The Rum Diary: An Introduction to Hunter S. Thompson's Esthetic Evolution

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The popular legend of author and journalist Hunter S. Thompson seldom notes the strength of his reflections regarding interdividuality and ontological sickness in the postmodern esthetic. Considering Eric Gans's esthetic evolution, outlined in *Originary Thinking*, Thompson's *The Rum Diary,* stands on the boundary between the modern and postmodern esthetics and demonstrates a subtle perspicacity for the mimetic nature of desire as described by René Girard. As an aspiring author, Thompson had at least two modern American novels, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*, in mind as he set out to write *The Rum Diary*. Though his style resembles those of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Thompson depicts desire as metaphysical and interdividual, where the moderns usually consider desire to be object-focused and originating from within an essential self. In *The Rum Diary*, the metaphysical and interdividual nature of desire is explored through the narrator Paul Kemp's reflections on his involvement in the mimetic sexual and economic ambitions of the novel's other characters. This movement of desire engenders the resentment that drives the narrative toward its scenes of collective violence. Like his model Fitzgerald, Thompson is reluctant to implicate his narrator directly in scenes of victimage. However, Kemp's inner monologue betrays his complicity as he reflects on the interdividuality of sexual desire and the mimetic machinations of the market. Hence, Thompson's first novel is a testing ground for the deeper social and anthropological insights that characterize his best-known work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*.

Eric Gans posits an evolving esthetic intuition of the originary scene in literature as it develops from modernism to postmodernism. In the modern esthetic, the originary self confronts the resentment that created it by placing base objects in the sacred centre of its supposedly unmediated desire (Gans 190). The movement to postmodernism is characterized by a rejection of the fallacy of unmediated centres

of desire (205-206). This development represents an attempt to comprehend the ethical, which functions to produce and control resentment. Thus, “[e]ach artwork is an experiment that tests the limits of an ethical system against our intuition of originary crisis” (21). An esthetic work’s representation of the ethical (or the renunciation of resentment producing desire) corresponds to a point in an evolving vision of the originary scene, which appears in the relation of a resentful periphery to a sacred centre (22). The novelistic conclusion of conversion, as it “consists in the renunciation of metaphysical desire” (Girard 1966: 293-294), is elusive in the modern American novel because the form of self-critique tends to be weak in its articulation of desire as interdividual. In *The Rum Diary*, this is significant because the narrator (in modernist fashion) attempts a self-criticism that demonstrates an awareness of the originary ethical scene, while refusing to fully represent himself in the circle of desirous, resentful victimizers. The modernists and their ethics significantly influence Thompson’s novel. As a youth, he copied out the entire text of *The Great Gatsby* in order to assume Fitzgerald’s style and cadence (Wenner 12). When he began to write *The Rum Diary,* he described the novel to a friend as “*The Sun Also Rises* in Puerto Rico” (47). Drawing from these sources, Thompson’s first work reflects the underdeveloped, but growing, originary intuition of his modern models, Fitzgerald and Hemingway.

Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* both employ the structure of the surrogate victim mechanism and typify Gans’s vision of the modern esthetic, while avoiding the conversion conclusion needed to confront the interdividual resentment they express. As an outsider and criminal, overcompensating for his low upbringing, Gatsby bears the stereotypes of persecution outlined by Girard (1986: 24). He is drawn into mimetic rivalry (Fitzgerald 130)–becomes lost in a crisis of non-differentiation (143)–and is murdered after absorbing responsibility for a crime he did not commit (162). He is rejected by everyone including the narrator, Carraway (154), who leaves Gatsby to the destiny created by his masochistic(1) obsession with Daisy. Carraway finishes his narrative in a tone of pacific acceptance rather than admitting the resentment that accompanied his own position in the circle of desiring subjects (178-179). Gatsby, as the centre of the scene of desire, is a low subject, who is heroicized by the structure of the surrogate victim mechanism. As per Gans, Fitzgerald’s choice of Gatsby as the central desire-object is in line with the modern esthetic’s tendency to favour shockingly trivial objects and reinforces the modernist idea that individuals choose the objects that enthral them (Gans 208). Thus, the esthetic effect of Carraway’s depiction of mimetic scapegoating is invoked without the admission of complicity that could suggest an exit from deferred desire and its accompanying violence. Hemingway uses a similar structure in *The Sun Also Rises* when he places self-defeating sexual obsession in the esthetic ring formed by desiring subjects. In *The Sun Also Rises,* the esthetics of the originary scene are evident in the symmetry

