The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative investigates the textuality of all discourse, arguing that the ideologically charged distinction between “journalism” and “fiction” is socially constructed rather than natural. Phyllis Frus separates literariness from aesthetic definitions, regarding it as a way of reading a text through its style to discover how it “makes” reality. Frus also takes up the problem of how we determine both the truth of historical events such as the Holocaust and the fictional or factual status of narratives about them.

Frus first examines narratives by Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway, showing that conventional understanding of the categories of fiction and nonfiction frequently determines the differences we perceive in texts, differences we imagine are determined by common sense. When journalists writing about historical events adopt the Hemingway-esque, understated narrative style that is commonly associated with both “objectivity” and “literature” (John Hersey is one example), the reader sees the damage done by the wholesale construction of literature as a “pure,” nonfunctional art: it leads to an audience unable to face the historical and social conditions in which it must function. She interprets New Journalistic narratives by Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, and Janet Malcolm, suggesting by her critical practice ways to counter the reification of modern consciousness to which both objective journalism and aestheticized fiction contribute.
The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative
The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative

The Timely and the Timeless

PHYLLIS FRUS
Vanderbilt University
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521102742

© Cambridge University Press 1994

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1994
This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Frus, Phyllis.
The politics and poetics of journalistic narrative : the timely and the timeless / Phyllis Frus.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
PS366. R44F78 1994
818'.50809 – dc20

To my parents, Roy Frus and Nelle Bennett Frus, and my son, Craig McCord:
“it was more than enough”
Contents

Preface: True Stories   page ix
Acknowledgments   xxiii

Introduction: What Isn’t Literature   1
1 Writing After the Fact: Crane, Journalism, and Fiction   13
2 “News That Stays”: Hemingway, Journalism, and Objectivity in Fiction   53
3 News That Fits: The Construction of Journalistic Objectivity   90
4 Other American New Journalisms: 1960s New Journalism as “Other”   120
5 The “Incredibility of Reality” and the Ideology of Form   157
6 Freud and Our “Wolfe Man”: The Right Stuff and the Concept of Belatedness   196

Conclusion   233

Notes   237
Works Cited   261
Index   285
Preface: True Stories

We are obliged to receive the majority of our experience at second hand through parents, friends, mates, lovers, enemies, and the journalists who report it to us.

– Norman Mailer, Some Honorable Men

This is a book about both journalism and fiction, specifically about the relationship between the two narrative modes over the course of the twentieth century. By “journalism” I mean writing that appears in periodicals; I also include book-length nonfiction which tells of recent events but which may not have appeared first in a magazine. (In Cold Blood did, but The Executioner’s Song did not.) Some of my examples are conventionally called “nonfiction novels” or true-life novels; others, especially those published since the 1980s, are not. Their immediacy, the research the writer has done, and her relationship with her subject make works like Janet Malcolm’s three nonfiction books journalistic to me. Unlike Thomas Connery, who excludes essays and commentary from journalism, I use the term in its broadest sense to mean “writing about newsworthy subjects.” Because writers make whatever they are interested in “news” to others, they in effect make their subjects journalistic by writing about them.

Most of what I say theoretically about journalism applies to nonfiction in general, but that is a large category, and I wanted to choose a more limited category, for practical reasons. My historical approach suggested journalism because that is the kind of nonfiction Stephen Crane and many other American writers practiced and that is how many of them still start out. I began this study many years ago by taking journalistic narrative as a place to consider what we mean by literature. Why do we set off some prose in a special category, rather than considering writing critically in all its diverse modes, in what Raymond Williams calls its “multiplicity” (Marxism 146)? Rather than trying to locate an essential quality that defines literature (which in prose is synonymous with “fic-
x  PREFACE

tion”), I came to use Williams’s conception of literature as a socially constructed category of works that developed its current meaning by the end of the nineteenth century: a privileged realm of works embodying timeless truth and transcendent values (Marxism chap. 3). This does not solve the problem of how to regard and evaluate what have been regarded as “crossover” texts in this hierarchy of prose modes (nonfiction treated like fiction, well-written history and biography), but it does guide me toward a historical and contextual framework for considering these examples.

