

# Tom Wolfe's Billion-Footed Beast

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At a time when the daily violence in some American cities has come to exceed that in many of the world's war zones, any book that attempts to portray contemporary urban conditions in the United States is taking on a formidable task. Tom Wolfe's novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* combines the frenetic chase for money and social status among New York's economic elite on Wall Street and Park Avenue with the despair of America's underprivileged in the South Bronx, one of the nation's most poverty-stricken areas—all in a spirit of savage satire.<sup>1</sup> Through its acerbic humor and intricate plot, involving the social and political uproar after the accidental fatal injury of a ghetto boy by Manhattan socialites, the book shows how the various social, ethnic, and economic factions that make up New York society battle for control of America's largest city and prey upon one another in their struggle. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe captures the reckless, go-to-hell atmosphere of the 1980s, and his own recent metaphor of a "wild ride" through American civilization is an apt description of what it can be like to read the book.<sup>2</sup>

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* has created about as big a sensation in the United States as could ever be expected from a work of fiction appearing in book form rather than on the television or movie screen. Although Wolfe's fashionable women, called "social x-rays" and "lemon tarts," will probably never be as well known to the general public as the naughty women of "Dallas" or the afternoon soap operas, Wolfe's novel has proven itself a remarkably marketable item. After having been the number one longest-running hardcover best seller for 1988, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was still

1 Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Bantam, 1987).

2 Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Manifesto for the New Social Novel," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1985, p. 56.

selling strong in paperback and even beating out the thrills of Stephen King's *Tommyknockers* in the last weeks of that year.<sup>3</sup> And not only were a great many people buying the book, but even college professors had begun almost immediately to make it required reading in their sociology and contemporary literature courses. The appearance of "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" in *Harper's Magazine* of November 1989, exactly two years after the publication of the book, seemed to signal that Wolfe had established himself as an important fiction writer and that the reading public was hungry for his word on the art of novel writing.

Wolfe's comparison of the process of writing and reading about contemporary American society to "a wild ride"<sup>m</sup>—an exhilarating flight through the ether or a roller-coaster ride—comes at the end of "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast." In his manifesto Wolfe plays the role of literary historian and critic, as well as explicator of his own aims in writing the novel. "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast"<sup>n</sup> has three overt objectives: a review of American fiction and the theoretical discussions of it in the last three decades, a re-declaration of beliefs Wolfe expressed in 1973 in his introduction to *The New Journalism*, and most important, an after-the-fact statement of intention for *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in which Wolfe attempts to relate his own novel to the literary productions of great novelists of previous centuries.

Upon first reading, Wolfe's manifesto appears heartening in one respect: it purports to stand up for the idea that art and life, literature and the world have something to do with one another. Wolfe advocates literature that involves itself directly with life as it is lived in America today in the midst of seeming chaos and insanity. He says that "the answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms."<sup>4</sup> This pronouncement, as well as Wolfe's statement that his novel was an attempt to cram "as much of New York City between the covers"<sup>5</sup> as he could, rings courageous against the din of post-structural literary criticism that would have everyone believe that all writing is pure artifice unconnected with reality and "the world." Finally, however, like all literary manifestos, Wolfe's is primarily self-serving: it attempts to speak for the kind of literature Wolfe would like to write and claims that *that* kind of literature is what is in fact most needed at the moment.

Wolfe's manifesto is at least as much a reaction against other self-serving manifestos—particularly those by writers who have seen the novel as a dying genre or as a mode for discussing fiction itself—as it is a statement against recent trends in literary theory. In 1967 John Barth suggested in his essay

3 *Publishers Weekly*, January 6, 1989; March 10, 1989.

4 Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 55.

5 *Zbid.*, p. 45.