between the circle of desiring male characters around Brett and this periphery's interplay with the physical and cultural spectacle of bullfighting (Hemingway 194, 219). The male characters vie with each other for Brett's approval the way the matadors vie with the bulls for the crowd's applause. The narrator Barnes' physical inability to consummate his obsession with Brett allows him to feign indifference to the infinite deferral of his desire (34-35), rather than critically engaging the mimetic nature of his fascination with the inaccessible other. The resentment of other characters, in particular Brett (39), is given full examination, while the narrator's own masochistic obsession is never completely unpacked. Near the end of the novel the narrator glibly sums up the emptiness of his self-defeating desire saying: "That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right" (243). The narrator's perspective is the strongest guide for the reader in identifying mimetic desire, which Hemingway does not suggest as the source of his continued frustration. Thus, Hemingway's narrative, though structurally contingent on scenes of thwarted mimetic desire, lacks the critical self-reflexivity to fully unveil the originary scene of victimage and interdividual desire structuring the narrative. It is from these renditions of the originary scene that Thompson takes his esthetic cues. However, encountering the sense of aporia inherent in the *zeitgeist* of the nineteen-sixties onward, Thompson's work becomes a "metavision of human history [, which is] . . . indifferently without crisis and all crisis" (Gans 218). This movement derives from his troubled reflections on the nature of his desire and his hedged consideration of involvement in the ongoing crises. *The Rum Diary*'s narrator, Kemp becomes a postmodern observer as he vacillates between depicting the central object as inaccessible or consumable (217-218).

The postmodern esthetic that distinguishes *The Rum Diary* from its modern models is manifest in its recognition that desire is contingent on the centres of mimetic attention undergirding cultural history. *The Rum Diary* represents a transitional phase between Gans's vision of the modern esthetic and the postmodern esthetic in so far as it comprehends the scene of desire as interdividual, while retaining the modern voice of the psychologising, self-sufficient outsider. In *The Rum Diary,* Thompson's style is modern in its tendency to affirm the spontaneity of individual desire when compared with his later, most popular and postmodern work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Friend and Pulitzer Prize winner, William Kennedy, has commented on the depth of Thompson's early faith in the modern novel. Remembering a conversation they had about *The Great Gatsby*, Kennedy explains that Thompson did not believe Gatsby's time was over. Instead, he "thought of *himself* as Gatsby, and he reveled in that kind of fate–that green light always receding, boats against the current, borne back into the past" (Wenner 45). Though *The Rum Diary*'s narrator, Paul Kemp, admits desire in the form of his modern predecessor, the confessions of desire, resentment and self-loathing make the

novel postmodern by admitting an “awareness of the paradoxicality of the esthetic . . . [which renders] impossible the reification of the esthetic object as either an unattainable icon or a picture of desire” (Gans 218). Thompson exposes the paradox of the central object of desire by repeatedly confronting Kemp’s inability to bridge “the distinction between the inaccessible and the consumable” (218). Gans further unpacks the difference between the two esthetic periods, thus:

Modernism could not affirm the actuality of the communal center that secretly guaranteed its existence because it denied that the esthetic-imaginary scene was defined by the communal, centralizing activity of representation. This gap in modernist self-consciousness, which led to the subordination of anthropology to individual psychology, would become apparent only when the limit of expansion was felt to have been reached. (208)In his attempts to emulate the moderns, Thompson reaches the limits of individual psychology and moves beyond into anthropology. Initially, Thompson’s narrative seems to adopt the modern tendency to blame the market for suggesting desire instead of allowing the individual to choose. However, the novel quickly recognizes the market as a manifestation of human entrapment within metaphysical desire: greed and lust. In this way, *The Rum Diary*’s speaker is implicitly critical of the illusion of individual object-focused desire.

Paul Kemp describes his ambition as constantly shifting to objects designated by those around him and repeatedly dissolving into violent crisis. In the first mediated instance of desire, Kemp spots a girl, Chenault, boarding the same plane as him, on the way to Puerto Rico. He describes her has having “a fine little body and an impatient way of standing that indicated a mass of stored-up energy” (1998: 8). The radiating energy that attracts Kemp resembles Girard’s exposition of the strength and agility attracting Proust’s protagonist’s fixation on a group of girls at Balbec in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (384-385). Chenault’s illusion of self-sufficiency fascinates Kemp and, in his attempt to grasp it, he admits that he becomes violent, shoving and intimidating an old man who obstructs his progress (Thompson 1998: 9-10). However, after losing sight of Chenault, Kemp quickly admits shame at his grasping and the violence it precipitates, reflecting,

[t]here was not much hope of finding her now and I was not optimistic about what might happen if I did. Few girls look with favour on a man of my stripe, a brutalizer of old people. I remembered the expression on her face when she saw me with the old man pinned against the window. It was almost too much to overcome. (10)Reflection upon this pattern of fruitless, aggressive pursuit of suggested desire resulting in violence will dominate Kemp’s inner monologue throughout the novel. At this early stage of the narrative, Kemp only admits the suggested nature of desire obliquely. He does not yet fully acknowledge that Chenault mediates his

desire for her “fine little body”. Instead, his desire simply appears, which is in accordance with the modern tendency to depict desire as spontaneous and derived from within an essential self.

