. (*KF*, p. 5: emphasis in original)

One summer day in 1946, two FBI agents knocked on the door of the Thompson family home in Louisville, Kentucky. They accused the eldest son of the house, Hunter Stockton Thompson, aged nine, of damaging a federal mailbox, an offence that carried a 5-year prison sentence. They urged Hunter to confess; they already had witnesses, they said, because his friends had squealed on him. Indeed, the boy was guilty. But, acting on impulse, he decided to turn the tables on the G-Men by asking *them* a question: exactly what witnesses did they have? They had none, and had been lying, and he never saw them again.

With the hindsight of nearly 60 years, writing in his late memoir *Kingdom of Fear* (2003), Thompson recalled his escape from the agents as ‘a magic moment in my life, a defining instant for me or any other nine-year-old boy growing up in the 1940s after World War II’ (*KF*, p. 5). Unlike the many hardened gangsters, let alone children, who had cracked under such pressure, Thompson had triumphed over his historical context by refusing to believe the popular myth that the Bureau always got its man: ‘I learned that the FBI was not *unbeatable*, and that is a very important lesson to learn at the age of nine in America’ (p. 8: emphasis in original).

Thompson then moves his memoir forward with a marvellously detailed piece of self-irony. Without that youthful victory over the FBI, he says, he would not be ‘sitting alone at this goddamn typewriter at 4:23 a.m.'
with an empty drink beside me and an unlit cigarette in my mouth and a naked woman singing “Porgy and Bess” on TV across the room’ (p. 8). Thompson’s humour arises from the ludicrously specific description of his situation. He does not say ‘without defying the FBI I would not have become a writer’ but implies it through depicting the consequence of his decision: entry into a world of desperate late night deadline pressure, heavy drinking and jaded soft porn consumption that mocks the received idea of a literary life.

Thompson is interrupted when his wife Anita bursts into the room, saying she has just read an online report that the USA has threatened to invade Saudi Arabia if the Saudis do not become allies in the War on Terror (p. 9). When President George W. Bush’s Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld appears on TV to denounce this as a malicious rumour, Thompson again makes clear the duplicity and evasiveness of the state. In the 1940s, the G-Men’s lies about their non-existent evidence, along with the popular legend of the invincible FBI, had threatened to ruin the young Thompson’s life by sending him to jail for what was, with the benefit of hindsight, a trivial offence: likewise, in the 2000s, the Bush administration is spreading disinformation and cultivating the myth that it is fundamentally benevolent and morally sound to conceal its own ruthless pragmatism. Rumsfeld rants that he will ‘track down and eliminate’ the source of the rumour, while paradoxically urging sweet reasonableness, assuring viewers that the US would never invade such a close ally: ‘That would be insane’ (p. 9).

Thompson concludes, with heavy irony, that he would not dare to question the decisions of a president about to send the US to war against the Muslim world, as ‘That would make me a traitor and a dangerous Security Risk’ (p. 9). Instead, he passes to his audience the responsibility to turn the tables on the system, as the 9-year-old Thompson had done to the FBI: to interrogate Bush’s foreign policy and see through the smoke-screen laid down by Rumsfeld. The nation, as Thompson saw it, was at a moment of decision: ‘We are coming to a big fork in the road for this country’ (p. 9).

In 2001, just as in 1946, Thompson had to use his liberty or lose it. He did not want the status of a writer to protect him from urgent national questions, from the responsibility to participate in and change history. His response to 9/11 and the subsequent wars was to hit back at Bush, his backers and his hirelings, but not through ‘sudden outbursts of frustrated violence’ such as the childish vandalism that had first brought the FBI to his door (PH, p. 70). Instead, he struck at the government through texts such as *Kingdom of Fear*, which demonstrate how ideology influences the private sphere, and how everyone must try to respond to history, or
even to shape it, in response to their own feelings: ‘Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string’ (Emerson, 1984, p. 31).

Throughout his life, Thompson followed this prompt. He was an individualist. Although he participated keenly in the American political scene as a reporter, activist and candidate, he subscribed to Henry David Thoreau’s construction of the individual ‘as a higher and independent power, from which all […] the state’s] power and authority are derived’ (Thoreau, 1992, p. 245). His life and work affirmed Ralph Waldo Emerson’s repudiation of authority, whereby each person must ‘not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography and all the government of the world’ (Emerson, 1984, p. 10).

