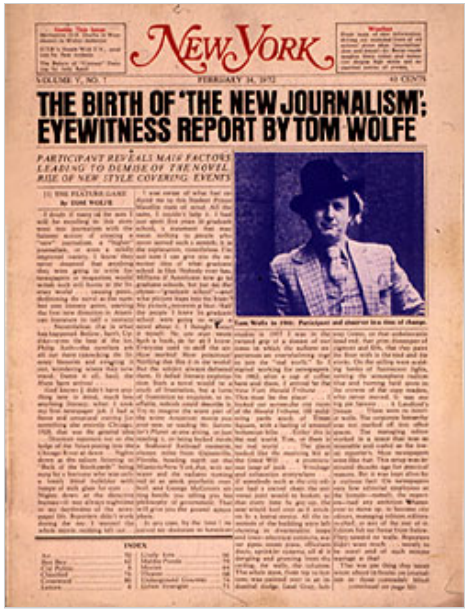
NEW YORK

# The Birth of 'The New Journalism'; Eyewitness Report by Tom Wolfe

**Participant Reveals Main Factors Leading to Demise of the Novel, Rise of New Style Covering Events**

By Tom Wolfe


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## I. The Feature Game

I doubt if many of the aces I will be extolling in this story went into journalism with the faintest notion of creating a "new" journalism, a "higher" journalism, or even a mildly improved variety. I know they never dreamed that anything they were going to write for newspapers or magazines would wreak such evil havoc in the literary world . . . causing panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century . . . Nevertheless, that is what has happened. Bellow, Barth, Updike—even the best of the lot, Philip Roth—the novelists are all out there ransacking the literary histories and sweating it out, wondering where they now stand. Damn it all, Saul, the *Huns* have arrived. . .

God knows I didn't have anything new in mind, much less anything literary, when I took my first newspaper job. I had a fierce and unnatural craving for something else entirely. Chicago, 1928, that was the general idea . . . Drunken reporters out on the ledge of the *News* peeing into the Chicago River at dawn . . . Nights down at the saloon listening to "Back of the Stockyards" being sung by a baritone who was only a lonely blind bulldyke with lumps of milk glass for eyes . . . Nights down at the detective bureau—it was always nighttime in my daydreams of the newspaper life. Reporters didn't work during the day. I wanted the whole movie, nothing left out . . .

I was aware of what had reduced me to this Student Prince Maudlin state of mind. All the same, I couldn't help it. I had just spent five years in graduate school, a

statement that may mean nothing to people who never served such a stretch; it is the explanation, nonetheless. I'm not sure I can give you the remotest idea of what graduate school is like. Nobody ever has. Millions of Americans now go to graduate schools, but just say the phrase—"graduate school"—and what picture leaps into the brain? No picture, not even a blur. Half the people I knew in graduate school were going to write a novel about it. I thought about it myself. No one ever wrote such a book, as far as I know. Everyone used to sniff the air. How morbid! How poisonous! Nothing else like it in the world! But the subject always defeated them. It defied literary exploitation. Such a novel would be a study of frustration, but a form of frustration so exquisite, so ineffable, nobody could describe it. Try to imagine the worst part of the worst Antonioni movie you ever saw, or reading *Mr. Sammler's Planet* at one sitting, or just reading it, or being locked inside a Seaboard Railroad roomette, sixteen miles from Gainesville, Florida, heading north on the Miami-to-New York run, with no water and the radiator turning red in an amok psychotic over boil, and George McGovern sitting beside you telling you his philosophy of government. That will give you the general atmosphere.

In any case, by the time I received my doctorate in American studies in 1957 I was in the twisted grip of a disease of our times in which the sufferer experiences an overwhelming urge to join the "real world." So I started working for newspapers. In 1962, after a cup of coffee here and there, I arrived at the *New York Herald Tribune* . . This must be the place! . . . I looked out across the city room of the *Herald Tribune*, 100 moldering yards south of Times Square, with a feeling of amazed bohemian bliss . . . Either this is the real world, Tom, or there is no real world . . . The place looked like the receiving bin at the Good Will . . . a promiscuous heap of junk . . . Wreckage and exhaustion everywhere . . . If somebody such as the city editor had a swivel chair, the universal joint would be broken, so that every time he got up, the seat would keel over as if stricken by a lateral stroke. All the intestines of the building were left showing in diverticulitic loops and lines—electrical conduits, water pipes, steam pipes, effluvium ducts, sprinkler systems, all of it dangling and grunting from the ceiling, the walls, the columns. The whole mess, from top to bottom, was painted over in an industrial sludge, Lead Gray, Subway Green, or that unbelievable dead red, that grim distemper of pigment and filth, that they paint the floor with in the tool and die works. On the ceiling were scalding banks of fluorescent lights, turning the atmosphere radium blue and burning bald spots in the crowns of the copy readers, who never moved. It was one big pie factory . . . A Landlord's Dream . . . There were no interior walls. The corporate hierarchy was not marked off into office spaces. The managing editor worked in a space that was as miserable and scabid as the lowest reporter's. Most newspapers were like that. This setup was instituted decades ago for practical reasons. But it was kept alive by a curious fact. On newspapers very few editorial employees at the bottom—namely, the reporters—had any ambition whatsoever to move up, to become city editors, managing editors, editors-in-chief, or any of the rest of it. Editors felt no threat from below.

They needed no walls. Reporters didn't want much . . . merely to be *stars*! and of such minute wattage at that!

