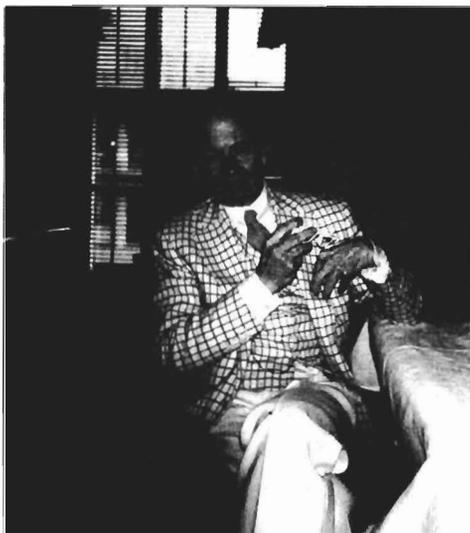


Philosophical Fiction

An Interview with Tom Wolfe

HRP: YOU HAVE HAD A CAREER AS A REPORTER, YOU HAVE written non-fiction works about radically non-mainstream American lives (*The Right Stuff* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), and you have published two works of fiction, *Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full*. How would you compare these media as means of conveying truth about society? In this respect, how do you think the novel differs from reportage?

Wolfe: Well, to begin with, both of the novels that I have written involved an enormous amount of reporting. I made a prediction while I was still doing non-fiction; I wrote a long essay called “New Journalism,” which I didn’t publish until 1987. In that piece, I said that if the novel is to have a future, and I doubted that it really has a future—I still doubt it—it would have one only as a journalistic or documentary novel. It would be naturalistic in the sense that Emile Zola used the term; it would be intensely realistic. The novel would be used in terms of what it can convey—it has the value of a certain amount of economy.



I feel that what I am doing is a future for the novel. That may sound egotistical, but if I didn’t feel that way, why would I do it? In one work of fiction you can present a lot of true settings, true situations, true types of character. But in general, there’s really practically nothing that a novel can do that real, written non-fiction can’t do. And I still think that the experiments in non-fiction since 1950 have been the most important step in American literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

HRP: Many of your novels are written in what is sometimes called a classical narrative style, similar to Trollope’s.

Wolfe: And Zola’s. He’s my ideal. My contention is that realism and naturalism get

*Tom Wolfe is a world-renowned author of fiction and non-fiction. His non-fiction includes *The Right Stuff* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. His two highly acclaimed works of fiction are *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and, recently, *A Man in Full*. This interview was conducted by S. Phineas Upham at The Harvard Club in Cambridge, MA in March 2000.*

down to the real logical workings of the mind. The vivid detail of the realistic novel, which after all is an invention of the eighteenth century, hasn't been with us that long.—It is something that jogs the memory in such a way that emotions get stirred.

We now know that memories are attached to emotions; we don't just store factual memory—there's always emotion attached. Realistic fiction plays upon that, and so you get that symphony of emotions. It was only with the invention of the realistic novel that reading literature made people cry. It just never happened before. Now second-rate novels can make people cry because of the technical advantages of realism. I'm saying you can't back down from that. You can only take it further. And that is what I insist I have done.

HRP: You have been interested in neuroscience recently. How has this informed your work, and how do you think this will affect philosophy or literature in general?

Wolfe: Yes, I have. For most of this century, among the most dominant ideas that influenced human beings in countries such as the US were theories that held that external situations create the destiny of the individual. The two major ideas have been Freudianism and Marxism. Both are external theories, or externalist theories. Marx says your class identity is your destiny. Freud says your family's Oedipal drama is your destiny. In both cases, something from outside is acting on the infant and the child. Neuroscience says something entirely different. It says your genetic history

is your destiny. Edward Wilson, who I think is probably the most influential thinker in this area, says that every human being is born not as a blank slate, but as a negative waiting to be slipped into developmental fluid.

Every human being is born not as a blank slate, but as a negative waiting to be slipped into developmental fluid.

In other words, you can develop your potential well

or you can develop it poorly; but all you're going to get is what's on that negative at birth—that genetic imprint. Now this I think is already causing people to revise their conceptions of themselves and to believe that “the fix is in.”

Professor Nozick mentioned a study about happiness earlier today that says everyone has a certain happiness thermostat setting. If your setting is low, you can have a tremendous triumph in your career and you will be happier for six weeks. Then one day you'll say, “Oh God, I really didn't deserve all of that. Things are actually pretty awful.” And you're right back down to your setting. Or somebody who has a high setting can have a most horrible reversal and then wake up one day and say, “I think I'll go out and sell some encyclopedias.”

