

The Paperboy Turned Novelist: Thomas Wolfe and Journalism

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As any reader of *Look Homeward, Angel* may infer, Thomas Wolfe's initiation to college life did not go smoothly—judging, that is, by the experience of his alter ego, Eugene Gant. An easy mark for practical jokes, Eugene soon became the laughingstock of the University of North Carolina campus. “For the first time in his life,” the narrator says, “he began to dislike whatever fits too snugly in a measure” (395). As his first novel attests, Wolfe did not care for neat packages or easy answers. The line reveals something else about Wolfe, however. Like so many other American writers—among them Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, William Dean Howells, and Ernest Hemingway—Wolfe dabbled in journalism early in life. After working as a paperboy in Asheville, he wrote for his college newspaper and even considered making a career of journalism. Deep down, however, Wolfe surely realized that he was not cut out for newswriting. Years after he committed himself to fiction, he critiqued journalism in both *Look Homeward, Angel* and a sketch called “Gentlemen of the Press” from *The Hills Beyond*. Taking aim at what he perceived as “complacency” and “servility,” Wolfe depicted journalism as fatally flawed in the pursuit of truth. In doing so, he not only shows why he took his writing in the direction he did, but also comments on the intimate, yet stormy relationship that has existed between American journalism and American literature from the creative reportage of Captain John Smith to the debacle of Janet Cooke.

Before Wolfe arrived at this conclusion, he studied journalism from a variety of angles—as a paperboy, as a reader of his hometown newspaper, and eventually as editor of the *Tar Heel* at the University of North Carolina. Wolfe's introduction to journalism probably came through his hometown newspaper, the *Asheville Citizen*. Like his brother Ben before him, Wolfe worked as a paperboy for the *Citizen*, getting up before dawn to begin his route. This experience may have left him with a strong sense of the magic of the written word. It was in the newspaper's pressroom, after all, where he saw ideas take tangible form. Wolfe describes this process in *Look Homeward, Angel*:

A broad river of white paper rushed constantly up from the cylinder and leaped into a mangling chaos of machinery whence it emerged a second later, cut, printed, folded and stacked, sliding along a board with a hundred others in a fattening sheaf. (297)

Here, then, ideas could have a reality beyond a writer's mind; they could be incarnated, multiplied, made available to a reading public. In his first novel, in fact, Wolfe uses his description of Eugene's paper route as a kind of metaphor for the role of the writer. His description of mysterious forces beckoning him from sleep to work suggests something of the call of the Muses to the writer. He says:

Strange aerial music came fluting out of darkness, or over his slow-wakening senses swept the great waves of symphonic orchestration. Fiend-voices, beautiful and sleep-loud, called down through darkness and light, developing the thread of ancient memory. (295)

Thoreau-like, this lonely artist brings the word to the slumbering multitudes. Wolfe writes: “Alone, the only man alive, he began the day for men . . .” (300). In short, Wolfe portrays Eugene the paperboy as the inspired writer transforming the mysteries of nature into tangible products and distributing these missives among the unenlightened.

If the idea of the newspaper was enchanting, the reality was disappointing. A daily newspaper that ran about ten to twelve pages on weekdays, the *Asheville Citizen* was far from a model of reporting or editing. Indeed, a glance at some of the issues from a period when Wolfe was probably reading it—that is, 1913 and 1914—shows why he held it in such disdain—and indeed why he harbored such animosity toward journalism as a whole. Wire reports made up a large percentage of the material, especially on the front page. The front page of the July 3, 1914, issue, for instance, features twelve stories, none of them local. Local coverage tended to be uncritical, even sycophantic. An article appearing under the headline “Oasis Patrol Arrives for the Ceremonial Session Tonight” contains a typical passage:

The patrol comes cocked and primed to put on the best work ever seen by Oasis temple Shriners. For months it has been drilling at Charlotte, getting in ship-shape for the duties of this ceremonial session and the fresh meat which is here offers especially pleasing material for its best endeavors.

Perhaps the most ridiculous—and, for Wolfe, most infuriating—portion of the paper was the section that regularly appeared on page 2 under the standing headline of “Society and Personals.” A typical feature of hometown papers, this section reported the parties, weddings, and plain comings and goings of local folk. Like other local stories, it was flattering, but it had the added insult of being inconsequential. A typical item from the July 7, 1914, issue reads:

Just after the grand march the floor was cleared and a feature dance given by two young girls who might easily be taken for professionals, so perfectly did they go through the difficult steps of the Mexican dance—Misses Annie and Mary Ward, impersonating a gay Mexican soldier and his senorita.