Increasingly, Kemp’s co-workers and superiors mediate his desire and appear to be subjectivities motivated by mimetic greed and lust, whose objects consistently evaporate. Kemp encounters Chenault again at the home of his friend and co-worker Yeamon. He happens upon them making love in the surf at their remote paradisiacal bungalow. His description immediately betrays his elevation of Chenault, thus far the novel’s central object, to the realm of the inaccessible: “At first I thought I was having a vision. The scene was so idyllic that my mind refused to accept it. I just stood there and watched” (37). Embarrassed, he leaves. When he returns, he finds Chenault and Yeamon still in swimming wear; he then mentally admits the mediated nature of his desire: “I glanced enviously at Yeamon, wearing nothing but a pair of black trunks. I felt like a bill collector, standing there in a coat and tie” (38). Chenault remains the inaccessible object mediated this time through Yeamon. Kemp confesses his desire and the seeming impossibility of its fulfilment saying, “[s]he was so close to naked, and so apparently unaware of it that I felt helpless. . . . Yeamon suggested that we take the speargun out to the reef and look for some lobster. I quickly agreed, feeling that almost anything would be preferable to sitting there and stewing in my own lust” (39). Later in the mimetic frenzy of a carnival on an island off Puerto Rico, Kemp’s acquisitive mimetic impulse appears as he watches the naked couple sleep on a beach and reflects that no one could blame him if he killed Yeamon and raped Chenault on the spot (143). His frustrated and violent fantasy foreshadows an actual circle of mimetically desiring subjects focused on Chenault as a sexual object. Later that evening, at party during the carnival a room full of dancers

made a big circle and in the middle of it [was] Chenault . . . Chenault . . . wore . . . [a] dazed, ecstatic expression as the man reached out and eased her panties over her hips and down to her knees. . . . Yeamon broke loose. He leaped in to the circle and they were on him immediately, but this time he was harder to pin. . . . The melee stopped the dance. For and instant I saw Chenault standing alone; she looked surprised and bewildered . . .. She looked small and naked and helpless, and then I saw the man grab her arm and start pulling her toward the door. . . . Once I thought I heard her scream, but it could have been anyone. (155-156).This scene exemplifies the narrative’s recital of Girard’s formulation of originary acquisitive mimesis. The circular configuration of the dancers around the objectified girl combined with overt sexuality and rivalry typifies the configuration of the originary scene. Further, the non-differentiation of the “melee” and ritual context of the carnival both harmonize with Girard’s theory of generative violence, which asserts that a non-differentiated crisis precedes sacrificial resolution (1977: 79). Here too,

Thompson abandons the modern penchant for individual psychological analysis to focus on the mob phenomenon that underlies the Caribbean carnival, with its syncretistic amalgam of pagan and Christian rites. Girard's anthropology illuminates what Thompson's scene depicts, when it notes: "[b]eyond the sexual symbolism is the violence that gives shape to the events and that literally inscribes itself–first as cultural order, then as sexuality hidden behind that order, and finally and openly as violence, which underlies all possible meanings" (1977: 141). After the carnival, Kemp and Yeamon reluctantly give up attempts to find Chenault and return home relieved to have survived (Thompson 1998: 164). Esthetically, the climactic dance, fight and apparent rape of Chenault have functioned as apogee for the novel's action. As a central object of desire, Chenault is at once inaccessible and easily consumable in the vein of Gans's postmodern esthetic. However, the motif of the female central object embattled by competing males–found in Thompson's favoured modern authors–is the self-conscious vehicle of this ambiguous postmodern esthetic. Thus, Thompson's vision hangs on the esthetic of the originary scene of victimage, while simultaneously exposing the potential brutality existing within mimetic desire and the culture it engenders.

To further this theme, Kemp's reflections on the role of mimetic desire in the market demonstrate how his narrative stands between the esthetics of the modern and the postmodern. In this struggle, Puerto Rico is an object that Kemp's newspaper is attempting to sell to American investors to avert communist expansion in the Caribbean (Thompson 1998: 69). Though Kemp quickly and contemptuously perceives the capitalist agenda, he just as quickly becomes complicit in achieving its aims, both personally and for his superiors. After agreeing to write a travel article that will help turn a pristine bay into a mega-resort, Kemp says, "I was being paid twenty-five dollars a day to ruin the only place I'd seen in ten years where I'd felt a sense of peace" (134). Earlier, after seeing the luxurious home of the public relations manager in charge of financing his advertisements for Puerto Rico, Kemp's mimetic consumerist impulse is made explicit: "I decided that when I got a little more money I would look for a place like this for myself. The one I had now was good for a start, but it didn't have a porch or a garden or a beach, and I saw no reason why I shouldn't have those things" (125). Simultaneously recognizing his mimetic desire and the destructive potential it has as a tool of the market, Kemp wonders how he can rid himself of "[t]hat maddening delusion that a man can lead a decent life without hiring himself out as a Judas Goat" (134). At this point, the narrative is confronting the gap that separates the modern and postmodern esthetics with regard to the market. As Gans explains, the early "esthetics [Romanticism and Modernism] founded their quest for the originary on the denial of the historical validity of the market; the postmodern resignation to the permanence of the market appears in turn to deny the validity of this quest" (Gans 207).