Although my main focus is on texts by canonical American writers who have published journalism as well as fiction (narratives usually regarded as blurring the boundaries between literature and reportage), I do not use the term “literary journalism,” because I cannot accept the valuation that results from separating some examples of journalistic narrative from general coverage of current events and issues. Designating narratives as “literary” places them within an objectivist and essentialist framework that inevitably affects our readings of these works: it implies some aesthetic judgment and tends to remove the text from historical or political analysis. We usually overlook the fact that “literature,” as currently defined, is produced in a “gate-keeping” process involving publishers, critics, teachers, and professional journals. Historicizing the concept of making literature produces an alternative definition: “Literature comprises works with a history of critical readings that emphasize their universal characteristics or aesthetic aspects.” The result of this aestheticizing process is to render literary narrative something we regard as “neither true nor false.”

Once the tension between nonfiction and fictional tendencies signaled by a given narrative has been resolved in favor of literature, the text becomes nonpropositional, and thus unlikely to be a factor in the politics of ordinary life, the domain of social experience and public expression where change is possible. The particular, local claims of a literary work are subsumed under its universal qualities, whereas a narrative on the border keeps its readers (if it continues to attract them) because they are interested at least partly in its truth claims, that is, in its referentiality. This is a readership to be desired, for the notion that literature is too pure to be useful in gaining particular ends inevitably constructs an audience unable to face the historical and social conditions in which it must function. This is why I struggle to represent the complexity of truth claims inherent in narratives on the border and to resist either celebrating these texts’ stylistic attributes for their own sake (which is to begin the process that will lead them to the literary category) or emphasizing their factuality and accuracy (thus beginning the process that leads to nonliterary status). My goal is to counter the tendency of literary
critics and historians on one hand and media critics and journalist-reviewers on the other to reduce problematic narratives to either factual or fictional status and to lament the muddying of distinctions that have not always been clear anyway.

This puts my study squarely in the midst of the current debate in the humanities over whether the “canon” (defined narrowly as “literature itself”) should be conceived more broadly or whether the formalist notion of literature will prove difficult to dislodge or modify because of its ability to exclude deviant forms and incorporate or co-opt alternatives. Because I regard the hierarchical categories of literature and non-literary forms, fiction and “other” prose modes, as pernicious to the development of the complex public discourse necessary in a well-functioning democratic society, I oppose the aesthetic judgments these high-low distinctions rest on and would do away with the canon altogether. But I also understand the resistance to such leveling tactics on the part of conservatives, who view them as threatening the ground of meaning, of absolute standards, and of coherent structures that provide stability and the basis for moral judgments in society.

Because there is no winning this battle in the current climate – as indicated by the recent governmental, judiciary, and media backlash against liberal scholars (in the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as the National Endowment for the Arts), against women who do not accept their “natural” place or biological roles (see Faludi), and against First Amendment protection of artistic expression – I would turn the discussion to a different issue, one obscured by the argument over the weakening of standards and the assault on the canon by what are labeled “radical” or “diluting” forces. To insist on the importance of maintaining universal, “natural,” and aesthetic standards for art in the face of calls for diversity, pluralism, and an openness to popular forms avoids the historical and political issues raised by these energetic and democratizing alternatives. In whose interest is it to preserve an elitist canon, moral absolutes, high aesthetic standards? And – a corollary question – why are the groups in ascendancy content to conduct the debate on the grounds of taste, aesthetic value, and the moral force of art?

One answer is that the canon of great American literature and the values necessary to preserve it mesh very well with the dominant myths of our American past, which seem to illuminate our progress to the status of a powerful and influential nation. If we lose those myths and the values they imply, or even if they are seriously questioned, we may lose that place (or we may be forced to admit that it is being steadily eroded). James Carey suggests that the “national media give public and identifiable form to symbols and values of national identity and also
block out of public communication areas of potential conflict” (“Communications” 25). Perhaps the strongest argument against the perpetuation of these naturalized categories of myth and art is the argument from history, but although those in support of the status quo may pay lip service to history (usually a nostalgic or mythic version), they seem to be invested in promulgating myth, rather than in real historical analysis.

