

*Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities: a nineteenth century novel of the 1980s*¹

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ABSTRACT

The Bonfire of the Vanities is Tom Wolfe's attempt at fulfilling his own widely-known prediction, namely that the future of the modern novel would lie in a closer approach to social reality than the one generally employed by contemporary novelists. His sources of inspiration were the great social writers of the nineteenth century, both in French and Russian literature. Prominent among them is Emile Zola, who inspired and fostered a movement that many considered dead and forgotten: Naturalism. This paper seeks to reveal that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a Naturalistic novel. Wolfe's admiration for Zola and other nineteenth-century writers is only marginal evidence. His shaping of his first work of fiction in a Naturalistic fashion is irrefutable proof. So is the fact that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a story of fight, adaptation and survival in an urban jungle of the 1980s.

After having become the most fervent advocate for the dethronement of the novel as the supreme literary genre and its replacement by what he called himself "New Journalism", Tom Wolfe decided that the presumably agonizing genre was worth a last try and produced *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). The effort was not wasted, as Wolfe's is one of the most significant novels within contemporary American fiction. Seen in the light of some of his previous work, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* strikes one as a fairly conventional novel, all the more so given the highly experimental character of *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamlined Baby* (1965), *The Electric-Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) or *The Pump House Gang* (1968), to name only a few. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities* Wolfe not only restricted experimentation considerably

but even found major sources of inspiration in nineteenth-century writers. Balzac, Tolstoy and, particularly, Emile Zola can be classed as Wolfe's literary predecessors as far as his fiction is concerned. In particular, Naturalism, as practiced and exposed by Zola², was to influence Wolfe to such an extent that there exists undeniable evidence that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was conceived and developed in terms of a Naturalistic novel.

Lisa Grunwald, in discussing *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, believes to have detected certain traits that undermine Wolfe's pretension of "great realist fiction" (158). They are an over-simplified psychological rendering of characters and a lack of moral commitment on his part. She exemplifies the former by borrowing one of the central symbols in *The Electric-Kool-Aid Acid Test*: "he [Wolfe] ignores the fact that even if one wants desperately to be on the bus, one can, sometimes, if briefly, find oneself just as desperate to be off the bus" (158); namely, that human beings are too complex to reduce them to pre-established roles, unless for comic effect. With regards to her second remark, it is terribly hard to believe that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a cold and detached piece of work; maybe there is no explicit judgement on the characters' actions but it is precisely because to have done so would have been redundant. Their attitudes speak for themselves but even if they don't, Wolfe's ironies serve the function of delivering a final blow to them. It goes without saying that Maria Ruskin, Peter Fallow, Larry Kramer, Abe Weiss and the whole bunch are no more than a group of arrivistes surreptitiously awaiting their opportunity to climb the social ladder of money, pleasure and success. The fact is that Grunwald has not taken into account that Wolfe is not writing only Realistic but also Naturalistic fiction and that what she singles out as drawbacks are precisely elements distinguishing both fictional approaches.

Furst and Skrine considered the usual lack of psychological complexity in Naturalistic characters a result not of any fault on the part of writers but a consequence of their belief in man's condition being determined by external forces beyond his control (18). Precisely because of it, Naturalistic writers saw no more sense in condemning a wolf which had slaughtered a lamb than in condemning an "evil" action in man, as in both cases Nature, instinctive drives or sheer survival were to be held responsible (20). This is not the place to discuss the appropriateness of such notions; anyhow, they account for the characteristically pessimistic and amoral tone of Naturalistic novels, as well as for their relative lack of psychological complexities when dealing with particular characters. The conception of man as a representative product of his milieu also prevents a real hero emerging from any of these novels (Furst/Skrine: 51-2); Maggie, Nana, Clyde Griffiths³ or Sherman McCoy are not figures easy to identify with, much less admire. At most, readers can pity them, and that is something in which the writer is not going to be of much help either, as predators are not usually the object of the Naturalistic author's wrath. What

readers do have in this type of fiction is a sometimes overwhelming quantity of realistic details concerning outer appearances, clothes, houses... Zola insisted on a meticulous observation of reality; in the same way a scientist did not limit himself to define a cell by saying that it was round, writers were encouraged to describe their material as scrupulously and abundantly as possible. Wolfe is obviously a good disciple and has diligently applied the great Master's suggestions. Any of his readers can corroborate this obvious fact. When criticized because of it, Wolfe has found solace in the fact that great nineteenth-century writers were criticized for the very same reasons:

Brand names, tastes in clothes and furniture, manners, the way people treat children, servants, or their superiors are important clues to an individual's expectations. This is something else that I am criticized for, mocked for, ridiculed for. I take some solace in the fact that the leading critic of Balzac's day, Sainte-Beuve, used to say the same thing about Balzac's fixation on furniture. (Plimpton: 67)

The fact that Wolfe is a reporter is clearly reflected in his fiction. Furthermore, he has not missed the chance to remind us that Zola considered reporting a basic requirement for the social writer:

Dickens, Dostoyevski, Balzac, Zola and Sinclair Lewis assumed that the novelist had to go beyond his personal experience and head out into society as a reporter. Zola called it documentation, and his documenting expeditions to the slums [...] became legendary. (1987: xx-xxi)

Further confirmation of his reverence for nineteenth-century fiction and Zola, in particular, is here supplied. Wolfe's aim is, then, to describe man "in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him" (1987: xvii); in other words, "the demonstration of the influence of society on even the most personal aspects of the individual" (1987: xviii). Though Wolfe uses a realistic technique, clearly based on reporting, he goes beyond realism: he tries to offer evidence of how the individual relates to and is dependent on his social environment. This is a clearly Naturalistic concern.

In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Naturalistic traits are more apparent than it seems. To begin with, the whole novel's protagonist might well be New York itself (Mora: 237). Wolfe acknowledges his indebtedness to Naturalism in this further respect: "such a book [he's referring to what later became *The Bonfire of the Vanities*] should be a novel of the city, in the sense that Balzac or Zola had written novels of Paris [...]" (1987: viii). Indeed, most Naturalistic novels are city novels. Other obvious facts can corroborate the Naturalistic adscription of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*: the already discussed lack of a straightforward moral evaluation and of psychological richness in the depiction of characters,

as well as the tragic ending of the protagonist, a denouement frequently employed by Naturalistic writers. As far as technique is concerned, and leaving aside Wolfe's striking and unique innovations in the field, Impressionism, with its emphasis on lights and colors being more significant than objects themselves, as well as the extensive use of metonymy, occupy a prominent position within *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Espejo: 32-3). These two devices are derived from Zola and other Naturalistic writers, such as the American Stephen Crane, whose employment of Impressionism in his novel *Maggie* has been much admired and praised. The use of this technique does not contradict the alleged obsession with details. On the contrary, it is precisely those details revealing features otherwise difficult to grasp that an Impressionistic technique seeks to highlight. The effect is achieved by means of omitting or abridging what is not strictly relevant.

There are some events in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that signal the Naturalistic delineation of its plot. To understand what is going on, it is necessary to be acquainted with the characters' background and upbringing, as both combine to create social and biological determinisms, crucial in the novel. Sherman's chin, to which many allusions are made, is one of his most outstanding physical attributes and a symbol of those forces which, together, determine his behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and customs: "[...] a prominent chin [...] He was proud of his chin. The McCoy chin; the Lion had it, too. It was a manly chin, a round chin such as Yale men used to have [...] He was a Yale man himself" (17-8). Yale and his father are two powerful forces which have configured Sherman's personality. A WASP family with a solid background, a young man with an impeccable education, ancient traditions, immaculate moral convictions, [...] A world, therefore, "neatly bounded by the two ropes" (255) with which Sherman's beach club protected its clients from transgressors. Sherman remembers having once crossed the lines when he was a child; it was the most exciting adventure he could have conceived, entering "alien terrain", an expression Sherman later uses to refer to both Killian's office (410) and to the Criminal Courts Building (426). Out of his known world, his territory, using Naturalistic jargon, Sherman is lost and vulnerable. The territorial question is basic to Naturalism: the individual's domain is that place he has been conditioned to belong to, the one to which he is adapted. When Sherman is approached by a black youth in a telephone booth outside his apartment building, he calms his fears by assuring himself that he is exactly where he belongs: "Well, let him come! I'm not budging! It's my territory!" (25). Within one's territorial limits, situations can be coped with. Being outside of them is certainly dangerous: "You were an alien on the streets of the 44th Precinct and you knew that at once, every time Fate led you into their territory" (150). No wonder that after the incident in the Bronx has started being taken notice of by the press, Sherman's anxiety leads him to long for what is known to him: a