In both the sexual and the economic realms, Kemp begins to recognize the transient nature of his ambitions and thus, the metaphysical nature of his desire. When Chenault, who was once so full of sexual vivacity, inexplicably returns from the carnival, Kemp describes her changed appearance: “She was wearing the same clothes, but now she looked haggard and dirty. The delicate illusions that get us through life can only stand so much strain–and now, looking at Chenault, I wanted to slam the door and go back to bed” (169). These delicate illusions are contingent on their continued inaccessibility. Now that Chenault comes to Kemp for help, having been easily and publicly appropriated, she is too accessible and therefore lacking in the metaphysical being Kemp perceived in her at the beginning of the novel (8). Further, Chenault has opted to go to Kemp instead of Yeamon, who previously mediated Kemp’s desire for her. This enhances Chenault’s accessibility to the point where the desire that drives Kemp no longer designates her as a value-laden object. This is metaphysical desire *par excellence* as described in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, where Girard explains that “[t]he value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. . . . This process of transfiguration does not correspond to anything real, and yet it transforms the object into something that appears superabundantly real” (295-296). Kemp’s intuition of the nature of desire, aligns with Girard’s in his recognition of its ultimate insubstantiality. He relates his sense of desire through the metaphor of a passing Caribbean day:

[there were] good mornings, when the sun was hot and the air was quick and promising, when the Real Business seemed right on the verge of happening and I felt that if I went just a little faster I might overtake that bright and fleeting thing that was always just ahead.Then came noon and morning withered like a lost dream. The sweat was torture and rest of the day was littered with the dead remains of all those things that might have happened, but couldn’t stand the heat. When the sun got hot enough it burned away all the illusions and I saw the place as it was–cheap, sullen, and garish–nothing good was going to happen here.

Sometimes at dusk, when you were trying to relax and not think about the general stagnation, the Garbage God would gather a handful of those choked off morning hopes and dangle them somewhere just out of reach; they would hang in the breeze and make a sound like delicate glass bells, reminding you of something you never quite got hold of, and never would. (Thompson 1998: 190-191)

This passage illustrates Kemp’s growing resignation to the effusive nature of a desire that promises ever renewed and unique objects. Here again, Thompson departs from his modernist models’ tendency to seek after the newest esthetic experience. As Gans explains, “[t]he disillusion that defines postmodernism is more profound than the mere discovery that newness is not indefinitely cumulative, that

the latest style is not guaranteed to be more original than the preceding. The modernists . . . had . . . adopted [the mocked bourgeoisie's] . . . belief in historical progress" (209). Unlike his modern models, Thompson has his narrator reluctantly and resentfully articulate a desiring-self that is complicit in the market's redundant production of deferred desire. Accordingly, when Kemp makes plans to visit the objectified Chenault after leaving Puerto Rico (Thompson 1998: 203), the reader must take the view that the central esthetic object will remain both inaccessible and consumable.

Though many of Kemp's reflections consider the deferral of desire, consumption occupies a large piece of the novel's narrative. Early on, the possibility of imbibing the essence of Puerto Rico drips from Kemp's descriptions of his wild nights and days. In one instance, after a night of heavy drinking at local casinos, Kemp goes swimming in the surf and makes love to a stranger on the beach (32-33). This incident foreshadows the role that excessive consumption of alcohol will play in the narrative by increasing the volatile potentiality of scenes involving acquisitive mimesis. Accordingly, Kemp's description of a carnival on the island of St. Thomas is a riotous portrayal of unbridled consumption. These episodes make a deep impression on the mood of the novel, as in this vivid description:

About two hundred people had looted one of the big liquor stores. [. . .] Cases of champagne and scotch lay broken in the street, and everyone I saw had a bottle. They were screaming and dancing, and in the middle of the crowd a giant Swede wearing a blue jock strap was blowing long blasts on a trumpet. (146-147)Thompson's ability to use absurd details to emphasize the hedonistic decadence of a scenario appears in this passage. The Swedish figure is a centrepiece in a melee of appropriative mimesis. He is clearly one of many drunken revellers and, in this sense, common. Yet, in the modernist style described by Gans, Thompson sets the insignificant Swede up as an esthetic object, which is cast into the "public space of desire" in order to shock his reader's bourgeois consumerist sensibilities (Gans 129). This stylistic habit resonates most with the scenes of riotous self-indulgence found chronicled in Hemingway and ironically observed in Fitzgerald. Coupled with these episodes of indulgence are Kemp's aspirations to better his position in economic terms. He reflects with pleasure on the material acquisitions his new success brings him (Thompson 1998: 120-123). These ruminations on acquiring consumer objects undercut Kemp's view of himself as a bohemian hedonist, which again resonates with the theme of anti-consumerist modernity versus postmodernity's acceptance of the market's role (Gans 129). Thus, Thompson's vision succeeds beyond the modern faith in the perpetual newness of "'scandalously' insignificant objects" (129) to the indefinite present of resentment, where communal central objects oscillate between the attainable and the inaccessible.