What are we missing out on when we do not preserve the nonliterary, the popular, the nonfictional text? Preserving texts is, after all, what the canon process is about: publishers keeping books in print and reprinting journalism, booksellers distributing them, critics and scholars creating a body of criticism about them, teachers and administrators choosing them to teach. The brief answer is that we lose the ability to discuss the complex political and historical issues they raise. Under the guise of requiring works to satisfy criteria of permanent and universal interest, we may lose texts (and even particular subgenres) of importance, but certainly a number of writers and works will disappear because they are considered radical, irrelevant, “feminine,” subcultural, or lowbrow. (Lauter [“Race”], O’Brien, and Ohmann [“Shaping”] describe the influence that categories named by these adjectives have on canon formation.) One reason to be grateful for the canonical status of a work like Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night*, for example, is that anyone reading the second half of that novel cannot readily dismiss the antiwar activists of the sixties as improvising radicals, or hippies and freaks, as easily happens when students pick up their knowledge of that decade from television and films and learn popular myths from conservative parents. Being canonical means that this text is likely to be read – perhaps even assigned for a course in history, literature, sociology, or political science – and thus carefully analyzed.

Similarly, if we emphasize only the literary style or techniques of journalistic and other nonfictional narratives, we risk overlooking their context, message, and argumentative strategies and what they can teach us about complex argument and political discourse. As Donald Lazere points out in an important essay, “Literacy and Mass Media,” both conservative and leftist groups have an interest in raising the level of public discourse by working to change the superficial banalities of mass-journalistic forms and the passivity and “universal regression of reasoning capacities” to which they apparently lead (288). He argues that teaching literature and literary criticism can help to improve Americans’ abilities to contribute to public discourse and participate in democratic institutions, but he is not talking about approaching literature as an autonomous realm filled with works that are “good” for us. Rather, he is asserting the connection between the study of literature and other areas where advanced cognitive development is important.

Journalist-critic Sven Birkerts seems to have reached a similar conclu-
PREFACE

sion about the interrelationship of critical thinking and literary criticism, based on his experience of teaching introductory expository writing to Harvard freshmen. He describes struggling to find ways to improve the quality of reading and the level of discussion and expression of his students. (Lazere reports that, according to their teachers, upper-middle-class, suburban white students are not immune to the deficiencies in cognitive development and to “media-induced illiteracy” that researchers have found in students from lower social classes, from oral cultures, or mired in the “culture of poverty” [“Literacy” 299–300].) A good method for teaching advanced literacy, Birkerts discovered, is to encourage close reading of essays and of their geographical, historical, social, and political contexts. If his approach begins in New Critical interpretive strategies, it does not remain there, but moves on, like Mark Miller’s analyses of television, publicity, films, shopping malls, and the arrival of 1984, to backgrounds such as the women’s movement, neocolonialism, and theories of propaganda.1

My point here is that the ahistoricism of our mass media (especially television news but also print journalism in its daily, objective form) is not corrected by the ahistoricism of predominantly New Critical interpretive strategies taught to masses of students in secondary and postsecondary schools and applied to “superior” examples of well-researched and prestigiously presented magazine articles and trade books. Therefore I reject the approach implicit in all critical strategies emphasizing “literary journalism” or “literary nonfiction.” By and large, journalists and their productions are assimilated to the literary canon on the basis of essentialist criteria, as the titles of two collections edited by Norman Sims indicate: The Literary Journalists and Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century. These “canonical” examples of journalism or nonfiction are sometimes used to illustrate techniques of postmodernism, such as fabulism and metafiction (Hellmann, Zavrzadeh) and new strategies for reviving the near-moribund novel in the late twentieth century (Birkerts 149; Wolfe, “Stalking”). Although I too treat journalistic narratives that have been much discussed by other critics (what an early reader of this manuscript called “the same old new journalistic works”) – In Cold Blood, The Executioner’s Song, and The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test – I do it not to increase their canonical status but to show their politics, and I read even the self-conscious strategies I find there as more than stylistic attributes. Most previous readings of these novels have emphasized their rhetoric, and many have read them against the turmoil of the sixties and seventies, but they also generally regard the interesting border crossings as occurring as a discrete phenomenon within a finite period (Wolfe, Introduction; Hollowell; Hellmann).

