



New York Writing by Thomas P. McDonnell

"To write simply is as difficult as to be good."

—Somerset Maugham

The Bonfire of the Vanities by Tom Wolfe, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$19.95.

It is just possible that Tom Wolfe's first novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, may be more important for extraliterary reasons than for purely literary ones. Of course, there are no purely literary reasons for anything, especially in the form of fiction, perhaps the most massive impure art form ever invented. But to say that this large but strangely slick hunk of a book may be important, almost as if on appearance, is simply to locate its possible significance in a brace of considerations: (1) as an occasion for stock-taking on the state of the American novel today; and (2) as a symptom of the cultural situation itself.

Roughly speaking, there are two obvious currents which flow in the mainstream of American fiction. One has to do with what we recognize as the imperishable works of our literature—in the great fictions, say, of Hawthorne, Melville, James, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Saul Bellow—while the other has to do with those strictly perishable and peripheral productions which in any period comprise the bulk of the best-seller listings. In the first instance, we have almost ceased to produce any fiction of major importance, and this for the shockingly simple reason that we have at the same time failed to produce a new generation of great readers. Today, indeed, the survivors in literacy must exert themselves to handle the works of John

Jakes, Danielle Steele, and the rest. That's where adult reading is today.

At this early point, it is difficult to go on without resorting to a basically subjective view and allowing scholarly objectivity to slide quietly into the dustbin. In the overview, I can see only one aspect in which Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—a marvelous title, by the way—may be said to have any relationship at all to the novel of classical tradition. Certainly, it has no relationship to the great novels as far as thoughtful and reflective prose is concerned. There are no structural points of rest in Tom Wolfe's self-devouring fiction, such as can be found, for example, in the famous trout-fishing scene from *The Sun Also Rises*. Everything is so full of hype and superficial effects that one might easily miss the way *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is likely to survive what remains of our rapidly diminishing century. It is a novel of New York City. The city is the hero, the heroine, the comic and tragic figure of it all. It is indeed the bonfire of our vanities. All flesh is grass and burns at last in the consuming fire of our vast inanities. The shocker is that Tom Wolfe doesn't know it.

As for literary effects, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* has perhaps forever unfocused any image we may still have of Henry James's New York as the prevailing and classical recreation of that particular time and place. The term "literary effects" has ironic relevance here insofar as this is the only level on which Tom Wolfe can compete with the one and only master of civilized prose we have produced on this continent and displaced to another. But if there is anything that Wolfe doesn't want to know, it's how to write

a complex and Jamesian sentence. Again, he is the artist of the electronic impulse, our laureate of the age of television who has legitimized the tradition of trash. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe has achieved the apotheosis of glitz.

I feel that it has been necessary to say these things aside from any attempt to provide the reader with a summary of plot. The trouble is, the plot isn't all that interesting. It is the author's retelling of the myth of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf (if he'll pardon the expression) let loose in New York City. Sherman McCoy is Little Red Riding Hood, a bungling innocent of an investment banker making about a million per year with the prestigious firm of Pierce & Pierce, who still allows himself to become hopelessly victimized by crime, the law, and social circumstance. A voracious and composite ethnic minority is the Big Bad Wolf that gobbles McCoy alive. The book is on fast-forward all the time, without any letup, so that characters and incidents flash by in a multiplicity of scenes that will no doubt become easily adapted to a TV mini-series or to movie screens in our cement block clinics across the land. All the characters—the dull but decorative wife, the seductive and obligatory mistress, cops and lawyers, high investors as well as the sleazy hustlers that infest the city at its lowest levels—are caricatures of types that the well-conditioned reader and potential viewer will recognize immediately and have no further need to relate to the untoward complexities of reality itself.

Tom Wolfe's typographical tricks are all resplendently and tediously displayed: the onomatopoeic spellings, relentlessly supplied whether the reader requires them or not, and such homophonics as may even reduce the word "talk" to *tawk*. It is difficult not to

Thomas McDonnell is a free-lance writer living near Boston.

wonder, momentarily, just how Mr. Wolfe would have us pronounce the word "talk," if not *tawk*, or does he want the "t" pronounced, too, as in *talc*? Frankly, if more prudently edited on the side of bulk alone, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* would make the very zinger of a tape-recorded book. It fairly bristles with sound effects. But in the end, after all the hijinks have been duly performed and put to rest, this is an overlarge novel of very small consequence. It has all the substantiality of spun cotton candy for the junk-food addicts of the new illiteracy.

