LITERARY TECHNIQUE IN THE LAST QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

I just want to make a few remarks about a side of literary technique that is never written about and seldom talked about. It is one that most writers begin to understand only late in the game, if ever. If ever, as I say... for here I think we may have the answer to why this, the last quarter of the twentieth century, is the dreariest period of the century for such major forms as the novel and the play.

I think most writers go through the same stages, in terms of technique. The first I think of as the musical stage, in which the young writer is mainly fascinated by his ability to put pleasing, sonorous, rhythmical, or strange strings of words together. At about age thirteen, as I recall, I became intrigued by words that began with j. They looked marvelous to me... “jaded”... “jejune”... I didn’t even know how to pronounce “jejune”—in fact, to this day I have never heard anyone use the word in conversation—but I put it in writing every chance I had. This one word began to take over entire passages, entire narratives. I wrote a short story in which everything was jejune and everybody was jejune... Pretty soon it became a noun as well as an adjective... “The jaded jejune of his hopes,” that sort of thing... and finally it became a verb as well. People were jejuning each other all over the place and were in turn being ruthlessly jejuned by the jasmine jugate jinn of their own fantasies, and so forth and so on. It was not long after that I wrote my first poem. It was called Owed to an Aesthete... 

*This was the Avery Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan for 1978. Mr. Wolfe spoke without notes. This text is from a transcription of what he said. © 1978 Tom Wolfe.
I considered that word play and a half... and it went:

Your only faintly saffron suns
Your nicely nipponesian nudes
Your limply purslane slpped-up dung
From your exema'd face exudes.

Nevertheless!—that example notwithstanding!—I think that this early musical stage of technique accounts for the fact that so many outstanding poets have done their best work while quite young. Poetry is the music of literature... in that like music it can have a non-rational but very sudden and powerful effect upon the mind. You will find a poet such as Shelley at the height of his powers, writing *Alastor* by day... and in the evenings sneaking hunks of bread off the table and rolling them into doughballs and flicking them surreptitiously into the face of his father-in-law. Nothing very strange about that... they just happen to occur at the same time, the two things, the marvelous surge of musical talent and the season of the rising sap.

The second stage comes when the young writer discovers that, for better or worse, the main arena in literature is prose. It is here that the greatest status is to be attained; that is what he finds out. This has been so for about 120 years, I would say. At this point many young writers are attracted to "poetic" prose or else to prose written after the manner of myths or fables. I can remember that I decided at this stage to write what I thought of as "crystalline" prose, prose that would shimmer like crystals. It would ring in your ears like the music of Richard Strauss. It would be timeless. It would seem as ethereal in the twenty-fifth century as in the twentieth. I considered that an advantage if one intended to become one of literature's immortals. Unfortunately, I can recite to you none of my timeless prose. I abandoned most of these efforts on the morning after. Today I see young writers, at this stage, tremendously attracted to the work of writers such as Tolkien, Hermann Hesse, Kafka, Borges, Garcia Marquez, and Zamyatin. All of them write modern fables, although Zamyatin's range goes far beyond the fable.