In a letter written in 1957, when he was only 20 years old and still in military service, Thompson tentatively articulated his ideal of personal autonomy based on ‘a freedom and mobility of thought that few people are able – or even have the courage – to achieve’ (PH, p. 70). At this time, he was strongly influenced by Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead – a novel that had ‘really impressed’ him as a high school student (AGW, p. 156). Rand’s narrative is about a maverick architect’s fight against a corrupt and oppressive system. Its protagonist, Howard Roark, sets himself up as a non-conformer even in youth, just as Thompson did. Roark is told by his teachers that a life of self-sacrifice is ‘beautiful and inspiring. Only he had not felt inspired. He had felt nothing at all’ (Rand, 2007, p. 528). The Fountainhead formed an extended metaphor for Rand’s belief that people should aim to be ‘man-worshipers, [who] in my sense of the term, are those who see man’s highest potential and strive to actualize it’, as opposed to the mediocre, conformist ‘man-haters’ who work to stifle human self-realization (Rand, 2007, p. xii).

Thompson found such libertarian rhetoric attractive as it articulated his intuitive sense of himself as a unique individual whose lifelong quest would be to create himself on his own terms. As a relative youth, he had difficulty expressing his principles clearly, but he had faith in his future development as a writer, which would eventually enable him to crystallize his ideas: ‘That will come later […] because the lack] lies not in the ability, but in the scope of perception of one’s own creative ability’ (PH, p. 70).

Throughout his life, Thompson strove to create and develop an authentic, autonomous identity; but he also understood that there was a power structure to which every individual had to adapt, and that history could mould the subject far more easily than the subject could mould itself. Indeed, history did its best to crush Thompson. His quest to reach his full potential was hindered by such outside forces as poverty and the
lack of a college degree and social connections; but his strongest opponent was the state. After his brush with the FBI over the mailbox affair in 1946, he spent a month in jail as a teenager in 1955; a cop clubbed him when he showed his press pass at an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in 1968; the police raided his home in 1990 and he was charged with sexual assault and the possession of illicit drugs. He weathered all this and consistently refused to accept that historical forces, personified by state institutions, could or should determine his life. Like Emerson, he:

internalized or subjectified history so as to be able to use it, to make it part of his own fiber. He did not step out of history but into it, deciding to make it rather than be made by it. (Porte, 1999, p. 4)\(^1\)

Thompson’s belief that the individual subject should realize itself and shape its own place in history was typified by his definition of politics as ‘the art of controlling your environment’ to which he added the anti-establishment caveat, ‘If you don’t get into politics, somebody else controls your environment, your world’ (\textit{AGW}, p. 156).

The environment Thompson controlled was, first and foremost, his dwelling place. He created his own version of Thoreau’s Walden Pond at Owl Farm – the isolated ranch in Woody Creek, near Aspen, Colorado, where he lived from 1967 to the end of his life. There, relatively unhindered by officialdom, he could, in the tradition of a transcendentalist hermit, ‘transact some private business with the fewest obstacles’ (Thoreau, 1992, p. 13). In Thompson’s case, this meant taking drugs, shooting guns, detonating explosives and driving dangerously – but above all else, it meant writing. Thompson’s constant phone calls and correspondence with friends, editors, creditors and others, as well as his tastes for intoxicants and for printed and televised information, meant that he was in some respects the opposite of Thoreau, who ‘would fain keep sober always’ (Thoreau, 1992, p. 145) and despised letters and news as a waste of time and gossip (p. 63–4); but like his nineteenth-century ancestors, Thompson knew the value of freedom in solitude. Owl Farm was an environment that he fought tenaciously to preserve; he resisted all

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\(^1\) ‘All history become subjective; in other words, there is properly no History; only Biography’ (Emerson, 1984, p. 11). Emerson further privileges the individual by locating him/her as an instance of the universal: ‘If the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience. […] Of the universal mind each individual man is one more incarnation. All its properties consist in him. Every step in his private experience flashes a light on what great bodies of men have done, and the crises of his life refer to national crises’ (Emerson, 1984, p. 8).
attempts to build on the land around it, as he struggled to keep Aspen un­contaminated by real-estate developers and businessmen hunting a fast buck.

Thompson did not share the spiritual focus of Emerson and Thoreau. He was a humanist in several senses: he celebrated humane values over cruelty and greed; he championed the individual against the system; although staunchly anti-Republican and loosely pro-Democrat, he never actively campaigned for any political party except his own Freak Power movement (see Chapter 3), as he preferred a sceptical, non-aligned stance that allowed free thought; and he was not a religious believer. He subscribed to the 1960s counterculture’s distrust of grand abstractions and shared its preference for ‘The lively consciousness of men and women as they are in their vital daily reality’ (Roszak, 1971, p. 54: emphasis in original).

