



Appreciating Tom Wolfe (1930–2018)

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Tom Wolfe the novelist arrived as modern fiction was going bankrupt. Modernism, the revolution in the arts that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century, had delivered all it had to deliver, and was in fact sometimes leaving empty boxes on the curb. The age of iconoclastic landmarks like *Ulysses*, *Metamorphosis*, *The Magic Mountain*, *To the Lighthouse*, was long past and some of them, such as *Ulysses*, were looking a little shopworn. The promise of revolutionary breakthrough in consciousness, of aesthetic transformation and transcendence of life, man, society, was long past, and far from being fulfilled. The image of the writer and artist as sacred figure, the prophet or shaman who led to the depths of experience beyond the ordinary, was growing faint.

Postmodernism had set in, beginning sometime after the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies, bringing in a host of experimental forms—absurdism, fabulism, minimalism, magical realism, metafiction, as Wolfe would detail in his literary manifesto, “Stalking the Billion Footed Beast,” two years after he had made his fiction debut with the rollicking *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), about race, class, and sex-riven New York City in the 1980s. With such as Gaddis, Pynchon, Doctorow, DeLillo, Beattie, Coover, Carver, Hawkes, Barth, Barthelme, reading had become something of a chore—dry, sullen minimalist works with very little payoff, or maybe big books trying very hard but giving no particular reason to plough through them. (I can read it, a friend said to me of one 800-page number, but why? Truth to tell, though, some of these books did become cult classics, especially with younger men.)

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Poetry too, had long gone from the expansive, soul shattering visions of the likes of T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and William Butler Yeats, who took on important themes and managed to make their own peculiar angle of vision large enough for others to enter. Later poets turned increasingly inward to explorations of the self and subjective experience. We went from hearing vigor in language and haunting lines to increasingly hermetic utterances that escaped any kind of recall. (A reading by John Ashbery that I attended almost finished poetry for me.)

In the other arts too, we were long past the exciting forays of the early modern period—Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Brancusi. Art lovers were left trying to squeeze rapture out of such specimens as Andre Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” Richard Serra’s gigantic, rusty “Tilted Arc,” and Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party,” consisting of large dinner plates delicately painted to represent the private parts of famous women, reverently displayed around a large dining room table. As for music, the Stravinskys and Coplands were no more, and one was always wary of having some frightful contemporary piece sprung on one, usually before the intermission at a concert, with the possibility of escape foreclosed.

It’s not that everything postmodern was bad, and not that there weren’t sometimes interesting and lively works, *Grendel* (1971), for example, by John Gardner, who issued his own literary protest manifesto, *On Moral Fiction* (1978); or John Updike’s “Scarlet Letter trilogy” (1975–1988); or Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977)), but on the whole things were seeming rather tiresome, aimless, pointless.

Wolfe had already knocked contemporary art and its pretensions off its pedestal in *The Painted Word* (1975), and thanks to *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981), we finally understood what had led to the unfortunate cascade of glass boxes on Manhattan’s Sixth Avenue. Then our ever-dissenting white-suited Southern gentleman came up with his new-old idea in *Bonfire*—back to the future with unvarnished realism in fiction. Instead of shattering limits and erasing boundaries, Wolfe recommended acknowledging the boundaries and presenting what lies within them with minute faithfulness, turning back to the literary techniques of nineteenth century writers such as Dickens and Zola, with their broad social canvas, numerous characters from varied levels of society, and multiple plots and subplots.

Bonfire centered around Wall Street bond trader Sherman McCoy, who starts out as a “master of the universe,” with his million dollar a year salary and fancy three million dollar Park Avenue co-op. Driving into the city from the airport, Sherman

could see the island of Manhattan off to the left. The towers were jammed together so tightly, he could feel the mass and stupendous weight. Just think of the millions, from all over the globe, who yearned to be on that island, in those towers, in those narrow streets! There it was, the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the irresistible destination of all those who insist on being where things are happening—and he was among the victors!

Not for long, however. As he glides with his married mistress into Manhattan in his Mercedes, the also-married Sherman misses the exit ramp and winds up in the South Bronx. In the ensuing confusion, his mistress takes the wheel and accidentally hits a black teenager. This is built into a huge racial incident, with Sherman as the accused, thanks to a totally unprincipled media and a black hustler-pastor named Reverend Bacon (a character who turned up in real life a few months after *Bonfire*'s publication in the person of the Reverend Al Sharpton). For Wolfe, we were way past the principled, high minded, colorblind idealism of the civil rights movement. Blacks were not just victims of a racist society, but capable of a full range of human action, including mayhem and race-baiting. And some, like the poor black teenager, actually are victims, of other blacks as well as of whites.