What is the appeal of the fable to the young writer? I think it's this: the fable form avoids the problems of realism.
When you're at that age, when you're in your late teens or early twenties and you want to write, you want to feel that the only thing that matters is your genius. The material, the content of the writer's work, is merely the clay, the wax, that Himself is going to use. It is very hard for a young writer to come to grips with the realization that the material he finds—the subject matter—may account for fifty percent or more of his success . . . and of what comes to be known as his talent. A young writer does not want to believe that. He is apt to find that he is simply not very good at analyzing the world around him and selecting material from it. He doesn't know much about it. It becomes far more convenient to write a sort of cynical or ironic whimsy patterned after Borges or Kafka. It becomes quite easy to discount realism, if there is any way to justify doing so.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, when I was in college, it was hard to avoid realism, because it was still so much in vogue in the literary world generally. So practically everyone was forced to enter stage three—writing realistic prose—fairly early on. The typical and natural solution was to write about your own life, poignantly if possible. This became more than just a solution, however. It was an article of faith at that time: namely, that the only genuine, legitimate, and truly profound material for the great novelist was the substance of his own life. Practically every highly praised first novel of the period was autobiographical: whether it was a war novel, such as *From Here to Eternity* or *The Naked and the Dead*, or a novel of school life, such as *End as a Man*, or the great picaresque novel of the fifties, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. When I was doing research on *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, I met Neal Cassady, who was the hero, under the name Dean Moriarty, of *On the Road*. "It used to amaze us," he told me. "Jack and me and everybody would take these wild rides back and forth across the United States, in these '46 Chryslers with the kickdown gears and whatever, and we'd start drinking and smoking and swallowing everything we could get our hands on; and when we got through everything we'd ever heard of, like we'd smoke Oriental rugs and eat dried creosote and swallow mildewed jute
pellets, and end up absolutely wrecked and vomiting and Jack would crawl off into some flophouse, and we’d figure he was just sleeping it off, but in fact he would be in there with a typewriter, writing down everything that had happened, everything we had done. These things came out as his novels, and insofar as any of us could tell, he changed absolutely not one thing except the names.”

Such was the mental atmosphere of the realistic novel fifteen or twenty years ago. In many cases it was nonfiction with the names changed. And I think this was the chief cause of what was notorious at the time as the “curse of the second novel.” Without realizing what the process was, many talented first novelists had ransacked the first twenty years or so of their lives for material for one novel. When it came time for the second novel, they had lived only two or three years in the meantime and were absolutely baffled as to what to write about. Norman Mailer and James Jones were two in a long line of novelists of the period who had this problem and never really found a way out of it. Today we see something of the same thing plaguing Philip Roth, who I happen to think is the most naturally gifted novelist in the country. Roth has wound up continually ransacking and re-ransacking the material of his early life. *Portnoy’s Complaint* was a brilliant book, in my opinion, but *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire* are rewrites of the same material. They are brilliant rewrites, for that matter—but here we run into the fact that, as I mentioned earlier, content is a big part of what we think of as talent or genius, and the material becomes thinner and less fresh, less novel, with each reuse.

When you think about it, it’s a bit uneconomical to have to spend twenty years of your life to get material for one novel or even to spend five years of daily living to get new material for a second book. It reminds me of the marvelous Charles Lamb story called “A Dissertation on Roast Pig.” A Chinese lout by accident burns down his house. In the ruins he finds the roasted carcass of a pig. It’s delicious; it’s the first roast pig he has ever had. When the passion for roast pig overcomes him again, he burns down his new house, first putting a pig inside, of course.
Well, there I see the novelists of the forties and fifties trying to get tasty material out of their own lives.

In the 1960s a tremendous change in literary fashion seemed to solve the problem for the young writers of that period. The modern fable came into vogue. It became quite all right—quite desirable, in fact—for the young writer to remain in stage two, the "timeless" stage, and ignore the problems of realism altogether. The New Fabulism, exemplified by writers such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, and John Gardner, was the reigning form. The typical New Fable was a short story by Raymond Kennedy entitled "Room Temperature." It concerned a man named Jack who was living as a hermit in a shack in the woods in the dead of winter without plumbing, electricity, or any other apparatus of modern civilization. He is evidently happy to be removed from society, but we are told nothing of his background. Nothing in what he says or thinks betrays any ethnic, national, or class origin. We don't even know what part of the earth he is in, except that there is a lot of snow. Jack is possessed by a nameless dread. Soon an Inexplicable Visitor shows up, a man named Dick who has been beaten up in the city and dumped out here in the snow with no clothes on except for one shoe. Not the least bit dismayed by the way they stomped him in the city, Dick wants to return as soon as possible. Hermit Jack has just saved Dick from freezing to death, but Dick has an inexplicable attitude toward him. He orders Jack about his own shack and tells him he wants him to return to the city with him, apparently as a servant. Hermit Jack doesn't want to, but he finds himself inexplicably tagging along behind Dick out in the snowy wastes. The extreme cold is too much for him, and he slumps into the snow and begins to freeze to death . . . as Dick heads on back to civilization without so much as offering him a warm goodbye. As the story ends, Hermit Jack is alone in the snow, frozen stiff and dying.

