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Tom Wolfe, Reporter: His Relationship to Old New Journalism and to New New Journalism

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Continuities and Origins

Tom Wolfe ambles from the rear of this enormous ballroom in Boston where about 500 journalists, many of them star writers or future star writers for a variety of American newspapers and magazines, wait in silence. He is a familiar figure to this crowd, though at 74, his sharp-nosed prep-school looks have turned a bit wizen and one shoulder of his trademark white-suit jacket drapes, cape-fashion, over his left arm, which is in a sling. He rises to the lectern to kick off this Harvard conference on narrative journalism, and delivers the day's key-note address.

These are not just journalists, but practitioners of a strand of news writing that consciously claims a literary pedigree going back to the nineteenth century, at least. In its ordinary guise in your local paper, it is merely feature writing, the soft lead, or one of those Sunday stories that runs on and on. But this tradition of American journalism has its occasional outbreaks of revolutionary fire, and one of those was led by Tom Wolfe in the 1960s and '70s under the banner of the New Journalism. The techniques used by Wolfe and his critter company in *Esquire*, *New York*, *Harper's*, and *Rolling Stone* became absorbed into the bloodstream of magazine and newspaper writing in the 1980s and '90s. These techniques, beneath the surface razzle-dazzle, were a handful of methods borrowed from fiction. Wolfe defined the New Journalism by identifying four of these: scene, dialogue, point-of-view, and status detail. The difference—and Wolfe repeatedly claimed this made it superior to contemporary fiction—was that it was all true. This required more than basic fact-gathering. It required what he called “saturation reporting,” vacuum-cleaning every last detail. Okay, but how can a reporter know what was going on inside someone's head for point-of-view writing? Simple, Wolfe said. You ask them.

The writers in the Boston ballroom know all this well. The conference itself, the annual Nieman Foundation Conference on Narrative Journalism, is testimony to a revival of a tradition that was called the New Journalism thirty years ago, but now goes by many names. One recent anthology calls it “Intimate Journalism.” Another “The New New Journalism.” It's also called the literature of fact, literary nonfiction, or just plain storytelling. It produces long, gripping sagas in *The Los Angeles Times* and *St. Petersburg Times*. It produces nonfiction books like *Black Hawk Down* and *Moneyball*, both of which Wolfe praises. It is the best of the journalism of today's *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, some of whose writers are in the audience. The attendees know their predecessors

are lofty, and their futures bright – never mind the worries of newspaper editors these days.

Still, it's nice to be reminded of this by one of their heroes. Wolfe talks about Stephen Crane, the handsome young reporter who was inspired by a Jacob Riis lecture in 1892 to move into the Bowery to learn the speech of the poor. That experience gave Crane the material for his novel *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, and probably gave him the tuberculosis that silenced him at age twenty-eight. Of the first twenty great American social realists, Wolfe says, eleven were newspaper reporters first.

“You’re riding a wave of the most important writing going on today,” he says. “And this country has hardly been explored. If you spend thirty days with your eyes open, you’re going to have enough stories for a lifetime.”

Long before the New Journalism was applied to the way Wolfe and others covered the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, there was another New Journalism. In fact, “the new journalism” was originally a label used for the brash style of reporting that emerged in the 1890s at Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*. Such newspapers virtually invented beat reporting, in the sense of reporters going down to the police station, the courthouse, City Hall, and certain bars and ballrooms, and coming back to thrumming newsrooms like ants to the anthill. They spun stories out of crime, politics, low life, and high society. It was the age of the reporter, who was increasingly college-educated, and sometimes even sober. Their stories became so feverish, suspended between screaming headlines and comics (both of which were also invented around this time), someone coined the term Yellow Journalism to imply a fetid stench. Their intrusion into drawing-room scandals provoked a couple of upper-class Boston lawyers to declare a right to privacy—an idea somehow overlooked by the Founding Fathers—in an article they published in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1890. But the critics never said this old new journalism was made up, that its news was false. Sensational, perhaps, but it was based on factual reporting.

