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MEET ME AT RINGSIDE: “non-fiction” novel as a one-punch literary phenomenon

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ABSTRACT: The text will focus on the golden era of the so-called “non-fiction novel”, seeking to describe the difficulties in defining the sub-genre within the context of an overarching theoretical quest which aspires to determine the exact terms of a notion of “fiction” in a literary framework. Two exemplary works from the period will be described, and the strategies put into force by both their authors (Truman Capote and Norman Mailer) – in order to enforce a certain idea of (non) “fiction” –, albeit multimodal and sometimes inconsistent, will be compared. That idea of “fiction” entails, as will become apparent, decisive side implications on the definitions of crucial terms such as “narrator”, “tale”, “account” and even “History”, calling for a deliberate rarefaction of these categories in order to accommodate an uncommon, unmatched sense of “presence”.

KEYWORDS: Non-fiction novel, History, narrative, presence, objectivity.

RESUMO: Este texto concentrar-se-á na época áurea do chamado “romance não-ficção”, procurando descrever as dificuldades de definição do sub-género no contexto da demanda teórica de largo curso que aspira a decretar os termos exatos para uma noção de “ficção” no quadro literário. Serão escolhidas duas obras paradigmáticas do período, contrastando-se as estratégias multimodais e, por vezes, inconsistentes, utilizadas pelos dois autores (Truman Capote e Norman Mailer) para fazerem valer uma certa ideia de (não) “ficção”. Essa ideia tem, como se tornará aparente, implicações laterais decisivas para a definição de termos cruciais como os de “narrador”, “estória”, “relato” e mesmo “História”, produzindo uma rarefação deliberada dessas categorias a fim de acomodar um sentido de “presença” incomum e irreplicável.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Romance não-ficção, História, narrativa, presença, objetividade.

On the evening of March 8 1971, a sports event of unimaginable significance took place in New York City: the heavyweight championship bout between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. In the aftermath of the turmoil brought by a decade-long struggle over Civil Rights, the involvement in the Vietnam War and the emergence of a powerful counter-culture, America was virtually split in half. Ali (formerly Cassius Marcellus Clay), a tall, outspoken virtuoso of the ring, had dodged the draft and been stripped of his heavyweight championship of the world. While waiting for the appeal on the ruling, Frazier, a short, relentless puncher with marathon-like stamina, had snatched it. When they were finally scheduled to face each other at Madison Square Garden (the Mecca of boxing before the casinos in Las Vegas, Atlantic City and Miami became the most coveted venues for championship fights), the split in American society became ever more evident. Ali taunted Frazier from the minute the contracts were signed, calling him a “monkey” and an “Uncle Tom”, and accusing him of being the white man’s favorite.¹ The pun grew in significance and media attention. Seeing himself as the paladin of coherence and the defense of black people’s rights against the white oligarchy, Ali was intent on becoming the champion of all African-Americans. Incidentally, Frazier (who was also black) was to be demoted as a symbol of white dominance and prejudice. Uneducated, but righteous and humble, “Smoking Joe” took the blow deeply and never forgave Ali for the off-the-ring massacre. Inside the fourteen ropes, however, he refused to quit before a far more talented foe, and pounded Ali for fifteen rounds (knocking him down in the fourteenth) *en route* to a unanimous decision victory, thus retaining the belt. The “Fight of the Century” was over, but what happened that night would forever be subject to debate.

Of course, the bout drew enormous attention and was witnessed first-hand by a parade of celebrities. Among them were two of the most recognizable authors of 20th century America: Truman Capote and Norman Mailer. Though very different in literary and personal style, Capote and Mailer got along well, especially when it came down to one of their common passions: professional boxing. On the evening of March 8 1971, they shared a moment of conversation at ringside.² Both were by then still reaping the rewards of highly influential works, deemed as poster-books of a loose sub-genre described as “non-fiction novel”. Capote, 1965 *In Cold Blood*, showed a subheading which read “A true account of a multiple murder and its consequences”; Mailer, 1968 *The*



Armies of the Night (to which he added four similar works in the following years), presented itself as “History as a Novel/The Novel as History”. Thus, both were apparently self-conscious of the anticipated placement of their works within the literary dynamics of classification and arrangement. But what exactly would this amount to in the late 1960s? What consequences did it have? Or, why was a peculiar mix of fact and fiction so appealing to authors (and readers alike) at a particular point in literary history?³

