

THE RELATIONSHIP OF FICTION AND NONFICTION

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Since the publication, in 1965, of Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" *IN COLD BLOOD*, a rich, controversial crossfertilization of fiction and nonfiction has been taking place in American literature. When a novelist of Norman Mailer's stature enters the world of nonfiction to report on the march against the Pentagon in 1967 and a year later produces *ARMIES OF THE NIGHT*, subtitled it "History as a Novel, the Novel as History," winning the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, something is happening. When a journalist like Hunter Thompson inserts himself into his reporting to such an extent Hunter Thompson **as a character** becomes a cultural phenomenon as important as his subjects, new ground in journalism is being broken. When journalist and novelist Joan Didion blends autobiography and reporting, combining the merely personal with the toughly observed, a new definition of objectivity is being put forward.

Many people would argue that what has happened **in fiction** in this crossfertilization is not new, that all fiction is a combination of fact and invention, that E.L. Doctorow, by putting Emma Goldman as a character into his novel *RAGTIME* is not doing anything substantially different from Dickens and Dostoyevski, who also blended imagination and reality. For this writer and reader, reading *RAGTIME* and discovering the radical Emma Goldman interacting with imaginary characters was electrifying, and quite different from say, Doctorow's earlier novel, *THE BOOK OF DANIEL*, based loosely on the execution of the accused Soviet spies, the Rosenbergs. In *THE BOOK OF DANIEL*, we know we are reading what is sometimes called a "novelization," a made up version of a true story. In *RAGTIME*, however, we are reading a made up story in which real, historical characters participate. The technical innovation is distinct.

What is definitely new in the crossfertilization of fiction and nonfiction is the consistent use of techniques, in journalism and other forms of nonfiction, that have previously been seen as the province of the novelist. In his book *THE NEW JOURNALISM* (Harper & Row, 1973), Tom Wolfe isolates four techniques which he thinks distinguish the new journalism. These are scene - by - scene construction, reliance on dialogue to reveal character rather than information, an approach to detail that is like a novelist's and experimentation with point of view.

Listen to the beginning of this story by Theresa Carpenter published in the *Village Voice*, a weekly New York newspaper where Theresa and I are both Staff Writer. Theresa won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for this story, which is called "Murder on a Day Pass." It's rather gruesome, so bear with me. There are several reasons why I've chosen to read it.

Ewa Berwid knew perfectly well that her husband intended to kill her. Adam had told her so in a series of matter - of fact letters penned on yellow legal sheets from the Nassau County Jail. He would strangle her, he promised. Push her ribs right through her back.

So resolute was he in this obsession that during May of 1978, sometime after their divorce became final, he announced in open court his intentions to take her life if she did not relinquish custody of their two small children, Adam and Olga. After catching a glimpse of her during a later appearance, he lunged for her and was tackled by sheriff's deputies before he could straddle the rail of the jury box.

Life for Ewa Berwid became, as a result, one long - running nightmare. Even after Adam was committed to a state mental hospital for observation, she

never drew a free breath. For she knew that Adam was cunning enough to elude those who watched him. She bought a revolver, kept it by her bed, and tried to live sensibly with terror.

Early last December, Adam Berwid persuaded a psychiatrist at Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in Brentwood, Long Island, to give him a day pass. He was free more than six hours before Ewa realized it. When she did, it was too late. Shortly after dusk on December 6, Ewa was at home with her two children when she heard glass shattering in the basement. There was no time to run upstairs for the gun. She hurried instead to the wall phone in the kitchen at the head of the basement stairs and punched 911. An emergency operator answered, but Ewa never had the chance to identify herself or utter a coherent message. Adam appeared at the top of the stairs with a hunting knife, and when he grabbed her the nightmare ended in a series of fast, flickering freeze frames.

"Olga, get out!" Adam plunged the knife into her neck and chest with four fatal and audible blows. As the receiver dangled by its cord from the wall, the police operator heard the muffled shuffles of a struggle and a woman crying. "He's killing me...I'm dying...Oh, God...Oh, God." Then there was silence except for a sigh. And someone placed the receiver back on its cradle. There was no time to trace the call.

Ewa Berwid's death, while perhaps not the most ghastly homicide in this season of mutilations and decapitations, was certainly one of the most infuriating. How could a woman marked so clearly for death be left so vulnerable by the police, by the courts, and most particularly by the psychiatrist who granted Adam Berwid his day pass?

First, notice the reliance on detail in this passage. Adam's letters from jail were penned on "yellow legal sheets". "He would strangle her, he promised. Push her ribs right through her back." The "strangle her" comment is rather ordinary: "push her ribs right through her back" is much more chilling because it is much more original. Carpenter builds her case for the madness of Adam Berwid's hate with two more quick instances: he had announced in open court his intention to take her life, and he had lunged for her and had to be restrained "before he could straddle the rail of the jury box."

Why would Carpenter be so specific? What

does this specificity do? The novelists have always known that the road to the universal is through the particular, that the way to make a situation or a character representative is to make it or him as individualized as possible. Carpenter, the "new journalist", knows this too, so she makes the killing of Ewa Berwid real for us not for the sake of sensationalism, but to make us understand a larger picture. Her attention to detail helps sustain a reader's interest through many complicated pages about the Berwid case.

Notice how Carpenter uses narrative, that is, she tells a story in time: this happened, then this happened, then this happened. "Life for Ewa Berwid became one long - running nightmare...she never drew a free breath...she bought a revolver and kept it by the bed...Early last December, Adam Berwid persuaded a psychiatrist...to give him a day pass..."