And yet he was equally ready to criticize the emerging institutions of the counterculture. He despised the fashionable fusion of drugs and Eastern religion, exemplified by the pseudo-Buddhist doctrines of the Harvard psychologist–turned LSD guru Timothy Leary. He used hallucinogenic substances regularly, but did so in order to achieve a secular form of transcendence of the mental restrictions imposed by law and government. For Thompson, acid was not a spiritual drug but it was, in his own sense, political, as it became a medium through which he could control his sensory environment and mental state and change both for the better. Unlike Leary, Thompson did not get high to abandon his ego. He did so to fashion that ego (see Chapter 2); to follow his own idiosyncratic interpretation of Thomas Jefferson’s creed of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The decade of the hippies, LSD, Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement offered many opportunities to live out this ideal. The 1960s were a pivotal time in Thompson’s life: he published his first book, found his lifelong enemy in Richard M. Nixon, discovered hallucinogenics, married and raised a child and founded Owl Farm. Like the 1830s context of Emerson’s transcendentalist movement, the 1960s were a fine time to be a rebel: ‘a moment in history containing both expansive hope and a sense of strife and embattlement, and marked by […] new ethical and political imperatives’ (Robinson, 1999, p. 13). Arthur Marwick has argued that during the decade, ‘various countercultural movements and

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2 As an adult he never attended church or professed belief, though in 2002, he wrote, with a fair dose of irony: ‘I secretly worship God, folks. He had the good judgment to leave me alone to write a few genuine black-on-white pages by myself, for a change’ (KF, p. 275).
subcultures’ engaged with mainstream society and ‘did not confront that society but permeated and transformed it’ (Marwick, 1999, p. 13: emphasis in original): Thompson, though, not only confronted the establishment through his subversive, satirical writing and political activism, but also scorned the counterculture’s naïve belief that it could transform society through an infusion of peace, love and dope.

Thompson was a patriot. He sought to rebel against the corrupt establishment, but only in order to return the US to its neglected core values – those of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence – that promised individual fulfilment founded on the principle that all human beings are created equal. Like the Founding Fathers, Thompson had inherited from the eighteenth-century radical Thomas Paine the ideal of inalienable human rights, founded on the binary opposition between the individual and government: ‘man, were he not corrupted by governments, is naturally the friend of man […] human nature is not of itself vicious’ (Paine, 1969, p. 230).

Thompson believed in acting like a human being, and in treating others as such, by defying whatever degrading cruelty convention might demand. The word “human” always carries positive connotations in his writing, and usually also suggests a value under threat from hostile forces. In a 1965 letter to Lyndon B. Johnson, he exhorted the president to start ‘acting like a thinking human instead of a senile political beast’ (PH, p. 497). In 1970, he explained his search for a house and land in Aspen, Colorado, as a quest for a refuge from the brutal modernity of Johnson and Nixon, for a place where he could live ‘like a human being’ (FLA, p. 273). In a 1973 letter to the right-wing Republican ideologue Pat Buchanan, then one of Nixon’s speechwriters, he said he was pleased

3 Thompson had faith in the ideology of 1776, but the historical circumstances were more problematic than the noble prose of the Declaration implies. The Founding Fathers who ratified the Declaration and the Constitution were professionals and slave-owners: ‘men of substance – gentry and lawyers […]. So they tended to be conservative in social attitudes’ (Reynolds, 2009, p. 75). Their families had benefited from British imperialism until the imposition of unpopular taxes in the late 1700s that led to the independence movement. The issue of slavery in the new Republic was particularly vexed: ‘Jefferson’s dilemma – how to throw off British “slavery” while perpetuating slaveholding at home – would be a cancer at the heart of the new nation’ (Reynolds, 2009, p. 67). The Native Americans also did not seem to be entitled to the same inalienable rights as the white colonists: ‘Jefferson’s main object in his projected relations with Indians was to extend the fur trade and deprive the tribes, peacefully if possible, of their lands’ (Bush, 1977, p. 214). Women, too, were disenfranchised: the US did not grant universal female suffrage until the 19th amendment to the Constitution became a law in 1920.
that political opponents could ‘sit down at night as friends and human beings’ and that he welcomed ‘a human talk with you, if things work out’ (FLA, p. 531). Later, in 1975, Thompson railed at Jann Wenner, his editor at Rolling Stone magazine, for betraying him over a book proposal, after having acted at first ‘like a human being’ (FLA, p. 610).

To Thompson, being or becoming human meant realizing an authentic self. Like his contemporary, the novelist Ken Kesey, whose work he greatly admired, Thompson ‘began with the urge to create from within himself and to involve himself in his world, drives which suggest a need to experience fully what it means to be human’ (Bredahl, 1981, pp. 76–7). ‘He took it seriously – being a decent human, seriously caring about the rights of man’ (Ralph Steadman, cited in Wenner and Seymour, 2007, p. 437).