That was one thing they never wrote about in books on journalism or those comradely blind bulldagger boots-upon-the-brass-rail swill-bar speakeasy memoirs about newspaper days and children of the century . . . namely, the little curlicues of newspaper status competition . . . For example, at the desk behind mine in the *Herald Tribune* city room sat Charles Portis. Portis was the original laconic cutup. At one point he was asked onto a kind of *Meet the Press* show with Malcolm X, and Malcolm X made the mistake of giving the reporters a little lecture before they went on about how he didn't want to hear anybody calling him "Malcolm," because he was not a dining-car waiter—his name happened to be "Malcolm X." By the end of the show Malcolm X was furious. He was climbing the goddamned acoustical tiles. The original laconic cutup, Portis, had invariably and continually addressed him as "Mr. X" . . . "Now, Mr. X, let me ask you this . . ." Anyway, Portis had the desk behind mine. Down in a bullpen at the far end of the room was Jimmy Breslin. Over to one side sat Dick Schaap. We were all engaged in a form of newspaper competition that I have never known anybody to even talk about in public. Yet Schaap had quit as city editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, which was one of the legendary jobs in journalism—moved *down* the organizational chart, in other words—just to get in this secret game.

Everybody knows about one form of competition among newspaper reporters, the so-called *scoop* competition. Scoop reporters competed with their counterparts on other newspapers, or wire services, to see who could get a story first and write it fastest; the bigger the story—i.e., the more it had to do with matters of power or catastrophe—the better. In short, they were concerned with the main business of the newspaper. But there was this other lot of reporters as well . . . They tended to be what is known as "feature writers." What they had in common was that they all regarded the newspaper as a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph. The idea was to get a job on a newspaper, keep body and soul together, pay the rent, get to know "the world," accumulate "experience," perhaps work some of the fat off your style—then, at some point, quit cold, say goodbye to journalism, move into a shack somewhere, work night and day for six months, and light up the sky with the final triumph. The final triumph was known as The Novel.

". . . Feature writers regarded newspapers as a motel stop on the road to final triumph . . ."

That was Someday, you understand . . . Meanwhile, these dreamboaters were in there banging away, in every place in America that had a newspaper, competing for a tiny crown the rest of the world wasn't even aware of: Best Feature Writer in

Town. The "feature" was the newspaper term for a story that fell outside the category of hard news. It included everything from "brights," chuckly little items, often from the police beat . . . There was this out-of-towner who checked into a hotel in San Francisco last night, bent upon suicide, and he threw himself out of his fifth-story window—and fell nine feet and sprained his ankle. What he didn't know was—the hotel was on a steep hill! . . . to "human interest stories," long and often hideously sentimental accounts of hitherto unknown souls beset by tragedy or unusual hobbies within the sheet's circulation area . . . In any case, feature stories gave a man a certain amount of room in which to write.

Unlike the scoop reporters, the feature writers did not openly acknowledge the existence of their competition, not even to one another. Nor was there any sort of scorecard. And yet everyone in the game knew precisely what was going on and went through the most mortifying sieges of envy, even resentment, or else surges of euphoria, depending on how the game was going. No one would ever admit to such a thing, and yet all felt it, almost daily. The feature writers' arena differed from the scoop reporters' in another way. Your competition was not necessarily working for another publication. You were just as likely to be competing with people on your own paper, which meant you were even less likely to talk about it.

So here was half the feature competition in New York, right in the same city room with me, because the *Herald Tribune* was like the main Tijuana bullring for feature writers . . . Portis, Breslin, Schaap . . . Schaap and Breslin had columns, which gave them more freedom, but I figured I could take the both of them. You had to be brave. Over at the *Times* there was Gay Talese and Robert Lipsyte. At the *Daily News* there was Michael Mok. (There were other contenders, too, on all the newspapers, including the *Herald Tribune*. I am only mentioning those I remember most clearly.) Mok I had been up against before, when I worked on the *Washington Post* and he worked on the *Washington Star*. Mok was tough competition, because, for one thing, he was willing to risk his hide on a feature story with the same wild courage he later showed in covering Vietnam and the Arab-Israel war for *Life*. Mok would do . . . eerie things. For example, the *News* sends Mok and a photographer out to do a feature on a fat man who is trying to lose weight by marooning himself on a sailboat anchored out in Long Island Sound ("I'm one of those guys, I walk past a delicatessen and breathe deep, and I gain ten pounds"). The motorboat they hire conks out about a mile from the fat man's sloop, with only four or five hours to go before the deadline. This is March, but Mok dives in and starts swimming. The water is about 42 degrees. He swims until he's half dead, and the fat man has to fish him out with an oar. So Mok gets the story. He makes the deadline. There are pictures in the *News* of Mok swimming furiously through Long Island Sound in order to retrieve this great blob's diet saga for two million readers If, instead, he had drowned, if he had ended up down with the oysters in the hepatitic muck of the Sound, nobody would have put up a plaque for him. Editors save their tears for war correspondents. As for feature writers—the less said, the better. (Just the other day I saw one of the

*New York Times's* grand panjandrums react with amazement to superlative praise for one of his paper's most popular writers, Israel Shenker, as follows: "But he's a *feature* writer!") No, if Mok had bought the oyster farm that afternoon, he wouldn't even have rated the quietest award in journalism, which is 30 seconds of silence at the Overseas Press Club dinner. Nevertheless, he dove into Long Island Sound in March! Such was the raging competition within our odd and tiny grotto!

