Tom Wolfe's Mastery of Postmodern America

by Pedro Blas González (January 2020)

Jester on a Horse, Ben Shahn, 1955

Like the value of securities and commodities, the literary estimation of writers and their work can also be terribly inflated. Often, a writer's work comes along at a moment in history that attributes to it disproportionate value based on extrinsic factors. Because some writers come in and out of fashion, what literary quality remains in their work post their rise to fame will be subjected to the test of time. Undoubtedly, Plato has been vindicated in his assertion that time is the ultimate test of truth.

Fame that comes to writers through social-political posturing eventually withers. Writers and literary works that have been overblown by reviews motivated by factors other than literary quality fare badly with the passage of time.

Many mid-twentieth century writers fit this description. This is particularly true of writers who enjoyed stardom in the 1960s, a time when being fashionable and politically/morally outrageous—both of these being extrinsic factors—was all the rage. Tom Wolfe (1930-2018) is not one of these writers.

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- Politicizing Language
- The Theology of Edgar Allan Poe

Wolfe began his literary career as a journalist writing for *The Washington Post* in 1959 and later *The New York Herald*

Tribune, staring in 1962. An inquisitive reporter, Wolfe convinced his editor to let him write about Southern California car culture. The article that resulted from his research was entitled “There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!): That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.”

The article foreshadowed Wolfe’s canny ability to embrace the subject of his research wholeheartedly. What seemed at face value a mundane topic became the trial run for Wolfe’s New Journalism, a type of reporting that employed fiction and literary techniques. In this form of writing, writers intercede their voice in the story in order to make it more existential.

One admirable aspect of Wolfe’s writing is the amount of research he did for his articles. This was also true of his novels. Because Wolfe did not share in the values of the subjects that he investigated, an aspect of his writing that became apparent over time, immersion into his investigative reporting did not translate to participation. Remaining like an alert fly on the wall, Wolfe was able to take in the spectacles that he wrote about from an objective distance. This enabled him to develop his sense of satire, that “you won’t believe what I just witnessed” quality of his writing.

Wolfe’s Writing About the 1960s Counterculture

The main reason that Wolfe’s writing has weathered the test of time and garnered literary respect unlike chic literati of the 1960s is because he debunked cultural and literary fashion. Beginning with the counterculture movement of the 1960s, Wolfe

began reporting about the underlying cultural/moral forces that dictated the events of the 1960s.

His publications describe diverse aspects of the 1960s; his works about the culture and values of that decade enabled him to be recognized as a unique writer.

Wolfe was an intuitive writer. He understood that the fashionable and affected values he wrote about undermined the values of America post WWII, and would eventually dictate the way people think and live in postmodernity.

Wolfe's books about the 1960s include *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965); *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and *The Pump House Gang* (1968). These works track counterculture, ranging from Southern California car culture and surfing, to Ken Kesey's influence on the spread of illicit psychedelic drugs in the youth culture. Wolfe foresaw that the politicization of culture would eventually deliver postmodern man to the tribal attitude that he describes in his novel *Back to Blood* (2012).

Part of the charm that Wolfe brings to his writing is his approach to narrative. Wolfe tells a story like few non-fiction writers; he was a novelist at heart. Also alluring is his camera-like reporting; the writer allows himself to become awed by the spectacle he is describing. His depiction of people, places and events is colorful and tree-dimensional. This affords Wolfe's work a panoramic perspective on the human psyche and reality. Wolfe is a master of form and content.

The Politicization of Culture and Radical Chic

Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers (1970) exposes left-wing hypocrisy. The book is composed of two long essays that unmask opportunistic and predatory progressivism. In *Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, the author explores the fraud and many scams that drive the welfare state. Anyone who lived in an American inner city during the 1970s can easily vindicate Wolfe as a sincere writer.