"The Literature of Exhaustion" that perhaps "the novel, if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt."<sup>6</sup> Barth's essay concerns itself not with the relationship between literature and society, but with fiction as a self-reflexive means of expression that can turn "the artist's mode or form into a metaphor for his concerns."<sup>7</sup> Barth is fascinated by the work of J. L. Borges who can write "a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature."<sup>8</sup> Later in 1979, Barth clarified and moderated his often misunderstood statements of 1967. In "The Literature of Replenishment" he explains that he did not mean to say that fiction was "*kaput*" but to admonish those writers who thought that they could adopt the techniques of "nineteenth-century middle-class realism" and write as if the "modernist enterprise" had never taken place. His objection is to those writers who write as if their twentieth-century predecessors had never existed. Barth's ideal, postmodernist writer "neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back."<sup>9</sup>

The interest in self-referential fiction that Barth demonstrated in 1967 finds even more radical expression in the manifestos of Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick, printed in *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (1975) an entire volume devoted to discussing fiction that discusses itself. In "Surfiction: Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction" (1975), Federman proselytizes for fiction that is not only self-reflexing but that also bares the illusive nature of reality:

for me, the only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction; the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man's imagination and not in man's distorted vision of reality—that reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality. This I call SURFICTION. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Federman argues that such common notions as plot and order must be done away with and that the age-old metaphor of literature as a mirror must be

6 "The Literature of Exhaustion." *Atlantic* 220 (1967), pp. 29-34. Reprinted in *The Friday Book* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), p. 71.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Zbid.*, p. 69.

9 "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction." *Atlantic* 245 (1979): 65-71. Reprinted in *The Friday Book.*, pp.205, 203.

10 Raymond Federman, "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction." *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, edited Raymond Federman (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1975), p. 7.

recognized as outmoded. Fiction "will no longer be a representation of something exterior to it, but self-representation. That is to say, rather than being the stable image of daily life, fiction will be in a perpetual state of redoubling upon itself."<sup>11</sup> Ronald Sukenick also speaks about freeing fiction "from the representational and the need to imitate some version of reality other than its own."<sup>12</sup> Attention first of all to the fictionality of fiction and second to the fictionality of what we generally speak of as reality—the world out there—is what preoccupied many writers of the 1960s and 1970s and provides the background for much of Wolfe's discussion in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast."

Reacting against the notion that "a novel is a sublime literary game"<sup>3</sup>—the bogie that he says has haunted American literature for the past three decades—Wolfe asserts the main principle of his creed: "It is not merely that reporting is useful in gathering the *petits faits vrais* that create verisimilitude and make a novel gripping or absorbing .... My contention is that, especially in an age like this, they are essential for the very greatest effects literature can achieve." Literature ought not return to "the primal origins of fiction, back to a happier time, before realism and all its contaminations, back to myth, fable, and legend," as the Neo-Fabulists have mistakenly done, but should deal instead with the complexity of the here and now. Wolfe asserts that the best means of reclaiming "this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hogstomping Baroque country of ours" as "literary property" is through documentation—through the sort of research journalists employ in their reporting. But for all his protest against the last thirty years of retreat into unreality, Wolfe is surprisingly careless in the way he deals with facts about other writers and in his presentation of literary history. Finally, the manifesto betrays itself as the kind of verbal game playing Wolfe himself openly denigrates.<sup>13</sup>

Several well-known writers were invited by *Harper's Magazine* to comment on Wolfe's manifesto in letters to the editor. These letters were printed in the February 1990 issue, and many took Wolfe to task. Philip Roth objects that Wolfe misrepresented him to "serve the thesis of his literary manifesto for the new social novel." Roth says that Wolfe's assessment of his essay "Writing American Fiction" (1961) is incorrect.<sup>14</sup> Wolfe mistakenly reports that by 1961 Roth was having "second thoughts" about the "brilliant ... but, alas, highly realistic" *Goodbye, Columbus* and that other young writers learned from Roth that "it was time to avert their eyes."<sup>15</sup> Roth testifies that this was

11 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

12 Ronald Sukenick, "The New Tradition in Fiction." *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, p. 44.

13 Wolfe, "Manifesto," pp. 48, 49, 55.

14 "Tom Wolfe's Novel Ideas," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1990, p. 4

15 Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 48.