This was before journalism aspired to “objectivity,” a concept that journalists borrowed from the social sciences in the early twentieth century. It was enough simply to be true. But within this commitment to true facts, American journalism has long been divided into two different functions, as the social historian Michael Schudson pointed out in *Discovering the News* (1978). One is what Schudson calls an informational model, news as pure facts without a frame of reference, marked by scrupulously dispassionate reporting. This model tends to be considered more reliable, although Schudson questions whether this is a sound assumption. The other model he calls the story function. In this model, news takes on an aesthetic purpose. It gives readers an enjoyable experience that helps them make sense of their lives within the city, the nation, and the world. In practice, these functions act together as two magnetic poles of American journalism, one electrode of fact and the other electrode of story. Both were deeply ingrained in the profession in the nineteenth century, and remain so today. All reporters can switch from one to the other as the material requires. It is almost subconscious, the choice you have already made when you sit down to type your first sentence. You know whether you will use an

anecdotal lead or hard lead, inverted pyramid or narrative structure. Reporters with any experience at all can easily switch from feature style to straight news. Still, every reporter leans one way or the other, as do newspapers.

Attack from Journalism's Citadel

Wolfe's reception has always been mixed. He has been successful beyond the wildest dreams of any ambitious American writer—successful in terms of making money, always working, producing books of increasing weight, cutting a distinctive image as a celebrity, having fun, and leaving a body of writing, both non-fiction and fiction, that is at once hip, wild, stylish, original, respected, and still holding up well over time. For all that, he somehow maintains a genteel bearing and a deep privacy. (In an e-mail to me, he deflected my request for permission to see his Washington & Lee transcripts by riffing on how, in one of his first newspaper interviews, Duke Ellington told him it's better to keep out of the history books or you'll freeze. "I'd better find a new direction, I guess, just in order to make my early days inexplicable," Wolfe said in his e-mail. "If I fall asleep now, I'll freeze.") Yet Wolfe is also despised, immoderately. Critics of Wolfe have weighed in early, often, and without ceasing. "If you can't sing, don't try," novelist John Irving said in a public radio interview recently, trying to describe how much he hates Wolfe's sentences. Others are more expansive. "To read his breathless prose, shrill with yaps and self-importance, is like having a small dog attack one's leg," Alexander Cockburn wrote in 2000, disgusted to see *Harper's* 150th anniversary cover juxtapose the genius of Mark Twain with Wolfe's "modest talents." Much of the criticism, like that of Irving and Cockburn, seems catty and inflamed, an allergy perhaps to Wolfe's conservative politics, or to his impertinent two-part put-down of *The New Yorker* in an upstart magazine in April 1965, or maybe just to his success.

The most penetrating line of criticism has come from the upper reaches of the journalistic establishment. This is the charge that the New Journalism may have borrowed more from fiction than just structure and point-of-view; that it also conceals the unforgivable journalistic sin of making stuff up. Wolfe wrote in his introduction to the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism* that he suspected as much himself when he read a scene of dialogue between prizefighter Joe Lewis and his wife, in a 1962 *Esquire* piece by Gay Talese. Describing this article as a kind of epiphany for him, Wolfe said he was amazed at the way it was built around scenes and dialogue, like a short story. "My instinctive, defensive reaction was that the man has piped it, as the saying went. . . winged it, made up the dialogue. . . Christ, maybe he made up whole scenes, the unscrupulous geek."

But criticism from the ordained druids of serious journalism was more nuanced than "liar, liar." It was, in fact, a moral argument about the nature of journalism. Dwight Macdonald, an intellectual journalist who over his long career was a staff writer at *Fortune*, *Time*, and *The New Yorker*, wrote a two-part dissection of Wolfe and his tribe by labeling their work "parajournalism." Macdonald's attack in *The New York Review of Books* began with an August 1965 review of Wolfe's first book, a collection of magazine reporting titled *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. Macdonald

defined parajournalism, from the Greek *para-*, “beside” or “against,” as a genre that took the form of factual journalism, but was not. How was it not journalism? The most interesting answer Macdonald gives is that Wolfe is too close to his subject, that the writer vanishes into pure subjectivity. Without standing somewhat apart, according to Macdonald, the nonfiction writer has no space in which to plant any of the virtues of journalism: objectivity, facts that are verifiable, or moral judgment. Thus, the informational model of journalism, with its calm, polished voice of the narrator that Wolfe mocked as the putty-colored walls of neutral interior decorating, was for Macdonald the basis of journalism’s moral claim. Without a modicum of detachment, parajournalism becomes mere entertainment. Worst than that, without the air-space for judgment, it projects a moral ambivalence that Macdonald finds “rather unpleasant.” Wolfe seems to be celebrating his subjects – from stock car champion Junior Johnson, to New York disc jockey Murray the K, to rock groupie girl-of-the-year Jane Holzer—but also mocking them brutally. And the same ambivalence obtains in his relationship with the reader, Macdonald says. If you don’t dig his arcane reporting, “you’re dead.”

