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The New Journalism: An Introduction

The New Journalism, the most frequently used label for the recent developments in American nonfiction writing, has been the subject of many books, scholarly articles and panel discussions. As is the case with any recent literary trend there are many doubts as to its definition and much confusion in the terminology that it employs. The New Journalism is only one of many names ascribed to this phenomenon by its critics. It is also often called: the nonfiction novel, alternative journalism, experimental journalism, underground journalism, parajournalism or new nonfiction. The New Journalism is a very broad term and does not only refer to the writing of a new group of journalists who abandoned traditional journalistic techniques to create a new kind of nonfiction, but also covers all the changes in American journalism in the 60's such as: the emergence of the underground press and radio, rock journalism and other changes in the established media. The latter, however, will not be dealt with here and for our purposes we shall accept a definition suggested by Tom Wolfe, the spokesman of the New Journalism and its main practitioner, who says:

"...the New Journalism is the use by people writing nonfiction of techniques which heretofore had been thought of as confined to the novel or to the short story, to create in one form both the kind of objective reality of journalism and the subjective reality that people have always gone to the novel for."

This definition and the New Journalism itself caused many controversies and the critics involved in them range from those denying the existence of this new literary phenomenon to people like the already quoted Tom Wolfe who accepts a very extreme view and even states that the

New Journalism is:

"...causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century."²

view and the use of different types of narrators. The use of the first person narrator /prevailing in autobiographies, memoirs and many forms of standard journalism/ presents only one point of view which in many cases may not be relevant to the story. Taking this for granted, Wolfe seldom presents his own point of view but rather that of his characters. The reporter assumes here that he is being more honest if he makes an attempt at presenting his characters' subjective experience than if he merely presents facts, dates and numbers. With this the New Journalism offers the reader a possibility of a wider view on the world and presents its complexity and disorder. Tom Wolfe seems to employ this device very often and can do it in a very subtle way even within one paragraph or a sentence. Presentation of characters' thoughts often results in a stream of consciousness technique - one more device of fiction used by the New Journalists. In the following quotation from a piece on a famous record producer Phil Spector, the point of view changes from that of the described character to that of the reporter himself, and this type of shifting point of view is very characteristic of all Wolfe's writings:

"All these raindrops are hitting something. They don't roll down the window, they come straight back, toward the tail, wobbling, like all those Mr. Cool snow heads walking on mattresses. The plane is taxiing out toward the runway to take off, and this stupid inter-faced water wobbles, sideways, across the window. Phil Spector, twenty-three years old, the rock and roll megastar, producer of Phillips Records, America's first teen-age tycoon watches ... this water pathology... It is going to be a first. He tightens his seat belt over his bowels..."

Wolfe developed this technique later in his The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test where, moreover, he often uses his characters' type of language even when it is the narrator who tells the story. This creates the illusion of seeing the action through the eyes of someone who is actually involved in it, which - in Wolfe's opinion - is more effective than the use of the neutral style of the depersonalized narrator. The presentation of the inner life of characters can be achieved, in this kind of writing, only by interviewing them very closely about their opinions, thoughts and emotions. Very often it requires a very serious commitment on the part of the reporter who in order to be close to the described events joins the army and goes to Vietnam /John Sack, the author of M, a book on the Vietnam war/ or joins the Hell's Angels to be eventually badly beaten by them /Hunter S. Thompson, the author of Hell's Angels /.

The last of the four points mentioned by Wolfe is the stress on the recording of customs, manners, fashions and all sorts of detail that can describe the character's position in society. This stress on detail,

once again, is not anything new - this technique of realism deriving from Dickens and Balzac is only rediscovered by the New Journalism, and the novelty here lies in introducing it into nonfiction.

Not all the New Journalists follow this program and Tom Wolfe does not confine himself to the four points only. The majority of the critics writing on Wolfe notice that it is something else that makes him so original. They call Wolfe a "post-journalist" and discuss mainly his style. Undoubtedly many of Wolfe's mannerisms of writing, his unusual use of punctuation marks, some of which never existed before, empty spaces, nonsense words, pleonasm, the excessive use of the historic present or onomatopoeia make Wolfe's style very rich and original. His seemingly strange use of punctuation marks and other similar devices is, however, always functional. Robert Scholer makes an interesting remark concerning Wolfe's style. Writing about The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, a book presenting the famous American novelist Ken Kesey, the leader of the hippie - like Merry Pranksters, their wild bus rides through the United States and their experiments with LSD and other mind-expanding drugs Scholer notices:

"Wolfe's chameleon styles are more reflective of his material than of himself. Here he has an ideal subject for his rhetorical virtuosity. Recreating the psychedelic experience in words requires the verbal equivalent of Day-Glo and stroboscopic light. Wolfe has the equipment."