At the same time everybody in the game had terrible dark moments during which he lost heart and told himself: "You're only kidding yourself, boy. This is just one more of your devious ways of postponing the decision to put it *all* on the line . . . and go into the shack . . . and write your novel." Your Novel! At this late date—partly due to the New Journalism itself—it is hard to explain what an American dream the idea of writing a novel was in the 1940s, the 1950s, and right into the early 1960s. The Novel was no mere literary form. It was a psychological phenomenon. It was a cortical fever. It belonged in the glossary to *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, somewhere between Narcissism and Obsessional Neuroses. In 1969 Seymour Krim wrote a strange confession for *Playboy* that began: "I was literally made, shaped, whetted and given a world with a purpose by the American realistic novel of the mid- to late-1930s. From the age of fourteen to seventeen, I gorged myself with the works of Thomas Wolfe (beginning with *Of Time and the River*, catching up with *Angel* and then keeping pace till Big Tom's stunning end), Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, John O'Hara, James Cain, Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, Jerome Weidman, and William Saroyan, and knew in my pumping heart that I wanted to be such a novelist." The piece turned into a confession because first Krim admitted that the idea of being a novelist had been the overwhelming passion of his life, his spiritual calling, in fact, the Pacemaker that kept his ego ticking through all the miserable humiliations of his young manhood—then he faced up to the fact that he was now in his forties and had never written a novel and more than likely never would. Personally I was fascinated by the article, but why *Playboy* was running it, I didn't know, unless it was the magazine's monthly 10 cc. of literary penicillin . . . to hold down the gonococci and the spirochetes . . . I couldn't imagine anyone other than writers being interested in Krim's Complex. That, however, was where I was wrong.

After thinking it over, I realized that writers comprise but a fraction of the Americans who have experienced Krim's peculiar obsession. Not so long ago, I am willing to wager, half the people who went to work for publishing houses did so with the belief that their real destiny was to be novelists. Among people on what they call the creative side of advertising, those who actually dream up the ads, the percentage must have reached 90 per cent. In 1955, in *The Exurbanites*, the late A. C. Spectorsky depicted the well-paid Madison Avenue advertising genius as being a man who wouldn't read a novel without checking out the dust jacket blurb and the picture of the author on the back . . . and if that ego-flushed little bastard

with the unbuttoned shirt and the wind rushing through his locks was younger than he was, he couldn't bear to open the goddamn book. Such was the grip of the damnable Novel. Likewise among people in television, public relations, the movies, on the English faculties of colleges and high schools, among framing shop clerks, convicts, unmarried sons living with Mom . . . a whole swarm of fantasizers out there steaming and proliferating in the ego mulches of America . . .

The Novel seemed like one of the last of those super-strokes, like finding gold or striking oil, through which an American could, overnight, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny. There were plenty of examples to feed the fantasy. In the 1930s all the novelists had seemed to be people who came blazing up into stardom from out of total obscurity. That seemed to be the nature of the beast. The biographical notes on the dustjackets of the novels were terrific. The author, you would be assured, was previously employed as a hod carrier (Steinbeck), a truck dispatcher (Cain), a bellboy (Wright), a Western Union boy (Saroyan), a dishwasher in a Greek restaurant in New York (Faulkner), a truck driver, logger, berry picker, spindle cleaner, crop duster, pilot . . . There was no end to it . . . Some novelists had whole strings of these credentials . . . That way you knew you were getting the real goods . . .

By the 1950s The Novel had become a nationwide tournament. There was a magical assumption that the end of World War II in 1945 was the dawn of a new golden age of the American Novel, like the Hemingway-Dos Passos-Fitzgerald era after World War I. There was even a kind of Olympian club where the new golden boys met face-to-face every Sunday afternoon in New York, namely, the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street . . . Ah! There's Jones! There's Mailer! There's Styron! There's Baldwin! There's Willingham! In the flesh—right here in this room! The scene was strictly for novelists, people who were writing novels, and people who were paying court to The Novel. There was no room for a journalist unless he was there in the role of would-be novelist or simple courtier of the great. There was no such thing as a *literary* journalist working for popular magazines or newspapers. If a journalist aspired to literary status—then he had better have the sense and the courage to quit the popular press and try to get into the big league.

As for our little league of feature writers—two of the contestants, Portis and Breslin, actually went on to live out the fantasy. They wrote their novels. Portis did it in a way that was so much like the way it happens in the dream, it was unbelievable. One day he suddenly quit as London correspondent for the *Herald Tribune*. That was generally regarded as a very choice job in the newspaper business. Portis quit cold one day; just like that, without a warning. He returned to the United States and moved into a fishing shack in Arkansas. In six months he wrote a beautiful little novel called *Norwood*. Then he wrote *True Grit,* which was a best seller. The reviews were terrific . . . He sold both books to the movies . . . He made a fortune . . . A *fishing* shack! In *Arkansas*! It was too goddamned perfect to

be true, and yet there it was. Which is to say that the old dream, The Novel, has never died.

". . . At the same time everybody in the game had terrible dark moments when he told himself: 'You're kidding yourself, boy' . . ."

And yet in the early 1960s a curious new notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature statusphere. It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would . . . read like a novel. *Like* a novel, if you get the picture. This was the sincerest form of homage to The Novel and to those greats, the novelists, of course. Not even the journalists who pioneered in this direction doubted for a moment that the novelist was the reigning literary artist, now and forever. All they were asking for was the privilege of dressing up like him . . . until the day when they themselves would work up their nerve and go into the shack and try it for real . . . They were dreamers, all right, but one thing they never dreamed of. They never dreamed of the approaching irony. They never guessed for a minute that the work they would do over the next ten years, as journalists, would wipe out the novel as literature's main event.

## II. Like a Novel

*What inna namea Christ is this*—in the fall of 1962 I happened to pick up a copy of *Esquire* and read a story called "Joe Louis: the King as a Middle-aged Man." The piece didn't open like an ordinary magazine article at all. It opened with the tone and mood of a short story, with a rather intimate scene; or intimate by the standards of magazine journalism in 1962, in any case:

" 'Hi, sweetheart!' Joe Louis called to his wife, spotting her waiting for him at the Los Angeles airport.