John Hersey, the late journalist and novelist, is sometimes credited with launching modern narrative journalism in August 1946 when one issue of *The New Yorker* was filled with his book-length account of the lives of a few Japanese citizens of Hiroshima when the atom bomb fell. Wolfe, in fact, notes this article’s “novelistic” style and cites Hersey’s earlier journalism as being a direct ancestor of the later New Journalism. But Hersey was troubled by the flourishing of the New Journalism in the 1960s and ‘70s. In a 1980 issue of *The Yale Review*, reviewing Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer’s *Executioner’s Song*, and Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*, Hersey laid out the reasons that he felt journalism was then “on a sickbed and is in a very bad way.”

Hersey conceded that pure “objectivity” takes flight at the first act of selection by a journalist. But readers are not deceived by selectivity. Confection is the problem; readers assume they can trust what Hersey calls the legend on the journalist’s license: “None of this was made up.” Hersey says *The Right Stuff* is “relatively accurate” compared to Wolfe’s other works. But he sees in Wolfe’s grandiose generalizations the little termites of error. The brand names of cars and clothes, the accents of a West Virginia holler, hairstyles and dance styles—the things Wolfe invests with almost sexual power as “status details”—he tends to fling out to an entire group, subset or class of people. Whether that comes from shrewd journalistic stereotyping, from Wolfe’s social science, or from his application of “point-of-view” subjectivity, Hersey wonders if it is accurate to apply such specific details so broadly. He wonders why Wolfe did not check his facts when naming the kind of car John Glenn drove, or saying when the compass was invented, or giving the Latin word of chimpanzee.

But the error to which Hersey gives the most space is from that still-stinging insult of fifteen years earlier, the knocking of *The New Yorker*, for which Hersey was a devoted writer. Wolfe, in that 1965 piece, had imagined the beloved editor, William Shawn (who had refused to talk to Wolfe, and sought to have the article killed) listening to an old jazz record with Bix Beiderbecke playing the trumpet solo on “I Can’t Get Started,” wherein “Bix hits that incredibly high one he died on, popping a vessel in his temporal fossa. . .”

Two *New Yorker* staffers afterward checked every fact in that two-part series, and found numerous problems, including the fact that Beiderbecke was dead before “I Can’t Get Started” was written. (Wolfe apparently meant Bunny Berigan, and slipped this name into the version he re-published in his 2000 collection *Hooking Up*, though an editor really should have checked the spelling of Berigan.) Little errors wither a reader’s trust on the big things, as every reporter knows. So Hersey, having lost faith in Wolfe’s reporting, sees what Macdonald saw—that discomfiting ambivalence, the tricky love-hate Wolfe seems to lavish on his subjects, and on his readers. Hersey concludes: “Wolfe loves what he loathes.”

Nobody defends factual errors in journalism, big or tiny, least of all Wolfe. The criticism of his New Journalism was not really about errors, but about what kind of journalism is legitimate. Macdonald and Hersey, though they were themselves famous practitioners of literary journalism, argued that there is only one real line of journalism. It is the informational model, that magnetic pole of timely facts. Macdonald did not deny that the New Journalism had a long past. But he found its ancestry in hoaxes, publicity stunts, and sentimental tripe, not the literary ancestry that Wolfe traces. An appreciation of Wolfe must begin with what these critics failed to acknowledge—that journalism has long had two distinct purposes, or poles, not just factual information-giving but also storytelling. Either strand of reporting can be done well or shabbily, full of errors or tight as a drum. In that regard, Tom Wolfe’s nonfiction holds up quite well as good storytelling, with intellect, style, and massive note-taking behind it.

Macdonald, on the other hand, has all but vanished from memory. Macdonald predicted in 1965 that Wolfe’s early popularity would fade within a year because his subjects were mere fads and his literary eccentricities, “while novel,” were monotonous. And who today re-reads Macdonald’s long, elegant *New Yorker* pieces on the Ford Foundation or on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible? As for Hersey, he would later be charged with the opposite of fabrication – plagiarism, known as journalism’s “unoriginal sin.” He lifted, without crediting the author, passages from Laurence Bergreen’s biography of James Agee and was accused of stealing material from World War II correspondent Annalee Jacoby. Hersey is still highly regarded, but as Gore Vidal once noted, he had an eye for minutiae and no gift for selection, a formula for profound dullness. “A week of reading Emile Zola might do him good,” Vidal concluded.