The article goes on to an exhaustive description of the guests’ “handsome gowns,” stretching over more than sixty lines of text.

In November 1918, when he was a junior at the University of North Carolina, Wolfe became managing editor of the *Tar Heel*, a student newspaper. Soon, the editor-in-chief left for military training, and Wolfe assumed his duties as well (Donald 49). Thus he, like Eugene Gant in *Look Homeward, Angel*, became responsible for “the entire work of publication” (534). Because the newspaper generally lacks bylines, we must speculate as to which articles Wolfe actually wrote. In the novel, at least, much of the *Tar Heel*’s material comes from Eugene:

He Carried On. He Held High the Torch. He Did His Bit. He was editor, reporter, censor, factotum of the paper. He wrote the news. He wrote the editorials. He seared them with flaming words. He extolled the crusade. He was possessed of the inspiration for murder. (535)

There is obviously some hyperbole in that statement. As a line on the weekly newspaper’s masthead reveals, the *Tar Heel* was the “Official Organ of the Athletic Association of the University of North Carolina.” Although “flaming words” and crusades may have made sporadic appearances, they probably would have been overshadowed by the newspaper’s numerous puff pieces on the school’s baseball team, student magazine, and the like. In fact, in its flattery, uncritical eye, and windy style, the *Tar Heel* reads much like the *Asheville Citizen*. The front page of the February 21, 1919, issue, for example, contains this representative sentence: “It will be learned with much pleasure,

especially by the older men who knew him, that Holmes Herty, star shortstop for the past two seasons, will return next week, having just been discharged from service.”

Whether Wolfe wrote, edited, or merely sanctioned articles such as these, they certainly do not foreshadow a luminous future in the newspaper business. Nevertheless, Wolfe claimed to be pursuing a career in journalism. Biographer David Herbert Donald writes that Wolfe had

the vague idea that he should become a writer, though he did not articulate this ambition even to himself. Like his family, he was used to thinking of a writer as “a very remote kind of person, a romantic figure like Lord Byron, or Longfellow. . . .” Unable to confess such an outlandish aspiration, he convinced himself that he wanted to become a journalist—an ambition that his family could understand. (62)

Donald notes that Wolfe then sought admission to Harvard University for further study:

“I want this year’s graduate work at Harvard in preference to [a] year at the Columbia Journalism School, or some other,” he stated in his application, “because I feel that such work as I may get at Harvard will be of more real value than the somewhat technical training of journalism schools.” (62)

Wolfe’s real reasons for steering away from journalism, however, may be that he had come to recognize the serious shortcomings that kept its practitioners from discovering or at least reporting the truth.

Near the beginning of his career, Wolfe famously declared: “I don’t know yet what I am capable of doing but, by God, I have genius . . .” (*Letters* 46). The remaining question was whether he would give voice to that genius through journalism or literature. In truth, the ultimate gravitation toward literature was probably inevitable, as we can see in his tributes to literature in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Nevertheless, a close examination of the specific complaints that Wolfe made about journalism is instructive, as it reveals something of the relationship between journalism and literature and suggests the reasons why so many great American authors abandoned the former in favor of the latter.

There is, first, the style of newswriting. Of course, Wolfe’s contemporary Ernest Hemingway famously credited his journalism experience with strengthening his style. Wolfe, however,

could not have written within journalism's strict limitations. Although the lengthy, indirect sentences one finds in the *Asheville Citizen* and the *Tar Heel* make these publications anything but models of tight journalistic prose, Wolfe apparently had encountered or at least imagined newspaper editors who mocked "flowery" writing, for he included a fictional one in "Gentlemen of the Press," which features the following exchange between a reporter who has dressed up one of his news stories and a more experienced reporter, serving as his hard-boiled editor:

RED: . . . The trouble with you guys is that you're all a bunch of illiterate half-wits who don't know anything about style and don't appreciate a piece of writing when you see one!

WILLIS: Style, hell! What I'd appreciate from you is a simple declarative sentence in the English language. If you've got to get all that fancy palaver out of your system, write it in your memory book. But for God's sake, don't expect to get it published in a newspaper. (54)

This passage reveals Wolfe's awareness of journalistic strictures on style.