"She smiled, walked toward him, and was about to stretch up on her toes and kiss him—but suddenly stopped.

" 'Joe,' she said, 'where's your tie?'

" 'Aw, sweetie,' he said, shrugging, 'I stayed out all night in New York and didn't have time—'

" 'All *night!*' she cut in. 'When you're out here all you do is sleep, sleep, sleep.'

" 'Sweetie,' Joe Louis said, with a tired grin, 'I'm an ole man.'

" 'Yes,' she agreed, 'but when you go to New York you try to be young again.' "

The story featured several scenes like that, showing the private life of a sports hero growing older, balder, sadder. It wound up with a scene in the home of Louis's second wife, Rose Morgan. In this scene Rose Morgan is showing a film of the first Joe Louis-Billy Conn fight to a roomful of people, including her present husband.

"Rose seemed excited at seeing Joe at the top of his form, and every time a Louis punch would jolt Conn, she'd go, 'Mummm' (sock). 'Mummm' (sock). 'Mummm.'

"Billy Conn was impressive through the middle rounds, but as the screen flashed Round 13, somebody said, 'Here's where Conn's gonna make his mistake; he's gonna try to slug it out with Joe Louis.' Rose's husband remained silent, sipping his Scotch.

"When the Louis combinations began to land, Rose went, 'Mummmmm, mummmmm,' and then the pale body of Conn began to collapse against the canvas.

"Billy Conn slowly began to rise. The referee counted over him. Conn had one leg up, then two, then was standing—but the referee forced him back. It was too late.

"—and then, for the first time, from the back of the room, from out of the downy billows of the sofa, comes the voice of the present husband—*this Joe Louis crap again*—

" 'I thought Conn got up in time,' he said, 'but that referee wouldn't let him go on.'

"Rose Morgan said nothing—just swallowed the rest of her drink."

*What the hell is going on?* With a little reworking the whole article could have read like a short story. The passages in between the scenes, the expository passages, were conventional 1950s-style magazine journalism, but they could have been easily recast. The piece could have been turned into a non-fiction short story with very little effort. The really unique thing about it, however, was the reporting. This I frankly couldn't comprehend at first. I really didn't understand how anyone could manage to do reporting on things like the personal by-play between a man and his fourth wife at an airport and then follow it up with that amazing cakewalk down Memory Lane in his second wife's living room. My instinctive, defensive reaction was that the man had piped it, as the saying went . . . winged it, made up the dialogue . . . Christ, maybe he made up whole scenes, the unscrupulous geek . . . The funny thing was, that was precisely the reaction that countless journalists and literary intellectuals would have over the next nine years as the New Journalism picked up momentum. *The bastards are making it up!* (I'm telling you, Ump, that's a *spitball* he's throwing . . .) Really stylish reporting was something no one knew how to deal with, since no one was used to thinking of reporting as having an *esthetic* dimension.

At the time I hardly ever read magazines like *Esquire*. I wouldn't have read the Joe Louis piece except that it was by Gay Talese. After all, Talese was a reporter for the *Times*. He was a player in my own feature game. What he had written for *Esquire* was so much better than what he was doing (or was allowed to do) for the *Times*, I had to check out what was going on.

". . . *What the hell is going on?* With a little reworking Talese's whole article on Joe Louis could have read like a short story . . ."

Not long after that Jimmy Breslin started writing an extraordinary local column for my own paper, the *Herald Tribune*. Breslin came to the *Herald Tribune* in 1963 from out of nowhere, which is to say he had written a hundred or so articles for magazines like *True, Life*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Naturally he was virtually unknown. At that time knocking your brains out as a free-lance writer for popular magazines was a guaranteed way to stay anonymous.* (See footnote.) Breslin caught the attention of the *Herald Tribune*'s publisher, Jock Whitney, through his book about the New York Mets called *Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?* The *Herald Tribune* hired Breslin to do a "bright" local column to help offset some of the heavy lumber on the editorial page, paralyzing snoremongers like Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop. Newspaper columns had become a classic illustration of the theory that organizations tend to promote people up to their levels of incompetence. The usual practice was to give a man a column as a reward for outstanding service as a reporter. That way they could lose a good reporter and gain a bad writer. The archetypical newspaper columnist was Lippmann. For 35 years Lippmann seemed to do nothing more than ingest the *Times* every morning, turn it over in his ponderous cud for a few days, and then methodically egest it in the form of a drop of mush on the foreheads of several hundred thousand readers of other newspapers in the days thereafter. The only form of reporting that I remember Lippmann going for was the occasional red-carpet visit to a head of state, during which he had the opportunity of sitting on braided chairs in wainscotted offices and swallowing the exalted one's official lies in person instead of reading them in the *Times*. I don't mean to single out Lippmann, however. He was only doing what was expected of him . . .

In any case, Breslin made a revolutionary discovery. He made the discovery that it was feasible for a columnist to leave the building, go outside and do reporting on his own, actual legwork. Breslin would go up to the city editor and ask what stories and assignments were coming up, choose one, go out, leave the building, cover the story as a reporter, and write about it in his column. If the story were big enough, his column would start on page one instead of inside. As obvious as this system may sound, it was unheard of among newspaper columnists, whether local or national. If possible, local columnists are even more pathetic. They usually start out full of juice, sounding like terrific boulevardiers and raconteurs, retailing in

print all the marvelous *mots* and anecdotes they have been dribbling away over lunch for the past few years. After eight or ten weeks, however, they start to dry up. You can see the poor bastards floundering and gasping. They're dying of thirst. They're out of material. They start writing about funny things that happened around the house the other day, homey one-liners that the Better Half or the Avon lady got off, or some fascinating book or article that started them thinking, or else something they saw on the TV. Thank God for the TV! Without television shows to cannibalize, half of these people would be lost, utterly catatonic. Pretty soon you can almost see it, the tubercular blue of the 23-inch screen, radiating from their prose. Anytime you see a columnist trying to squeeze material out of his house, articles, books, or the television set, you've got a starving soul on your hands . . . You should send him a basket . . .