Though *The Rum Diary* culminates in a collective murder generated by mimetic resentment, representing a return to the anthropological critique that will characterize the postmodern esthetic (214), the speaker does not attain to Girard's criteria for novelistic conversion. Kemp's co-workers murder their editor for withholding pay, but Kemp is not directly involved in the killing (Thompson 1998: 197). Kemp, like the narrators in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*, does not consider himself complicit in the collective murder or expulsion. Here, Thompson's ideal of protagonists who are self-righteous, autonomous outsiders mimics the modern motif, which Girard has exposed in an essay entitled, "Camus's Stranger Retired" (1978, 34). Thus, *The Rum Diary* misses the conversion ending that would be truly revelatory. This is in keeping with Girard's reflections on the development of authors such as Camus and Proust, who in their youth write self-aggrandizing fantasy and only in their later years are able to see the dishonesty of their early work. However, Thompson has been clear sighted enough to depict the mimetic impetus behind the violent originary scene in the novel's culminating murder, which signals both an ending and new beginning for Kemp, who must leave Puerto Rico (Thompson 1998: 203). The mimetic desire of Kemp's fellow reporters manifests itself as greed, which turns to resentment and finally murderous rage (196-199). Though Kemp removes himself from the scene of the murder, the killing becomes the scene of reconciliation for Kemp and his rival Yeamon. When Kemp returns to his apartment, Yeamon is there and Kemp agrees to help him escape from the island (202). Thus, Kemp becomes an accessory to the murder. Additionally, Kemp and Yeamon's reconciliation over the body of their former employer resonates with the pacific effects engendered by the surrogate victim mechanism (Girard 1977: 8). Despite his best efforts to escape the violent final phase of resentment's progress, Kemp's previous admission of his ensnarement in mimetic desire infers his partial involvement in the final bloody scene. His post-murder involvement in the collective killing can be understood as a remark on the impossibility of total immunity from the machinations of resentment and its often violent fallout. However, Kemp never reflects directly on this problem. In his later work, Thompson's journalistic tendency to elide his role in the events he observes is reconsidered as he pioneers Gonzo(2)–a form of journalism that places the speaker at the centre of the events described.

Gonzo's confident candour is largely absent in *The Rum Diary*, where Thompson's narrator only reluctantly expresses his desire's contingency on the other. This is clear in his diffident admissions of jealousy and frustration (1998: 10). Though it exists, explicit discussion of the character's involvement in mimetic desire is often limited. One such limited discussion is found in the novel's fictionalized preface, where Kemp provides a gonzoesque, first-person retrospective:

I was a seeker, a mover, a malcontent, and at times a stupid hell-raiser: I was never

idle enough to do much thinking, but I felt somehow that my instincts were right. . . . At the same time, I shared a dark suspicion that the life we were leading was a lost cause, that we were all actors, kidding ourselves along, on a senseless odyssey. . . It was the tension between these two poles . . . that kept me going. (5)The preface is written in the past tense, which suggests it is an addition to the completed novel. It should be remembered that Thompson never considered the book his best work and it was published only to secure much needed funds (Wenner 331). This may indicate that Thompson added the preface to contextualize the limited depth of the youthful impressions the rest of narrative contains. In the preface, Kemp expresses suspicion regarding his own restlessness as an actor–an imitator–in pursuit of some unrealizable dream. Juxtaposed to this sense is the individualist's thoughtless self-righteousness: "*I was never idle enough to do much thinking, but I felt* . . . *that my instincts were right*". These apparently contradictory afterthoughts emphasize the hesitancy of Thompson's introspection in this first novel. Considering the strained circumstances of *The Rum Diary*'s publication, his agent recalls Thompson's early inability to delve deeply into analysis of conflict in interpersonal relationship: "He had a generous heart, which gave him so much conflict, and that led to . . . self-abuse and abuse of others. He couldn't deal with that part of himself consistently. What a great, great writer he would've been–to have been able to bring that into his prose. . . . he really needed it in *The Rum Diary*" (331). Released for publication long after the mature and self-conscious *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson would have had time to reflect on how *The Rum Diary* fails to give a clear analysis of the narrator's experience of desire. As Thompson's career as a journalist developed, Gonzo emerged. Gonzo forces Thompson to remain mindful of the interdividuality of the self in scenes he observes (Wenner 127). Writing in this style allows Thompson to more fully articulate many of *The Rum Diary*'s incomplete insights into the scene of desire. The contradictions expressed in the preface of *The Rum Diary* exist because of a partial elision of the narrator's involvement in mimetic desire and collective violence–themes that the speaker openly engages in Thompson's Gonzo masterpiece, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In this work, Thompson's ability to place himself at the centre of chaotic mimesis and remain lucid allows him to commentate with wit and authority on the darker side of desire.