In Wolfe's eyes, however, journalism suffered from even more serious limitations, ones that did not merely confine the writer's style, but inhibited his pursuit of truth. The first of these limitations can be seen in Wolfe's description of a reporter in *Look Homeward, Angel*: "Mr. Richard Gorman, twenty-six, city reporter of *The Citizen*, strode rapidly up the street, with proud cold news-nose lifted. His complacent smile, hard-lipped, loosened into servility" (340). Wolfe goes on to show this reporter uncritically lapping up political rhetoric. Apparently drawing on the kinds of stories quoted above from the *Asheville Citizen*, he imagines the scene of this reporter "interviewing" William Jennings Bryan, who spouts:

I have gone from the woods of Maine to the wave-washed sands of Florida, from Hatteras to Halifax, and from the summits of the Rockies to where Missouri rolls her turgid flood, but I have seen few spots that equal, and none that surpass, the beauty of this mountain Eden. (341)

In a comical tone, Wolfe notes that the reporter "made notes rapidly" (341). Wolfe even imagines headlines such as "Earthy Paradise, Thinks Commoner" and "Foresees Dawn of New Era"

that present reality in neat, attractive little packages—carefully crafted to fit their allotted space, or, we might say, to fit snugly in a measure. This, then, is another shortcoming of journalism, the tendency—at least among some reporters and editors—to settle for easy answers, to take them uncritically from politicians or other authorities, and to present them to readers in tidy little packages.

Of course, thoughtful journalists may be able to overcome at least some of these obstacles. Although they still have to meet word counts and accept headlines written by editors, they can question and challenge their sources, consider multiple perspectives, and treat the subtleties of the issues they cover. Still, there remains one obstacle over which they have little control, and it was this obstacle that may have frustrated Wolfe the most. A newspaper is a business and must cater to its readers and advertisers. As Wolfe perhaps recognized, the pressure to satisfy an audience was especially keen in small markets, such as Asheville, where residents sometimes contributed their own stories. A scene from "Gentlemen of the Press" illustrates this fact. In the play, the reporter Theodore Willis takes a call from someone with society news to report:

WILLIS: Hello. . . . Yes, this is the *Courier*. . . . (*In an agreeable tone that is belied by the expression of extreme boredom on his face*) Yes, Mrs. Purtle. Yes, of course. . . . Oh, yes, there's still time. . . . No, she's not here, but I'll see that it gets in. . . . Certainly, Mrs. Purtle. Oh, absolutely. . . . (*He rolls his dark eyes aloft with an expression of anguished entreaty to his Maker.*) Yes, indeed, I promise you. It will be in the morning edition. . . . Yes, I can well understand how important it is. (*He indicates his understanding of its importance by scratching himself languidly on the hind quarter.*) . . . Oh, absolutely without fail. You can depend on it. . . . Yes, Mrs. Purtle. . . . (*He sprawls forward on one elbow, takes the moist fag end of a cigarette from his mouth and puts it in a tray, picks up a pencil, and wearily begins to take notes.*) Mr. and Mrs. S. Frederick Purtle. . . . No, I won't forget the S. . . . Yes, I know we had it Fred last time. (61, ellipses in original)

The result of this situation was that newspapers such as the *Asheville Citizen* wound up devoting large portions of their editorial space to the purpose of satisfying and even flattering their public, regardless of whether the material they were asked

to print was significant or even true. In chapter 24 of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe mocks this kind of reporting, which was especially noticeable in the “society news.” One passage in this chapter reads: “Mr. Eugene Gant was the host last night at a hot winnie [*sic*] roast given to members of the local Younger Set at Dixieland, the beautiful old ancestral mansion of his mother, Mrs. Eliza Gant” (333). In a later paragraph, he continues: “During the course of the evening, the Honorable George Graves, the talented scion of one of our oldest and wealthiest families, the Chesterfield Graveses, (\$10 a week and up), rendered a few appropriate selections on the jews-harp” (333).