In an interview published in the *Boston Globe* (November 13, 1987), Tom Wolfe said something which may indicate why his first novel lacks any substance beyond its momentary glitter as an exciting media product. He said: "We're now in a period of freedom from religion; we've long since gone through freedom of religion. The last freedom is to remove the internal shackles of ethics, morality, all those things. That's been the great struggle of the last 20 years, and that struggle's been largely successful." This is a very curious statement for a novelist to

make, I think, as it removes the main source of tension which the drama of human relationships irresistibly compels: I mean, of course, the moral dimension. The moderns have now displaced Cardinal John Henry Newman's sensible dictum — that we cannot have a sinless literature in a sinful world — with the notion that a sinful world itself is an illusion of the ethicist. But if this is the case, who gives a damn about Sherman McCoy anyway?

Electric Logocentricity by E. Christian Kopff

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In the beginning was the Word. Not *verbum*, the written word, thought Erasmus, but *sermo*, the spoken word. Whatever its validity for understanding St. John's Gospel, literature that matters seems to split along the lines of that dichotomy. There are exciting and important books that dance on the page, wheeling and turning at the command of a master drill sergeant, able to conquer vast terrains, but in silence. Read Kant, for instance, aloud, and his magic vanishes. Then there are the masters of the spoken language, who charm us because we can hear their voices, even if we cannot follow everything they are saying: Plato, Virgil, Dante, St. John himself.

Tom Wolfe belongs to the electric masters of logocentricity. To this day I can hear the famous party that pulsates at the center of "Radical Chic." "Mr. Bernstein." "STEIN!" Of course, there are other sensual images in Wolfe's carnival. He begins *The Painted Word* by comparing the experience of reading the Sunday *New York Times* not to an intellectual activity but to sinking slowly into a soporific hot tub. The image is as illuminating as it is witty. In the end, however, Tom Wolfe is meant to be read aloud.

In comparison with those earlier

tone poems, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is an oratorio sung by full choir. "There are eight million stories in the Naked City," the old TV show used to end. It seems as though there are that many voices in this novel and each one heard and captured by Wolfe like a prize Lepidoptera, to be pinned exactly in context or, just as often, shoved violently into a situation where it stands out like a yuppie's yellow tie against a Mafioso's black shirt.

It is not easy to find the right parallel for this epic, performed not by a bard but by a city of voices. The main plot is a variant on Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, though with a surprise ending out of Baudelaire's "*Ecrasez les Pauvres!*" (Well, I am trying not to give it away.) The depiction of the working stiffs of New York, seen at first harshly and crudely, but then revealed as rooted in intelligence and moral commitment, reminds me of the best of James Gould Cozzens. The one real parallel, however, seems to me John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Wolfe's novel lacks the unforgettable hero of that comic masterpiece, but I left both books with my ears full of the sounds, spoken, whispered, shouted, of a great city.

Wolfe delights in playing with a significant linguistic reality, the use of the third person singular of the verb "to do" as a class marker in contemporary America. The educated use "he does not" as a matter of course, just as the poorer use "he don't." To appreciate Wolfe's magic, however, you have to hear the intermediary sections of

our society. We listen in on a D.A. trying to lure cooperation out of a recalcitrant black witness. To say "he does not" in that room would freeze up the witness by showing that he is confronted by a foreigner who speaks a different dialect. Alone with a trusted aide, preaching on the rights of the poor and puffed up with altruistic self-righteousness, the D.A. reverts to "he does not." Future historians of American English will treasure this book.

Each reader will find his favorite part of this extravaganza. My own includes the savage picture of the parasitic Englishman, come over to work on the *New York Post*, who always slips away just before the check arrives, leaving it for the silly Yank off whom he wines and dines. There is the searing contrast between elite WASP America, which leaves even its closest friends in the lurch if notoriety impinges, with the dogged loyalty and honesty of middle-class Irish lawyers and policemen. The student of ethics will find as much to ponder as the linguist.

In the end, however, I remember the sounds: the laughter at an upper-class party, the background hysteria of the bonds market on Wall Street, the accents of English and German, of rich and poor. As Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi made us notice things we have had before us all our lives but have never seen, Tom Wolfe makes us hear the sounds of our own society. We shall never sound the same again.

E. Christian Kopff is professor of classics at the University of Colorado.