My strategies for self-conscious and historical readings of these jour-
nalistic narratives emphasize the importance of activating readers to become co-creators, rather than passive consumers of either pleasure or information. Because journalist-novelists exploit the tension between the referentiality and the form of their productions, this is one source of readers’ pleasure. Readers can also emphasize these two levels, as when they read the content of any narrative through its form. We do this when we discover how a text, through its style, “makes” reality. Thus when we read texts in relation to the conditions that have given rise to them, we engage in the process of producing literature. Reading narratives historically is therefore one way of countering the aesthetic criteria of the canonization process. I demonstrate this in Chapter 1, where, unlike nearly every other critic of Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat,” I read this story as autobiographical, revealing Crane’s obsession with the idea of immortality but trying to suppress it within the context of yellow journalism and the idea of the freelance writer as a “man of business” rather than simply a “man of letters.”

This is a rather theoretical approach to the problem of border-crossing genres. I have taken this path out of a desire to shift the discussion away from the issue of whether these texts are factual or fictional, nonfictional or literary. I want fiction to take on some of the intellectual and political power of nonfiction – its propositionality, or ability to make statements that influence the way we frame and interpret our experience, and that locate it in particular social processes and contexts. At the same time, I advocate reading journalism so that it crosses over to share fiction’s emphasis on its own materiality – not so that it will achieve the label of “literature,” with its status and prestige, but so that it will attract the serious readings we give to fiction. In Murray Krieger’s words, “Literature, losing its definition and reduced to an egalitarian status with all texts, is returned to the greater privilege of providing the model for a mode of interpretation to which all texts are now made eligible” (21).

Because all narratives have the same status as texts, and because the language structures of formal realism take priority over the reality they produce, “true-life” narratives ought to be judged as fictional ones are: according to their coherence and correspondence to a world we recognize, that is, as they correspond not to the events themselves but to other narratives. We naturally do compare the events that we derive from different narratives, but once events have happened we can recover them only through narratives about them (considering memory, too, as a kind of narrative), and so they are secondary to the plots in which they are embedded. In other words, narratives, whether recited to ourselves in our mind’s ear, told aloud, or read, are not representations of reality but in some sense prior to the happenings that supposedly gave rise to them. In an age of electronic as well as mechanical reproduction, instant
PREFACE

replay, news simulations, docudrama, multiple transmission sites (cable), and burgeoning video and computer technologies, it is the rare reader or viewer who has not been confused about the reality of some representation or felt the secondariness of even “original” experience. If mass-media forms are not creating a new “reality,” they may be restructuring the way we experience it by affecting the way we perceive the world.

There is a dark underside to this insight, which may be responsible for the virulence of the antitheory sentiment among journalists and some sectors of the academy, which in turn is part of what Lazere says is a “long-running assault by conservative politicians, journalists, and scholars on the American academic Left, particularly in literary and cultural studies” (“Literary Revisionism” 49). This is the fear, usually repressed, and detectable mainly in the unreasonable temper of the response, that what leftist theorists and cultural revisionists have been saying about the relation between texts and reality may be correct – for example, their skepticism about our ability to “know” anything for certain and even to pursue knowledge and disseminate the results of our search free from the political view within which we undertook it. It is probably always difficult to learn that there are very few uncontested facts in the world, and almost impossible to admit how one benefits from the common belief that supporting things as they are is not a political position, whereas criticizing the existing form of government, economic relations, or class system, or suggesting alternatives to particular social forms such as heterosexual marriage or the nuclear family, is clearly regarded as partisan and biased, and somehow un-American (Lazere, “Literary Revisionism” [54]).