What makes Wolfe’s parody, which continues throughout much of the chapter, especially interesting is the way he weaves into it his own brand of writing, one that actually tells the truth about the townspeople. That is, while he retains the conventions of society news and journalism in general—including middle initials and courtesy titles, for example, and using appositives to indicate ages and occupations—he tells it like it is instead of telling it like the residents wish it to be. He writes:

A little before them, that undaunted daughter of desires, Miss Elizabeth Scragg, emerged from Woolworth’s Five and Ten Cent Store, and turned up toward the Square. Smiling, she acknowledged the ponderous salute of Big Jeff White, the giant half-owner of the Whitestone hotel, whose fortunes had begun when he had refused to return to his old comrade, Dickson Reese, the embezzling cashier, ninety thousand dollars of entrusted loot. Dog eat dog. Thief catch thief. (337)

In another passage, Wolfe parodies the treatment of fashion in society news, describing Willie Goff’s wardrobe even as he attacks his character:

The fingers of his withered arm pointed stiffly toward himself, beckoning to him, and touching him as he walked with stiff jerking taps, in a terrible parody of vanity. A gaudy handkerchief with blue, yellow and crimson patterns hung in a riotous blot from his breast-pocket over his neatly belted gray Norfolk jacket, a wide loose collar of silk barred with red and orange stripes flowered across his narrow shoulders. In his lapel, a huge red carnation. His thin face, beneath the jutting globular head, grinned constantly, glutting his features with wide, lapping, receding, returning, idiot smiles. (342)

Here, then, Wolfe draws attention to one of the chief shortcomings of journalism. In its effort to stay in the good graces of its readers and advertisers, the newspaper’s treatment of residents merely touches the surface, and then only with a paralyzing sense of etiquette. Because he is writing fiction, however, Wolfe can tell the truth by piercing the surface and saying the unsayable. In doing so, he indulges a desire that he expresses in “Gentlemen of the Press” through the voice of Willis, who says: “If I could only be sure tomorrow was going to be the last day of the world, what a paper I’d get out! That’s my idea of heaven—to have, just for once in my life, the chance to tell these bastards what they are” (62). Later, he goes on:

Why, God-damn that bunch of mountaineers—half of ’em never owned an extra pair of pants until they were twenty-one. As for Fred Purtle, he was brought up out in Yancey County on hawg and hominy. His father used to go over him with a curry comb and horse clippers every Christmas, whether he needed it or not. Why, hell yes. They had to throw him down to hold him while they put shoes on him. And now, for Christ’s sake, it’s Mr. S. Frederick Purtle—and don’t leave out the S. My God! What a world! And what a job I could do on all the bastards in this town if I only had the chance! To be able, just for once, to tell the truth, to spill the beans, to print the facts about every son-of-a-bitch of them. To tell where they came from, who they were, how they stole their money, who they cheated, who they robbed, whose wives they slept with, who they murdered and betrayed, how they got here, who they really are. My God, it would be like taking a trip down the sewer in a glass-bottomed boat! (63)

The A.P. man responds to Willis’s plan: “Boy, you could sure go to town on that, couldn’t you? Only, you couldn’t get it in an ordinary edition. You’d need an extra-extra-extra feature edition with fourteen supplements” (62). Wolfe came out with that edition, of course. We know it as *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Journalism, then, may have performed an important service for Thomas Wolfe, as indeed it has for all of American literature. As the passages about Eugene Gant’s newspaper route in *Look Homeward, Angel* suggest, journalism seems to have helped Wolfe to appreciate the magic of the written word and to see himself in the role of a writer translating ethereal truths and delivering them in concrete form to an unenlightened audience.

His stint on the *Tar Heel*, furthermore, gave him reason to think that he could make a career out of writing. Ultimately, however, Wolfe rejected journalism, which he perceived as fatally flawed. He probably found its stylistic restrictions oppressive, but more important, Wolfe felt that newspapers were too bound by their nature and their audience to serve as effective discoverers or messengers of truth. Instead, he seems to have believed that journalism was doomed to serve as a mere bearer of facts—small details that apparently held little interest for him. Indeed, Donald suggests that Wolfe, like a philosophy professor who inspired him, neglected or rejected facts. Discussing two college essays that Wolfe wrote on labor issues, Donald notes that “neither reflected any reading or research” (55). For Wolfe, at any rate, the facts that readers found in newspapers did little to enlighten them. Thus, he shows that Eugene’s reading of newspapers actually misled him about the progress of the Germans in World War I. He writes that Eugene, after surveying “this wilderness of print” deduces that the Germans are foundering, only to realize later that they were actually succeeding (350). Similarly, he suggests that the magazines in Dr. Coker’s waiting room have provided no answers for readers when he says: “A litter of magazines—*Life*, *Judge*, *The Literary Digest*, and *The American*—on the black mission table, told its story of weary and distressed fumbling” (352). Thus, like so many American authors before and after him, Wolfe chose literature as the better means to truth. If fiction, drama, poetry could serve as the “lost lane-end into heaven,” then journalism was a disappointing dead-end.

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