Though well-established as fiction writers, both Capote and Mailer had a long history of immersion in the journalistic style.⁴ Also, both were recognized by resorting to the autobiographical mode in their prose fiction. These facts are crucial to understanding the works that made the two (among others, of course) famous and accomplished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although the historical novel has been present for many centuries (and will be for decades to come), the genre inaugurated by Capote, Mailer, *et al.* seemed, on all accounts, rooted in the postmodern spirit of the times, thus transcending the typical compositional strategies and motifs used by the first. Bold, unsettling, crude and sentimental at once, fast and seemingly based on factual descriptions of contemporary events, deliberately challenging common-sense notions about the putative relations between report, depiction and fantasy, *In Cold Blood* and *The Armies of the Night* set new standards for literary classification, and even criticism. From its inception, there was little agreement about what to call it, so the genre (or style) came to be somewhat loosely referred to under a set of descriptions: “creative non-fiction”, “faction”, “non-fiction novel” being the most recognizable.⁵ The descriptive resorting to the construct “fiction”, however, did more to hinder than to help a potentially less polemic definition of the genre.

For, in order to describe something as being “non-fictional”, one must be able to satisfactorily describe what “fiction” is. As literary theory will have it, a number of essentialist and/or ontological explanations as to the nature and modes of existence of literary fiction were argued for, to little or no avail. Fiction is slippery, has no infallible method of proof and, as a concept, is easier to apply than to define. This means, perhaps, that only by enforcing a pragmatic, case-by-case stance, will we be able to identify – even if only approximately – what counts as literary fiction and what doesn’t. Accordingly, and logically, the same is to be said about “non-fiction”.

In the 1998 revised edition of his glossary of literary definitions, J. A. Cuddon refers to non-fiction literature as “faction”, describing it as a “portmanteau word” for a genre of which the “notable examples” are, precisely, Capote and Mailer (plus Alex Haley, author of *Roots*). In his words, “faction” denotes “fiction which is based on and combined with fact ... a vague term at the best of times ... its usefulness has been questioned” (Cuddon 1999, 302). It is then contrasted with: i) the historical novel which, by definition, seems impervious to the possibility of major changes in its nature by the addition of fictional elements; and ii) television which, to the same extent (by virtue of its visual nature), allows placidly for the use of fictional elements. What is, then, that makes the retelling of contemporary fact-based events so unlike other fact-based narratives? The answer seems to lie in two trivial, yet disparate, circumstances: i) that the events may still be fresh in readers’ minds; and ii) that the style of telling is as “contemporary” as the events themselves.

If, however, differences between disparate forms of fiction based and/or rooted in fact (i.e. real events and/or real people) are more or less easy to determine – if only in empirical terms –, differences between fact and fiction are, as hinted above, far more difficult to settle. In his influential 1957 book on literary criticism, Northrop Frye refers to the “fictional modes” as follows:

In literary fictions the plot consists of somebody doing something. The somebody, if an individual, is the hero, and the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of the postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience. Fictions, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero’s power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same. (Frye 1990, 33)

Plot, the central element of every narrative instance, seems thus very similar in both fiction and non-fiction. Even if we take for granted that fictional plots are, to some extent, created *ab ovo* by their authors, whereas non-fictional ones seem to escape the deliberation of the storyteller – a common-sense assumption –, it is clear that the development of the story depends upon an agent and actions performed by that agent. Following this line of thought, it would be easy to determine who the “hero” is in *AN* – a man called Norman Mailer, referred to in the third person by the raconteur: “the phone

rang one morning and Norman Mailer ... picked it up” (Mailer 2018, 4). In *CB*, on the other hand, prominence (and, also, descriptive objectivity) is claimed by the first-person narrator from the onset: “All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned ...” (Capote 1992, 2).⁶

So, to a large extent, the “non-fictional” pact between author and reader is, apparently, in need of further tuning. Interspersing novel and history, or stating the willingness of turning a narrative of true events into a work of literary art, then, are instances of the same *relocation* of the pact (curiously, though, both Mailer and Capote seemed nonchalant as to the possibility that at least some parts of their reports could be easily disproven by other credible first-hand witnesses to the events). Still, concerns as to the measuring of works of literary art as either “history” or a “true account” are, precisely, a negation of fictionality *plus* a particular opening to posterity – in a way similar to the evidential dynamics of courts of law or politics.