A similar comment is made by Michael L. Johnson who writes about the same book: "...his /Wolfe's/ style grows out of the fantastic events of the story." These seem to be the best replies to the critics maliciously remarking that Wolfe's experiments with style are done for pure effect and are in no way justified.

As has already been mentioned not all the New Journalists followed step by step the four point program of Wolfe. Norman Mailer, whom many call "the best journalist in America", the author of many books, three of which The Armies of the Night, Miami And the Siege of Chicago and Of the Fire on the Moon are fine achievements of the New Journalism, follows a slightly different route. Mailer's books are projections of his own personality which - as it seems - is always as important as the described events. Mailer, unlike Wolfe, is always present as a protagonist in his books. In The Armies of the Night the author uses the third person autobiographical form and speaks of himself as "Mailer" and not only does he present and make comments on the famous March on Pentagon, the political situation of the United States in the late 60's or more generally his search for the American psyche, but also uses the book as an outlet for showing his own personality and skill. The stress on "ego" is clearly

visible here. The book is full of digressions, its chronology is very often broken and long, detailed descriptions co-exist side by side with reflective, almost poetic passages. Very often Kallier makes use of direct authorial intervention, a device quite common in the 18th or 19th century novel. This may be seen in the following quotation:

"Let us then make our comic hero the narrative vehicle for the March on Pentagon".

The New Journalist is then free to use any even very old fashioned device of fiction.

In The Angels of the Night there are constant shifts between megalomania and self-deprecation. Kallier often calls himself a "snob of the worst sort", a "crooked person" or an "absolute egomaniac". While the presence of megalomania is quite easy to explain, the occurrence of self-deprecatory phrases and scenes calls for some explanation. It seems that Kallier does this to win the reader's trust so that the reader may put more confidence in his reporting. This is only one of many various devices used by the New Journalists to gain credibility.

Kallier and Wolfe although very different writers and personalities, the latter being more detached, skeptical, interested in manners rather than exploring morals, social rather than political, share some common features which have been summarized as follows:

"They are more involved in what they report than a journalist would be, and they bring to their reporting a more efficient intellectual apparatus, a richer framework of ideas and attitudes, a perspective more historical than journalistic".

This comment seems to be true of most of the New Journalists and summarizes well what the New Journalism is about.

Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Kallier not only try to make reporting an art form but also personalize their writing thus strengthening its credibility. It is this process that results in one more label that the New Journalism is given by its critics - "personal journalism". This name is often used in connection with Hunter S. Thompson, the author of Hell's Angels, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72 and many magazine pieces. In his first book Hell's Angels the author uses the first person narrator and at the same time is one of the characters. This book is not a typical example of what is called "personal journalism" or as Thompson himself calls it "Gonzo journalism". His own reactions and emotions which occupy most of the space in his later books are not so important here. The Angels, their customs and life are the main subject of the book. Thompson's analysis of the group is close to the New Journalism not only because of the techniques that are employed by the author. What brings it close to it is also the author's intention to show

the real picture of this subculture phenomenon and contrast it with the official, distorted picture of the Hell's Angels. In his book Thompson uses quotes from the articles on the Hell's Angels taken from the established magazines and from police reports and then contrasts them with the reality which he thoroughly familiarized himself with by living with the Angels.

Thompson, like Kallier, makes use of a centre-stage participatory manner of presentation. In his later books and articles it is the author's reality that is presented and the supposed subject of his books seems to be purely incidental. Such a method of reporting is often criticized for being "non-objective". Thompson is aware of this and comments:

"Objective journalism is a hard thing to come by these days. We all yearn for it, but who can point the way? /.../ The only thing that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed-circuit TV setup that watched shoplifters in the General Store at Woody Creek, Colorado. /.../ With the possible exception of things like box-scores, race results and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms." 10

The problem of objectivity versus subjectivity or, more generally, fact versus fiction, in the New Journalism demands a separate study and can only be signaled here. Wolfe's statement that the New Journalism brings us the news together with a unique way of looking at the world from the viewpoint of different characters, offering in this way both objective and subjective reality, although superficially correct, should be amplified and carefully studied.