Here Wolfe's earlier writing as a journalist turned out to be excellent training—describing, for example, the glittering gathering for the Black Panthers given by conductor/composer Leonard Bernstein in his sumptuous Park Avenue apartment in “Radical Chic (1970),” and then working as a New Journalist in the so-called non-fiction novel. Reality as it was unfolding was a hundred times more interesting than the wanderings and meanderings and self-absorption of even so prodigiously gifted a wordsmith as Philip Roth, and Wolfe's effort was to make his prose reflect the thrill and chill of that reality.

Actually, it was Roth who gave Wolfe his cue toward realism in fiction, albeit inadvertently. Reality is too great for the novelist today, Roth had declared as far back as 1961. “The actuality is continually outdoing your talents,” he asserted, “and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist.” American life a decade or two after World War II had moved beyond the capacities of the realistic novel, Roth maintained; it had become chaotic, random, absurd. Realistic fiction continued to be created, but was losing prestige (Faulkner and Hemingway were gone; think, maybe, John O'Hara and James Jones). Thanks to Roth, as Wolfe saw it, a generation of young talented writers averted their eyes from the outward scene and turned inward, toward preoccupation with words and form and showing off in the act of writing itself.

Yes, the news was outpacing the imagination of the novelist. “But a generation of American writers has drawn precisely the wrong conclusion from that perfectly valid observation,” wrote Wolfe. “The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the [billion footed] beast and bring it to terms.”

And then perhaps Roth, who like Wolfe passed away in May, took a cue from Wolfe in turn, laying off the literary self-stimulation and focusing on the more objective reality of what the counterculture had done to American life and American youth, in *American Pastoral* (1997), for example.

Bonfire was so raw and truthful it was electrifying. It broke through the pieties of political correctness before political correctness in its contemporary sense even fully had that name. By contrast, it almost seemed that all that postmodern experimentation had been more or less an effort at obfuscation, holding back a vigorous confrontation with the realities of contemporary life. Wolfe took it on directly. As he explains in “Stalking”:

New York and practically every other large city in the United States are undergoing a profound change. The fourth great wave of immigrants—this one from Asia, North Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean—is now pouring in. Within ten years political power in most major American cities will have passed to the nonwhite majorities. Does that render these cities incomprehensible, fragmented beyond the grasp of all logic, absurd, meaningless to gaze upon in a literary sense? Not in my opinion. It merely makes the task of the writer more difficult if he wants to know what truly presses upon the heart of the individual, white or nonwhite, living in the metropolis in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Wolfe may have gotten a little ahead of reality with that prediction of power passing to nonwhite majorities in American cities by the turn of the century, although in some cases this has come to pass, and in general the thrust of his words has turned out to be all too true. The bulk of the novel shows Sherman being systematically divested of what would in our time come to be designated his “white male privilege.”

Wolfe had taken on what had become a taboo subject, more taboo, possibly, even than race itself, since it grafted onto that subject too—namely, the new wave of immigration that eventually followed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, and that interacted with and exacerbated America’s native race problem and altogether began to change the country. Opportunists of the Left and idealists of

the Right were celebrating the change from entirely different motives, the one to promote disunity and division in order to gain political power, the other to cheer the expansion of America's enduring universal values, shared by all people everywhere regardless of origin, in their view.

Long before this phenomenon eventuated in what is now termed "identity politics," Wolfe had declared in "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast": "Despite all the talk of 'coming together,' I see the fast multiplying factions of the modern cities trying to insulate themselves more diligently than ever before." He also cites this bit from *Bonfire*: the mayor of New York City has a flash of insight as he's being hustled off the stage by demonstrators at a speaking event in Harlem. Thinking of those sitting pretty above the fray on Park Avenue and Wall Street, he wonders:

"Do you really think this is *your* city any longer? Open your eyes! The greatest city of the twentieth century! Do you think *money* will keep it yours? Come down from your swell co-ops, you general partners and merger lawyers! It's the Third World down there! Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Haitians, Dominicans, Cubans, Colombians, Hondurans, Koreans, Chinese, Thais, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians, Panamanians, Filipinos, Albanians, Senegalese, and Afro-Americans! Go visit the frontiers, you gutless wonders!" [The "frontiers" meaning the outer boroughs and neighborhoods of New York City.]

Between the pieties preached by the Left, glorifying multiculturalism and diversity, and by the Right, glorifying universalism supposedly transcending all particularities of origin, Americans of all races were not permitted even to discuss the enormous changes happening before their eyes, without being accused of bigotry. They watched the very American exceptionalism that many conservatives were claiming as being fulfilled by the new waves of immigration actually eroding into balkanization and group rights. Tom Wolfe was not afraid to take off the ideological blinders, to see reality as it unfolds, and to bring it to the page.