Taking Notes on the Lurid, Hog-Stomping Circus of the Real World

The charges of factual errors may have stung Wolfe more than he let on. Throughout his career, Wolfe has been tireless in his reporting. His early work was full of notebook dumping, leaving out very little of what he saw and heard. He was a hot talent in a hurry. Over time, he became more selective in what came out on the page. When he was asked at a convention of newspaper editors how his style of reporting compares with the traditional form, he said the reporting was the same. By reporting, he meant observing, interviewing, running around and filling spiral notebooks with ballpoint-pen jottings. The difference was in the technique one used after the reporting was finished. “It was completely in using the material you had gathered in a more literary fashion.” When

Wolfe addressed the same association of newspaper editors eleven years later, in 1990, he not only identified with his audience—as an old reporter speaking to old editors. He lectured those editors on the decline of good reporting. “Reporting is the heart of everything, and the reason that the link has become weak is the fact that there has been such an erosion of competition in the newspaper business.” He went on to describe how, when he turned to novel-writing, he re-discovered reporting in order to bring detail and ideas to *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Next, he spent eleven years researching—reporting—novel number two, *A Man in Full*. “I committed the sin of hubris,” he wrote of this globe-girdling ordeal. “I was going to cram the *world* into that novel, *all* of it.”

According to this confession, he wrote his novels partly to prove a point he had asserted like a barroom bet: That the American novel was not dead, but starving for lack of nourishment from real American life. He had made that argument in his 1973 introduction to *The New Journalism* anthology, and again in 1987, in a *Harper's* article, “Stalking the Billion-footed Beast.” Out there was this “wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of ours,” while young novelists with MFA degrees in creative writing huddled among themselves. Wolfe urged them to get out there, like good reporters—be curious, take notes, talk to people.

Wolfe may have also been over-reporting his novels to prove another point—that he was still a keen observer and a hell of a good feet-on-the-ground reporter. If William Shawn and his loyal staffers at the *New Yorker* wouldn't talk to him in 1965, he could still hang out at the edges of their St. Regis Hotel party and find other sources. Look at the cocktail-party scene in *Bonfire*, in the chapter called “The Masque of the Red Death.” The title is from Poe, but the details are right out of Wolfe's notebook, as was his famous article on Leonard Bernstein's party for the Black Panthers, “Radical Chic.”

If the literati didn't appreciate the reporting behind his novels, journalists did. Seymour Topping, an editor at the *New York Times*, introduced Wolfe to that 1990 convention of editors by joking that *Bonfire* only pretended to be a novel. “[E]verybody knows that it was in fact the best damned piece of reporting we have seen on what has been going on in New York.” John Huey, an Atlanta native who covered the South for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune*, reviewed *A Man in Full* for the hometown paper with an editor's squinting eye for the slightest reportorial slip-ups. Huey's big problem with the book was its fictional elements—what he considered to be its cartoonish characters, lame dialogue, and implausible plot. But the reporting—well, Huey wrote, “the author gets so much detail about [Atlanta] right—including those fabulous symphonic Wolfeian descriptions of its neighborhoods, and a pretty fair taxonomy of those who inhabit its political and social scenes—that it's almost worth plowing through all 742 pages for nothing more than a cultural travelogue of your hometown.”

To understand how Wolfe could invest such importance in running around with notebook and pen like a wayward stenographer, you have to grasp an old romantic ideal of the newspaper reporter as literary ragamuffin. The ideal is older than Watergate, older than the New Journalism revolt. Wolfe says he had a picture in his head from the “Front Page” days of Chicago newspapering in the 1930s. After years of moldering in the stacks

of the library at Yale University, where he earned a Ph.D. in American Studies in 1956, Wolfe was desperate for a different scene, and a late-night smoky newsroom with rumpled Hildy Johnsons was just the ticket, he said. It was anti-ivory tower stuff, the School of Life, the native genius of a Huck Finn in the metropolis. H.L. Mencken, in his memoir *Newspaper Days*, recalled his initiation into this heady realm around 1900 at the Baltimore *Herald*:

At a time when the respectable bourgeois youngsters of my generation were college freshmen, oppressed by simian sophomores and affronted with balderdash daily and hourly by chalky pedagogues, I was at large in a wicked seaport of half a million people, with a front seat at every public show, as free of the night as of the day, and getting earfuls and eyefuls of instruction in a hundred giddy arcana, none of them taught in schools. On my twenty-first birthday, by all orthodox cultural standards, I probably reached my all-time low, for the heavy reading of my teens had been abandoned in favor of life itself, and I did not return seriously to the lamp until a time near the end of this record. But it would be an exaggeration to say that I was ignorant, for if I neglected the humanities I was meanwhile laying in all the worldly wisdom of a police lieutenant, a bartender, a shyster lawyer, or a midwife. And it would certainly be idiotic to say that I was not happy.