not the case at all and that his essay was "not a manifesto but an *analysis*" of what he saw as a "postwar literary trend."<sup>16</sup> A glance at the essay in question reveals that in fact Roth was just as perplexed and concerned about how to deal with the incredibility of daily events in America as Wolfe is. Roth campaigns for nothing in the essay but merely observes that there are "certain obsessions and innovations, to be found in the novels of our best writers, supporting the notion that the social world has ceased to be as suitable or as manageable a subject as it once may have been."<sup>17</sup>

Philip Roth is not the only writer who takes exception to Wolfe's manifesto. Others, like John Hawkes, "deplore Wolfe's self-serving attacks on other writers" and resent what they see as a skewed presentation of American literary history since the beginning of the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Alison Lurie finds fault with Wolfe's sexist presentation of American writing, as she notes that of the forty-eight writers mentioned, only two are women, and are cited only in passing.<sup>19</sup> Mary Gordon points out that Wolfe complains that writers have neglected the issue of race relations but does not even bother to mention Toni Morrison.<sup>20</sup> These comments from other writers put many of Wolfe's statements in a dubious light, but the manifesto itself is worth examining closely for its own argument and for what it suggests about *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and about Wolfe's real ambitions as a writer.

Wolfe admits in his manifesto that one of the motivations behind his novel was that he wanted to fulfil a prediction and prove a point that he had made in *The New Journalism* in 1973. In the manifesto he restates that point: "that the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him."<sup>21</sup> Wolfe's repetition here is symptomatic of the manifesto as a whole. There is little that is new. Unlike Barth, Wolfe has not revised his earlier declarations on the nature of literature. In fact, Wolfe does not just refer to his earlier ideas; he even repeats their exact formulation. For example, his disbelief in the affective power of some of the greatest writers in history is restated word for word and reused as an argument for realism: "No one was ever moved to tears by reading about the unhappy fates of heroes and heroines in Homer, Sophocles, Molière, Racine, Sydney, Spenser, or Shakespeare. Yet<sup>22</sup> even the impeccable Lord Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh*

16 "Tom Wolfe's Novel Ideas," p. 4.

17 Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," *Commentary* 31 (1961), pp. 223-333. Reprinted in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 181.

18 "Tom Wolfe's Novel Ideas," p. 11.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

21 Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 50.

22 "But" is written instead of "yet" in *The New Journalism*, p. 34.

*Review*, confessed to having cried—blubbered,<sup>23</sup> boohooed, snuffled, and sighed—over the death of Little Nell<sup>24</sup> in *The Old Curiosity Shop*." The point of this anecdote and piece of reader-response criticism is pronounced in the following assertion and analogy, also virtually verbatim from *The New Journalism*: "For writers to give up this power<sup>25</sup> in the quest for a more up-to-date<sup>26</sup> kind of fiction—it is as if an engineer were to set out to develop a more sophisticated machine technology by first of all discarding the principle of electricity."<sup>27</sup> The statement in the manifesto ends with the phrase, "on the grounds that it has been used ad nauseam for a hundred years"<sup>28</sup>—Wolfe's only new addition to a nearly twenty-year-old sentence. In one sense Wolfe's manifesto is consistent: he says nothing about fiction as a genre here that he has not said before.

Wolfe's pronouncement on Homer, Sophocles, Molière, Racine, Sydney, Spenser, and Shakespeare is certain to awake suspicion among many readers. That this statement is actually a word-for-word repetition of a statement made in *The New Journalism* suggests that it expresses a sentiment particularly close to Wolfe's heart. To the reader who may have shed a tear over the classic heroes and heroines, Wolfe's declaration seems remarkably obtuse. But even aside from one's subjective reaction, Wolfe's pronouncement indicates doubtful assumptions about the criteria by which literature should be judged. The capacity to evoke tears—a capability that Wolfe's own novel does *not* have—becomes the means of measuring the value of a work of art. The statement also implies that works like *The Odyssey* and *Hamlet* contain little that is realistic, but that Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*, generally acknowledged as one of Dickens' most sentimental works, and particularly the chapter on Little Nell's death, represent the epitome of realism. The conclusion Wolfe draws from this generalization is ambiguous. His beginning phrase—"For writers to give up this power"—is obscure, as it is not clear what "this" refers to, but perhaps Wolfe means the power to move readers' emotions, presumably through realism. But one glance at the scene mentioned from Dickens' novel shows that realism hardly figures and that the affective power arises from a kind of description that is all but realistic. A few lines from Dickens' chapter on Nell's death expose the fallacy in Wolfe's argument:

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

23 "actually blubbered" is written in *The New Journalism*, p. 35.