customary weekend in Long Island with Judy and his parents: "That was the way he wanted things this weekend; the same, the same, the same, the same and neatly bounded by the two ropes." (255)

Territorial attachment and dependence on the environment are particularly dramatic in Sherman's case, as they are going to cause his destruction. They are not lacking, however, in the rest of the characters. Abe Weiss, for instance, is described as "nothing if not a creature of the system" (461); for him, being separated from his immediate surroundings "would have been like being thrown over the railing on a Christmas cruise ship in the middle of the Caribbean Sea." (117) Maria's medium is "men", just as "a dolphin's medium is the sea" (678). The Irish are biologically determined to be the toughest 'guys' on earth, just as Jews inherit liberalism and respect for the law runs through the veins of WASPs. Rhonda, Kramer's wife, has been educated to become her own mother and, in fact, she's nearly done it; the poor assistant district attorney realizes this fact: "She was her mother! [...] It was only a matter of time!" (37). As far as Kramer himself is concerned, "in Jewish families like his, liberalism came with the similac and the Mott's apple juice and the Instamatic and Daddy's grins in the evening." (121) There are times, however, at which certain conditions impose a particular degree of adaptation in a character, even if it means overcoming innate trends. Kramer usually distinguishes don't and doesn't, but in the company of Martin and Goldberg, he is ready to forget about such a trifling grammatical requirement just for the sake of appearing tougher. In fact, Kramer is not the only one: "All the cops turned Irish, the Jewish cops, like Goldberg, but also the Italian cops, the Latin cops, and the black cops [...] The same was true of assistant district attorneys in the Homicide Bureau. You were supposed to turn Irish." (401-2) In Darwin's theory, this would be called 'the survival of the fittest'.

The individual's dependence on society is not paralleled by a sense of attachment the opposite way. Naturalistic writers tend to emphasize the fact that while an individual cut off from his umbilical cord with the environment cannot survive, society, instead, does not stop for a minute to cry over its corpses: "No, the fate of Sherman McCoy didn't make all that much difference. Lopwitz's English Reproduction life would endure Sherman McCoy's problems [...] Another air-to-ground telephone call from some fat celebrity and Lopwitz wouldn't even remember who he was." (474) However, Naturalistic writers cannot be charged with being one-sided about society and its destructive potential. Hence, they usually introduce examples of successful trajectories, opposite to those of their protagonists. In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), the tragic fate of a victim of the system, Hurstwood, is paralleled by the steady promotion of Carrie Meeber herself. Sherman McCoy's outcome is dramatically contrasted with that of Peter Fallow. Both characters follow opposite courses: from a wealthy Park Avenue living standard to the Bronx detention pens; from a

second-rate job as a journalist in a second-rate newspaper and a filthy apartment to a Pulitzer-prize-winning celebrity status and undreamed-of respect and success. Unlike Sherman, Fallow manages to overcome his snobbishness and adapt to the ongoing flow.