These elements—the Hermit or Isolated Character, the Elemental Terrain (woods, snowy wastes, sea, desert, swamps), Lack of Background, Lack of Realistic Dialogue, Inexplicable Visitors, Inexplicable Attitudes, Inexplicable Forces, Frozen
Death (or Paralysis)—plus an atmosphere of futility, meaninglessness, imminent and pointless disaster—these elements recurred continually in the New Fabulism. Not merely solitude, but Catatonic Solitude, became extremely fashionable, culminating in a story by Robert Coover that began: “In order to get started, he went to live alone on an island and shot himself.”

So this century—this century which has seen wars so all-involving that they are known as world wars, this century in which man has perfected the means with which to obliterate himself but also the means with which to reach the stars, this century which has seen the growth of huge metropolises, tumultuous collisions of the races, and such crazy pile-ups of wealth that by 1968 every forty-eight-year-old vinyl-wallet manufacturer in America was out on the discotheque floor with his shirt unbuttoned down to his sternum and a lot of brutal chainwork around his neck and his red eyes beaming out of his walnut-shell eyelids, doing the Watusi, the Hully-Gully, and the New Boogaloo until the onset of dawn or saline depletion, whichever came first—this is the century that our most ambitious young writers chose to treat, in the words of the title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s book, as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In all the publishing houses they were waiting for the great novels that the rising generation of writers would write about the war in Vietnam, the protest movements, the hippie world, race, class, sex, the new ways of life in America—and these novels were never written. Not a single first-rate novel has come out of the war in Vietnam; and precious few of any sort. The rising generation the publishers were waiting for never rose.

A parallel development occurred in the theater. It was illustrated most strikingly by the career of Edward Albee. Albee became famous through the success of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which was in most respects quite a realistic slice of life among American intellectuals in the 1950s. Just then the fashion in the American theater changed from realism of this, the Tennessee Williams sort, to the European fabulist style of Pinter and Beckett. Albee became determined to write “timeless” plays like theirs. Starting with *Tiny Alice* and *A Delicate Balance* his work became increasingly abstract and fable-like...
windier and emptier and less and less successful, even among critics. The fashion was so strong, however, that Albee was unable to break out of it.

Supporting the new fashion for fables was a body of theory that had two main arguments. One was that realism was an approach that had been done to death and was now exhausted. The other was summed up by William Phillips, the editor of *The Partisan Review*: "Realism is just another formal device, not a permanent method for dealing with experience." In my opinion precisely the opposite is true. The introduction of realism into literature by writers such as Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett in the eighteenth century was like the introduction of electricity into machine technology. It was not just another device; it raised the state of the art to a new plateau. The effect of realism on the emotions was something that had never been conceived of before. 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. But even the impeccable Lord Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, had confessed to weeping, blubbering, snuffling, boo-hooing, over the death of Dickens' Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. One doesn't have to admire Dickens, or any of the other writers who first demonstrated this power, in order to appreciate the point. For writers to abandon this unique power simply because it had already been used—this was one of the more intriguing literary follies of the 1960s.

Publishers began to give up on the New Fabulism in the early 1970s for the simple reason that it did not sell. It bored readers to the point of skull implosions. Now you began to see the New Fabulists backing into realism . . . while paying homage to fabulism. E. L. Doctorow started the trend with his book *Ragtime*, in which he writes a typical modern fable but populates it with real people from recent history. The aforementioned Robert Coover then tried the same thing in *A Public Burning*, a rather naive and amateurish fable populated with real figures from the era of the Rosenberg spy case. In *October Light* Gardner starts off with a typical modern fable of solitude in the wilds. It's a story of a brother and sister who hate each other. They're
shut up in a farmhouse. One—the sister, I believe—locks herself in a room, where she discovers a paperback novel. Gardner now prints the novel she finds: a book in which the rules and conventions of the New Fabulism are freely transgressed. It was by far the most popular thing he had ever written.