24 *The New Journalism* has "Dickens' Little Nell," p. 35.

25 *The New Journalism* has "unique power," p. 35.

26 The phrase is "sophisticated kind of fiction" in *The New Journalism* (35).

27 Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 50-51.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose.<sup>29</sup>

Dicken's portrayal of Nell's death combines quasi-religious description with blatant sentimentality. The passage plays upon the reader's feelings, not by describing the dead Nell in minute, realistic detail, but by using idealized depiction, pathetic contrast and an elegiac tone evoked by the "*ubi sunt?*" formula.

Wolfe's treatment of Zola in his manifesto suffers from the same sort of brazen carelessness as his reference to Dickens. Wolfe's admiration for Zola appears to consist largely in the similarity of their research techniques. Like Wolfe, Zola visited the places and people he was writing about, taking down realistic details in his documentation notebooks as he explored slums, railroad yards, engine decks and coal mines. Wolfe focusses on the "moment of The Horse in *Germinal*"<sup>30</sup> as the quintessential example of how reporting creates verisimilitude in fiction. Even a superficial reading of the passage in question reveals, however, that it is not Zola's use of realistic detail that makes the episode of the horse effective, but his sentimental description drawing upon personification and the pathetic fallacy.

He [Trompette, the dead horse] had never been able to accustom himself to life underground and had remained dismal and unwilling to work, tortured by longing for the daylight he had lost. In vain had Bataille, the father of the pit, given him friendly rubs with his side and nibbled his neck so as to give him a little of his own resignation after ten years underground. Caresses only made him more doleful and his skin quivered when his friend who had grown old in the darkness whispered secrets in his ear. And whenever they met and snorted together they both seemed to be lamenting—the old one because he could not now remember, and the young one because he could not forget. They lived side by side in the stable, lowering their heads into the same manger and blowing into each other's nostrils, comparing their unending dreams of daylight, their visions of green pastures, white roads, and golden sunlight for ever and ever. Then as Trompette, bathed in sweat, lay dying on his straw, Bataille had begun to sniff at him with heartbroken little sniffs, like sobs ....<sup>31</sup>

Zola's horses are friends who whisper secrets to one another, lament, compare their dreams, mourn and reason about their own death, and suffer physical effects of grief. Zola's language is neither realistic nor reminiscent of

<sup>29</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 538-9.

<sup>30</sup> Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Emile Zola, *Germinal*. Trans. Leonard Tancock, (New York: Penguin, 1951), p. 401.

reportage. Although Zola may have originally been inspired by having witnessed the death of a horse in the mines, the description is highly figurative as it attributes to horses the feelings of human beings. The effectiveness of the episode does not rely on realism but upon the reader's willingness to accept the validity of Zola's figuration and his or her ability to identify sympathetically with the horses.

Wolfe's examples of realism can hardly be classified as realism at all, and Wolfe's manifesto as a whole fails to provide a convincing argument in itself since the examples Wolfe uses unintentionally undercut his thesis. What is perhaps most interesting about the manifesto, however, is the disparity between the way Wolfe suggests he would like to write and the way he actually does write in *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolfe's examples of "realism" in his manifesto can be put side by side with *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in order to illustrate fundamental differences between the works of Dickens and Zola, works Wolfe claims to admire, and Wolfe's own work. Wolfe cites the descriptions of Little Nell and fallen Trompette in order to illustrate the capacity of realism for awaking emotion in the reader, but finally the references to Dickens and Zola serve most effectively to point out what Wolfe's own novel does not do—allow the reader to identify with the characters and arouse his or her empathy and compassion.