HRP: What aspects of human nature do you believe are intrinsic or constant and what aspects are variable, given this view of human nature as a photographic negative?

Wolfe: I believe there are at least four determined constants within human behavior.

They never change. One is the desire to ward off death. Another is the desire to avoid irksome toil. I think that's a fundamental human trait—it expresses the principle of inertia: the desire to avoid irksome toil. The third one is the desire to procreate. We really are like mayflies.

HRP: And *Mayflies* was originally the title of your newest book, ultimately called *A Man in Full*.

Wolfe: Yes, originally. Mayflies go through this furious activity in one month. Mayflies, if you ever seen them, rise up near riverbanks, particularly in the Midwest. They are like a blizzard in the streets.

They furiously try to procreate, and each one lives only twenty-four hours. I saw this at Appleton, Wisconsin. I was up in Lange College with a biology teacher. She was explaining to me the nature of the mayfly. I said, "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. How could evolution come up with a creature that just does nothing but spend twenty-four hours trying to reproduce itself?" And she said, "Well, I'll tell you two things. First of all, to the mayfly it's a lifetime. And second, what makes you think your life is any different?"

The fourth [constant within human nature] is the one that interests me the most. It is the overarching one—a universal aspect that I was subsumed by. It's the desire to serve the honor and superiority of—in quotes—"my kind." Not me, but "my kind." For that reason I think that sociology right now should be the queen of all the sciences and that evolutionary biology should be a subset. In *Consilience*, Edward Wilson proposes that evolutionary psychology is the queen of the sciences and that everything else is a subset, particularly sociology. I think the opposite is the case, but I won't get into that right now.

I think that biology is both literally and scientifically a subset of sociology. But certainly it is a subset of the social sciences. Just think of the parts of human life that are determined by a concern for "my kind."

HRP: Continue on the theme of human nature. What is essential about human nature; what's fundamental about human nature and the nature of other creatures?

Wolfe: That's a very big point right there. I'm interested in the fact that evolutionary biology is now part of the given. In the intellectual world, it is generally part of the given that Darwinism is absolutely correct, that there is no cardinal distinction between man and animals. However, before "the death of God," before many people stopped believing in God, man was believed to have been created in the image of God. That's a fundamental Christian belief, and probably other religions have the same belief. Once you get rid of God, once you don't believe in God anymore, you have to, or you're more apt to, believe in Darwin; you are more likely to believe that there's no difference, no fundamental difference, between animals and humans.

HRP: You often speak of America. Both of your books contain dramatic panoramas of the diversity of American life. What do you believe holds America together? Is America a philosophical construct, say, that can accommodate everybody because of a set of philosophically liberal positions? Your books include so many different classes and mutually exclusive points of view:

how do you reconcile them?

Wolfe: There used to be debates about something called American exceptionalism. I do think that America is exceptional in that this country never had an aristocracy. It never had a real class system. To this day it doesn't have one.

Any sociologist worth a nickel—worth a dollar—will tell you that socially there is only one dividing line in this country in terms of class: you either have a bachelor's degree or you don't. And that is significant. Beyond that, in most parts of this country, the only other major class distinction is whether you are respectable or not. "Respectable" means "subscribing to certain bourgeois values"—believing in order, politeness, education, enterprise, and citizenship.

HRP: And those values are essentially American?

Wolfe: These are the bourgeois values all over the world.

HRP: What then makes America's philosophical basis different?

Wolfe: That there's nothing else.

HRP: Any examples?

Wolfe: You'll notice that even at the height of the New Left movement, that is, the late anti-war movement in the sixties, no one ever attacked the upper classes; the attack was always on bourgeois values. No one ever knows where it is, the upper

class. There are seventy people who have a lot of money. So it really gets down to whether you have a bachelor's degree or not. That is very significant. There are all sorts of jobs that are shut if you don't have a bachelor's degree.

I was shocked at how many people saw Bonfire of the Vanities as a horrifying portrait of a big city.... To me, it was human comedy.

HRP: In your novels, you seem to portray American culture as becoming in some ways more cruel and more brutal. Consider, for example, in *A Man in Full* the brutal treatment of Charlie by the bankers. That could never have occurred eighty years ago.

Wolfe: Because it would've been a violation of a sense of bourgeois rightness. But it's not a very big deal. I was shocked at how many people saw *Bonfire of the Vanities* as a horrifying portrait of a big city. When I wrote it, I was in awe of the way these people lived their lives. I said to myself, "Look at what that one's doing! Look at that one! This is amazing!" To me, it was human comedy.

