

THE ART OF FACT

Contemporary Artists
of Nonfiction

Barbara Lounsberry

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF WORLD
LITERATURE, NUMBER 35



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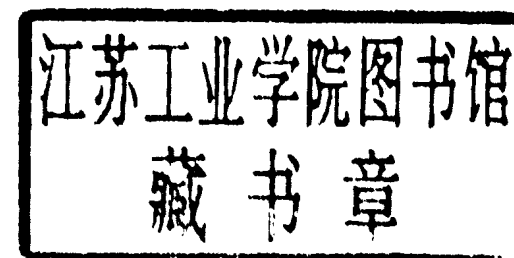
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Introduction

The Realtors

The artistry of nonfiction is the great unexplored territory of contemporary criticism. This is ironic, for the second half of the twentieth century has been an age of nonfiction. American book clubs, which began in the 1920s offering primarily fiction, now emphasize nonfiction. Today's *New York Times Book Review* reviews nonfiction over fiction almost three to one. In truth, our age has stopped subscribing to the belief that the novel is the highest form of the literary imagination. It is beginning to think of fiction as only one of many artful "prose narratives in print," to use Lennard Davis's accurate phrase (44). Other compelling prose narratives are certain artful memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, histories, travelogues, essays, works of journalism, forms of nature and science writing, and ingenious combinations of these forms.

If we live in an age of nonfiction, then why is critical appreciation of this work so rare? This is explained, in part, by the inevitable lag of the critic behind the artist, but also by the lack of a satisfactory name for this work. How do we distinguish what I will call artful *literary nonfiction* from the often artless and droning expository prose that floods the category "nonfiction"?¹ The very term "nonfiction" discloses the former Romantic bias toward fiction: everything not fiction is nonfiction. Pity the nonfiction artists! Caught in this catchall category, their works are ignored. Scholars skilled at tracing artistic and rhetorical strategies in fiction, poetry, and drama seem to halt at the border of nonfiction; they have made few forays toward even a simple taxonomy of the form.² As a result, critical appreciation of such a highly esteemed writer as John McPhee exists primarily in the form of brief book reviews.³ The same is true of Gay Talese, whose prodigious research and continuing efforts to explore the boundaries of "fact writing" have earned him the

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To nonfiction artists, past and present

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Norman Mailer. Excerpts from *ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF* (1959), *THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT* (1968), *THE PRISONER OF SEX* (1971), *THE FIGHT* (1975), *GENIUS AND LUST* (1976), and *THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG* (1979). Reprinted by

wide respect of his peers. Even the controversial writings of bad boy Tom Wolfe have generated only a handful of extended studies in the nearly thirty years of his career.¹

Perhaps Wolfe has recently turned to fiction to gain some critical attention for his work. Of the five major artists of nonfiction treated in this study, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion have received the greatest critical scrutiny, but that is perhaps because Mailer and Didion are also novelists, and critics have come to their nonfiction through their fiction. Writers like McPhee and Talese, who are committed to nonfiction, as well as other elegant artists of nonfiction such as Lillian Ross, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Lewis Thomas, Edward Hoagland, Tracy Kidder, Annie Dillard, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many others, currently appear to be doomed to neglect.

What label might be applied to these writers' enterprises? Terms like the French *reportage*, "journalit," or the "new" or "high" journalism seem too narrow, given the reach of much work beyond reporting or journalism. Other names, like Dwight Macdonald's "parajournalism," are merely pejorative. Phrases highlighting the "hybrid" nature of the form, its application of narrative techniques often associated with fiction to nonfictional subject matter, seem somewhat better. However, Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" or Norman Mailer's "true life novel," tip the scales toward the fictive side of the equation. "Faction," Alex Haley's term, avoids this problem, but it has not caught on. Neither has the even more attractive term "realtor" proffered by the late artful historian Barbara Tuchman. Citing historian George Macaulay Trevelyan's assertion that history *ideally* should be the presentation of the facts about the past "in their full emotional and intellectual value to a wide public by the difficult art of literature," Tuchman continues:

I see no reason why the word [artist] should always be confined to writers of fiction and poetry while the rest of us are lumped under that despicable term "Nonfiction." . . . I cannot very well call us "Realtors" because that has been pre-empted—although as a matter of fact I would like to. "Real Estate," when you come to think of it, is a very fine phrase and it is exactly the sphere that writers of nonfiction deal in: the real estate of man, of human conduct. I wish we could get it back from the dealers in land. Then the categories could be poets, novelists, and realtors. (46)

Our current semantic quandary would amuse Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. In the first half of the eighteenth century, they were struggling to name their own new narrative prose form—a form we have no difficulty today calling the novel. In desperation Fielding finally called *Tom Jones* a "comic epic-poem in prose"! Historical perspective in fact is what has been missing in many of the "new journalism," fact/fiction debates of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In some

respects we are seeing the turn of the wheel back to the time, only 200 years ago, when serious writers chose nonfiction over fiction for expressing their views and crafting their art. The novel was considered frivolous.

Similarly, we seem to have forgotten that the great prose writers of the past have been by and large authors of literary nonfiction: Montaigne, Robert Burton, Sir Thomas Browne, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Macaulay, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Ruskin. Annie Dillard, the artful twentieth-century essayist, has noted that "fine writing" in fictional prose has come to the fore only in the past 140 years with Flaubert and the Modernists—with Henry James, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and "the lavish Joyce of the novels" (104). Taking the long view, the novel's reign has been short indeed. Germaine Bree has even suggested that the term "novel" is being used rather consistently now in critical studies to apply only to the realistic fiction that dominated the nineteenth century (88).