Newspaper reporters, in this view, have a special freedom from educated cant, institutional ennui, and financial responsibility that makes them the natural storytellers of the age – if only they weren’t looked down upon by “real” writers. A popular lecturer named Gerald Stanley Lee wrote an essay called “Journalism as a Basis for Literature” in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900, the same time Mencken was in his cub-reporter romp. Lee called the daily paper “the Nazareth of literature.” “That no good can come out of it is one of the settled convictions of what might be called the gentlemanly literary life.”

But this scorned creature, the reporter, who bustles through American cities all awry and out of sync with banker’s hours, is destined to be the raw talent from which will come our next generation of great writers, Lee predicted. Reporters are in the whirlpool, and with the transfiguration of art, can fix the age for all times. “[T]his nineteenth century of ours is like some vast Roman circus under the wide heaven, the huge race course of which is drawing strangely now, in hot and eager madness, to its eternal close. . . It is a spectacle for the gods.” Tom Wolfe was saying much the same thing about the “lurid carnival” of the twentieth century as it drew to a close a hundred years later.

Education and Apprenticeship

Wolfe, ironically enough, seems to have acquired this romantic ideal of the reporter from literature. Since his school days at St. Christopher’s, an all-male Episcopal preparatory school in his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, and during his years at Washington & Lee University, where he helped launch *Shenandoah* in the spring of 1950 as a student-editor and contributor of two psychological short stories, he apparently

fancied himself a writer. Not a reporter, but the latest initiate to the gentlemanly literary life. In a photograph of the 1947 senior class at St. Christopher's, among 23 boys wearing crew-neck letter sweaters and other dorky prepwear, Wolfe stands out cool and combed in a dark suit and light tie. He wrote unsigned editorials in the student newspaper, *The Pine Needle*, and also a column on sports, "In the Bullpen with TK Wolfe Jr." (His father, Thomas K. Wolfe Sr., had been an agronomist from southwestern Virginia who moved to Richmond as editor of a regional farming magazine with antebellum roots, *The Southern Planter*.) "TK Jr." sometimes used his sports column to show off his literary flair, writing of boxing matches, imagining comic dialogue between Coach and his boys, and reeling off sentences like this: "Charging a big league price the rotund Nabob of the Neckbenders brings big league wrestling to hundreds of oh so lucky local fans." In an email to me, Wolfe mocked his high-school self as having picked up a lot of pretentious words like inchoate, simpering, and jejune from his (unrelated) namesake, novelist Thomas Wolfe of North Carolina. "I had jejune people simpering inchoately all over the place," he wrote. A search of "In the Bullpen" archives failed to exhume a sentence remotely so jejune. But a farewell editorial addressed to the succeeding staff captures something of Wolfe's adolescent prose style:

As the editors of this year's *The Pine Needle* fold their tents as the Arabs and steal silently away, the curtain of genius rings down on one more annum of laborious, glorious journalistic excellence. It is our hope that next year's Staff will follow closely in the footsteps of this year's high command and will also soar to sublime heights with a series of stellar publications.

As we are wafted by the winds of wanderlust, we feel the phantasmagorical miasma of nostalgia creep over us. It is with the high hope that *The Pine Needle* will be an all-engulfing representation of all that is in St. Christopher's that we turn over the reins of this literary Trojan horse to next year's editors.

Note the "literary Trojan horse." Whether that meant the boys were using a newspaper to sneak literary fire into the enemy's city, or using literary pretension as a hollowed-out thing to conceal their journalism, the phrase foretells New Journalism's mutant strain.

At Washington & Lee from 1947 to 1951, Wolfe, a tea-totaling member of the Phi Kappa Sigma fraternity, wrote about sports for a literary-journalistic-humor magazine hybrid called *The Southern Collegian*, founded at the college in 1868. Since Wolfe was also a pitcher on the General's varsity baseball team, he faced a potential conflict-of-interest, and handled this with the sort of wit that would get him in trouble later with the scolds at *The New Yorker*. "[T]his writer," he wrote in a spring 1951 review of four years of W&L sports, "while seeing rather limited action in [baseball], does have the perhaps vague distinction of having set an unofficial B.P.P.O.A.T.Y.S. (Batting practice pitches over a three-year span) record for the Eastern Seaboard, with a mark of 1,792,334, eclipsing (before the next to last game) the old record of 1,792,002 set in 1926 by Oswald Hartley Fernandez of Harvard." He covered sports for the student newspaper, the *Ring-*

tum *Phi*, under the byline Tekay Wolfe in his junior year, serving as sports editor in the winter term of 1950.