And I just loved every minute of it; I loved living in the city where life was so colorful. And that was also—from the moment I saw the first potato plantation in Georgia—which is how *A Man in Full* began. I said, I've got to know about these people, I've got to learn what they're like, where they come from, what they do. So I didn't write either book as an indictment of anything. I pride myself on that fact that if you read any of my long books, starting with *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Right Stuff*, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, or *A Man in Full*, and try to find

a moral slant in them, I don't think you'll succeed.

And I think that is a great sign. I think there is such a thing as egotistical writers, egotistical objectivity. It's more important for a writer to discover sides of life that most people don't know about, to bring them alive, and to bring whatever you're writing about alive, and to make people see and understand it.

If that's more important to you than any other issue in the world, more important to you than any moral issue, any political issue, that lends you an objectivity—egotistical objectivity. It's more important for you to see well as a writer than to advance any cause. I feel sorry for people who devote their writing talent to advancing causes because obviously their cause is more important than their talent. Now Orwell disagreed. I love Orwell, but he disagreed. He said he never wrote a decent line that wasn't political. A lot of people feel that way, but I don't.

HRP: When you were doing your research for some of your earlier books, in what way were you able to integrate yourself into a hippie community, or a surfing community, or a community of Black Panthers, or a community of racecar drivers?

Wolfe: I gave up early in the game on integrating myself.

HRP: What were you able to do?

Wolfe: I've never tried to blend in—I mean, I tried in the beginning to blend in. It was hopeless. I was usually too different.

HRP: But they accepted you on some level.

Wolfe: Because I was the man from Mars. Most people, I've found, think journalists are a great ally. Most people have what I call information compulsion. For example, and I think all of us feel it, if you're walking down the street, and somebody drives up and says, "Excuse me, could you tell me the way to Chestnut Lane?" If you know the way, you can't talk enough. You say, "Turn around down here and go back two lights 'til you see a big church. You'll run into a big church, take a right." You can't tell them enough because you have information compulsion; you're gaining a few minor status points by knowing something they don't know and imparting the information. If on the other hand you don't know how to get there, you go away muttering, "What the hell did they stop me for? What do they think I am, some local mission girl? The nerve!" This is information compulsion. So I was always the man from Mars who wants to know, who doesn't know a thing, who is eager to learn.

"I want to know what you know. Please tell me." And people will—that's the way I worked. I didn't dress down; I always wore a jacket and tie. A suit and tie, really, among the hippies. In fact they kind of were amused by it, and then they respected it as a show of independence. They hadn't seen a necktie in ages, except on the hated suits. I go everywhere as me, so I never become integrated.

HRP: You write about the modern condition that man finds himself in. This condition, almost a moral stance towards life, includes a portrayal of a world where in many ways manners and morals have been declining. What do you think came first, the decline of manners or the decline of morals?

Wolfe: Well it's probably the decline in morals that was first. We go back to Nietzsche now. Nietzsche said that once you no longer believe in God—and, you have to understand, you're talking to someone who doesn't believe in God—once you no longer believe that there's a power that can point to you with a very long finger and say, "Thou shalt, thou shalt not, and thou better listen," it's very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a moral code. So the breakdown in the strength of moral code really began with what Nietzsche called the death of God. A period that began with nationalism in which influential people stopped believing in God.

Another thing that goes along with that, which seems very mundane and is very much underestimated, is the ease of travel. It means you can live a life in which no one's looking over your shoulder. That's why the sexual revolution has been in New York for a long time. There's no community looking over your shoulder.

HRP: In the recent and widely acclaimed publication of *A Man in Full*, you presented Stoicism as the answer to the modern-day condition. What is this condition, and is Stoicism a final answer or the correct approach for a man of decency and honor in the short run? What do you say about how our status of living in a post-Christian world is related to that of living in a pre-Christian world—where Stoicism originated?

Wolfe: I used it as a device to point out the lack of moral rigor in contemporary life. It would be hard to think of anything more foreign to the spirit of the age that we're in right now—that's the term that used to be taken seriously: spirit of the age, *Zeitgeist*.

Stoicism is so foreign to the spirit of this age because Stoicism gives you no wriggle-learning strategies. The essential Stoic story is the story of Agrapinas and Floris. Agrapinas is the Stoic. Knock on the door, here's Floris, the famous historian. He seems very agitated. "Agrapinas, something terrible has happened. Nero has ordered me to appear in one of those ridiculous pageants." Nero had a way of doing this to prominent people in Rome: he'd make them dress up in ridiculous costumes and deliver lines that he, Nero, had written.