Nonetheless, the seeds of Gonzo journalism are present in *The Rum Diary*. Its foundations appear primarily in the consistent first-person perspective of the novel, but also in its setting. Thompson lived in Puerto Rico while he wrote novel and, like Kemp, worked as a journalist (Wenner 44). Like Yeamon, Thompson lived with his girlfriend in a remote beach bungalow (47). The use of real life experience is typical of many novelists and is therefore not a definitive trait of Gonzo's radically personalized perspective and analysis. However, by making use of these actual events *The Rum Diary* presages Thompson's later more self-reflexive work. The scene in *The Rum Diary*, where Kemp, Yeamon and Sala are beaten by a mob and

thrown into a Puerto Rican jail for refusing to pay a bar tab (Thompson 1998: 82-83) is taken from an actual incident (Wenner 48). Kemp's first person description of the beating and the jail are vivid and engaging, while providing an internalized self-critique (Thompson 1998: 90). Kemp (and, in this case, Thompson) are the focus of a mob's appropriative violence, which precedes and prepares for the scenes of Chenault's rape and the editor's murder. Considering these episodes against Kemp's aforementioned analysis of his own complicity, it seems clear that Thompson's apprehension of the scene of collective desire and violence is evolving with his reiterative experience of desire's volatile scenicity within his life and writing. Despite this development, the mob incident is represented in *The Rum Diary* as pure fiction, where Thompson's later Gonzo style conceives of itself as objective reporting. Thus, the foundations of Thompson's Gonzo style are latent in the fundamental veracity of the personal experiences he describes.

In Gonzo fashion, the real persona of Hunter S. Thompson (a witty drug addled journalist) invades all of his best work and is indispensible to his rendering of the scapegoat mechanism inherent to the American dream. Before his suicide in 2005, Hunter Thompson attracted a cult following based on this romantic personal image, which exploded with the film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Played by Johnny Depp, Thompson's avatar, Raoul Duke vaunts across the screen as an observer-participant in Las Vegas' brutal mimetic frenzy. Duke's insatiable appetite for all manner of intoxicants is reflective of Thompson's real life excesses (Wenner 242). This self-conscious thematization of excessive consumption becomes an important tool in Thompson's critique of the collective scene of desire as it appears in *Fear and Loathing*.

Where *The Rum Diary*'s narrator expresses regret over his involvement in the machinations of the market, the narrator of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* makes an ironic comment on gratuitous consumption by taking the contemporary market's excess even further. In *Fear and Loathing*, Thompson's narrator depicts his complicity in the gross appetitive desire of Las Vegas, thus creating a sardonic portrait of Horatio Alger's(3) American Dream, as manifested in the decadence of the late twentieth century. Throughout the novel, Duke refers to Alger and identifies with his vision. In one instance, when he prepares to skip out on a hotel bill after running up massive room service charges, Duke wonders, "[h]ow would Horatio Alger handle this situation" (Thompson 2005: 70) ? Again, at the end of the novel, after posing as a clergyman in order to buy drugs, Duke reflects, "I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger" (204). Early on, Duke explains his journey by saying he is on his "way to Las Vegas to find the American Dream" (6). These high ideals and aspirations take a sarcastic tone in the mouth of the drug addled Duke as he and his attorney stumble through the glitz and pseudo-glamour of the Vegas strip. The combination of Duke's illegal and copious intake of intoxicants with

lofty national ideals becomes a wry comment on the excesses of contemporary Western self-indulgence. Duke and his attorney find the heart of the American Dream at a rotating merry-go-round bar in the mega-casino Circus Circus, which typifies Thompson's sense of irony by casting a cheap casino gimmick as the "main nerve" of the American Dream (2005: 47-48). The circular configuration of the bar evokes the originary scene with an intoxicated Duke as the central figure to a periphery of casino gamblers and readers. By making his vertiginous intoxication in a casino the focal point of a sacred national ideology, Thompson parodies the self-deluding fallacies of an ideal advanced upon ravenous acquisitive mimesis. In this way, Thompson expresses the ambiguity of the postmodern condition, which is at once disgusted by and enamoured with its contingency on consumer capitalist immoderation. This theme runs throughout the novel and resonates with Gans's vision of the postmodern esthetic, which Thompson first begins to articulate in *The Rum Diary*. By juxtaposing his nefarious dealings and excess against the high ideals of Alger, Thompson trades the "modernist aggression against the market . . . [for] irony toward the market. [He] . . . learns to take the philistinism of consumer society seriously by inventively affecting not to take it seriously" (Bartlett 133).