A typical lead conveys the liveliness of his style: “Considerable stroking of chins was the reaction to that unfortunate foray which the Washington and Lee basketball club underwent over the weekend.” He majored in English, not journalism, though W&L’s journalism department was then a lively hive of big-name visitors directed by O.W. “Tom” Riegel, whom Wolfe recalled as “one of the giants of American journalism.” Wolfe was inducted into the campus Literary Society, and met with fellow short-story writers in the old Dutch Inn to read and discuss one another’s fiction. Academically, he was perhaps most inspired by Professor Marshall Fishwick, whose interest in the emerging mongrel field of Popular Culture crossed several disciplinary boundaries. Fishwick led Wolfe to pursue an advanced degree at Yale, where American Studies was taking root.

Wolfe’s 1956 dissertation was titled “The League of American Writers: Communist Organizational Activity among American Writers, 1929-1942.” The only thing noticeably Wolfeian about this 355-page opus is its droll indifference to the prevailing pieties of the American literati of the mid-Fifties, when Wolfe was holed up in the gothic Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. Writers at this time had endured, and prevailed over, the worst of the Communist-hunting of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (or HUAC). So what does Wolfe do? He digs up all the documentation he can find, including material from HUAC, on the way the Communist Party of the United States, at the behest of the Communist International, did indeed successfully organized a huge percentage of American writers in the 1930s into a League of American Writers (LAW).

“For all practical purposes the activities of the LAW centered upon the New York literary community and were calculated to mobilize the prestige of New York literati behind Communist-favored causes,” he notes on page 166. He then lists 680 writers who joined LAW during a two-year surge in the late 1930s. The list includes Sherwood Anderson, Heywood Broun, Pearl Buck, Countee Cullen, Erskine Caldwell, Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Lewis Mumford, Archibald MacLeish, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Steinbeck, and Upton Sinclair.

Five years of graduate school had an odd effect on Wolfe. By his account, it inspired him to run in the opposite direction, away from academia, gasping for air. He suffered from “an overwhelming urge to join the ‘real world,’” as he puts it in his introduction in *The New Journalism*. His destination was any old newspaper city room, as Mencken experienced it, or as Wolfe says he imagined it, “Drunken reporters out on the ledge of the News peeing into the Chicago River at dawn.” His first newspaper job was at *The Springfield (Massachusetts) Union*. It printed some of Wolfe’s illustrations with his stories, a double-talent not seen in American newspapers since Lafcadio Hearn ran his own sketches with stories he wrote for *The New Orleans Item* in the 1880s. After three years at *The Union*, Wolfe landed a job at *The Washington Post*, doing general assignment reporting around the District just as it was shaking off the somnolent

Eisenhower era for the charms of Camelot. The *Post* prided itself on being independent, meaning it reflected its mercurial publisher, Philip Graham; but it was rising with the times as a Kennedy paper, politically and stylistically.

For the next three years, there were 313 stories in *The Washington Post* under the by-line Thomas Wolfe. Thanks to ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, these can now be listed, read, and analyzed without leaving one's office. It is a worthwhile endeavor, because it reveals what a diligent, stylish, energetic "new journalist" Wolfe was throughout these years. This is obvious from his first spot-news story of 27 July 1959, on a monkey that materialized in the yards of a local neighborhood. Wolfe made this not only what editors call a "bright." He made it, in a mere nine quick paragraphs on the front page, a story.

"Above the rustle of the Sunday papers in suburban Birchwood City rose the cries of the hunt – and another monkey chase was on." Yes, *another*, the story goes on, in droll detail, as good as a *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" short. Wolfe's very last article at the *Post*, 29 March 1962, happens to be an equally deft handling of an equally trivial spot-news event, a pupil inadvertently left in an elementary school infirmary well after the school closed. "When the teacher told Michael Thompson, 10, who didn't feel well, to go to the school dispensary and lie down, Michael was not one to lollygag around. He went right in there and lay down. He kept on lying down at 3:30 p.m. . . ." And so it went, playing with the old bugbear of grammar teachers, lie, lay, lying, a subtle "point-of-view" touch.