Wolfe says that he originally planned to pattern *The Bonfire of the Vanities* on Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, a novel that he soon realized was an inadequate model since it dealt only with the upper classes of British society. One of Wolfe's gestures at realism was to write a novel that dealt with all levels of New York society including the very extremes—the highest on Wall Street and Park Avenue and the lowest in the South Bronx. Wolfe explains in his manifesto that "The economy with which realistic fiction can bring the many currents of a city together in a single, fairly simple story was something that [he] eventually found exhilarating." He also outlines his intention by referring to what he sees as the achievement of the realistic novel from Richardson on—"the demonstration of the influence of society on even the most personal aspects of the life of the individual." Modifying Lionel Trilling's statement that the great characterization of nineteenth-century novels was achieved through portrayal of "class traits modified by personality," Wolfe substitutes *status* into Trilling's formula and asserts that "that technique has never been more essential in portraying the innermost life of the individual."<sup>32</sup> Wolfe's invocation of social novelists of the 1800s, which includes Balzac and Tolstoy as well as those mentioned above, and his recitation of Trilling's theoretical statements are intended to help define his own sense of what a novel should be. These references do help Wolfe define his *intention*, but they also help to point out how the novel differs significantly from the great social novels of the

32 Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 56, 51.



previous century and how far Wolfe is from writing the kind of literature that he claims to want to write.

Wolfe says first of all that he wanted to write a realistic book about life in America today. There can be no doubt that Wolfe has in fact visited the kinds of locales that he portrays in his novel and that his descriptions are based upon detailed notes about people's appearances, gestures and speech. And the book does deal with problems of contemporary importance: for example, the overloaded and hopelessly ineffective court system in crime-ridden areas like the Bronx, and the tendency of the news media to control public opinion and root mercilessly through the lives of those who happen to come under public scrutiny. Does this therefore make *The Bonfire of the Vanities* a realistic book? As Harold H. Kolb points out in *The Illusion of Life*, "Realistic details do not define realism" since all writers, including Homer, use details that are realistic—that supposedly refer to the world of fact.<sup>33</sup> Although Wolfe seems to think that he presents realistic detail as such, he most frequently indulges in description spiced with similes and metaphors that ironically expose the system of social charades by which the characters conduct their lives. As mentioned earlier, Wolfe claims that it is "the *petits faits vrais* that create verisimilitude" that are responsible for "the very greatest effects literature can achieve," and yet his own novel demonstrates that realistic details alone are quite inadequate for making good literature.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the thrill of reading Wolfe's novel comes from his mastery of irony and sarcasm.

One of the strengths of *Bonfire of the Vanities* lies in Wolfe's ability to portray social posturing vividly and to give a name to social pretensions. Wolfe is a genius at supplying epithets—like "social x-ray" and "Lemon Tart"<sup>m</sup>—that ironically illuminate the main attributes and mannerisms of his characters. Wolfe's proclivity for ironic name-calling, particularly when it points out the difference between a fictionalized ideal and a debased actuality, points to the satiric nature of Wolfe's characterization and of the book as a whole. Rather than exploring the depths of his characters' personalities, Wolfe exposes their superficiality and lack of complexity by resorting to neat, sarcastic expressions to categorize and mock them.

The superficiality of Wolfe's characters finds apt expression in the way the book dwells on surfaces and the outermost life of the individual, as opposed to the "innermost life of the individual," something Wolfe claims to be concerned about in the manifesto. Most of the novel is taken up with manifestations of characters' status obsessions. Wolfe is, in fact, at his best when describing appearances, when portraying the system of signs by which people consciously or unconsciously indicate their position in society. Wolfe's New York is the

33 Harold H. Kolb, *The Illusion of Life: American Realism as a Literary Form* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1969), p. 27.

34 Wolfe, "Manifesto," p. 55.

exhibition hall of social semiotics. Appearance and gesture are what count in human relationships. What characters say to one another has little import.