Necessarily, such insights require a keen awareness of the mimetic nature of the self. As a journalist on assignment, Duke imitates the behaviour he observes and parodies the ubiquity of mimeticism in the society he critiques. As he walks through a casino floor in the early hours of the morning, he observers the gamblers still at their games: "Who *are* these people? . . . there are a hell of a *lot* of them–still screaming around these . . . crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the . . . pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino" (Thompson 2005: 57). Imitating his subjects, Duke decides to join in and puts some money down on a game. When he loses, he adopts the mindset of the players he observes: "No. Calm down. Learn to *enjoy* losing. The important thing is to cover the story on its own terms" (57). This self-reflexive experience of mimetic desire is a major development from the bewildered portrayal of frustrated metaphysical desire described in *The Rum Diary*'s allegory of a passing Caribbean day. In the second half of *Fear and Loathing*, Duke prepares to cover the District Attorney's conference and explains that his story on the Mint 400 "had been an *observer* gig, this one would need *participation*" (91). Going even further than when Thompson was researching for *Hells Angels*, Duke's role-play involves adopting a false police officer identity (140-141) and inventing law enforcement stories to swap with newfound colleagues (145). The adoption of an affected persona, assumed to infiltrate the subgroup he observes, further exemplifies Thompson's abilities as a social critic and American subculture ethnographer. In this sense, Thompson discovers undercover investigative journalism to be a truly postmodern form, as it "presents its works as the products of conventions, of the insights of a historical other rather than a

visionary self" (Gans 129). Thompson does not attempt to report objectively on what he observes. Instead, he allows his surroundings, with their conventions and cultural-historical context, to shape the story he tells.

As in *The Rum Diary*, the mimetic desire of the market precipitates a violent crisis in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This time, the speaker is able to come to terms with his own complicity. "The mentality of Las Vegas is so grossly atavistic that a really massive crime often slips by unrecognized" (Thompson 2005: 173), Duke explains as he reflects on how his own excess had gone beyond what even Las Vegas could tolerate: "I'd abused every rule Vegas lived by–burning the locals, abusing the tourists, terrifying the help" (173). The admission of "abusing the tourists" refers to Duke's involvement in a dubious sexual encounter between his lawyer and a teenage girl named Lucy, who has traveled to Las Vegas from Montana. Duke arrives at his hotel room to find his attorney has slept with the teenager after giving her a hit of LSD (114). Duke is concerned that, when Lucy comes down, she will accuse the men of rape (116). In order to convince his attorney of the risk he is taking in his continued relationship with Lucy, Duke ironically unfolds an elaborate plan to pimp Lucy to the police officers at the district attorney's convention (114-115). The effect of the plan on the reader and the attorney is to recoil at the brutality of Duke's imagination. His attorney sums up his shock when he says, "I knew you were sick, but I never expected to hear you actually *say* that kind of stuff" (115). Duke insists that Lucy must be gotten rid of. In an aside to the reader, he considers killing Lucy and feeding her body to the lizards in the desert (118). However, he ultimately decides to abandon the girl by sending her (still high on acid) to another hotel where she will wait in vain for the men to contact her (119). Duke freely admits the ethical deficiency of his decision saying, "I felt like a Nazi but it had to be done" (115). The whole episode acts as a kind of confession, in which Thompson's narrator demonstrates the extent of his participation in the ugly victimage mechanisms of Las Vegas, where "they *kill* the weak and deranged" (104). The successful expulsion of Lucy restores peace to Duke and his attorney's friendship and allays Duke's fears of criminal prosecution. Thus, the episode offers a clear example of the surrogate victim mechanism operating in the cutthroat world of the Las Vegas strip: home to Thompson's American Dream.

When compared to the collective scene of desire involving Chenault in *The Rum Diary*, the Lucy episode goes further in demonstrating the narrator's complicity in violence as it proceeds out of collective appropriative mimesis. The centre and desiring-periphery configuration of the dance scene around Chenault appears again in Duke's proposal to turn Lucy into a prostitute. "We can set her up in one of these back-street motels, hang pictures of Jesus all over the room, then turn these pigs loose on her . . . Hell, she's strong; she'll hold her own" (114-115), says Duke. The mention of hanging images of Christ in the room is suggested as a way to pacify

Lucy, who, Duke has discovered, is a Christian. However, the inclusion of the bizarre detail inverts the usual configuration of desiring subjects around the victimized Christ and places him in the crowd of victimizers, who are focused on a desire-object and surrogate victim: Lucy. This ironic turn demonstrates Thompson's understanding of the collective configuration of every scene of desire, no matter how elevated or base. As a pimp, Duke's sardonic fantasy makes him part of the periphery that benefits from Lucy's exploitation. Thus, the fantasy goes further in admitting complicity in exploitation than Kemp does in his rape fantasy involving Chenault (1998: 143), or his observer position in the scene of Chenault's violent appropriation at the carnival (156). Though Duke's expulsion of Lucy is far less brutal than his imaginary proposal, such self-implicating candour is a result of Thompson' s Gonzo style, which exposes the facts of his involvement far more than the fictionalized peripheral role his speaker plays in *The Rum Diary*.