Wolfe was all over the place, from covering spot news ("Doctors' 7-Hour Battle Fails to Save Worker Suffocated in Manhole Heat") to getting naked to report on a Virginia nudist camp, illustrated by his own sketches. His editors quickly pegged him as the writer who could crank out light, well-researched pieces about exotic lands, such as a "not-too-serious" series on places Vice President Nixon was to visit and a "Dispensable Guide" series containing "utterly inconsequential information about the places President Eisenhower will visit on his 11-nation tour." Wolfe covered a lot of big-name writers who came to town, especially poets. He tended to look for how they fit into the social and cultural scene – their ideas, manners, and of course their clothes. He must have volunteered to interview anyone reading poetry at the Library of Congress – Robert Lowell, Richard Eberhart, Stephen Spender, and others of their stature. Robert Penn Warren, interviewed on 27 March 1961, was described as toggled out "in a British-cut tweed jacket, flannel pants and a button-down shirt." Robert Frost among the Washington press corps, on 1 May 1961, "became so quotable so fast, the poor scribes had to reach for the notebooks and lose a shot at some sociable china-balancing. . . [Frost] came to the morning coffee bee wearing summer cloth-top shoes and long johns." Wolfe reviewed books and performing arts with a cocky flair for background facts and curt judgments.

He says Joseph Bryan III of Richmond pulls off the difficult trick of a book of "reminiscences about reminiscences" (*The Sword Over the Mantel: The Civil War*) because he is a fine storyteller in the vein of Samuel Hopkins Adams and Robert L. Duffus (whoever they are). Some New York actors in dark grey and black suits and

dresses, performing Conrad Aiken's poems on stage March 20, 1961, were seen as a "severely sophisticated and slightly precious group," and the effect of their "hamming up Western lingos and dialects in 'The Kid' was not entirely a happy one."

He also covered politics (the filibuster of a civil rights bill of 1960 by Southern segregationists) and became a Latin American correspondent. But the latter role did not last: Only 21 stories in a five-week period appear under his by-line with a foreign dateline, and these are followed by an unexplained absence of his by-line for six weeks. He obviously did not share the left's swoon for Castro's Cuba, as is clear in a couple of wry book reviews. But what is more significant about his Latin American coverage is that it is so conventional. It is the only body of writing from Wolfe that illustrates his point that conventional, information-heavy journalism can be a turn-off. His best "political" writing is on the culture and energy of power, and the fashions. For example, amused by the press shivering in chic Georgetown to get a glimpse of President-elect Kennedy, Wolfe as usual reads the semiotics of wardrobes. "How does it look to have a frozen rabble in army-surplus gear out front at 3307 N. St.—when, as any Savile Row tailor could tell you, the correct winter wear in John Kennedy's neighborhood is English Melton cloth towncoats with Astrakhan collars and cuffs."

The record shows that Wolfe did not just suddenly burst into flame with that first *Esquire* piece in November 1963, "There Goes [Varoom! Varoom!] That Kandy-Colored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby." When he hit New York to work for the *Herald-Tribune*, from which he branched into magazines, he was a seasoned jump-and-run reporter. He could handle straight news, but he was clearly a feature writer, bound for a whole new kind of culture beat. He had his six years apprenticeship as a reporter. And behind that lay five years of grad school, four years of a Southern liberal arts college, and six years at a good Southern prep school, where a course in classical rhetoric obviously left a mark.

In addition to all this, Wolfe had a talent so radioactive it was bound to shoot past any barriers of normal journalism, or literary journalism. In a lonely and long arc, Wolfe would rip through the top of the sky, like when test-pilot Chuck Yeager takes his X-1 beyond Mach 1.0, "faster than any man in history. . .so high in such a vast space that there was no sensation of motion," as the writer put it in *The Right Stuff*. In atmosphere too thin to hold reflecting particles, the sky would turn purple, the stars come out, and still the sun would be shining like a god. Writer Heaven!

Democracy and Storytelling

But the point is not how high Tom Wolfe flew. It is that the darker side of journalism, the storytelling art, of which Wolfe has been a kind of swaggering Chuck Yeager hero, continues to rumble along. A typical front page of the *Washington Post* will often carry a feature story like one that appeared earlier this year about left-wing, anti-Bush Web log writers—bloggers. The lead was right out of the head of the main character (this kind of journalism finds "characters" the way directors cast movies):

In the angry life of Maryscott O'Connor, the rage begins as soon as she opens her eyes and realizes that her president is still George W. Bush. The sun has yet to rise and her family is asleep, but no matter; as soon as the realization kicks in, O'Connor, 37, is out of bed and heading toward her computer.