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**Richard Gehman once told me about running into Abe Rosenthal (now managing editor of the "New York Times") shortly after Rosenthal had won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Polish rebellion of 1960. Gehman congratulated him profusely, whereupon Rosenthal, by way of being polite, asked Gehman if he were still writing for magazines. Gehman stared at him. He was dumbfounded. "Still writing?" At that moment he had sixteen articles on newsstands, in magazines ranging from men's adventures to the "Atlantic Monthly."*

But Breslin worked like a Turk. He would be out all day covering a story, come back in at 4 p.m. or so and sit down at a desk in the middle of the city room. It was quite a show. He was a good-looking Irishman with a lot of black hair and a great wrestler's gut. When he sat down at his typewriter he hunched himself over into a shape like a bowling ball. He would start drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes until vapor started drifting off his body. He looked like a bowling ball fueled with liquid oxygen. Thus fired up, he would start typing. I've never seen a man who could write so well against a daily deadline. I particularly remember one story he wrote about the sentencing, on a charge of extortion, of a Teamster boss named Anthony Provenzano. Early in the story Breslin set up the image of the sun coming through the moldering old windows of the Federal courthouse and exploding off Provenzano's diamond pinky ring:

"It did not seem like a bad morning at all. The boss, Tony Provenzano, who is one of the biggest men in the Teamsters Union, walked up and down the corridor outside of this Federal courtroom in Newark and he had a little smile on his face and he kept flicking a white cigarette holder around.

" 'Today is the kind of a day for fishing,' Tony was saying. 'We ought to go out and get some fluke.'

"Then he spread his legs a little and went at this big guy named Jack, who had on a gray suit. Tony stuck out his left hand so he could throw a hook at this guy Jack.

The big diamond ring on Tony's pinky flashed in the light coming through the tall windows of the corridor. Then Tony shifted and hit Jack with a right hand on the shoulder.

" 'Always the shoulder,' one of the guys in the corridor laughed. 'Tony is always banging Jack on the shoulder.' "

The story went on in that vein with Provenzano's Jersey courtiers circling around him and fawning, while the sun explodes off his pinky ring. Inside the courtroom itself, however, Provenzano starts getting his. The judge starts lecturing him, and the sweat starts breaking out on Provenzano's upper lip. Then the judge sentences him to seven years, and Provenzano starts twisting his pinky ring finger with his right hand. Then Breslin wraps it up with a scene in a cafeteria where the young prosecutor who worked the case is eating fried scallops and fruit salad off a tray.

"Nothing on his hand flashed. The guy who sunk Tony Pro doesn't even have a diamond ring on his pinky."

Well—all right! Say what you will! There it was, a short story, complete with symbolism, in fact, and yet true-life, as they say, about something that happened today, and you could pick it up on the newsstand by 11 tonight for a dime . . .

Breslin's work stirred up a certain vague resentment among both journalists and literati during the first year or two of his column—vague, because they never fully understood what he was doing . . . only that in some vile Low Rent way the man's output was *literary*. Among literary intellectuals you would hear Breslin referred to as "a cop who writes" or "Runyon on welfare." These weren't even intelligent insults, however, because they dealt with Breslin's attitude, which seemed to be that of the cabdriver with his cap tilted over one eye. A crucial part of Breslin's work they didn't seem to be conscious of at all: namely, the reporting he did. Breslin made it a practice to arrive on the scene long before the main event in order to gather the off-camera material, the byplay in the make-up room, that would enable him to create character. It was part of his *modus operandi* to gather "novelistic" details, the rings, the perspiration, the jabs on the shoulder, and he did it more skillfully than most novelists.

Literary people were oblivious to this side of the New Journalism, because it is one of the unconscious assumptions of modern criticism that the raw material is simply "there." It is the "given." The idea is: Given such-and-such a body of material, what has the artist done with it? The crucial part that reporting plays in all story-telling, whether in novels, films, or non-fiction, is something that is not so much ignored as simply not comprehended. The modern notion of art is an essentially religious or magical one in which the artist is viewed as a holy beast who in some way, big or small, receives flashes from the godhead, which is known as creativity. The material is merely his clay, his palette . . . Even the obvious relationship between reporting and the major novels—one has only to think of Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and, in fact, Joyce—is something

that literary historians deal with only in a biographical sense. It took the New Journalism to bring this strange matter of reporting into the foreground.

But these were all matters that came up later. I don't remember a soul talking about them at the time. I certainly didn't. In the spring of 1963 I made my own entry into this new arena, although without meaning to. I have already described (in the introduction to *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*) the odd circumstances under which I happened to write my first magazine article —"There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmm) . . . . . ."—in the form of what I thought was merely a memorandum to the managing editor of *Esquire*. This article was by no means like a short story, despite the use of scenes and dialogue. I wasn't thinking about that at all. It is hard to say what it was like. It was a garage sale, that piece . . . vignettes, odds and ends of scholarship, bits of memoirs, short bursts of sociology, apostrophes, epithets, moans, cackles, anything that came into my head, much of it thrown together in a rough and awkward way. Its virtue was precisely in showing me the possibility of there being something "new" in journalism. What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that—plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space . . . to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally. I am not laying all those gladiolas on that rather curious first article of mine, you understand. I'm only talking about what it suggested to me.

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". . . Breslin made a revolutionary discovery—that it was feasible for a columnist to leave the building and do his own legwork . . ."