Three events are crucial in the novel, as they are the immediate cause of Sherman's destruction: his affair with Maria, his getting lost in the Bronx and his giving himself away when the two detectives visit him; each one triggers the following. The three are, moreover, the direct consequence of Sherman's poor adaptation. To begin with, Sherman has married the wrong woman, one from outside his social circle who, after some time, develops extravagant tastes, clearly repulsive to a man of such a conventional upbringing. Fashionable parties, bizarre companies, ostentatious furniture gradually invading his home, Sherman feels his estrangement from his wife increase alarmingly. In one of such parties, the Bavardages', Sherman "was stranded. Only he was a wallflower with no conversational mate, a social light of no wattage whatsoever in the Bavardage Celebrity Zoo." (390) As a result, he engages in an affair with Maria, hoping to regain some of the romance he and Judy had shared but which was by then utterly finished ("...Sherman made this climb up to Maria's with a romantic relish. How bohemian!" (26)). The problem is that Sherman has not been brought up to cheat on his wife, much less to lie to her, and these are intrinsic requirements of a secret love affair. His guilt is so strong that he needs to compensate it, first by trying to blame it on "this tidal wave of concupiscence rolling across the world" (64-5) and afterwards with an incredible amount of self-confidence, part of which being his ridiculous consideration of himself as a 'Master of the Universe'. It is precisely in one of those fits of self-confidence when he forgets to concentrate on the road and misses his exit from the motorway he is driving along after having picked up Maria at the airport:

He lived on Park Avenue, the street of dreams! He worked on Wall Street, fifty floors up, for the legendary Pierce and Pierce, overlooking the world! He was at the wheel of a 48,000 roadster with one of the most beautiful women in New York [...] He was of that breed whose natural destiny it was... to have what they wanted! (91)

This absurd triumphalism leads Sherman to commit a second mistake: missing the right exit and heading straight into the Bronx, into 'alien terrain'.

The finishing touch comes when Sherman decides to follow Maria's suggestions and not report the incident to the police. Obviously, it is not in Sherman's nature to hide information from the authorities or to lie to the two detectives in charge of the investigation. Sherman proves unable to cope with it, as revealed in his disastrous interview with Martin and Goldberg, in which he obnoxiously betrays himself. Much later Sherman realizes the truth: "And

Sherman McCoy [...] discovered what many had discovered before him. In well-reared girls and boys, guilt and the instinct to obey the rules are reflexes, ineradicable ghosts in the machine." (713) By then, however, Sherman has been defeated in his battle against determinism. His upbringing had doomed it to be this way: he was not prepared to be married to a wife such as his, to handle a situation in which he is forced to lie, to go against the law or to face physical fight with the landlord of Maria's apartment ("He couldn't possibly touch him. He couldn't intimidate him. The Lion's cool commands had no effect. And beneath it all the very foundations were rotten." (300)). Sherman's unconscious insistence on ignoring these facts and rebelling against his very nature will have a tragic result. Nevertheless, Sherman's self-deceit continues right to the end:

I have nothing to do with Wall Street or Park Avenue or Yale or St. Paul's or Buckley or the Lion of Dunning Sponget [...] Every creature has its habitat, and I'm in mine right now. Reade Street and 161st Street and the pens. If I think I'm above it, I'm only kidding myself, and I've stopped kidding myself. (692)

Nothing farther from reality.

The Bonfire of the Vanities, mirroring the short tale "The Koala" by Campbell McCoy (487), is then partly a story about determinism and unsuccessful adaptation. It examines how these forces operate to destroy an individual who has undertaken a feeble and pathetic rebellion against them by trying to forget moral scruples, guilt, traditions, rectitude, honesty, and other similar instincts circulating within his blood. The origin of Sherman's tragedy, his relationship with Judy, is described as one in which "they closed themselves up in the perfect cocoon [...] immune to all that his parents and Buckley and St. Paul's and Yale had ever imposed on him" (35). When Sherman bade farewell to Judy every day, he used a salute which "was supposed to say that yes, I was going to work on Wall Street, but my heart and soul would never belong to it. I would use it and rebel and break with it" (685). Sherman McCoy's case is counterbalanced, however, by multiple examples of successful adaptation. Maria's fundamental tools for survival are her attractiveness, an astonishing skill for handling men, and a portentous instinct to take care of herself when in danger. She never gives a thought to what has happened in the Bronx, much less feels guilty for not having reported it. A perfect account of it is given by herself:

There's two kinds of a jungle. Wall Street is a jungle [...] You know how to handle yourself in that jungle [...] And then there's the other jungle. That's the one we got lost in the other night, in the Bronx [...] You don't know what that's like. You had a good upbringing. Laws weren't any kind of a threat to you. They were your laws, Sherman, people like you and your family's. Well, I didn't grow up that way. We were always staggering back and forth across the line [...] and so I know and it doesn't frighten me. (297)

Her upbringing has prepared her for doing everything Sherman cannot do: lie, transgress the law, cheat on her husband, and so on. Her survival is guaranteed.

To reinforce the Naturalistic profile of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, some attention must be paid to the question of imagery. In addition to the continuous references, already introduced and discussed, to territory, medium, habitat and alien terrain, the most recurrent metaphor is that of the jungle. It is not a new motive in this type of fiction; its most evident expression is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). In fact, working conditions for brokers at Pierce & Pierce are not very different from those for Chicago slaughterhouse workers as depicted by Sinclair. No time can be wasted. Talk and idleness are strictly discouraged, to put it mildly. The working day amounts to ten or twelve hours. When a piece of the machinery no longer works properly, he is simply dismissed, in Sinclair's novel, or 'sent to rest' in Wolfe's; both linguistic formulations allude to the same concept. For bond salesmen "the end of the trading day was like the end of a battle [...] They told war stories and beat their breasts and yodeled, if they deserved it" (348). Maria's version, later adopted by Sherman, of their incident in the Bronx is that "They had been drawn into a fight in the jungle, and they had fought and won, and the jungle did not scream about its wounded" (270). A whole chapter is therefore entitled "King of the Jungle" (113). Moreover, Sherman's confrontation with the apartment owner is described as a "male battle" (299). Shelly Thomas is, according to Kramer, "thrilling to the strength of those who were manly enough to deal with the predators" (281). In a word, Wolfe manages to establish a climate of fight and human degradation, in which men and women are seen as jungle beasts doing their best to survive in a hostile environment. Many of the images are considerably degrading for the characters, though in Naturalism human beings were rendered in this way, their daily actions being explained in animal terms. Instinctive drives, though different in their manifestations, operated from a similar basis in both men and animals. The jungle, because of its hostile and devastating character, was an ideal setting for such Naturalistic tenets.

When Kramer tries to wrap his witness, Roland Auburn, in an aura of sanctity, Wolfe's ironic remark is highly revealing: "The Crack King of Evergreen Avenue had abdicated and become a mere serf of the environment" (669). This shows that Wolfe is conscious of the conventions he's employing and, furthermore, distanced enough to laugh at them if necessary. What has been discussed so far is not intended to conclude that Tom Wolfe is so naïve as to believe in every idea coming from Naturalistic postulates. Certainly he does not. However, it is significant of his admiration for Zola and other nineteenth-century writers that he borrowed some of their conventions for his first work of fiction. Some of them are even useful to explain part of what is happening in modern society. Nevertheless, Wolfe's reverence for nineteenth-century novels

and his shaping of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in such a fashion reinforces what he has himself stated at times, namely that most contemporary novelists are too far from the Earth to appeal to ordinary readers and that social reality is too valuable a material not to take advantage of it in literature (1973: 29). Some may consider that these are old-fashioned ideas; for others, they are useful reminders of a reality neglected for too long.

NOTES

¹ The author wishes to respectfully thank Professor Pilar Marín, from the University of Seville, who has kindly granted me permission to use one of her remarks concerning *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as a title for this article.

² In treatises such as *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880) or *Les Romanciers Naturalistes* (1881).

³ The protagonists of Crane's *Maggie* (1893), Zola's *Nana* (1890) and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), respectively.

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