A new collection of pieces by Joan Didion, After Henry, well illustrates the practical implications of the messages that have been filtering through the thick screen of conservative resistance to recent theory. In the book’s opening section, as she focuses her incisive personal, New Journalistic style in what only appears to be scattershot recording of isolated scenes of the Reagan presidency and the 1988 presidential campaigns, it becomes clear that the press coverage of this significant national office and the process of electing someone to fill it has moved to a level far beyond mere “pseudoevent” or manipulation of the voting public. She shows this to be in large part the result of the press corps’s complicity in transmitting “the images their sources wish transmitted,” even to the point of being willing “in exchange for certain colorful details around which a ‘reconstruction’ can be built . . . to present these images not as a story the campaign wants told but as fact” (58). This “reconstruction” is, of course, the news story that will fill the reporter’s employer’s need for neutral but interesting coverage in order to sell
PREFACE

enough papers or magazines to justify the rates charged to advertisers. (We may have moved away from partisan political coverage, but surely not from economically “interested” reporting.)

One of her most effective strategies is cumulative: she shows the transformation, through three reporters’ accounts, of a Democratic presidential candidate “casually” throwing a baseball on an airport tarmac into an iconic representation of “He’s just a regular guy.” Any reader of Didion’s account of this transformation can hardly fail to see that the abuses of “objective” journalism are far greater than any benefit in the form of information the public might get. Here is Didion’s concluding analysis of this construction of a “real moment”:

What we had in the tarmac arrival with ball tossing, then, was an understanding: a repeated moment witnessed by many people, all of whom believed it to be a setup and yet most of whom believed that only an outsider, only someone too “naive” to know the rules of the game, would so describe it. (64–5)

Such collusion also renders this supposedly objective coverage far more fictive than the sophisticated political reporters convey through their modest self-referentiality. (David S. Broder began the tarmac story for the Washington Post with this sentence: “Dukakis called out to Jack Weeks, the handsome, curly-haired Welshman who good-naturedly shepherds us onward pressmen through the daily vagaries of the campaign schedule” [64].) Coverage from such a deceptively self-aware viewpoint does not even manage to contradict the illusion of objectivity, which is defined as the coverage from “nobody’s point of view” (as Edward Epstein quotes a producer of television news, giving Epstein his title News from Nowhere). Instead of taking responsibility for their agreement to “overlook the observable in the interests of obtaining a dramatic story line” (Didion 65), the reporters mask their collusion by their disingenuous references to the process of covering the story. They do not go so far as admitting that they contributed to the story, however.

This ability to co-opt criticism by incorporating the techniques of one’s critics but using them to bolster the illusion one is creating may be an indication that objective journalism, rather than giving up its goals in the face of repeated assaults on its legitimacy, is adapting to the critique and in fact gathering strength. Didion’s indirect reference to herself as the “naive” outsider, in the passage quoted earlier, and other allusions to her detached observation – in contrast to the other reporters, who apparently accepted the premise that “the winning of and the maintaining of public office warranted the invention of a public narrative based at no point on observable reality” (82) – contributes to a different
kind of self-consciousness. Unlike the aesthetic strategy of the self-deprecating, compromised establishment journalist, she reveals her political bias, as well as the construction of her attitudes and the criticism they lead to.

It may be that only the devastating irony of a Didion or extensive analysis like Miller’s of the “preemptive” self-derision of television, which protects its power by mocking its critics’ derision, can reveal the complicity between consumer advertising, journalism and other mass media, and the capitalist status quo. Didion’s collection (comprising pieces that appeared in the New York Review of Books, the New Yorker, and the now-defunct New West) is at the least a reminder that critical, political New Journalism is going strong, despite the paucity of references to it, and her results are evidence that it is needed more than ever.