I am not suggesting the death of the novel, or of fiction as a form for serious writing. I am saying that our current historical awareness of the origins of the novel and its complex relation to other prose narratives places us in an ideal position for studying the many strands of literary nonfiction now in abundance and meriting serious attention.⁵ Although it may be uncomfortable, we can proceed to study these works without a term for this discourse. I am asserting, however, that there is an identifiable discourse—recognizable in its solid central particulars, though blurring (as all genres do) at the edges—that might be called literary or artistic nonfiction. Its four constitutive features are these:

1. Documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to "invented" from the writer's mind.

Such subject matter includes natural phenomena, such as John McPhee's *Oranges* or *The Pine Barrens*. It includes human phenomena, portraits of: individual human beings such as McPhee's "A Room Full of Hovings"; human institutions, such as Gay Talese's *New York Times* volume *The Kingdom and the Power*; or cultural sub-groups, such as Tom Wolfe's *Right Stuff* pilots. It embraces human places, such as Joan Didion's *Salvador*, or human events, such as Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. In short, anything in the natural world is game for the nonfiction artist's attention.

2. Exhaustive research.

Thorough research not only enables writers to uncover "new" and "novel" perspectives on their subjects, it also permits them to establish the credibility of their narratives through verifiable references in their

texts. Gay Talese's volumes are weighty in names and miniature histories not only because he wishes to preserve the unnoticed in history, but also to make his narratives so factually solid and verifiable that we do not doubt his broader and more subjective conclusions about his subjects. This is precisely the importance of Tom Wolfe's "status detail," his brilliant catalogs of dress and style—from his Flak Catcher's \$4.99 brown Hush Puppies to his aviators' cheap Robert Hall suits and expensive watches. Because Wolfe assumes the satirist's liberty with comic exaggeration, to increase his credibility he works hard to ground his work in as many concrete, verifiable particulars as he can.

The Realtor's research and its presentation in a verifiable manner in the text thus are crucial to establishing reader confidence (so far as is possible today) in the "truth" of the account. Many artists of nonfiction go a step farther and create frames for their works in which they describe the writer-reader contract—just as the early novelists did. Such frames vary from Truman Capote's subtitle for *In Cold Blood*, "A True Account Of A Multiple Murder And Its Consequences," to Norman Mailer's Afterword to *The Executioner's Song* in which he explains and justifies his artistic decisions.⁶ Frames today may even piquantly insist, as does Annie Dillard in her Author's Note to *Teaching A Stone To Talk*, that the volume is not just another miscellany of an author's occasional pieces, but her "real work."

I would argue that when the factual accuracy of a work is questioned, or when authorial promises are violated, a work of literary nonfiction is either discredited or transferred out of the category. Tom Wolfe's vision of *The New Yorker* magazine, and particularly of its former editor, William Shawn, in his controversial articles "Tiny Mummies" and "Lost in the Whicky Thicket," was seriously undercut in many readers' eyes by the plethora of large and small factual errors in the work that were immediately exposed.⁷ The large and small errors and inventions in Capote's *In Cold Blood* constitute a violation of contract for many readers; any claims to greatness that book now tenders must be predicated on the "truths" of fiction rather than fact.⁸ In short, verifiability is fundamental to successful literary nonfiction. The invented quotation is anathema to serious artists of nonfiction, most of whom scorn composite characters as well, believing they court the twin dangers of inaccuracy and oversimplification.

3. The Scene.

Tom Wolfe was right to list the scene as the first characteristic of his "New Journalism." Along with its nonfiction subject matter, the scene is the trait by which literary nonfiction is most readily recognized. Instead of merely "reporting" or "discussing" an object or event, the artist of nonfiction recasts it in narrative form. The remarkable effect of such

transformation is that the moment is reprised; it lives again, yet with the subtle lights and shadings of the author's vision. The facts gain life, depth, and subtle reverberation. Often the scene (or scenes) will be only part of the artful form a work of literary nonfiction may take. Nevertheless, the scene is frequently a sign that the form of the work is consciously artful.

Tom Wolfe lists dialogue as the second trait of his "New Journalism"; however, dialogue is not as essential to the scene for other artists of nonfiction as it is for Wolfe, with his interest in presenting conflicting points of view. Little direct quotation, for example, can be found in John Hersey's artful *Hiroshima*. This is probably because the scrupulous Hersey did not trust words recollected six months after the atomic explosion—without a second or third confirmation. Gay Talese scorns the direct quotation for an entirely different reason. Talese considers most spoken language to represent "first draft" thinking; therefore, he believes he can usually present his subjects' views in both a more aesthetically pleasing and comprehensive manner than they can.⁹ John McPhee also infrequently resorts to quotation and dialogue, usually for humorous revelation of character, while Joan Didion uses only those quotations that underscore her vision of her subjects. In fact, she famously allows her subjects to damn themselves with their own words. Even the multiple voices in Wolfe have been challenged by Wilfrid Sheed—for sounding suspiciously like the same Wolfe voice (2). Dialogue, then, can come and go, but the narrated scene is the constant. It is, furthermore, what limits this discourse I am calling literary or artistic nonfiction to a small portion of the huge "nonfiction" category.