Only a few names have been presented in this paper, but there are many other writers trying to pursue reporting as an art form in their own individual ways. Yet it was Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Kallier and Hunter S. Thompson who stirred up most of the controversies.

Critical opinions concerning their works came into being with the New Journalism itself, and it seems that it was Dwight Macdonald who was the first to air his views and critical remarks about the new literary genre, calling it in 1965:

"...a bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction. Sovereignty rather than information..." 11

Macdonald and many other critics saw the New Journalism's bad side in what they called "the lack of solid reporting". Literary devices seem, in their opinion to influence to a considerable degree the factual contents of the New Journalism's final products and lessen the amount of journalistic information. There is also a feeling among other journalists and critics that the new nonfiction movement gives us emotions instead of facts and that the

new journalists' insistence that the reader sees life in t h e i r terms gives as a result a distorted picture of the described events and persons. One of the critics ironically remarks:

"The New Journalist is in the end, I think, less a journalist than an impresario. Tom Wolfe presents... Phil Spector! Jack Newfield presents... Nelson Rockefeller! Norman Mailer presents... the Moon Shot!" 12

To see whether the characters' thoughts and actions in some new journalistic pieces were not just made up by their authors many critics took the trouble to interview those persons, only to become disappointed with their answers, and to conclude that all the details were indeed very accurate.

Some critics also suggest that the New Journalism is open to criticism in another respect. It is often claimed that reporters who take us inside the heads of their characters cross the border between reporting and creative writing, but that since they remain bound to the fact, they fall short of high artistic quality.

There are many other charges against the New Journalism and there will be many more as long as the New Journalists claim that they belong both to serious, creative writing and to journalism. It should be understood that the New Journalism is something unique. As a new literary genre it operates on different levels and obviously must be understood in different terms. Perhaps Mailer, Wolfe and the rest should not be called the New Journalists but, as Ihab Hassan suggests, "factual fictionists". The necessity for introducing new terminology to discussions on the new literary phenomenon seems to be indispensable. As long as the critics commenting on books like The Armies of the Night or The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test treat them as journalism or fiction only they miss the point.

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia w ogólnych zarysach tak zwane "nowe dziennikarstwo amerykańskie". Ten nowy prąd w literaturze amerykańskiej nie doczekał się jeszcze w Polsce żadnego opracowania, pomimo że w samych Stanach Zjednoczonych uważany jest za niezwykle ważne zjawisko literackie. "Nowe dziennikarstwo" polega na wprowadzeniu do standardowego reportażu technik literackich wykorzystywanych w powieści lub opowiadaniu. Artykuł zaznacza i sformułowania i pokrótce charakteryzuje jego głównych przedstawicieli oraz dokonuje klasyfikacji tych cech, które różnią "nowe dziennikarstwo" od tradycyjnego reportażu. Przedstawione są również zarzuty krytyków pod adresem nowego prądu literackiego.

NOTES

1. The New Journalism: A panel Discussion With Harold Hayes, Tom Wolfe and Professor L.W. Robinson /in/ The Reporter As Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy, ed Ronald Weber, Hastings House Publ., New York 1974, p.67.
2. The New Journalism, /in/ The New Journalism with an Anthology, ed. Tom Wolfe, E.W. Johnson, Picador, London 1975, p.15
3. Tom Wolfe, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flak Streamline Baby, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1965.
4. Scott Donaldson, The Old World and the New Journalism. And the Novel, "The Sewanee" July-September 1974, p.531.
- 5: Tom Wolfe, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flak Streamline Baby, op.cit. p.58.
6. Robert Scholles, Double Perspective on Hysteria, "Saturday Review Aug.24 1968, p.37.
7. Michael L. Johnson, The New Journalism, The University Press of Kansas, Lawrence-Manhattan-Wichita 1971, pp. 58-59.
8. Norman Mailer, The Armies of the Night, Harmondsworth 1968, p.65.
9. Robert Scholles, op.cit., p.37.
10. Hunter S. Thompson, Fear and Loathing: On the Cannalsen Trail 72, Popular Library, New York 1973, pp. 47-48.
11. Dwight Macdonald, Parajournalism, or Tom Wolfe and His Magic Writing Machine, /in/ The Reporter As Artist, op.cit., p.223.
12. Michael Arlen, Notes on the New Journalism, /in/ The Reporter As Artist, op.cit., pp.253-254.