The American concern with keeping up appearances takes an extreme form in this book—creating the right appearance is everyone's obsession. Only Sherman, the defendant in the McCoy/Lamb case and the main character of the novel, is forced to change his ways when his notion of "self" begins to dissolve as he becomes the object of media attention and public hatred. It does change his appearance: at the end of the book we are told that he now "dresses for jail" in "an open-necked sport shirt, khaki pants, and hiking shoes."<sup>35</sup>

Wolfe's dwelling upon surfaces and gestures that constitute social status is clearly an attempt to show "the influence of society on even the most personal aspects of the life of the individual."<sup>36</sup> But one characteristic of *Bonfire of the Vanities* that keeps the book from resembling those novels that Wolfe claims he wants to imitate is that the characters have no personalities; they are mere conglomerations of their appearances, social gestures and ethnic prejudices. Because the characters tend to caricature, the "innermost life of the individual" is never portrayed in a convincing way.<sup>37</sup> The characters have attitudes that the reader will find familiar, but as characters they have no sense of selfhood. They are first members of some ethnic faction, be it WASP, Jewish, Black, or Irish, and second, bearers of social signs.

What Wolfe does not do in this book is show "what truly presses upon the heart of the individual."<sup>38</sup> Wolfe's characters have no time for an inner life because they are so caught up in the distractions of the outer one. Wolfe speaks in admiration of Tolstoy's "concept of the heart at war with the structure of society."<sup>39</sup> Yet because he has failed to give his characters hearts, Wolfe's book lacks the well-rounded characterization of the great social novels of the nineteenth century. Wolfe's irony brilliantly exposes the vanity and hypocrisy of his characters and of the society he describes. It cannot, however, give even a glimpse of the deeper motivations and feelings that direct human behavior.

Wolfe's manifesto shows that he would clearly like to align himself with writers like Balzac, Zola, Dickens, Thackeray, and Tolstoy, but his style and tone in the novel show a closer relation to satirists like Fielding and Swift, or on the American scene, to Sinclair Lewis and John Dos Passos. But strangely enough, "satire" is not a word that even appears in Wolfe's manifesto. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is an ironic exposé of the affectation in American society, not an in-depth study of human character, and generally speaking,

35 *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p. 687.

36 "Manifesto," p. 51.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Wolfe's techniques are those of the satirist, not the true social novelist. Wolfe himself, however, does not seem to want to admit this.

Wolfe's irony is often as obtrusive as Fielding's and as bitter as Swift's, but Wolfe writes without the desire for portraying virtue (as well as vice) that characterizes the former writer or the passion for censuring moral and social atrocities that typifies the latter. He exposes but he does not attempt to correct. All levels of society are treated with the same ruthless irony—the poor of Wolfe's New York are no better than the rich, and neither gains the reader's sympathy. If there is one thing *The Bonfire of the Vanities* does not do, it is incite the reader to philanthropic endeavors or a campaign to improve the conditions in American cities, or even to the belief that either is possible in America today.

Wolfe's penchant for unveiling affectation in American society finds a parallel in the novels of Sinclair Lewis, another writer who employs minute "realistic" details, but who is finally a great deal more kindly towards his characters. Lewis laughs but does not jeer at Babbitt, who, although money-hungry and status obsessed like Sherman McCoy, is a complex and sympathetic character occupying a world where people are still capable of genuine human feelings. In his manifesto Wolfe mentions Lewis and his use of documentation in the writing of *Elmer Gantry* but does not discuss Lewis as a satirist. In fact, satirists discussed as such are remarkably absent from the list of writers Wolfe claims to want to emulate.