4. Fine Writing: A Literary Prose Style.

Verifiable subject matter and exhaustive research guarantee the nonfiction side of literary nonfiction; the narrative form and structure disclose the writer's artistry; and finally, its polished language reveals that the goal all along has been literature. Annie Dillard calls it "fine writing," while Gay Talese calls it "writing with style." Such writing may splurge on assonance and alliteration (as does Talese's), or on parallel structures and repetitions (as does Didion's). Fine writers may launch metaphors as probes (like Norman Mailer), dazzle us with verbal and typographical pyrotechnics (like Tom Wolfe), or employ plain prose for clarity and for purity of form matched to subject (like John McPhee). Call it what you will, care for language can be used as a strainer to separate *literary* nonfiction from the glut of nonfiction written in pedestrian prose. If the subject of a nonfiction work is compelling, its research exhaustive and verifiably elaborated, and its form artful and narrative, it may still fail the standards of literary nonfiction if its language is dull or diffuse.

If, then, these four features delimit an important art form of our time, a discourse grounded in fact but artful in execution that might be called *literary nonfiction*, what is needed is serious critical attention of all kinds to this work: formal criticism (both Russian Formalist and New Critical), historical, biographical, cultural, structuralist and deconstructionist, reader-response, and feminist. Because so little has been attempted, the chapters that follow, largely formalist in cast, seek to offer strong readings of the works of Talese, Wolfe, McPhee, Didion, and Mailer—perhaps the five most prominent contemporary artists of nonfiction. Besides their prominence, another criterion for their selection is that each has produced a considerable body of literary nonfiction. Critics to date, however, have tended to focus on only one or two of each writer's works, to illustrate particular critical points. I have tried instead to be comprehensive. My goal has been to describe themes and rhetorical strategies which unfold across the writer's whole body of nonfiction to date, and even to project likely future directions for their work, given current artistic trajectories. I have tried to describe the specific artistry of each writer and to demonstrate that the artistry of literary nonfiction can be equal to that of fiction, poetry, and drama. Ultimately I have tried to make my criticism "demonstrably right" in F. W. Bateson's terms—that is, "accurate, just, helpful, relevant, comprehensive" (122).

If we, with Bateson, regard literature as "life frozen into immobility at its points of highest consciousness and integration" (131), then it is also important to explore contemporary literary nonfiction for its cultural content and criticism. William Zinsser, the former editor of the Book of the Month Club, has called nonfiction "the new American literature" (53). Besides demonstrating the artistry of such work, I have tried to indicate the importance of this genre in addressing many of the persistent themes of the American imagination. These include conflicts between the individual and society, as well as the continued efficacy of the "American Dream." As the postmodern fiction writers of the 1960s and 1970s pursued the intellectual and aesthetic challenges of metafiction and surfiction, it has seemed, indeed, that it has been artists of nonfiction who have been most attentive to the American tradition.

Their response has been both preservative and expansionary. Gay Talese is obsessed with generational legacies. Whether writing of *The New York Times*, the Mafia, or sexual pioneers, he expands the specific dilemma of how to honor one's father in a changing age to the larger question of how to honor the national spirit, the American Dream of our *forefathers*, in a similarly changing and diminished era. The past is always a character in Talese's works, and the individual psychodramas of his subjects become the national psychodramas of us all.

My chapter on Tom Wolfe suggests that this rebel dandy has been, all along, an American Jeremiah, cloaking his Calvinism and evangelicalism in the sophisticated guise of a Menippean satirist. Wolfe finds much to criticize in contemporary American society, yet far from being either "pop" or "hip," he is carrying on the tradition of Jonathan Edwards and his "new light" revivalism.

In contrast, John McPhee preserves and extends the ideals of the nineteenth-century transcendentalists. He is a nature writer in the Thoreauvian mold, one who celebrates self-reliance and rugged individualism in the twentieth century. McPhee is both a link to nineteenth century America and a charming temperer of Emerson's and Thoreau's relentless idealism.

Far from transcendental, Joan Didion has a fiercely conservative vision, one that is correctively constricting rather than expanding or expansive. Didion's gaze is always backward to the fall. She insists on human sin and punctures all illusion of individual or national melioration.

Norman Mailer takes the opposite stance. In his literary nonfiction through *The Fight* (1975) he seeks to demonstrate that individual growth and change can be a model for social growth. His artful metaphors not only expand our sense of his subjects, but also are designed to animate us, to literally stimulate us to social action. Mailer is acutely aware of the American literary tradition and relies on such great predecessors as Walt Whitman, Henry Miller, and Ernest Hemingway to provide inspiring visions and challenging literary models for him to refashion. Through his literary acts Mailer regenerates not only himself, but his predecessors as well; he preserves while he expands the American literary tradition.

This preservative/expansionary tension in contemporary literary nonfiction is true to the essential doubleness Davis has demonstrated in the "news/novels discourse" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from which the English novel emerged. Davis asserts that the novel came into being as a result of both political and technological pressures during those centuries. He argues that England's severe libel laws forced writers to all sorts of literary sleights-of-hand, and finally to fiction, in order to write about their times. Simultaneously the printing press made their words readily available to the lower classes, encouraged political and social action, and enforced the idea of immortality through print.