With his astute ability to uncover the left's hypocrisy, Wolfe made a career from going out into the world of alleged progressives to unveil their ignorance and/or malevolence. *Radical Chic*—a phrase that Wolfe coined—introduces the reader to a fund-raising party thrown by New York Philharmonic conductor, Leonard Berstein, in his plush Manhattan apartment for the domestic terrorist group, the Black Panthers. The guests included Hollywood directors, art critics and other New York elites. Bernstein's invitees had two things in common: they were rich and self-styled progressives.

Radical Chic is a compelling example of the myopia and sheer mendacity that postmodernity has ushered in. The Black Panthers were an American Marxist terrorist organization that embraced communism and Maoism in order to destabilize the American government. That was their professed intent. The group existed from 1966 to 1982. They financed the organization through drug dealing and bank robbery, and were involved in the murder of policemen and hijacking of domestic airliners that were forcibly taken to communist Cuba.

Knowing what Mr. Berstein and his progressive elite friends knew about the Black Panthers at the time; the idea for the party, as Wolfe describes it, was not only ludicrous but immoral. Even more eye-opening is how the liberal news media treated the radical chic scene with cachet. *Radical Chic* will continue to grow in stature as a literary ledger of the corrosive influence that leftism has had on American culture.

The Painted Word (1976)

Tom Wolfe's collected work, including his last published book, *The Kingdom of Speech* (2016)—a book about the contradictions and controversies of the theory of evolution—is an education in Americana, what is referred today as American Studies. Wolfe's writing is especially important for younger generations, when much of the media and academia has turned a blind eye to objectivity.

At the time of writing, Wolfe's articles and books were anathema to the troubled values of the people that his writing exposed as frauds. Yet with the passage of time, the tables have turned. The subculture that Wolfe wrote about is fading, and will continue to do so. The counterculture of the 1960s now seems quaint at best. However, Wolfe effectively disclosed the values of the 1960s counterculture and how these relativistic, "I'm okay, you're okay" values have subsequently played a corrosive role in forming the American psyche.

The Painted Word is Wolfe's brilliant exposé of modern art, beginning in 1900. By 1900, the author of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* tells the reader, the era of the liberated artist had

taken flight. Separating themselves from what they considered the middle class bourgeoise, artists began to think of themselves as independent from art patrons. The efficient strategy of self-absorbed artists was to drag along the paying bourgeoise into their bohemian world. Thus, came about the description of boho (bohemian bourgeoisie).

The Painted Word is a scathing analysis of the morally vacuous world of modern art. Wolfe follows the trajectory and choreographed scandals of the art scene, from the start of the twentieth century to 1976, the publication date of the book.

Like other of Wolfe's non-fiction works, *The Painted Word* is an education in itself. From the rejection of nineteenth-century Realism by early Modernism, Abstract Expressionism's rejection of Modernism, the destruction of painting as reflective of the sensual world, the charade of Minimalism, to the eventual annihilation of painting, canvass and frame altogether, Wolfe offers the reader a glimpse at the mayhem that proponents of Marxist critical theory unleashed on art patrons and aficionados.

Why so much affectation in art? Wolfe's answer: because Modernism's tragic conceit revolved around the destruction of Realism, and the idea that art must not be allowed to represent human reality in any form or fashion.

Wolfe does not mince words. The diction of his essays is geared to do battle with the nihilistic pretensions of modernity and post-modernity; always citing examples of the dog and pony show that radical chic elites unleash. Wolfe details the influence that critical theory, which was created by non-artists, the likes of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Leo Steinberg, has had on Modern art.

In the first part of *The Painted Word*, readers are treated to the suspect motives of critical theory, and its ability to entrap fledgling artists who were willing to play the game in exchange for fame and financial reward. This is the lamentable pattern of Modern art that Wolfe uncovers and presents to readers who are interested in the behind the scenes world of Modern art and cultural Marxism. Wolfe follows the trajectory of the many strains of Marxism that have tainted Modern art.

While unsuspecting art patrons, historians and lovers of art venerate modern painters as geniuses, etc., Wolfe exposes many of them as mere followers, conformists who allowed the theoretical and political motives of critical theory to dictate the form and content of their artistic creations.