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I soon had the chance to explore every possibility I could think of. The *Herald Tribune* assigned me split duties, like a utility infielder's. Two days a week I was supposed to work for the city desk as a general assignment reporter, as usual. The other three days I was supposed to turn out a weekly piece of about 1,500 words for the *Herald Tribune's* new Sunday supplement, which was called *New York*. At the same time, following the success of "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmm) . . . . ."—I was also cranking out stories for *Esquire*. This setup was crazy enough to begin with. I can remember flying to Las Vegas on my two regular days off from the *Herald Tribune* to do a story for *Esquire*—"Las Vegas!!!!"—and winding up sitting on the

edge of a white satin bed in a Hog-Stomping Baroque suite in a hotel on the Strip —in the décor known as Hog-Stomping Baroque there are 400-pound cut-glass chandeliers in the bathrooms—and picking up the phone and dictating to the stenographic battery of the *Trib* city desk the last third of a story on demolition derbies in Long Island for *New York*—"Clean Fun at Riverhead"—hoping to finish in time to meet a psychiatrist in a black silk mohair suit with brass buttons and a shawl collar, no lapels, one of the only two psychiatrists in Las Vegas County at that time, to take me to see the casualties of the Strip in the state mental ward out Charleston Boulevard. What made it crazier was that the piece about the demolition derbies was the last one I wrote that came anywhere close to being 1,500 words. After that they started climbing to 3,000, 4,000, 5,000, 6,000 words. Like Pascal, I was sorry, but I didn't have time to write short ones. In nine months in the latter part of 1963 and first half of 1964 I wrote three more long pieces for *Esquire* and twenty for *New York*. All of this was in addition to what I was writing as a reporter for the *Herald Tribune* city desk two days a week. The idea of a day off lost all meaning. I can remember being furious on Monday, November 25, 1963, because there were people I desperately needed to talk to, for some story or other, and I couldn't reach them because all the offices in New York seemed to be closed, every one. It was the day of President Kennedy's funeral. I remember staring at the television set . . . morosely, but for all the wrong reasons.

Yet in terms of experimenting in non-fiction, the way I worked at that point couldn't have been more ideal. I was writing mostly for *New York*, which, as I say, was a Sunday supplement. At that time, 1963 and 1964, Sunday supplements were close to being the lowest form of periodical. Their status was well below that of the ordinary daily newspaper, and only slightly above that of the morbidity press, sheets like the *National Enquirer* in its "I Left My Babies in the Deep Freeze" period. As a result, Sunday supplements had no traditions, no pretensions, no promises to live up to, not even any rules to speak of. They were brain candy, that was all. Readers felt no guilt whatsoever about laying them aside, throwing them away or not looking at them at all. I never felt the slightest hesitation about trying any device that might conceivably grab the reader a few seconds longer. I tried to yell right in his ear: *Stick around*! . . . Sunday supplements were no place for diffident souls. That was how I started playing around with the device of point-of-view.

For example, I once did a story about the girls in jail at the Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village at Greenwich Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas, an intersection known as Nut Heaven. The girls used to yell down to boys on the street, to all the nice free funky Village groovies they saw walking around down there. They would yell every male first name they could think of —"Bob!" "Bill!" "Joe!" "Jack!" "Jimmy!" "Willie!" "Benny!"—until they hit the right name, and some poor fool would stop and look up and answer. Then they would suggest a lot of quaint anatomical impossibilities for the kid to perform on himself

and start laughing like maniacs. I was there one night when they caught a boy who looked 21 named Harry. So I started the story with the girls yelling at him:

"'Hai-ai-ai-

should be like the off-white or putty-colored walls that Syrie Maugham popularized in interior decoration . . . a "neutral background" against which bits of color would stand out. *Understatement* was the thing. You can't imagine what a positive word "understatement" was among both journalists and literati ten years ago. There is something to be said for the notion, of course, but the trouble was that by the early 1960s understatement had become an absolute pall. Readers were bored to tears without understanding why. When they came upon that pale beige tone, it began to signal to them, unconsciously, that a well-known bore was here again, "the journalist," a pedestrian mind, a phlegmatic spirit, a faded personality, and there was no way to get rid of the pallid little troll, short of ceasing to read. This had nothing to do with objectivity and subjectivity or taking a stand or "commitment"—it was a matter of personality, energy, drive, bravura . . . style, in a word . . . The standard non-fiction writer's voice was like the standard announcer's voice . . . a drag, a droning . . .

To avoid this I would try anything. For example, I wrote a story about Junior Johnson, a stock car racer from Ingle Hollow, North Carolina, who had learned to drive by running moonshine whiskey to Charlotte and other distribution points. "There ain't no harder work in the world than making whiskey," Junior would say. "I don't know of any other business that compels you to get up at all times of night and go outdoors in the snow and everything else and work. H'it's the hardest way in the world to make a living, and I don't think anybody'd do it unless they had to." Now, as long as Junior Johnson was explaining the corn liquor industry, there was no problem, because (a) dialogue tends to be naturally attractive, or involving, to the reader; and (b) Johnson's Ingle Hollow lingo was unusual. But then I had to take over the explanation myself, in order to compress into a few paragraphs information that had come from several interviews. So . . . I decided I would rather talk in Ingle Hollow accents myself, since that seemed to go over all right. There is no law that says the narrator has to speak in beige or even New York journalese. So I picked up the explanation myself, as follows: "Working mash wouldn't wait for a man. It started coming to a head when it got ready to and a man had to be there to take it off, out there in the woods, in the brush, in the brambles, in the muck, in the snow. Wouldn't it have been something if you could have just set it all up inside a good old shed with a corrugated metal roof and order those parts like you want them and not have to smuggle all that copper and all that sugar and all that everything out here in the woods and be a coppersmith and a plumber and a cooper and a carpenter and a pack horse and every other goddamned thing God ever saw in the world, all at once.