In Thomson’s lexicon, human beings were always opposed to the inhuman drones who served the corrupt establishment, whom he often called “pigfuckers” or “scumsuckers”. Swine was another consistent term of abuse in Thompson’s work, and was often linked to venality. He entitled one anthology of his newspaper columns Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the ’80s. In it, he wrote, ‘Heaven will be a place where the swine will be sorted out at the gate and sent off like rats’ (GS, p. 11). Thompson’s excoriating denunciation of mindless conformity recalls Thoreau: ‘The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as machines [...] . They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs’ (Thoreau, 1992, p. 228). In 1972, Thompson debated, with dry irony, whether Richard Nixon qualified as human: ‘Is Nixon “human?” Probably so, in the technical sense. He is not a fish or a fowl. [...] It is one of those ugly realities [...] that we will all have to face and accept’ (Wenner and Seymour, 2007, pp. 168–69).

Thompson’s humanism was never self-satisfied or complacent: he was often bitterly self-critical, and did not spare the counterculture. The debauched drug abuse of Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas represents an escapist, animalistic retreat from the human condition, as well as an exaggerated parody of Thompson’s own drug-centred lifestyle. The novel carries the epigraph from Dr Johnson, ‘He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man’ (LV, n.p.). This is amply demonstrated in the opening chapter, where the stoned protagonists bait a hapless hitchhiker, and the guilt-ridden Duke wonders, ‘Had we deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts?’ (p. 8: emphasis in original).

Thompson realized his own humanity through writing as much as through life: paradoxically, the authentic self that he wanted to create and maintain was to a great extent evolved on the page through a series of more or less autobiographical characters. Italo Calvino, the prolific
Italian fabulist and experimental novelist, once remarked that ‘The preliminary condition of any work of literature is that the person who is writing has to invent that first character, who is the author of the work’ (Calvino, 1989, p. 111). Calvino situates the author outside biography: the composer is no longer a flesh–and–blood person, but is as much a fiction as the protagonist.

Thompson wrote in detail about his lived experience, placing himself assertively in his texts in the first person in a way that makes him seem, on the surface, the polar opposite of the sort of author-character that Calvino proposes; and yet, much about his work suggests exactly Calvino’s point that Thompson’s first and most important fictional creation was himself. Over five decades of publishing journalism and novels, Thompson evolved a constantly changing persona that not only determined the direction of future writing projects, but also affected how he lived. This persona was not created overnight in a burst of inspiration, but evolved in parallel with the experiences of its real-life creator.4

‘It Won’t Fit Often, But You’re Learning’: The Struggles of a Self-Made Man

Thompson was born on 18 July 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky. His adolescence was a paradoxical mixture of achievement and delinquency: he was elected to the town’s most prestigious literary society for teenagers, the Athenaeum Club; he distinguished himself as an athlete, writer and speaker; and yet he robbed the same gas station repeatedly, was busted for drunk driving and buying alcohol under age and served a month in Jefferson County Jail for threatening rape. The bald wording of the

charge simplifies the circumstances. When drunk, Thompson and two of his friends had accosted two courting couples, and Thompson had resorted to lurid intimidation in an attempt to bully the lovers into giving him money for cigarettes. After he received his custodial sentence, he began to realize the extent to which class discrimination affected American justice: his friends, who were also charged, happened to be ‘sons of prominent attorneys’; they were given probation and a fine, respectively (McKeen, 2008, p. 19).

Thompson spent the day of his high school graduation in jail. For an ex-convict with no money or social connections, university was not an option. Instead, he seemed fated to be a black sheep. On completing his jail term in 1955, he realized that the law enforcement establishment in Louisville had him blacklisted: the judge at his trial had ominously warned him, ‘We’ll be watching you’ (McKeen, 2008, p. 21). Thompson decided that his choices boiled down to military service or going back to jail (AGW, p. 332). He duly enlisted, and on Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, discovered not only that he could write sports journalism for the base newspaper full time, but also that sportswriting suited his literary and anti-authoritarian temperament far better than being a regular airman. Most importantly, the genre allowed him free rein to make things up: his military superiors acknowledged his talent for ‘innuendo and exaggeration’ (PH, p. 62).

After his discharge in 1958, he worked on various newspapers, and was frequently fired. All the while, he was trying to write fiction. Even this early in his life, Thompson knew that he wanted to be a writer; but to him, at this point, “writer” meant a novelist like Fitzgerald or Hemingway, whose works he literally copied, typing them word for word, to learn his craft: ‘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’ (McKeen, 2008, p. 41: emphasis in original). He sent fiction manuscripts to publishers, but all were rejected. He thus became a journalist not out of a sense of vocation, but out of a need to make an income by writing, so that he could hone his skills and improve his novels without having his ambitions destroyed by nine-to-five drudgery.

Eventually, in 1962, he found regular work for the National Observer as a roving South America correspondent. On his return to the States, he continued with his unpublished novels and paying journalism. Success and money were frustratingly elusive. He found himself in San Francisco in the mid-1960s with a wife and a baby son, so poor that he lined up with alcoholics and tramps on the street seeking casual work. He was never hired, even though he looked much fitter and healthier than the competition (C, p. 10).