The passage of time has proven *The Painted Word* to be an insightful and instructive testament, not only about Modern art's tow-the-line values, but also of the devastating power

that Marxist theory has come to enjoy over Western culture.

The Right Stuff for an Embattled Age

Tom Wolfe can be credited with inventing a jazzed-up street lingo that takes the most high-flown topic and simplifies it to a vital level that readers can embrace. Wolfe's nonfiction created an empirical language that cuts through the fat of pretense and affectation.

The Right Stuff is a masterpiece of non-fiction creativity. This is a bold work in many ways. For one, Wolfe does not appease postmodern intellectuals by imitating the clinical and artificial language of writers who are more often than not obfuscators, than they are awed by genuine understanding.

In *The Right Stuff*, the subject and author's technique command equal attention. Wolfe's presentation of the up-start American space program and test pilots who volunteered to fill her ranks is a work of perspicuity. One example of this is the author's realization that to match the energy and devil-may-care bravado of test pilots and astronauts, it was necessary to craft a language that would do justice to his subject matter. Wolfe's language captured the ethos of confronting human contingency head on; he addresses the pressing danger that test pilots and astronauts embrace.

The history of early American space exploration was a marriage of engineering and bravery that had no precedent. One captivating anecdote of the Mercury 7 astronauts is their

demand that NASA build them a capsule they could pilot like an airplane, not just one that was controlled from Earth, like the early capsules that were commandeered by chimpanzees.

It has gone unnoticed by many critics of *The Right Stuff* that the book chronicles the creative acts of differentiated persons who are making their way in the world, what Milton calls in *Paradise Lost*, darkness visible.

The test pilot is truly a knight of the sky, perhaps not like the errant Don Quixote chasing windmills, but braving the difficulties of the world nonetheless. For, even though the early American space program was the work of many people, it is also true that the individuals involved were the best people for the job. Creativity can be said in many ways.

The Right Stuff is a fine depiction of the science of the space program. In the preface to the book, Wolfe explains that he was motivated to write *The Right Stuff* because he was intrigued by the character of test pilots. He wanted to know what kind of people willingly sit atop a “roman candle” and do not flinch.

A close reading of *The Right Stuff* that is coupled with rudimentary knowledge of aviation history bears out the merit of Wolfe’s question. Wolfe makes it clear that after WWI, progressive intellectuals picked on officers as blameworthy for warfare in the twentieth century. On the contrary, Wolfe explains, the test pilots and officers who developed America’s space program were fearless visionaries.

Wolfe's well researched account of the early stages of the American space program documents the character and values of test pilots and astronauts like no other publication in this field. *The Right Stuff* is a vibrant, faced-paced documentary that rivets the reader to a sense of realism, which includes the many tragedies involved in the development of America's space program. The latter emphasis is especially important in our time, when personal sacrifice is viewed with a cynical eye.

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- A Story-Telling Decalogue
- Two Literary Sermons
- Remembering Don Emilio

The Right Stuff follows the trajectory of test pilots like Chuck Yeager, John Glenn, Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom and Gordon Cooper, men who tested the limit of aircrafts. The book puts on display the sacrifices that the wives and children of early test pilots and astronauts endured.

After WWII, the American Space program began in earnest, and at the root of this was the threat of nuclear proliferation in space by the Soviet Union. The American Space program was not just about getting to the moon first.

The Future of Homo Loquax

Wolfe's last book is a work about the nature of speech. It is also a philosophical work. Speech, he writes in *The Kingdom of Speech,* "and only speech, gives man the power to ask questions

about his own life." Wolfe debunks Darwinism for its inability to explain the origin of speech. Homo loquax's existential longing does not owe its essence to evolution.

Careful readers of Wolfe's collected work will identify him as a writer who has truly understood the meaning and impact of nihilism in Nietzsche's work. In fact, Wolfe mentions Nietzsche in many interviews. The main problem for man's future that troubled Wolfe is that thought and emotion rely on speech for transmission. As a manner of existential aspiration, the future of man will depend on the level of corruption of his speech through social-political tribalism.

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