The story I tell in the chapters that follow traces the separation of journalism and fiction as narrative categories (via such oppositions as “nonfiction” versus “literature,” “factual” versus “literary,” “real” versus “invented”), and the various ways writers and texts on the border have muddied these neat distinctions and questioned their basis. But in turn I also treat the way critics have interpreted and categorized those border-questioners – most characteristically, in terms of formalist or aesthetic norms. At each stage of the history of the relationship, things could have gone differently. There was nothing inevitable about either the separation of the two modes or the publishing, editing, teaching, and criticism that fostered and reinforced the separation, accepted the legitimacy of journalistic objectivity, and favored the production and reading of fiction in formalist terms. But because the relationship developed as it did, literature is today primarily an aesthetic category, its structuring devices are rendered invisible, and we exclude from the canon most political or historical novels and interpretations that emphasize politics or history. (As evidence, consider that the “historical novel” is now regarded primarily as a mass-market genre, and that contemporary historical novels by Didion, E. L. Doctorow, and Toni Morrison are rarely considered in that light; Birkerts’s essays provide a recent, casual example of that tendency.) At the same time, criticism of nonfiction is dominated by the questions “Is it true?” “Did this really happen?”

The story starts in an earlier time, a period in which what writers produce when they write for periodicals was not viewed as very different from their fictional output. “Journalism,” Carey says, “was traditionally conceived as a literary genre rather than as a species of technical writing” (“Communications” 32). The move of journalism from a sub-genre of literature to a mode dominated by objective reporting meant a loss of independence for the reporter; he (in the majority of cases, it was
PREFACE

a "he") could no longer be a clear advocate and social critic. From writing what readers must have been aware was observed from a subjective viewpoint, journalists moved to a position of complicity with the status quo. Objective journalism rarely acknowledges its role in actively shaping our environment; instead it asserts conventions of invisibility and the naturalness of fact.

I begin with a journalist from the old school, Stephen Crane, who cared so little about whether something he wrote was a sketch, or tale, or front-page reporting that his editors had had a hard time sorting it out. By comparing interpretations of two 1897 Crane narratives – “The Open Boat” and the piece of journalism he wrote about the same incident – I show the effect of the paradigmatic assumptions about fiction and journalism on our reading practice. Characteristics we find in the short story, such as third-person point of view and hierarchy of narration, are associated with fiction, and so all the things we “know” about fiction come into play in that reading. Thus I demonstrate how we tend to universalize the fictional.

The usual view is that realism in fiction, from Twain to Hemingway, developed out of the major realists’ experience as journalists, so that the techniques of American realism are those of the newsroom and the reporter. Because I define literature differently, I can see in Hemingway’s 1920s narratives the construction of the illusion of objectivity – which then is elevated to the status of transcendent, universal truth, above the contingency of history, through strategies of omission, understatement, and indirectness. This minimalist form of realistic fiction, which conceals its methods along with the temporality, particularity, politics, and history inherent in a nonfictional discourse like journalism – indeed excises “discourse” itself in favor of “pure” or ostensibly objective narration – thus works by ideology, defined by Roland Barthes in Mythologies as “what goes without saying” (11).

Although we use the term “objective” to describe the form of modernist realism perfected by Hemingway, this kind of realism did not grow out of journalism, for the journalism practiced by the likes of Crane, Dreiser, Cather, and Hemingway was subjective and personal, filled with signs of the presence of the observer or reporter and with references to its own production. Fictional objectivity is better seen as both a reaction to the commodification of artistic production and an expression of it. That is, the alienation of labor inevitable in the Taylorized workplace results in the obliteration of signs of work from the product; the corollary in artistic production is the autonomous art object, which conceals “the fact that it is itself a human construction,” in Adorno’s analysis (quoted in Jameson, Marxism and Form 408).

Next I tell the story of the rise of journalistic objectivity in the Anglo-
American tradition, likewise under the pressure of a society rapidly being transformed, first by monopoly and then by consumer or commodity capitalism. I contrast the doctrine of objectivity with literary and sociological notions of reflexivity, in order to undermine the notion that facts speak for themselves and to show how the “real” is produced through “news.” Two readings demonstrate the difference between “reflexive” and “objective” (or pragmatic) reading of journalism and fiction. These include Hemingway’s “Japanese Earthquake,” a self-conscious interview with earthquake survivors, which shows the journalist “alienating the apparatus of production” and thus revealing the conventions of survivor interviews; and Hiroshima, by John Hersey, which suppresses them in a transparent form that Hersey is at pains to distinguish from fiction (“The Legend on the License”).