Today critical standards and theories in the literary world are rather gloriously confused. In the fog I see writers sneaking toward realism in greater numbers. And I see playwrights beginning to discover the value of reporting as a means of gathering material for serious literature. Playwrights are actually following the lead of screenwriters, who have found that in a medium so dependent upon dialogue it is often necessary to go out and listen to the real thing in order to make it work; i.e., it becomes necessary to do reporting. Novelists have been slower in discovering how this works, and it is ironic. To the great nineteenth century novelists, reporting was a standard technique. They adopted procedures that today are associated only with "investigative reporting" by newspapermen. Dickens wanted to gain an inside look at the infamous Yorkshire boarding schools, where families farmed out their children for years at a time so as not to have to bother with them. So he presented himself as the agent for a father trying to park one of his sons in this manner, toured the schools, and wrote down his findings each night in a notebook, like any good reporter. When Balzac came to a point in a novel where he needed to write, say, a scene about a socially correct funeral in the countryside . . . he would stop writing and go seek out a socially correct funeral in the countryside . . . and take notes on it and then come back and write the scene. Zola wrote many of his books serially, just as Dickens did. Often he would spend two weeks of the month in reporting and two weeks on writing the instalment. He would decide—in Nana—that he wanted a scene at the races. So he would head off to Longchamps and take notes. The result—as you will remember, if you have read Nana—is something far richer than simply convincing detail, although that is there. The detail itself, obtained through reporting, enables Zola to take off on flights of extraordinary technical virtuosity. But let me give you an example from another part of Nana. Nana, of course,
is a courtesan, and Zola wanted to have authentic information about such a woman. So he obtained an introduction to a famous Paris courtesan of his day and went to her house. He found, to his disappointment, that she was far too sophisticated, too urbane a woman to be used as a model for Nana. But while in her house he had a look at her bed. It had been created by goldsmiths at a cost of about $75,000 in today’s terms. Out of its four golden posts came marvelous Priapic figures with shanks akimbo. The sight of that bed became for Zola a metaphor for the entire Second Empire in France and resulted in one of the most powerful images in French literature.

What I am saying is that it was through reporting that the great writers of the nineteenth century were able to come up not only with slices of life but also with the most important insights, the most arresting symbols, the most powerful material in prose literature. They did not labor under the illusion that profundity was to be found only in the inspection of one’s own immediate existence. They seemed, rather, to believe the opposite: profound knowledge was to be obtained only through moving out from one’s own circle and reporting on the world beyond. We are in a period today in which there is seldom a major novel with more than one interesting character portrayed, and this one character is usually the alter ego of the author himself. This is the great limitation of Saul Bellow’s work. His books are filled up with the swollen figure of the protagonist in the foreground—obviously himself under another name—with little stick figures dotted around in the small space that is left. The challenge that Zola, Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol—and Faulkner—routinely accepted was that of entering into the hides of characters utterly unlike themselves and bringing them alive, a full cast, in each novel. The key—this they understood as something obvious, as a matter of routine—was reporting.

Actually, I suppose I should keep quiet about this business of reporting. It is partly due to the general obtuseness of novelists and playwrights in this area that journalists have had such a field day in American writing over the past fifteen years. This has been perhaps the first period since the 1830s in England when
the literary history of any major country has been dominated by journalists, aesthetically as well as in popular appeal—and the difference has been in the least understood side of literary technique, which is the use and the necessity of reporting. Ah, but this brings me dangerously close to a topic which I swore five years ago I would never publicly expound upon again... the New Something-or-other... and so I will stop now.