What Thompson begins to indicate in *The Rum Diary*, and articulates in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is that (as a form) fiction is not sufficient to defer the resentment experienced within the self and observed in the world. For Thompson, there must be an amalgam of journalistic realism and a rendering of subjective experience that refuses to elide the speaker's involvement in victim-hungry mimetic systems. Such honesty collapses modernism's individualist self-justification and forces a reappraisal of the whole collective scene. Consequently, Thompson participates in "[t]he postmodern debunking of the esthetic utopia of modernism[, which corresponds] . . . to the demise of the anticapitalist social utopias that accompanied it" (Gans 129). Thompson began writing *The Rum Diary* in the early nineteen sixties and published *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in nineteen seventy-one. During this time, he watched a late surge of anticapitalist modernism disintegrate with the demise of the nineteen sixties youth movement. In *Fear and Loathing* he recalls the end of the counter-culture movement: "We had all the right momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave . . . now . . . with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark–that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back" (Thompson 2005: 68). Despite his nostalgic tone, Thompson is critical of the "central illusion [of the movement's drug culture, which produced] a generation of permanent cripples, [and] failed seekers" (178-179). In the preface to *The Rum Diary* Thompson categorizes his speaker as one such seeker (1998: 5) and, in *Fear and Loathing*, admits that "their loss and failure is ours, too" (2005: 178). Thompson identifies the culmination of the sixties counter-culture failure in "[t]he orgy of violence at Altamont [,which] merely *dramatized* the problem. . . . [T]he illness was understood to be terminal, and the energies of The Movement were long since aggressively dissipated by the rush to self-preservation" (179-180). This violent clash between counter-culture groups(4) exemplifies the non-differentiation of warring doubles. Ironically, violence–and the resentment it expresses–are exactly what the counter-culture movement sought to

end. By speaking so frankly about The Movement's failure, Thompson's "[p]ostmodernism discovers that there is no historical horizon beyond which desire is fulfilled and resentment disappears–resentment can never be abolished, only deferred" (Gans 129). The seeds of this realization are dormant in *The Rum Diary*, where the possibility of finding an outside to the market is questioned (Thompson 1998: 134). Ultimately, this questioning forces Thompson to confront his own complicity in the market he resents. By the time he writes *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the events of the sixties have demonstrated to him that "the originality of individual desire . . . [is] the central illusion . . . of life in market society" (Gans 129). When contrasted with Paul Kemp's outlook, the experiences of Raoul Duke exemplify "the historical moment in which the mimetic nature of desire can be understood, and the originary hypothesis explicitly formulated" (129).

The Rum Diary represents a young writer's effort to revive the early modernist resentment for the market, only to begin a hesitant exposition of the modernist myth that desire originates within an essential self. In the process, Thompson stumbles into the new postmodern esthetic. When the novel's film adaptation debuts, expected in 2011, the contemporary postmodern esthetic will certainly influence the presentation of Thompson's evolving style. How will producer and star Johnny Depp (D'Alessandro, par. 2) develop Thompson's early intuitions on the nature of desire? It will also be interesting to see how complicit Depp's character is in the narrative's conspiratorial murder. Will Depp go beyond Thompson by allowing his central character to recognize his complicity in collective violence? If the trajectory of Gans's esthetic evolution is accurate, the postmodern filmmaker will attempt to further explicate the mimetic and anthropological themes in Thompson's fledgling novel. This will mean making Kemp's complicity even more clear to the audience than Thompson's original work does. Whatever the film's bent, Thompson's early instincts regarding the nature of metaphysical desire and their developing social consequences are strong. Unlike Thompson's models, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, *The Rum Diary* admits a great deal about the interdividual nature of desire. In addition, his early vision anticipates the postmoderns' uncertainty in their experience of the esthetic object. In this way, *The Rum Diary* is a testing ground for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*' exposition of lust and greed in the American Dream. In *Fear and Loathing*, Thompson places himself at the centre–as close as possible to communal objects of desire. From this position, he is able to reflect upon desire as a communal phenomenon, the victims of which belong to everyone.

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Notes

1. I use the term “masochistic” in the way that Girard interprets it in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (329). (back)

2. Gonzo is a permutation of the New Journalism, a more literary style of reporting that arose in the sixties and early seventies. The unique first person perspective of Gonzo Journalism first appears in Thompson’s 1970 article, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (Wenner 125).The Oxford English Dictionary defines “gonzo” as “denoting journalism of an exaggerated, subjective, and fictionalized style”. William Kennedy explains the development of Gonzo thus: “[Thompson] found a way to turn himself into this singular first-person itinerant journalist who was interesting no matter what he wrote about. He put himself into the picture and became the story” (127). (back)

3. Horatio Alger is a nineteenth century author, who popularized the idea that everyone in America (regardless of social standing) can improve their situation through hard work and adherence to high moral standards. (back)

4. Duke explains that “[t]he [Hells] Angels blew it in 1965 . . . when they . . . attacked the front ranks of an anti-war march. This proved to be an historic schism in the then Rising Tide of the Youth Movement of the Sixties. It was the first open break between the Greasers and the Longhairs, and the importance of that break can be read in the history of SDS, which eventually destroyed itself in the doomed effort to reconcile the interests of the lower/working class biker/dropout types and the upper/middle, Berkeley/ student activists” (179). (back)