You notice a few things about this. One, it's in the present tense, like virtually all of Wolfe's nonfiction. Two, the reporter is right there in the woman's house, in Sherman Oaks, California, at the crack of dawn. It's mostly moment-by-moment scenes from this woman's morning at home. There are significant details stitched in, "a pack of cigarettes, a dirty ashtray, a can of nonalcoholic beer, an album with photos of her dead father and a taped-up note—starting at her—on which she has scrawled 'Why am I/you here?'" If these aren't Wolfe's "status details," they are at least loaded stage-props that drive the story. She smokes and drinks and asks why because her Marine father died in Vietnam three months before she was born. The writer doesn't need to explain what the anger is about. This is a story. And it's mostly in dialogue, with other bloggers, with her husband who walks in, and with their six-year-old son, who backs away from his mom's bewildering antics. It's a funny, poignant, revealing story. Three days after it appeared, the Pulitzer Prizes were announced. One of the four that the *Washington Post* won was awarded to David Finkel, the writer of the story about Maryscott O'Connor. The conference on narrative journalism that Wolfe kicked off in Boston the previous December was proof that there are hundreds of David Finkels out there, laboring in the vineyards.

Narrative art is not going to save newspapers, or save good journalism. But without it, newspapers and journalism tend to turn weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable. Storytelling is entertainment, but it can be a lot deeper than that too. It is a vital element of journalism, as it has become in many other fields. All of the academic disciplines outside of the hard sciences have started taking narrative seriously as a distinct mode of knowing. In an age when objective analysis has failed to deliver the goods in historiography, theology, structural analysis of literature, anthropology, and so on, "the story" has emerged as a legitimate epistemological tool. Jesus told parables for a reason. Thus, in journalism, information, in the flat, "objective," de-contextualized form it often takes in our culture of technical expertise, simply could not contain certain truths. In journalism, it could not convey the big news stories of the sixties and beyond – those of popular culture, lifestyle, and human consciousness.

A final question about the storytelling side of journalism is whether it does American democracy any good. The justification of a free press, an objective press that transmits public information to an enfranchised citizenry, is typically on the side of the information model, not the storytelling model. Voters need information, and the press, as the public's watchdog, is supposed to provide it. But this is an incomplete way to view mass communications. As media scholar James Carey puts it, communication embodies a community rather than transports a message. When a newspaper reports what the mayor said yesterday, it reaffirms the reader's connection with his or her community. "In the transmission model," Carey writes in *Communication as Culture* (1989), "a medium of

communication tells us what happened; in the ritual model, a medium of communication tells us who we are.” Stories also tell us who we are, and in the “ritual model” of journalism, they can do so in ways that confirm our citizenship in American democracy.

But here is something strange about storytellers like Wolfe. As the shamans of journalism, their relationship to a democratic society is ambiguous, but it moves in the direction of celebrating the masses. The narrative artist may start out as a snob—an aesthete who finds amusement, or contempt, in the stratifications of class. Indeed, Wolfe’s central theme has been class and status in American culture. As others have noted, it is unclear whether he is celebrating or mocking the plumber vacationing in splendor in St. Croix, or the fabulously wealthy. On the other hand, the avatars of fact-based journalism start by identifying with democracy—declaring that they take the public seriously. But eventually, this serious journalism despairs of the masses and turns elitist. The information becomes more technical, duller, and less meaningful to a mass audience, while it becomes more blatantly directed to the real decision-makers. Throughout most of the twentieth century, this establishment strand of journalism was the basis of elite newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The informational press eventually comes to embrace Walter Lippmann’s skepticism about public opinion. Likewise, critics like Dwight Macdonald, the left-wing American with his heavy load of moralizing, tend to develop a distaste for the masses and a belief that only elites can save culture and civilization.

Narrative journalism starts there, but moves in the opposite direction. Like Wolfe in his foppish white suits, storytelling tends to be tailored for a smaller, knowing audience. It is given to satire, hidden moral censure, aestheticism, inside jokes, and artistry. But this journalism, being more entertaining and real, finds its natural audience in American mass culture. And it finds its natural subjects in the spirit of individualism and improvisation. It is the journalism that believes, as Wolfe is always saying, that everybody has a story. Whether you think Wolfe’s position on class is elite and snooty, or insecure and outsider, he turns out to be the great celebrator of American democracy.

Editor’s Note: This article is published with permission of *Shenandoah*, a literary review at Washington & Lee University that will publish this piece next spring in a special issue focusing on Tom Wolfe.