Each of the five writers in this study exemplifies a strand of nonfiction narrative that both predated and contributed to the news/novels discourse: history (Talese), the sermon (Wolfe), travel writing (McPhee), autobiography (Didion), and epic narrative (Mailer). We might query what cultural forces in the twentieth century have returned narrative to the genetic pool and have fostered a bubbling forth of new artful versions of the early nonfictional narrative strands. The impact

of science on contemporary culture—as my metaphor of the genetic pool suggests—has increased public interest in every aspect of the natural world. At the same time, growing recognition of the subjectivity of all perspective, that all visions are in a sense “fictions,” has undercut fiction’s claim to sole proprietorship of the territory of the imagination. Fiction no longer is perceived as special.

In addition, technological advances have furthered the possibilities of global literacy begun by the printing press, thereby creating an even larger audience for literature of all kinds than in the eighteenth century. This hospitable climate has been enhanced in the United States by liberal censorship rulings in the 1960s which have permitted greater freedom of expression (as opposed to the restrictive pressures of the eighteenth-century English libel statutes). All these factors may be encouraging both a wider exploration of artistic form and subject matter and a sense that ideas can be offered through literary nonfiction rather than through the once-removed realm of fiction. In a sense, the political need for fiction is not as strongly felt in England and the United States today as it was at the time of the emergence of fiction, although this is not true in Central and South America, South Africa, and the European Soviet satellites, where the novel today is flourishing.

Through literary nonfiction, writers may believe they are finally able to have the best of both worlds. They can gain the reader credence novelists have forever sought by insisting that their fictions were true, and, through the arts of literature, they can make their visions of the world memorable, influential, even immortal. We may be witnessing, in addition, a drawing apart of the strands of narrative in order for a new synthesis to be formed.

The Art of Fact

Gay Talese's Fathers and Sons

Gay Talese files his research in shoe boxes. He outlines his books on shirt cardboard. He fastens minuscule swatchlike character cards with tailor's hat pins to a styrofoam board never far from his typewriter. As he shapes his nonfiction, he seeks to join his scenes into a seamless whole.

Later, when his finished pages are typed and pinned across his study wall, he takes out binoculars and reads his work from across the room—to achieve “distance.”

The above may be taken as a true portrait of a nonfiction artist. Research is prodigious and objectivity conscientiously sought, but the swatches, the hat pins, the shirt cardboard reveal both the artistry and the inescapable subjectivity of the son of a master tailor, one whose carefully crafted garments are books.

Talese worked as a reporter for *The New York Times* from 1953 to 1965 before quitting to write three consecutive best-sellers. He was never, however, a traditional journalist. Even as a college sports columnist at the University of Alabama, from 1950 to 1953, he was experimenting with three of the four techniques Tom Wolfe would later identify as characteristic of the 1960s New Journalism: the scene, dialogue, and unusual points of view. Talese admired the stylish writing of Red Smith and *Timesman* Gilbert Millstein, but his real literary heroes were fiction writers like John O'Hara, Irwin Shaw, and Ernest Hemingway who were writing about the lives of ordinary Americans. Talese wanted to do what O'Hara and company were doing, but only in nonfiction rather than in fiction; he thought of his feature writing as “stories with real names.”

Talese's distinctive gifts as a nonfiction artist are for exhaustive re-

search, for the unnoticed but intimate (often behind-the-scenes) angle, and for formality of style suited to the respect he feels for his ordinary subjects. Thorough research, he maintains, is what gives the nonfiction writer the freedom to be an artist. In order to describe a climactic meeting at *The New York Times* for his volume *The Kingdom and the Power*, Talese interviewed individually all ten persons at the meeting. Not only could he double-check facts and impressions by this method, and thereby increase the accuracy of his report, but ultimately he had the choice of narrating this dramatic episode from any one of the ten editors' perspectives. Had he been less thorough, he would have limited his artistic choices, as well as missed vivid details. Talese's skills as a researcher include a genuine earnestness in questioning, tenacity in returning to a specific moment again and again with his subjects, and patience for what he calls "the art of hanging out."¹ Together these traits are formidable and have enabled Talese to write of the private lives of the Mafia and of the sexual lives of Americans in ways many writers have thought impossible.

Talese's research techniques have grown from his special artistic sensibility. He has never been interested in what is called "the big story"; instead, he gravitates to the unnoticed story, the story that is there but ignored by everyone because they are following the big story. While all the other New York sports writers were writing about the fight at Madison Square Garden, Talese was watching and writing about the man who rang the bell between rounds. When *The Times* sent him to the United Nations, he wrote about the barber who cut the delegates' hair. When his editors sent him to Albany to cover New York politics, Talese wrote about the gold spittoons in the general assembly. All these subjects were present yet unremarked upon and thought unremarkable until Talese turned his research and vision and respectful language upon them. At times his detailed, dignifying language seems almost a prose poem, such as the opening to his paean to the unnoticed life of New York City, *New York: A Serendipiter's Journey*:

New York is a city of things unnoticed. It is a city with cats sleeping under parked cars, two stone armadillos crawling up St. Patrick's Cathedral, and thousands of ants creeping on top of the Empire State Building. The ants probably were carried up there by wind or birds, but nobody is sure; nobody in New York knows any more about the ants than they do about the panhandler who takes taxis to the Bowery; or the dapper man who picks trash out of Sixth Avenue trash cans; or the medium in the West Seventies who claims, "I am clairvoyant, clairaudient and clairsensuous." (FO 277)

Talese's penchant for writing about the ordinary rather than the extraordinary event, and the unnoticed rather than the noticed derives

from his early life as the unnoticed son of an immigrant Italian tailor. Talese identifies strongly with the unnoticed, and writes of obscure *Timesmen* and Mafia wives and children from an urgent sense that they not be overlooked by society—or history. Of the artists of nonfiction in this study, he comes closest to being a *histor*. By making his histories read like novels, he makes them more accessible and memorable than traditional histories, and thus helps to ensure that his unnoticed figures will not be lost in time.