One of these absences is as suggestive as the entire role call of Wolfe's esteemed writers. John Dos Passos' name never appears, and yet in terms of his overall scheme for *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—his professed desire to capture the rhythm of all of New York—Wolfe perhaps resembles him most closely. Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* also presents a panoramic view of New York by presenting an array of characters treated more as types than as individuals whose personalities are explored in depth.<sup>40</sup> Yet Dos Passos' superficial characterization is deliberate and purposeful: he is more interested in the interactions between characters—in society as a whole—than in characters' private lives. And most important, he has no pretences about being interested in "the heart of the individual." Dos Passos critically portrays society in action, but he does so without the kind of flagrant caustic humor Wolfe delights in. Dos Passos gives the impression of being truly concerned with the study of a society where "It's looks that count,"<sup>41</sup> and writes with a keen political and social awareness. This cannot be said of Wolfe, however. Wolfe merely gives an ironic presentation of the state of New York society and offers no insights into what to do about any of America's ills. Wolfe's ironic humor does not lead to a productive political or social vision and

<sup>40</sup> *Manhattan Transfer* (1925. New York: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

sometimes seems to have little purpose but scintillating verbal abuse for its own sake.

Though Wolfe's book is fun to read, it is also the kind of fun that ultimately becomes cloying—like staying on a roller coaster too long. Wolfe's book is also *funny*, on the surface, and one can read it simply to delight in the irony and snide humor. If taken seriously, however, the book is deeply disturbing. One of the questions the book silently poses is whether there is anything at all beneath the veneer of social gesturing that makes up New York society, and seemingly by implication, all of American society. The intimation is that there is not. All characters direct their energy into creating the proper image; none cultivates an inner life, and none, except the degenerate British reporter and parasite, Peter Fallow, shows any creative ability to change his or her circumstances. In Wolfe's New York it is impossible to act both imaginatively and morally.

Whether Wolfe means to project such a dire picture of the American character is not clear. The manifesto, with its careless handling of literary history and its jaunty tone, makes one wonder about the earnestness of Wolfe's intent—both in the manifesto and in the novel. Wolfe's zeal for witty mockery sometimes seems to override or undermine more serious intentions. Some of Wolfe's previous raillery, however, takes on interesting implications in light of his new career as a novel writer.

Although writers like the Neo-Fabulists are the main object of Wolfe's attack in the manifesto, one of his earlier "adversaries" was Saul Bellow—a writer who, unlike Wolfe, is ultimately affirmative in spite of his apocalyptic vision of the state of American civilization. In *The New Journalism* Wolfe refers twice to Bellow in a spirit of derision: first in the epigraph to the book where he implies that Bellow maintains a worn-out and empty tradition, and then in the first chapter where he compares the frustration of going to graduate school to reading *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), a book that also deals with the plight of urban America. Wolfe's derogatory statement about Bellow's novel becomes especially interesting in light of Wolfe's own attempt to write a book about New York. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* portrays New York as a place that "makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world."<sup>42</sup> In books like *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *The Dean's December* Bellow's portrayal of the violence and injustice that reign in American cities is more vivid, serious, and terrifying than Wolfe's, yet Bellow simultaneously upholds the integrity of the self and the human imagination even in the midst of a society on the edge of ruin. Bellow's vision provides a sustaining alternative to the cynical view that *Bonfire of the Vanities* perhaps inadvertently projects—that American culture is nothing but social gesture and struggle for status.

42 *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970. New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 277.

Surprisingly enough, in his manifesto Wolfe merely classifies Bellow as a realist, one of those writers who has not gone astray, and then makes no further comments.<sup>43</sup> After having earlier singled Bellow out as a kind of literary opponent, Wolfe's reserve is remarkable, particularly in view of his complete willingness to repeat other earlier statements without revision. If one takes *The Bonfire of the Vanities* seriously, it might in fact be said to portray the disintegration of civilization, a return to Sodom and Gomorrah—perhaps the consequences of the letting go of a belief that creative and moral thought and action are still possible in America today.

As a note to "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," *Harper's Magazine* tells us that Wolfe is working on a second novel. Wolfe's unconcealed admiration for great social novelists and his attempt to associate himself with them, as well as his blatant omissions and silences about other writers with whom he shares subject matter as well as definite stylistic and technical similarities, suggests that Wolfe is not entirely comfortable with the way he has written in *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Perhaps he will be able to sort out his conflicting impulses and meet the challenge of his own professed aims in this next book.

43 "Manifesto," p. 48.