By way of conclusion, we may at this point state that: i) in both *AN* and *CB* genre dynamics are deliberately blurred from the onset (right away in the subheadings), thus rendering intransitive descriptions of “fact”, “fiction” and “non-fiction” useless in the context; ii) in both *AN* and *CB*, the “matter-of-fact” or “true” accounts of historical, proven events are liable to future fact-checking (both by definition and also due to time-proximity with the events) – something which is bound to disturb the expected objective relation between the facts and their textual retelling.⁷ What is it, then, that renders “non-fiction” so prone to deliberate self-sabotaging by its very authors?

Characteristically, perhaps, Frye’s description of “non-literary prose”, biased though it is by strictly connecting the genre with public speeches by historical figures, can shed a bit of light on what may broadly be an insight into prose, when used in non-fictional contexts. He writes that

As these examples show, we are moving rapidly away from literature towards the direct verbal expression of kinetic emotion. The further we go in this direction, the more likely the author is to be, or to pretend to be, emotionally involved with his subject, so that what he exhorts us to embrace or avoid is in part a projection from his own emotional life. As this increases, a certain automatism comes into the

writing: the verbal expression of infantile-centered hatreds, fears, loves, and objects of adoration. (Frye 1990, 328)

It is somewhat surprising that, trying to describe “non-fiction”, Frye ends up listing a set of features that are common to both fictional and non-fictional uses of prose. Indeed, literature – in its broad sense of “story-telling” – cannot escape a sense of movement, in its double existence as both authorial and narrative displacement. Authors are, in more ways than one, compromised with their subject, fictional as it may be, and typically they establish a sort of causality bond with all items in the accounts they produce, something that applies indistinctively to characters, places, itineraries, and actions.

Moreover, literature is always, in part, an emotional projection by the author, the degree to which that process becomes “visible” in the narrative being arguably the only subject of debate. Something which, of course, renders Frye’s contention that literature is, in the end, all but a multifarious extension of human emotions, redundant. So, in trying to firmly establish the terms of existence of “non-fictional prose”, Frye is (unwittingly, perhaps) providing a general description into which a potentially large number of both fictional *and* non-fictional occurrences may fall. Plus, he seems intent on equating literature with fiction, and something else (perceived under a utilitarian point of view, but not fully described) as “non-literature”.

However, although lacking a strict line of demarcation between history, journalism and political pamphleteering, on the one hand; and, on the other, literary fiction prose, Frye’s description fits perfectly with the mentioned works by Mailer and Capote.⁸ Indeed, both *AN* and *CB* rely heavily on emotional projection, empathy with the subject matter and, ultimately, a set of obsessions which, under a certain point of view, may be described by some as “infantile”. Motivations, however, were quite different: as it becomes apparent in both texts, Mailer, on his part, revels in his own active participation in the events, while Capote uses his narrative skills to obscure the fact that he *didn’t* have an active involvement in the events, but rather in the resolution of the criminal case that followed. The obvious circumstance that there exists a massive disproportion between the widely considered public impact of both events (the march on Washington and the murder of the Clutter family in rural Kentucky), furthermore, is merely incidental: it plays no part in the generic or notional descriptions. Seemingly, storytelling abilities seem impervious to the subject matter in more ways than one (at



least in those cases in which the storyteller is able to provide its readers with sufficient detail as to the setting, the characters and, of course, its own role in the tale). 137

In that respect, however, both authors' stances differ deeply. Although, as hinted above, i) having shared the event or having been partly alien to it does not, in any way, impart on the nature of the event itself or the modes of presentation; and ii) some narrative strategies may exert influence on the interpreter's way of tackling the information presented, common ground between the two authors stops here. Mailer, on his part, is extremely self-aware of the dual role he is playing, even if he chooses a belated moment of the record to confess to it. He claims that

The Novelist in passing his baton to the Historian has a happy smile. He has been faster than you think. As a working craftsman, a journeyman artist, he 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 ... [s]o 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. (Mailer 2018, 225)

The novel reaches its final stages. Mailer, the novelist, is apparently through with his business and eager to pass on the burden of proof of his own historical accuracy to the *proper* specialists who will eventually fact-check his narrative. Still, they seem to have shared a common platform and agree on the basics of the tale. Working together, it is unlikely that dissent between the two sides would have been felt at all.