Like writers of fiction, Talese follows his artistic sensibility where it takes him. As a result, repeated themes can be found across his work despite the varied nature of his subject matter, just as a novelist explores repeated themes in varied plots. One of the strongest themes in Talese's work is his focus on generational legacies. Whether writing of bridge builders, celebrities, the Mafia, sexual pioneers, or *The New York Times*, Talese tends to be drawn obsessively toward the parent-child relation. In his works he expands the specific dilemma of how to honor one's father in a changing age to the larger question of how to honor the national spirit, the American dream of our *forefathers*, in a similarly changing and diminished era. Cultural critic Raymond Williams has observed that "a father is more than a person, he's in fact a society, the thing you grow up into" (Green 218). Thus the individual psychodramas of Talese's subjects become the national psychodramas of us all.

EARLY WRITING AND *THE BRIDGE*

During his years as a writer for *The Times*, Talese was also free-lancing articles to the *Saturday Evening Post*, to *Reader's Digest*, and, most important, to Harold Hayes's *Esquire* magazine. "The Soft Psyche of Joshua Logan," a 1963 *Esquire* article, offers the most straightforward illustration of the theme that will compel Talese's imagination throughout his career. The "news peg," or journalistic excuse, for this article was the 1963 opening of Joshua Logan's new play, *Tiger Tiger Burning Bright*, and Logan's attempt to make a Broadway comeback after such past glories as *Mr. Roberts* and *South Pacific*. Talese is quick to note the similarity of the play's plot to Logan's own parental conflict: *Tiger Tiger Burning Bright* is about "a mother who dominates her children in a dream world she has created in Louisiana—a play that gradually, as rehearsals progressed, churned up more and more memories for Logan, haunting memories of his days in Mansfield, Louisiana" (FO 62).

In his author's note to *Fame and Obscurity* Talese writes that one of his ambitions is to remain with his subjects long enough "to see their lives change in some way." Most of his works gradually mount to some dramatic crisis that reveals the son's success or failure in living up to his father's (or mother's) spiritual tradition or expectations. In "The

Soft Psyche" Logan shares the personal psychodrama behind his current theatrical effort:

No, he is by no means modest, he said, even though his mother is a bit disappointed in him, and once, after he had reminded her that he was a Pulitzer Prize winner (for *South Pacific*) she reminded him that *that* was for a collaboration—letting him know she knew the difference between a man who could win such a prize, and a man who could ride the horse *alone*. . . .

"But," he continued, now more slowly, thinking more deeply, "I think if I were free of whatever it is—if I were free—I think I could write . . . and write more than Marcel Proust . . . couldn't *stop* writing. But it is as though it were all damned up to here," he said, gripping his throat with his left hand, "and I have a theory—*just* a theory—that if I wrote, it would please my mother *too much*. It would be what she wanted. And maybe . . . maybe *then* I'd become like my father. And I would die." (FO 73)

Here boldly stated is Talese's archetypal situation: a son failing to live up to parental ideals, failing to become like the father, and the personal agony and introspection which that failure entails. Talese ends this article with the fate of Logan's venture. *Tiger Tiger Burning Bright* opens to praise, but Logan, ill, is unable to attend opening night:

one television announcer summed them up [the reviews] as "respectful." This is all Logan had hoped for. Something respectful. He did not need the big, box-office smash; he'd had plenty of those. And what he *did* want, he suspected he might never get. . . . And after thirty-three performances, the play closed. (FO 76)

The "play" closes as well on many of the sons in *The Bridge*, Talese's fascinating 1964 account of the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge from Brooklyn to Staten Island. Here, in a more extended work, Talese is able to move beyond the simple individual parental obsession of a famous figure like Joshua Logan to suggest the broader, indeed national, implications of the theme. Bridge builders *literally* "span" the nation and regard themselves, Talese tells us, as "the last of America's unhenpecked heroes" (TB 3). Across the ten chapters that make up this work Talese stresses family relationships again and again, particularly emphasizing the difficulties sons experience trying to escape the dangerous family tradition of bridge building:

The boomer's child might live in forty states and attend a dozen high schools before he graduates, *if* he graduates, and though the father swears he wants no boomer for a son, he usually gets one. He gets one, possibly, because he really wanted one, and maybe that is why boomers brag so much at home on weekends, creating a wondrous world with whiskey words, a world no son can

resist because this world seems to have everything: adventure, big cars, big money—sometimes \$350 to \$450 a week—and gambling on rainy days when the bridge is slippery, and booming around the country with Indians who are sure-footed as spiders, with Newfoundlanders as shiftless as the sea they come from, with roaming Rebel riveters escaping the poverty of their small Southern towns, all of them building something big and permanent, something that can be revisited years later and pointed to and said of: "See that bridge over there, son—well, one day, when I was younger, I drove twelve hundred rivets into that goddamned thing."