In Chapters 4 through 6, although I continue to integrate my critical readings of journalistic narrative with history and theory, I apply my theoretical and historical theses to the journalistic narratives that have been popular in the United States since 1965. Although 1960s New Journalism and nonfiction novels have been called “literary” genres, because of their self-conscious style and techniques supposedly borrowed from fiction, I see them as an identifiable category of nonfiction, because of the way they have been treated—by the mainstream media, academics, and critics, in a labeling and stereotyping process designed to set them apart from the dominant practice. They comprise narratives that have been noticed precisely because they call attention to what has been suppressed in the separation of journalism and fiction.

The usual explanation of these practices is that they blend the factual and the literary; to Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, for example, the nonfiction novel has “the shapeliness of fiction and the authority of reality” (56). Conceiving of the new nonfiction as a hybrid form that is ultimately literary (and designating it “literary journalism” or “the literature of fact”) not only splits form from content but asserts the prior claims of the world on narrative, rather than the other way around, for the devices borrowed from fiction are supposedly applied to stories of actual people and events. By regarding New Journalism as a hybrid mode, these critics sidestep the important epistemological question of the relation between discourse and reality, and the ideological implications of transparent realism. As I suggest in Chapter 4, a nonfiction novel like Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test gives instructions on how to read not only itself but the practice that it helps define. Following that process, one can read even history reflexively.

I also take up the problem of accounting for the appeal of nonfictional narratives in general and stories of sensational events in particular. The most common explanation for the popularity of New Journalism and
the nonfiction novel in recent decades is that, as Philip Roth said in 1960, reality is outdoing the novelist’s imagination; these genres supposedly answer the need for credibility that the traditional realistic novel can no longer take for granted, given the absurdity of modern life. I examine this view, expressed by novelists from Roth to Wolfe, suggesting that at least part of the new nonfiction’s power derives from its acknowledgment of the role that language and the conventions of mimesis play in structuring “reality” by structuring our consciousness of it. Using two nonfiction novels of crime, I show that these are different from fictional ones at the level of the story we derive from them (“what happens”), not at the level of plot, or “how the reader learns of what happens,” for this is the level of narrative itself, which cannot be divided neatly into factual or fictional categories.

The story we derive from Capote’s In Cold Blood is radically different from that of Mailer’s Executioner’s Song, for Capote suppresses his relationship to the killers. Besides, his third-person, impersonal narration presents cause–effect explanations and tidies up the sociological case study in the manner of a realistic novel with closure. Mailer’s massive novel accounts for its own production (the second half presents the story of the media’s involvement, including that of Larry Schiller, who got Mailer to write the novel), leaves many unanswered questions, and avoids psychological explanation. The ubiquitous true-crime novel (the default nonfiction novel, to some critics) seems more closely connected to antecedents such as novels of sensation, gothic novels, and detection fiction, popular since the earliest novels published in the United States, than to documentary nonfiction or journalism. The new element that has been added to the triad of criminal or villain, victim, and sleuth (law enforcement officer or private eye) is the journalist, who recounts the whole story and then either reminds us of his particular observer’s point of view (Mailer) or suppresses his role in uncovering “the facts” (Capote).

In Chapter 6 I use psychoanalytic theory to focus on the reader as fourth party to the narrative transaction. I treat Janet Malcolm’s reports and essays on psychoanalysis, including In the Freud Archives, and a highly fact-based journalistic narrative, Wolfe’s The Right Stuff, as well as Freud’s own texts. In the case study of the “Wolf Man,” Freud refuses to locate reality in events; rather, he defines a category of structural or “psychical” reality or experience: “something which has all the consistency of the real without being verifiable in external experience” (see Laplanche 33). Here, too, is the clearest expression of Freud’s concept of Nachträglichkeit, or belatedness: when we alter events afterwards, have experiences before we could have had them, and derive causes from effects. In the case of our present-day “Wolfe Man,” Tom, The Right
Preface