Besides, there is also a veiled admission by Mailer, the novelist, that, in the process, he himself played the role of a historian, a clear and undeniable fact given his direct role in the march on Washington and the events surrounding it. There is, however, something very intriguing in the description of this relay: it is the work of the novelist *plus* the work of the historian that builds the tower from which, with the proper equipment, it becomes possible to fully grasp the implications of a massively significant social event. The accruing of fact *and* fiction (or, at worst, a biased first-hand account of events) seemingly *elevates* viewers' stance and provides them with the proper lenses – thus equipping them to grasp both the full horizon and the minute details hidden within

it. In a way, then, the public significance of the marches plays no part in the narrative's mode of presentation, *but* is paramount to its justification.

On his part, Capote has to tackle a double difficulty: the fact that the Clutter family murder had no public impact outside Finney County, Kansas; and the fact that, although he forged strong friendships with relevant actors in the murder case (notably Alvin Dewey, the chief detective and Perry Smith, one of the assassins), he was neither a relevant witness to the crimes nor to the subsequent investigation.⁹ So, for the most part of the book, he tries to compensate for the lack of first-hand knowledge with both descriptive saturation *and* a sort of affective throughput by which the narrator depicts the actors' feelings and emotions as if they were his own. This compositional strategy is deemed, seemingly, as the key to retell a "true account" of the murders and of the inquiry which followed. Minute detail, added to by a self-conscious, deliberate and holistic appeal to plausible human feelings, emotions and thoughts – even though put into force by a third party –, seems to suffice to bridge the gap between *non-presence* and *narrative authority*. Capote, the narrator, is utterly at ease in describing the context, surroundings and landscapes, actions and motivations, even the inner thoughts and possible connections of those thoughts with practical affairs. Moreover, he is fully at ease in depicting the sentimental enchainment of past events, individuating them and reattaching them to their respective agents:

Mr. Clutter liked Bobby, and considered him, for a boy his age, which was seventeen, most dependable and gentlemanly; however, in the three years she had been permitted "dates", Nancy, popular and pretty as she was, had never gone out with anyone else, and while Mr. Clutter understood that it was the present national adolescent custom to form couples, to "go steady" and wear "engagement rings", he disapproved, particularly since he had not long ago, by accident, surprised his daughter and the Rupp boy kissing. (Capote 1992, 9)

Capote waves his reliability as the quintessential storyteller at all times. Aiming at the reader, and at the special, enigmatic, conventional pact inevitably established between teller and listener, writer and lector, he establishes minuteness and depth as the chief caveats of his tale. The "*as if*" which glues all the impossibilities of fictional discourse together is, in Capote's case, redirected at himself as an author and teller: all the



particulars, piled up and accounted for, reestablish his own authority. They mean, roughly, “I am telling you this *«as if»* I was there”.

Mailer, on his part, *was there*, and thus is intent on ascertaining his position as a first-hand witness to the events. His worries are not, as in Capote’s case, trying to render an incident which went under the radar of public attention less anonymous. Quite the opposite, actually. His main concern is to *correct* public perceptions of an event of worldwide magnitude, told and retold by a myriad of journalists, eyewitnesses, onlookers, bystanders, commentators and some opportunists. The appeal to history, implicitly conceived as a bastion of empirical accuracy and emotional detachment, is paramount to his overall strategy. Working for posterity, in a way that reverberates his own institutional biases and political viewpoints, he heads for the future, looking for a means of retrospective adjustment. Absolution by history is, for that matter, a common illocutionary manoeuvre – used extensively in some of the speeches Frye pointed out as examples of “non-fiction”. To strengthen his claim, Mailer directly addresses the press and its treatment of the protests, reassessing his insider stance and adopting a sardonic tone to denounce the official media’s wrongdoing in relation to the events. So, in a way, he is both in and out of his skin as a journalist, in and out of his skin as a novelist, in and out of his skin as a (unwilling, perhaps) historian. Still, he seems to be looking for a safe place to stand among all the antinomies, something he finds in the solid, reassuring haven of objectivity:

The method is then exposed. The mass media which surrounded the March on the Pentagon created a forest of inaccuracy which would blind the efforts of an historian; our novel has provided us with the possibility, no, even the instrument to view our facts and conceivably study them in that field of light a labor of lens-grinding has produced. Let us prepare, then (metaphors soon to be mixed – for the Novelist is slowing to a jog, and the Historian is all grip on the rein), let us prepare then to see what the history may disclose. (Mailer 2018, 225-6)

The *bête noire* is, then, the so-called “free press” and its poor treatment of subjects. In Mailer’s case, due to biased opinions and inaccuracy, possibly even to obscure political agendas. In Capote’s case, due to insufficient data and a conscious belittling of an otherwise important event. Excess of information and bias, on the one hand; lack of

ample information and empathy on the other. Features which, in both cases, seem to be corrected only by i) a generous selection of the relevant facts, and ii) the tailoring of those facts into a recognizable literary framework called a *novel*.

What is it, then, that novels possess which enables them to *correct* or *add* to events (or collections of events)? In *AN*, the process is multifarious. It encompasses a blend of descriptive oversaturation, first-hand knowledge, political opinion and a string of second-degree strategies such as the appeal to history and the symbiosis between narrator and main character. In *CB*, differently, the key is verisimilitude. Despite its original description as a “true account” (present right away in the subtitle), the book almost lures the reader into a limbo in which there is a parallel recognition of two opposite, indisputable facts: i) that the narrator *wasn’t* there; and ii) that he knows so much that it becomes comfortable to imagine that everything *must* have happened as we are told. The famous description of fiction as a “willing suspension of disbelief” thus reemerges in a perhaps surprising context: that of a “true account”. In a sense, it seems, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 19th-century Romantic rhetoric is, after all, potentially applicable to *all* narratives.¹⁰ A finding which refers back to the theoretical difficulty in finding demarcation lines between fiction and non-fiction – exemplified above in Cuddon’s description. For the formal, traditional categories of the narrator are blurred to the limit:

The graves of the Clutter family, four graves gathered under a single gray stone, lie in a far corner of the cemetery – beyond the trees, out in the sun, almost at the wheat field’s bright edge. As Dewey approached them, he saw that another visitor was already there: a willowy girl with white-gloved hands, a smooth cap of dark-honey hair, and long, elegant legs. She smiled at him, and he wondered who she was. (Capote 1992, 408-9)

The alternation between true fact (a description of a place) and a plausible event (a description of people and their attitudes) seems to be, therefore, the guarantee of a modicum of likelihood which contributes heavily to reassure the reader.

In Capote’s case, the overlap between verifiable and loose facts is frequently triggered by a simple arithmetic operation, by which the hard fact is followed immediately after by an indirect affective consideration, very likely to have happened in

the exact same terms as those of the account. In Mailer's case, quite differently, indirect considerations are permanently sidelined in exchange for *direct* opinion. Usually, and similarly to Capote, the hard fact is presented first (with roughly the same degree of descriptive saturation), only to be supplemented by acrimonious judgment presented in such detail that the reader is left to ask where exactly lies historical objectivity.

The mechanics of the telling thus seem to lure the reader into a second narrative level, after guaranteeing a firm, fact-grounded context on which that same reader can rest for a while before moving on. That the further movement will afterwards meet with affective regards, acid critique or polemic remarks is irrespective of the general strategy. The narrator's "presence", whether transparent, camouflaged, or vociferous, is at all times entangled with an intentional precariousness. Towards the end of both novels, however, the circle seems to close. A need for reassurance pops up, as if to reassert the initial terms of both accounts (truth, on the one hand, history on the other). Presence, in one case, or resorting to the historian's helping hand, in the other, plays a crucial role in wrapping up the fundamentals (and consequences) of both narratives. The goal seems to be, to a large extent, that of taking the reader back to the point of departure, and to the mentioned strategies behind all reading and interpretive acts:

Obviously, three of the murders Smith committed *were* logically motivated – Nancy, Kenyon and their mother had to be killed because Mr. Clutter had been killed. But it is Dr. Satten's contention that only the first murder matters psychologically, and that when Smith attacked Mr. Clutter he was under a mental eclipse, deep inside a schizophrenic darkness ... (Capote 1992, 360-1)

Deferred as they may be, the explanations presented *do* contribute to a feeling of completeness, adding to a sense that the narrator "must have been there" – to put things bluntly, descriptions of human feelings are a universe away from medical views about human actions. Thus, the "retrieval" of the narrator's presence in later stages of the telling contributes to a general feeling of *fait accompli*, even though, as predictable, the order of explanation is in many ways different.

While in Capote's case the ultimate gloss is filled with empathy, personal feelings and external opinions, in Mailer's there is a wider, bitter, self-deprecating reasoning:

Whole crisis of Christianity in America that the military heroes were on one side, and the unnamed saints on the other! Let the bugle blow. The death of America rides in on the smog. America – the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people – if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn – was then the will of God. Great and dangerous idea! If the locks did not turn, then the will of the people was the will of the Devil. Who by now could know where was that? Liars controlled the locks. (Mailer 2018, 295-6)

Ultimately, it seems that narratives do not survive (or, at best, shed part of their weight) without opinion. On its hand, then, the expression of an opinion is used for a final stand in the later stages of both narratives. It is, after all, well known that judges at ringside are typically prone to reward fighters who keep the action going until the final bell sounds, and much the same happens with both readers and boxing-goers alike. The thrill, though, is even higher when a late knockout wraps the night.

Anticipated labels are, ultimately, crucial to both narrative consumers and hardcore prizefight fans. Whenever you set out to watch a “welterweight non-title bout”, you typically develop the same prior strategies and expectations you use when fetching a “historical novel” to read in the coming days. The impact of the labeling “true account” or “history” appended to any novel automatically redirects our attention, positioning interpretive stances into a definite, fact-bound frame nurtured by a sense of probability. Inside the covers (or else inside the ropes), however, we understand both how easy it is to intentionally sabotage early-posted tagging and continuously play hide-and-seek with the reader.

Cuddon is, after all, right: theoretical claims to define a literary genre called “non-fiction novel” are sometimes misleading and, more often than not, unable to find the common traits which glue together a sufficient number of occurrences. The phenomenon, moreover, seems by now to be long dead and gone: short-lived, though intense and highly successful, it has been consistently overshadowed by competing narratives and overwhelmed by a corrective movement that has led to the reestablishment of a generic *status quo* dating back to the late-18th century. Of course, the spirit of the times, embedding a public hunger for journalistic objectivity and a thirst

for no-nonsense retelling, plays a decisive role in the making of the sub-genre. It is as if for a decade or so, reading people demanded to be served with the healthy, contrived menu of factual objectivity, only to slowly resort yet again to the opulent banquets of the tale, the lore and the “what if?”.

At some junctures, then, attempts at definition become utterly futile, and the only thing we are left with are disenchanted descriptions of objects which appeal to us, and this is probably what eventually happened to “non-fiction novels”. Still, to some extent, both Capote and Mailer anticipated the posterity of their works beforehand, by the mere fact of labeling them in a precise way, resorting to utterly ontological categories such as the “truth” and “history”. Although theories are typically set *after* a significant number of occurrences have happened in a *certain* way, it still is, as I expect to have demonstrated, impossible to imagine a suitable theoretical framework for such a motley storytelling – something which may help to explain the elusiveness of the sub-genre and its comparatively short life. Of course, some individuals seem to have an innate tendency to try to predict what will come next, although perfectly aware that literary texts are not exactly like weather forecasts or stock market predictions. For some others, to recognize that compelling books (just like exciting boxing bouts) don’t come up too often, is in the end simply enough.

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END NOTES

¹ For a wrap-up of the pleasantries exchanged between the two in the context of their trilogy of fights (March 1971 and January 1974, both in New York; October 1974 in Kinshasa, Zaire), see the following article: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2011/nov/08/muhammad-ali-joe-frazier>.

² They were both covering the fight for respectable publications, Mailer for *Life* magazine and Capote for *Rolling Stone*, and thus had press passes.