They tell their sons the good parts, forgetting the bad. . . . (TB 2–3)

Chapter 6 of *The Bridge* is titled "Death on the Bridge," and here Gerard McKee, a handsome, popular youth from a "boomer" family, falls to his death from the Verrazano span. Gerard has two brothers who are also boomers, and his father—"a man whom Gerard strongly resembled—had been hit by a collapsing crane a few years before, had had his leg permanently twisted, had a steel plate inserted in his head, and was disabled for life" (TB 84). Of all the mourners at Gerard's funeral this father suffers most: "'After what I've been through,' he said, shaking his head, tears in his eyes, 'I should know enough to keep my kids off the bridge'" (TB 92).

But McKee doesn't, and *The Bridge* ends with another son's death on the next bridge in Portugal. Talese's title explicitly links his vision of the nation with Hart Crane's in his famous poem of the same name. Both works proffer the bridge as a symbol of hope for a permanent spanning to some national ideal, and yet both show the negations that in the present somehow keep us from achieving the affirmations of Whitman's American prophecy. Failure, death, or, at best, a short-lived success like Joshua Logan's are the fates of the sons of bridge builders. A further irony of the title is that a bridge is created to take one someplace, yet, as Talese suggests through the boomer song he quotes for the final line of his volume, the bridge builders are "*linking everything but their lives*."

That Talese was never a typical newspaper reporter is shown in a remarkable series of thirty-eight articles on boxer Floyd Patterson that he wrote from 1957 to 1966. It is rare for a newspaper or magazine writer to write more than one feature on a given celebrity; three or four stories over a span of years might seem excessive to most journalists. That Talese returned again and again to Patterson, indeed thirty-eight times, suggests not only his interest in reporting change (in individuals and institutions) over time, but also his (perhaps unconscious) attraction to a father-son conflict.

The Floyd Patterson story, in Talese's telling, has as many resonances

of the failed American Dream as *The Bridge*, but it is, in some ways, more complex. It is the story of not one son, but two; the story of a bad son and a good. Furthermore, for the first time the father is not the literal (biological) father, but a surrogate father, Patterson's Italian manager, Cus D'Amato. As the son of a strong Italian father himself, Talese may have found Patterson's painfully intricate relationship with D'Amato ringing a very personal bell.

Talese begins to limn this father-son story in his seventh Patterson article, a feature following Patterson's knockout in 1959 by the Swedish fighter Ingemar Johansson.² Talese asks Patterson if D'Amato has "mismanaged" him, and Patterson replies: "No. Cus is the greatest, most honest person I know. He's like a father to me." Patterson reminds the reporters that D'Amato had no starving fighters and that none of his fighters went broke like Joe Louis. "Cus trained us to save," he says, implying that D'Amato's influence extended well beyond the boxing ring. We also learn that this loyal twenty-four-year-old shares a phobia with D'Amato: a fear of flying.

Four stories, thirteen months, and a victorious rematch later, Talese reports a change in Patterson's filial posture:

The angry words yesterday were from the "new" Patterson. He no longer is the shy, quiet man who looked to D'Amato for verbal guidance. . . .

"I'm doing the talking. My eyes were opened after my defeat by Johansson. . . . I decided if I ever won the title back, I'd make the decisions. I'd see that it doesn't happen again."³

This article ends with the news that Patterson has decided to fly to Sweden for a five-week European boxing exhibition, and that he will be met there by D'Amato, who had departed earlier—by ship.

Talese's articles in 1961 and 1962 reveal signs of Patterson's continued growth in self-reliance, as well as growing criticism by boxing promoters and writers of D'Amato's overprotection of the heavyweight champion. This tension comes to a dramatic climax in Patterson's decision to fight Sonny Liston in September 1962—against the wishes of D'Amato. The week of this widely publicized fight *The New York Times Magazine* printed a Talese article that defined with amazing prescience the dimensions of the contest:

For the first time in the fighter's relationship with D'Amato, he has publicly defied the will of the Father Image in the choice of an opponent.

D'Amato will not say exactly why he opposed the Liston fight. He likes to give the impression that he did so because of Liston's police record and because the challenger's Philadelphia backers are allegedly not Main Line. But maybe, in his heart, D'Amato fears something he will never openly admit. And that is,

for the first time in his career as a manager, he has gone ahead and helped make the arrangements for a battle that he thinks his own fighter will lose.⁴

Patterson does lose this battle, and it is a loss of more than personal dimension, for this fight is treated in the press (and in four Talese articles) as an American melodrama with Patterson representing "good" and Liston, "evil." Two days before the fight Talese writes: "being nurtured on the American ethic that good must prevail—that Wheaties-eaters must win—many seem to feel that if Patterson loses, it somehow will be a slam at the American ideal, a defeat for Our Way of Life."⁵ Patterson himself seems to have sensed the symbolic role he filled, for in describing his pre-fight emotions for an *Esquire* article Talese would title "The Loser," Patterson explained: "You have no idea how it is in the first round. You're out there with all those people around you, and those cameras, and the whole world looking in, and all that movement, that excitement, and *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and the whole nation hoping you'll win, including the President" (FO 43).

Despite this national support, the son loses. He fails to live up to national expectations. His defeat, however, causes a poignant reconciliation scene with D'Amato—which does not go unnoticed by Talese:

There had been a touching scene between D'Amato and Patterson last night in the ring following the knockout. Patterson lay his head on D'Amato's shoulder and the 54-year-old manager put his arm around the fighter.