". . . And live decent hours—Junior and his brothers, about two o'clock in the morning they'd head out to the stash, the place where the liquor was hidden after it was made . . ."

I was feigning the tones of an Ingle Hollow moonshiner, in order to create the

illusion of seeing the action through the eyes of someone who was actually on the scene and involved in it, rather than a beige narrator. I began to think of this device as the *downstage voice*, as if characters downstage from the protagonist himself were talking.

I would do the same thing with descriptions. Rather than just come on as the broadcaster describing the big parade, I would shift as quickly as possible into the eye sockets, as it were, of the people in the story. Often I would shift the point of view in the middle of a paragraph or even a sentence. I began a story on Baby Jane Holzer, entitled "The Girl of the Year," as follows:

"Bangs manes bouffant beehives Beatle caps butter faces brush-on lashes decal eyes puffy sweaters French thrust bras flailing leather blue jeans stretch pants stretch jeans honeydew bottoms eclair shanks elf boots ballerinas Knight slippers, hundreds of them, these flaming little buds, bobbing and screaming, rocketing around inside the Academy of Music Theater underneath that vast old moldering cherub dome up there—aren't they super-marvelous!

"'Aren't they super-marvelous!' says Baby Jane, and then: 'Hi, Isabel! Isabel! You want to sit backstage—with the Stones!'

"The show hasn't even started yet, the Rolling Stones aren't even on the stage, the place is full of a great shabby moldering dimness, and these flaming little buds.

"Girls are reeling this way and that way in the aisle and through their huge black decal eyes, sagging with Tiger Tongue Lick Me brush-on eyelashes and black appliqués, sagging like display-window Christmas trees, they keep staring at—her—Baby Jane—on the aisle."

> ". . . A reviewer called me a 'chameleon.' He meant it negatively. I took it as a compliment. A chameleon . . . but precisely! . . ."

As you see, the opening paragraph is a rush of Groovy clothes ending with the phrase "—aren't they super-marvelous!" With this phrase I shifted into the point-of-view of Baby Jane, looking through her eyes at the young girls, "the flaming little buds," who are running around the theater. The description continues through Jane's eyes until the phrase "they keep staring at—her—Baby Jane," whereupon the point-of-view shifts to the young girls, and the reader is suddenly looking through *their* eyes at Baby Jane: "What the hell is this? She is gorgeous in the most outrageous way. Her hair rises up from her head in a huge hairy corona, a huge tan mane around a narrow face and two eyes opened—swock!—like umbrellas, with all that hair flowing down over a coat made of . . . *ze*bra! Those motherless stripes! Oh, damn! Here she is with her friends, looking like some kind of queen bee for all flaming little buds everywhere."

In fact, three points-of-view are used in that rather short passage, the point-of-view of the subject (Baby Jane), the point-of-view of the people watching her (the "flaming little buds"), and my own. I switched back and forth between points-of-view continually, and often abruptly, in many articles I wrote in 1963, 1964, and 1965. Eventually a reviewer called me a "chameleon" who instantly took on the coloration of whomever he was writing about. He meant it negatively. I took it as a great compliment. A chameleon . . . but precisely!

Sometimes I used point-of-view in the Jamesian sense in which fiction writers understand it, entering directly into the mind of a character, experiencing the world through his central nervous system throughout a given scene. Writing about Phil Spector ("The First Tycoon of Teen"), I began the article not only inside his mind but with a virtual stream of consciousness. One of the news magazines apparently regarded my Spector story as an improbable feat, because they interviewed him and asked him if he didn't think this passage was merely a fiction that appropriated his name. Spector said that, in fact, he found it quite accurate. This should have come as no surprise, since every detail in the passage was taken from a long interview with Spector about exactly how he had felt at the time:

"All these raindrops are *high* or something. They don't roll down the window, they come straight back, toward the tail, wobbling, like all those Mr. Cool snowheads walking on mattresses. The plane is taxiing out toward the runway to take off, and this stupid infarcted water wobbles, sideways, across the window. Phil Spector, 23 years old, the rock and roll magnate, producer of Philles Records, America's first teen-age tycoon, watches . . . this watery pathology . . . it is *sick, fatal*. He tightens his seat belt over his bowels . . . A hum rises inside the plane, a shot of air comes shooting through the vent over somebody's seat, some ass turns on a cone of light, there is a sign stuck out by the runway, a mad, cryptic, insane instruction to the pilot—Runway 4, Are Cylinder Laps Main-side DOWN?—and beyond, disoriented crop rows of sulphur blue lights, like the lights on top of a New Jersey toothpaste factory, only spreading on and on in sulphur blue rows over Los Angeles County. It is . . . disoriented. Schizoid raindrops. The plane breaks in two on takeoff and everybody in the front half comes rushing toward Phil Spector in a gush of bodies in a thick orange—*napalm*! No, it happens aloft; there is a long rip in the side of the plane, it just rips, he can see the top ripping, folding back in sick curds, like a sick Dali egg, and Phil Spector goes sailing through the rip, dark, freezing. And the engine, it is *reedy*—

"Miss!"

"A stewardess is walking to the back to buckle herself in for the takeoff. The plane is moving, the jets are revving. Under a Lifebuoy blue skirt, her fireproof legs are clicking out of her Pinki-Kinki-Panti Fantasy—"

I had the feeling, rightly or wrongly, that I was doing things no one had ever done

before in journalism. I used to try to imagine the feeling readers must have had upon finding all this carrying on and cutting up in a Sunday supplement. I liked that idea. I had no sense of being a part of any normal journalistic or literary environment. Later I read the English critic John Bayley's yearnings for an age when writers had Pushkin's sense of "looking at all things afresh," as if for the first time, without the constant intimidation of being aware of what other writers have already done. In the mid-1960s that was exactly the feeling I had.