³ For reasons of economy, *In Cold Blood* will be referred to by the acronym “CB” and *The Armies of the Night* as “AN” from this point on in the text.

⁴ During the early 1940s, while launching his career as (primarily) a short-story writer, Capote worked in various capacities for at least three periodicals – among them, notably, *The New Yorker*. Mailer, in turn, had a decades-long media career and was a herald for the 1960s “new journalism” writing style – a mix of literary and newspaper report strategies applied to descriptions and events.

⁵ The description “creative non-fiction” was popularized by Lee Gutkind and his eponymous literary journal, whereas “faction” is a portmanteau word blending the words “fact” and “fiction”. The scholarly definition most widely used is “non-fiction novel”, summarized by David Herman *et al.*, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*

as follows: “Non-fiction novels are narratives depicting actual contemporary events and using the styles and techniques of fictional discourse. A story the author witnessed and/or investigated is presented in dialogues and dramatic scenes (rather than in historical summaries), from the point of view of the people involved (rather than from an objective, distant point of view), and it provides an immersive context in which the narration of actual events is as lively as the presentation of fictional worlds. Unlike historical novels, non-fiction novels focus on contemporary themes and dispense with fictive story elements. Since journalistic validity is part of the author-reader contract, authors frequently legitimise their knowledge in paratexts or metanarrative commentary.” (Herman *et al.* 2005, 397).

⁶ Even if Frye doesn’t allow for the instantiation of a “collective hero”, a mob, in *AN*, the crowd plays a very important role in plot development and the succession of events. Still, “Mailer”-the-hero is ever-present as protagonist, to the point of sabotaging the importance of the collective character, heightening or downplaying its influence almost at will. *CB*, however, seems to present a different set of difficulties. These arise, at first, from the fact that Mailer, the author, actively participated in the crucial events retold by Mailer the character (preparation of the demonstrations, public lectures, arrests and violence), whereas Capote did not (he was not present during the assassinations, the first stages of the investigation and the arrest of the criminals). Still, that seemingly crucial difference is blurred by the fact that Capote also played a decisive role in the sequence of events which unfolded after the Clutter family murder. Although his heroes are, subsequently, the members of the Clutter family, police and law enforcement members, or even the murderers themselves, they all seem to stand in a subordinate position in respect to the narrator – Capote himself – whose insider stance renders his position ubiquitous.

⁷ In *Fiction and Narrative*, Derek Matravers summarizes the tension as follows: “My view, in short, is that representations can be put to different uses: to teach, to persuade and to entertain being three of them. Representations also come in two varieties, thin and thick; or, rather, representations exist along a continuum from the very thin to the very thick. The traditional distinction, between representations that are fiction and representations that are non-fiction, is entirely unhelpful. It does not match any intuitive divide amongst the above.” (Matravers 2014, 47). The point, which is persuasive and well argued for, follows a clear and sound description of the theories of fiction by eminent scholars Donald Currie and Kendall L. Walton. For a further discussion using both Currie and Walton, plus Searle, Rorty, Wayne C. Booth, Frank Kermode, Michael Riffaterre and Peter Lamarque (among others), see my 2014 book *Teoria da Literatura e Interpretação*, chapter IV (“Jogar ao faz de conta”).

⁸ It becomes clear that Frye deplores what could be described as a political use of literature. Stuck as his description is to a limited array of public speeches urging listeners to take action, go into war or oppose some social or public *status quo*, he stealthily

146 argues for a literature without *pathos* – and, by extension, to the consideration of literature as a “pure” form comprising *ethos* and, to a lesser extent, *logos*. An occultation of the author (or speaker) is, in this context, paramount.

⁹ Herb Clutter, his wife Bonnie and children Nancy and Kenyon were shot to death in their rural home in Holcomb, Kansas, on November 15 1959, during a botched robbery by former convicts Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. Both were eventually sentenced to death and hanged in 1965.

¹⁰ The reference is to Coleridge’s widely recognized motto with respect to the effects of poetry, penned in his 1817 work *Biographia Literaria*, defined as “that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith”. The description has been the subject of much debate and analysis in literary theory and criticism, as well as in narrative theory.

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