Floris says, "If I do this, I'll be humiliated in front of all of Rome. If I don't, I'll be killed." Agrapinas responds, "I have the same summons." Now Floris asks, "What do we do?" and Agrapinas responds, "You act in the play. I don't."—"Why me and not you?"—"Because you considered it."

I love that story. That's the essential story of stories. To a Stoic there are no dilemmas. Today, our lives are full of dilemmas based on how can we wriggle out of bad situations. And to a really religious person, certainly a Stoic, you cannot look at life in that way.

HRP: In your novel *A Man in Full*, Conrad goes to the assistance of a weak man who's been brutalized in jail. Was this action Christian or Stoic? It seems in some ways antithetical to Stoicism as portrayed in the book. By going to help him, Conrad doesn't allow the man to accept the consequences of his actions.

Wolfe: You are right, it was not Stoic. It was a violation of Stoicism. I wanted to dramatize the severity of Stoicism, and I thought that this was the easiest way, that this emphasized the brutal demands of the system that Conrad had converted to.

Douglas Copland, who coined the phrase “Generation X,” claims that this generation, the first generation after God, still has Christian compassion. Now Conrad doesn’t know about Christianity; he doesn’t even have the idea of praying. He starts praying but doesn’t know what he’s doing. He tries to become Stoic, but he still retains Christian compassion. And that’s where Conrad is from, the first generation after God.

HRP: On the idea of the post-Christian world: if what you say is true, what do you feel will be the consequences of this loss?

Wolfe: When Nietzsche said that God is dead, he also said, “I’m now willing to give you the history of the next two centuries.” He said that since God is dead the faith that men formerly put in God they will put into barbaric, nationalistic brotherhood, which foreshadowed Nazism and Communism.

He said that there would be wars catastrophic beyond all imagination. He said, “Wars such as the world has never seen.” And he said there would be, within the intellectual world, a mood of universal skepticism, cynicism, irony, and contempt. Further, he claimed, humans would be looked upon as beasts, not made in the image of God.

George Bernard Shaw was probably the greatest dramatist of idea. He had the magic gift for presenting complex ideas in a wholly engaging dramatic form.

HRP: What did Nietzsche say would happen next?

Wolfe: A total eclipse of all values. He said we would limp along the twentieth century on the skeleton of the Christian moral framework of the nineteenth century. We’d get a long way, but towards the end of the century we’d face what we’re probably facing now. Neuroscience helps speed up the process because neuroscience does treat humans as beasts.

HRP: For Nietzsche, what would follow the eclipse of all values?

Wolfe: Absolute desolation. You have no justification for anything. You see, it’s ripping stuff.

HRP: You’re speaking today at Harvard on the theme of manliness, present in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full*, which seems to be a thread in your work. Could you tell us your conception of manliness in the modern world?

Wolfe: Manliness is tremendously devalued today in America. That’s not true for some other parts of the world, but it is true here. Whether it’s genetic or otherwise, the male psyche, the need to show manliness, has never stopped. It is the need to prove strength. I’m using it as an urge, a drive.

I love the term “dissing,” which only entered the written language in 1988. It’s been street language for some time, I don’t know when it started. It’s the

contraction of disrespecting as a word. Dissing or disrespecting is a male term. It usually refers to disrespecting someone's power as a man and challenging someone's strengths as a man.

HRP: Perhaps we can end with your thoughts on how literature and philosophy intersect, and you could recommend a few authors who you think meld the two fields particularly well. What about philosophical ideas in fictions? How are philosophical ideas changed when they are put into a work of fiction such as yours, and what do they gain or lose by being put into a work of fiction?

Wolfe: Well they usually lose a lot because the writers don't handle it very well. Occasionally you run into somebody like Alexander Solzhenitsyn or George Bernard Shaw. Probably Shaw was the greatest dramatist of idea. He had the magic gift for presenting complex ideas in a wholly engaging dramatic form.

HRP: Related to that, what philosophers do you think have beautiful, elegant styles and what literary figures have beautiful philosophical ideas?

Wolfe: Well, probably the most graceful philosophical writer in modern times was Freud. I think Freud was a philosopher rather than a scientist. But Nietzsche is hard to top. He was a great stylist—I'd put the two of them at the top of my list. I'd put Solzhenitsyn at the top of the list of the writers who deal with philosophical ideas. φ