". . . At the heart of every parody there is a gold ball of tribute. Even hostile parodies admit the target has a distinct voice . . ."

I'm sure that others who were experimenting with magazine articles, such as Talese, began to feel the same way. We were moving beyond the conventional limits of journalism, but not merely in terms of technique. The kind of reporting we were doing struck us as far more ambitious, too. It was more intense, more detailed, and certainly more time-consuming than anything that newspaper or magazine reporters, including investigative reporters, were accustomed to. We developed the habit of staying with the people we were writing about for days at a time, weeks in some cases. We had to gather all the material the conventional journalist was after—and then keep going. It seemed all-important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters. That was why it was so ironic when both the journalistic and literary old guards began to attack this new journalism as "impressionistic." The most important things we attempted in terms of technique depended upon a depth of information that had never been demanded in newspaper work. Only through the most searching forms of reporting was it possible, in non-fiction, to use whole scenes, extended dialogue, point-of-view, and interior monologue. Eventually I, and others, would be accused of "entering people's minds" . . . But exactly! I figured that was one more doorbell a reporter had to push.

Most of the people who eventually wrote about my style, however, tended to concentrate on certain mannerisms, the lavish use of dots, dashes, exclamation points, italics, and occasionally punctuation that never existed before ::::::::: and of interjections, shouts, nonsense words, onomatopoeia, mimesis, pleonasms, the continual use of the historical present, and so on. This was natural enough, because many of these devices stood out even before one had read a word. The typography actually *looked* different. Referring to my use of italics and exclamation points, one critic observed, with scorn, that my work looked like something out of Queen Victoria's childhood diary. Queen Victoria's childhood diaries are, in fact, quite readable; even charming. One has only to compare them

with the miles of official prose she laid on the English people during the course of her Palmerston, Wellington, Gladstone reign to see the point I'm making. I found a great many pieces of punctuation and typography lying around dormant when I came along—and I must say I had a good time using them. I figured it was time someone violated what Orwell called "the Geneva conventions of the mind" . . . a protocol that had kept journalism and non-fiction generally (and novels) in such a tedious bind for so long. I found that things like exclamation points, italics, and abrupt shifts (dashes) and syncopations (dots) helped to give the illusion not only of a person talking but of a person thinking. I used to enjoy using dots where they would be least expected, not at the end of a sentence but in the middle, creating the effect . . . of a skipped beat. It seemed to me the mind reacted—*first*! . . . in dots, dashes, and exclamation points, then rationalized, drew up a brief, with periods.

I soon found that people loved to parody my style. By 1966 the parodies began to come in a rush. I must say I read them all. I suppose it's because at the heart of every parody there is a little gold ball of tribute (a notion that led to an amazing hassle in 1965, as we shall see). Even hostile parodies admit from the start that the target has a distinct voice.

It is not very often that one comes across a new style, period. And if a new style were created not via the novel, or the short story, or poetry, but via journalism—I suppose that would seem extraordinary. It was probably that idea—more than any specific devices, such as using scenes and dialogue in a "novelistic" fashion—that began to give me very grand ideas about a new journalism. As I saw it, if a new literary style could originate in journalism, then it stood to reason that journalism could aspire to more than mere emulation of those aging giants, the novelists.

In any case, a . . . New Journalism . . . was in the air. "In the air," as I say it; it was not something that anyone took note of in print at the time, so far as I can remember. I have no idea who coined the term the New Journalism or when it was coined. I have never even liked the term. Any movement, group, party, program, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with "new" in it is just begging for trouble, of course. But it is the term that eventually caught on. At the time, the mid-1960s, one was aware only that there was some sort of new *artistic* excitement in journalism.

I knew nothing about what history, if any, lay behind it. I was only aware of what certain writers were doing at *Esquire*, Thomas B. Morgan, Brock Brower, Terry Southern and, above all, Gay Talese . . . Even a couple of established novelists were in on it, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, writing non-fiction for *Esquire* . . . and, of course, the writers on my own Sunday supplement, *New York*, chiefly Jimmy Breslin, but also Robert Christgau, Doon Arbus, Gail Sheehy, Tom Gallagher, Robert Benton and David Newman. Magazine writers were also beginning to provide the only portraits of the bizarre new styles of life that were

cropping up in the 1960s (novelists were strangely shy about dealing with them, as it developed). I was turning out articles as fast as I could write and checking out all these people to see what new spins they had come up with. I was completely wrapped up in . . . this new thing that was in the air. It was a regular little league we had going.

But one thing never crossed my mind. I never had the slightest idea that what we were doing might have an impact on the literary world, or, in fact, on any sphere outside the small world of feature journalism. The first direct knowledge I had of the stir the New Journalism was creating in literary circles was when I read an article in the June, 1966, *Atlantic* by Dan Wakefield, entitled "The Personal Voice and the Impersonal Eye." The gist of this piece was that for the first time in anybody's memory, for the first time since the turn of the century when the occasional Nobel Prize was thrown to writers like Theodor Mommsen, people in the literary world were beginning to talk about non-fiction as a serious artistic form. Wakefield attributed this remarkable change to two books: *In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote, and *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*.

But June, 1966, was actually pretty far down the line. The new form had already been paid a higher tribute, although I didn't comprehend that at the time. Namely, literary tribute in its cash forms: bitterness, envy, and resentment. This had all occurred during a curious interlude known as the *New Yorker* affair.