"It was like the old days," D'Amato said afterward. He was referring to the days when the fighter was almost totally reliant on D'Amato's wisdom. . . .

In defeat, there seemed to be a warmth and compatibility between them that had been lacking in victory.⁶

But this reunion is only crisis-bred, for immediately after the fight Patterson begins to take flying lessons, and the abridgment of D'Amato's paternal influence continues, from that of trainer and manager to merely manager, to final exit of D'Amato in 1964 from any role in Patterson's career. "The Loser," Talese's lengthiest treatment of this American father-son story, hints at many ironies. The father, D'Amato, appears to have been right. The defiant son was, perhaps, wrong. Yet, in Talese's telling, the son's defiance (and perhaps his failure) has been necessary, even admirable. And Talese's title is deliberately ironic. In his growth into a sensitive human being, a man who has conquered his fears and realized that fighting "isn't a nice thing" (FO 45), Floyd Patterson is a winner in life, though a loser in the ring.

I mentioned a second son. This son was Jose Torres, and during the years Talese was returning thirty-eight times to Floyd Patterson, he wrote five articles on Torres. In the first, written in October 1958, Talese

included this revealing exchange presented in a scene and dialogue unusual for newspaper sports writing:

"Cus, he is like a second father to me," said the young prizefighter yesterday in a small room on Eighth Avenue.

D'Amato, a square-shouldered man in a dark blue suit, smiled, and asked, "Have you ever disapproved of anything I've done for you?"

"No," said the fighter.

"Haven't I always welcomed suggestions from you?"

"Yes," said the fighter.⁷

Surely it is revealing that Talese is more strongly drawn to the defiant son, the failed son, the bad son than to the good.

The denouement to this father-son drama comes in Talese's thirty-sixth Patterson story, a feature filed in April 1965, shortly before Talese's resignation from *The Times*. In it Talese describes Patterson, in disguise and unrecognized, at a Torres victory at Madison Square Garden:

[Patterson] had come to watch Jose Torres try to take the light-heavyweight title away from Willie Pastrano. Once, Patterson and Torres were very close. They used to train together, and visit each other's homes. Both were managed by Cus D'Amato, a dominating but dedicated father figure who tutored them both in the peek-a-boo boxing style, who soothed their psyches, who dreamed of the day when both would be champions.

In recent years, however, the Patterson-Torres relationship became at times cool and complex, with hurt feelings on both sides. As Patterson became more his own man, listened less to D'Amato, he was more or less replaced in D'Amato's affections by Torres. When Patterson, over D'Amato's objections, took on Sonny Liston and lost the heavyweight title, D'Amato slowly ceased to be his manager.

Yesterday Torres, the new light-heavyweight champion, flushed in triumph and posing for photographers, announced that he would now like to take on heavyweights. Among those he challenged was Patterson—not realizing that in the Garden on Tuesday night, Patterson was watching every move he made in the ring.

Why was Patterson in disguise? One person who knows him quite well speculated that Patterson did not want to see D'Amato. There were never any harsh words between the two men, but there is a deep and complex hurt: the older son rebelling against the father; the father incapable of understanding the son's need for complete independence.⁸

THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER

An even more complex American father-son story is that told in *The Kingdom and the Power*, Talese's suggestively titled "human history" of *The New York Times* published in 1969. This work represents the best

and most complex unfolding of Talese's artistic vision; furthermore, many readers have not yet appreciated the searing indictment of *The Times* contained in this artfully woven document. Those who read *The Kingdom and the Power* carefully will find more than just the "human history of an institution in transition" that Talese claims; they will find a powerful arraignment of that institution, many of its top executives, and the U.S. Establishment as well.

Talese creates this arraignment through subtle equating and interweaving of three father figures. He begins by defining the central subject of his book as the transmission of *The Times* tradition from Adolph Ochs to each generation of his successors. This *Times* tradition is also depicted (through Talese's religious rhetoric) as a veritable *patriarchal religion* to Ochs and his fellow *Timesmen*. Finally, Talese equates *The Times's* tradition/religion with the secular vision of the U.S. Establishment. To the extent that Talese also continuously undercuts this Establishment, particularly for its indifference to the lower classes, his book indicts *The Times* as an example of the American Dream gone wrong, of American idealism gone elitist.

Talese begins by describing Adolph Ochs's intention of founding a grand and lasting newspaper tradition in *The New York Times*:

Ochs's desire [was] to have *The Times* run as he wished not only until his death, but long after it. . . . in his final years, Ochs became almost obsessed by his last will and testament, consulting endlessly with his lawyer lest there be confusion about his ultimate dream: *The New York Times* must, upon his death, be controlled only by his immediate family, and in turn by their families, and it would be the responsibility of them all to govern during their lifetime with the same dedication that he had during his. (K&P 12)

As the book unfolds, Talese depicts this patriarchal obsession as a ghost haunting the *Times* building.

Adhering to tradition becomes, through Talese's rhetoric, a matter of being true to the "father spirit," of keeping the "faith," and this religious diction elevates *The Times's* history to one of wider social implication. Talese presents Adolph Ochs as a quintessential Horatio Alger figure: "He truly believed that honesty was the best policy, and he honored his father and mother and was never blasphemous, and he was convinced that hard work would reap rewards" (K&P 85). With this American idealism Ochs is able to resist business "temptations" and run *The Times* "not merely for profit but somewhat along the business lines of a great church, gilding the wealth with virtue," committing his family "to an orthodoxy stronger than their religion—and establishing Adolph Ochs as their benefactor, a little father-figure even to his own father" (K&P 13, 81).