Stuff is a problematic and ambiguous narrative about the relationship between journalism and history, read in terms of belatedness. In his description of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union to win the “space race,” the “Right Stuff” turns out to be a euphemism for the death instinct, the longing to return to an earlier state of innocence and unity, with no gap between the “real” and our perception of it. But Wolfe’s attention-getting, opaque style reveals his desire to leave signs that he was here, of his originality, of his anxiety at having something new to say about the overly media-exposed astronauts. Meanwhile, the first seven astronauts desperately create themselves as the first space pioneers, despite their knowledge that test pilots like Chuck Yeager were their heroic forerunners and their awareness that the space flights do not live up to the elaborate training simulations that formed the original of their belated “actual” experience. In short, we see events appropriated by texts that become “prior” or original, and the dominant interpretation (which we call “narrative history”) in the process of being constructed.

My goal throughout the study is to show ways of reading contemporary narratives so as to illuminate the construction of the myths that dominate our public and private lives. A secondary aim is to help readers realize that they can learn to interpret critically and even against the implications of the formative cultural experiences that constitute their environment and determine their beliefs. As my epigraph suggests, many of these experiences come in the mediating forms of journalism, conceived in the largest sense, not simply as news that stays new, relevant, or influential.
Acknowledgments

The result of having written a book that demonstrates the effects on interpretation of reading nonfiction content through form is that I find myself paralyzed at the thought of acknowledging the many people who have contributed to this project by composing a narrative essay, which relies on sequence and therefore privilege. Many of those I want to thank are my readers, who have proved themselves adept at the practice of what I call reflexive reading and will not be fooled by a deceptively objective style into overlooking the politics of precedence or the hierarchy of effusiveness any such essay inevitably entails. And so the form I have chosen is a list, subject to interpretation primarily for its politics of inclusion or omission.

I gratefully acknowledge all those who contributed to this project, in no order save alphabetical, with four exceptions. The exceptions are my dedicatees, my family, whom I thank for their love and support (in the tangible forms of fresh garden vegetables, frequent shipments of baked goods, and regular cooking and caretaking); my wonderful friend Stanley Corkin, collaborator for a decade, whose ideas I can hardly distinguish from my own when I read anything I wrote during that period; my dissertation adviser Perry Meisel, who started me off down this road with powerful advice and challenging questions; and my patient and encouraging mentor at Vanderbilt University, Michael Kreiling, who has read this study in many different forms and has always said the right thing.

The “A” list: Chris Anderson, the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press, Margaret Bass, the late William Buckler, Ellen Caldwell, Susan Chang, Joyce Chaplin, Mary Jane Doherty, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Barbara Foley, Larry Frus, Teresa Goddu, Julie Greenblatt, Josephine Hendin, William Howarth, Mark Jarman, Paula Johnson, Christine Kreiling, Nancy Kranich, Larry Lerner, fine copy editor Christie Lerch, Joan Lichtman, Ilse Dusoir Lind, Vara Neverow-Turk,
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

James Olney, Elisabeth Perry, Jack Prostko, Gary Richards, Dennis Rygiel, Ronald Schleifer, Jane Schwartz, Richard Schweid, Marilyn Frus Schweitzer, Eric Sundquist, Jim Toplon, Valerie Traub, Roger Trefousse, Rashelle Trefousse, Nancy Walker, James Young, Dorothy Young, and students in my courses at New York University, Hunter College of the City University of New York, the Juilliard School, and Vanderbilt University.

The author acknowledges the kind permission of Southern Illinois University Press to reprint, in altered form, an essay that appeared in Literary Nonfiction, ed. Chris Anderson, which forms part of Chapter 1; and Genre, which first published an essay adapted here in Chapter 5. The Vanderbilt University Research Council awarded two summer grants for work on this manuscript. Permission to reprint four lines of “I’ll Never Forget the Day I Read a Book,” by Jack Barnett and Jimmy Durante, was graciously granted by the Jack Barnett Estate and Jimmy Durante Music Publishing.