Now Carpenter takes these new journalism techniques farther: she reconstructs the killing, telling us about the police operator taping so she can have credibility for us. She even dares to enter Ewa's mind, asserting that there was not time to go upstairs for the gun. I think Carpenter is guessing a bit here: Maybe Ewa simply made a bad decision in choosing the phone.

At any rate, Carpenter has a justification, a source, for telling us the dialogue. "Olga, get out" With horror we realize that the daughter is in the kitchen. "He's killing me...I'm dying...Oh, God...Oh, God..." the police operator hears, and so do we. We hear the silence, the sigh, the phone placed back on its cradle. Of course it is Adam who replaces the receiver, but here Carpenter does not choose to tell us so. "And someone placed the receiver back on its cradle." Choosing to say "Someone" keeps us hearing it through the phone, rather than seeing it.

So far Carpenter has used three of the fiction techniques Tom Wolfe has called characteristic of the "new journalism": reliance on detail, scene-by-scene construction, and dialogue used to reveal character and situation rather than to convey information. In the last paragraph she experiments mildly with point of view, that is, Carpenter steps onto the stage and offers an opinion: "Ewa Berwid's death, while perhaps not the most ghastly homicide in this season of mutilations and decapitations, was certainly one of the most infuriating." The sarcasm here is unmistakably Carpenter's.

I want to show you a clearer experimentation with point of view in this new type of nonfiction. In Joan Didion's brilliant essay "The White Album" from the book of the same name (Simon & Schuster 1979), she tries to capture the disintegration of American culture in the 1960's. One of the characteristics that distinguishes Didion's creative nonfiction is the way she combines autobiography, her personal story, with what she is reporting on. The intersection of personal and public are quite daring. Listen to this passage:

In June of this year patient experienced an attack of vertigo, nausea, and a feeling that she was going to pass out...A through medical evaluation ensued ...The Rhorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses...Emotionally, patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the word of other human beings...In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended...motivations which commit them ...to conflict and failure..."

The patient to whom this psychiatric report refers is me... By way of comment, I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968.

In this essay, Didion reports on the Doors, a rock group, on Eldridge Cleaver, a black revolutionary, on the student takeover that suspended operations at San Francisco State college, on the trial of the Ferguson brothers for the murder of Ramon Navarro, and on what she takes with her when she travels as a journalist. (emphasis mine) Why, in a essay that reports on an interview with Linda Kasabian, one of the Manson killers, would Didion list:

To Pack and Wear:

- 2 skirts
- 2 jerseys or leotards
- 1 pullover sweater
- 2 pairs shoes..

I won't bore you with the whole list out of context, but I will tell you that in the context of this essay, as we enter Didion's world in which meanings and connections were breaking down in the Sixties, we understand as much about that wild period of American history from her personal breakdown and her willingness to share it as we do from her more conventional reporting. She made the list, by the way, to show that, although she had everything else she needed when she traveled, she did not have a

watch. The point is that narrative was breaking down for her on the most fundamental level. Narrative exists in time.

I want to talk briefly about one other book. Norman Mailer's *THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT*, in which he chronicles the march on the Pentagon in 1967. If you don't know about this event, let me tell you that, as a protest against the American involvement in Vietnam, close to one hundred thousand protesters massed in Washington and made a symbolic march toward the Pentagon, the nerve center of our military forces. Many people were arrested, among them, Norman Mailer.

Mailer subtitled his book "History as a Novel, the Novel as History." I think it is fair to say that at least one half, if not more, of *ARMIES OF THE NIGHT* is about Mailer himself, about his ego, his fame, and his own small corner of what happened during the March. He talks about himself in the third person, as Mailer, or the Novelist, attempting to reinforce the sense we have of him as legend. The last third of the book, however, "The Novel as History" deals with the March in a less egocentric way and in fact describes events at which Mailer was not present. In other words, the last third of the book is an attempt at a more classically objective kind of reporting. Why would Mailer spend so much time on himself and his own point of view? He tells us at the beginning of "The Novel as History":

As a working craftsman, a journey man artist, [the Novelist] is not without his guile; he has come to decide that if you would see the horizon from a forest, you must build a tower. If the horizon will reveal most of what is significant, an hour of examination can yet do the job - it is the tower which takes months to build. So the Novelist working in secret collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study - at the greatest advantage - our own horizon. Of course, the tower is crooked, and the telescopes warped, but the instruments of all sciences - history so much as physics - are always constructed in small or large error; what supports the use of them now is that our intimacy with the master builder of the tower, and the lens grinder of the telescopes... has given some advantage for correcting the error of the instruments and the imbalance of his tower. Can that be claimed of many histories?...The method is then exposed....

In other words, Mailer is saying that, by exposing his own character and biases, his infamous ego (a lot of the book is about his competition with and admiration for the writers Robert Lowell and Dwight McDougal), by embracing his own **subjectivity** and building it right into the picture (the tower is crooked and the telescopes warped) he is in fact offering a truer **objectivity**. Our intimacy with the master builder gives us the advantage for correcting his errors.

This style of thinking about subjectivity and objectivity is a key to understanding what has been happening in creative nonfiction since Capote's groundbreaking work.

To sum up, since the mid Sixties, the lines between fiction and nonfiction in American literature have become increasingly blurred. Historical characters appear in novels, and novelists have helped raise journalism to the status of art. Ethical and philosophical questions abound. What are the limits of objectivity? What are the limits of the new techniques in nonfiction? These are living, working questions in American literature, and, if there are no clear answers, the questions themselves have given rise to a new body of writings of "creative nonfiction" that many people believe are the most important works in American literature of the last few decades.