Indeed, Talese presents *The Time's* third-floor newsroom as a vast humming rectory. The reporters seat themselves behind rows of desks "like parishioners at church" (212), the foreign deskmen are "suppliants at the altar of the wire god" (106), and the copyreaders are "Ochsian disciples" upholding "traditional standards" (296). And if all "remained faithful to the principles of Ochs, a sense of responsibility and caution, the old morality, they need not worry" (6); "Ochs, after death, could live long in the liturgy" (13).

Such was the hope, the dream. Such indeed, Talese argues, is the reality. Adolph Ochs was the father of "Timesism," a secular religion, and Talese's institutional history becomes a story of an American patriarch, his theocracy, and the "shrinekeepers" selected to carry on his tradition. Yet, through Talese's skillful rhetoric, the story also becomes the story of the United States's patriarchy, its theocracy, and the struggle of its citizens who toil, like the *Timesmen*, under the burden of tending the national shrine. For if Ochs is our Horatio Alger patriarch, his paper, Talese tells us, becomes "the bible of the American establishment" (60), and here begins the final turn of the screw, the linking of the "religion" of *The New York Times* with that of the U.S. power Establishment.

From its inception, when Adolph Ochs solicits a letter of recommendation from President Grover Cleveland, *The Times* is intimately involved with the political Establishment. In 1908, when a *Times* reporter interviews Kaiser Wilhelm II and quotes him as predicting that Germany would someday go to war against Britain, Adolph Ochs, "after consulting with President Theodore Roosevelt," decides not to publish the interview. "It would undoubtedly inflame American opinion," Talese writes, "and Ochs and Roosevelt both agreed that the impulsive Kaiser did not really mean all that he had said in the interview" (K&P 168).

After Ochs's death in 1935 the relationship with presidents continues. Talese describes the cooperation among *Times* Washington Bureau Chief Arthur Krock, Joseph Kennedy, and Henry Luce in publishing and promoting John F. Kennedy's book *Why England Slept*. Lyndon Johnson, three months after becoming president, drops in for lunch at *The Times* building, and in Talese's account this luncheon becomes a symbolic tableau of the symbiotic relationship between *The Times* and the government. Johnson sits at the table cozily between the two generations of Ochs's successors, "Arthur Hays Sulzberger and Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, father and son" (123), and eats from gold-rimmed dishes and silverware embossed with *The New York Times* emblem, the American eagle. In the final scene of the volume, at Arthur Hays Sulzberger's funeral in 1968, President-Elect Richard Nixon is now among the statesmen and business leaders at the service, and Talese notes that "it was obvious that the next President of the United States did not wish

to continue his dispute with *The Times*, which had, after Nixon's election, immediately begun to build its bridges back to the White House" (K&P 525).

Throughout his volume, then, Talese describes in mounting detail the connection between *The Times* tradition and that of the U.S. Establishment. It is because of this long tradition as part of the Establishment's "little club" that *Times* executives are particularly horrified at the accusations made against the paper during the congressional anti-American hearings in 1955 and 1956. What was *The New York Times* if not the paper of U.S. patriotism? But these accusations are symptomatic of the crisis in "faith" that emerges in the nation during the 1950s and 1960s, and that is reflected in *The Times*. The printers' strike in 1962 reveals that some *Timesmen* "now looked to the labor leaders for guidance, not to the spirit of Ochs" (K&P 223), and the founder's daughter, Iphigene Sulzberger, wonders if *The Times* had "lost some of its sense of mission" (K&P 517).

Indeed, from his first chapter Talese presages his ultimate conflict (between New York and Washington and between different styles of *Times* leadership) through the figures of managing editor Clifton Daniel and former Washington Bureau Chief James Reston. *The Kingdom and the Power* begins with Daniel and ends with Reston. In between, the two men—of similar backgrounds but antithetical styles—engage in a struggle for control of *The Times's* future, and in the end Adolph Ochs's grandson must decide between them. His crisis and his decision will reveal his faithfulness to his patriarchal heritage and the future direction of the "Timesian" liturgy.

The Daniel/Reston conflict is posed, however, in a most sophisticated manner. Although Talese sees in Daniel and Reston distinctly different aspects of the *Times's* corporate personality and uses them in this symbolic way, in no sense does he present the two in any simple or diametric opposition. They are both, after all, faithful sons of *The Times*. My feeling is that Talese chooses to begin his story with Clifton Daniel because Daniel epitomized to him the "public image" of *The Times*—the image that Talese wishes to debunk. As he writes near the end of the volume: "People are very curious about *The Times*, and many of them get from hearing and seeing Daniel a confirmation of their own ideas about the paper, its calm posture and pride in appearance, the respect for its tradition and the certainty of its virtue. They get from Daniel the image the institution has of itself, which is not necessarily all the reality beneath the surface" (K&P 410–11).

Clifton Daniel thus represents *The Times* as a whole—its public facade and its private struggle with tradition—as he conducts his daily four o'clock conference with the eyes of Turner Catledge, his predecessor, staring at this back (and Adolph Ochs's eyes presumably behind his).