

## Tom Wolfe and the Rise of Donald Trump: A Review of Wolfe's Writings

Wight Martindale, Jr.

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I confess that my title is a bit deceptive. If you want rants—pro or con—about President Trump, you will be disappointed. I am most concerned with the writing of Tom Wolfe, whom I first read in the 1960s as an admiring fellow journalist. I love his essays, which appeared regularly in Clay Felker's exciting *New York* magazine—a Sunday supplement to the *Herald Tribune*. In 1987 Wolfe wrote the first of four substantial novels, *Bonfire of the Vanities* (655 pages), and in 2016 he completed his last book, *The Kingdom of Speech*.

I believe that intellectually and, in some personal habits as well, Wolfe and Trump are similar. But they lived in separate worlds. Perhaps someday a doctoral student will show us that all along Wolfe was commenting on Trump. For sure, they were both dedicated New Yorkers, loving the city's energy and glamour. And both are great self-promoters. Trump had a TV show and sold himself along with his hotels and clubs as a brand. Wolfe got attention by wearing white suits, often with a white vest—winter or summer. When he was on the cover of *Time* in 1998 he added a white homburg, while holding a pair of white kid gloves and a white walking stick.

Most importantly, they both recognized themselves as natural drainers of the swamp, born iconoclasts. And they remained outsiders, for life. The political class dislikes Trump, and the West Side publishing world resents Wolfe. Trump has gone after an elite, bureaucratically protected political class, full of perks and

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power for themselves, using, rather than helping, the little people who elect them. They are both great defenders of the middle class, often feared by the elite (this is where the new rich and powerful will come from) and resented by the poor. Wolfe punctured the over-the-top pretentiousness of New York intellectuals—the secretive William Shawn (editor of the *The New Yorker*), the rival novelists who despised him, as well as insider celebrities like Leonard Bernstein (“Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s,” 1970). He bravely championed a new writer from Harlem, Claude Brown, whose book, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, was to sell four million copies (*New York*, July 18, 1965) “Brown,” Wolfe wrote, “makes James Baldwin look like a tourist.”

Wolfe was a new kind of iconoclast, refreshingly different from people like Darwin or Freud, Marx or Chomsky. He made you laugh. He loved what he was doing. He was having fun.

I am not the only person who has noticed the Wolfe-Trump connection. No less than Niall Ferguson—Research fellow at Jesus College, Oxford, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, and one-time Laurence Tisch Professor of History at Harvard—has made the same observation.

Ferguson’s commentary in the May 18, 2018 issue of the *South China Morning Post*, goes back to 1987, the year Trump published *The Art of the Deal* and Wolfe wrote *Bonfire*—both books being about financial wheeler-dealers. “You can easily picture the young tycoon Trump rubbing shoulders with Wolfe’s character, Sherman McCoy, the bond-trading master of the universe,” Ferguson writes. Wolfe’s second novel *A Man in Full*, is about an Atlanta real estate developer with a gorgeous young wife and an embittered ex-wife. His business, like Trump’s, is loaded with debt and often in trouble.

Ferguson goes on to point out that in March 2016 Wolfe recognized that Trump’s candidacy was capitalizing on the widespread distress and contempt for government and said that Trump’s “real childish side” is part of his appeal. “Childishness makes him seem honest,” Wolfe observed. He might have made another observation: Donald Trump was having fun upsetting things. He was not just rich, but happy with his toys, his influence, and his family.

Wolfe’s established literary rivals, including Norman Mailer, John Updike, and John Irving, recognized Wolfe’s conservatism and said bad things about his novels. Wolfe counterattacked with “My Three Stooges,” in 2000. In this rivalry Ferguson sides with Wolfe writing, “Wolfe’s fiction is superior to theirs. For what Wolfe shows is that the obsession with money and the status it confers is only part of a triptych. Next to it, is sex—about which Croker, the central character in *A Man In Full* thinks a great deal—and race, America’s original

sin, about which Wolfe wrote fearlessly. Most intellectuals missed completely the potency of Trump's candidacy."

### ***The New Yorker Bomb***

Even before the controversial novels that Ferguson cites, I go back with Wolfe to 1965, the year he wrote his two-part series in the *New York Herald Tribune* Sunday supplement mocking its great rival, *The New Yorker* magazine and its editor William Shawn. Here Wolfe clarifies some of his attitudes, artistically and politically. He is also at his most strident—perhaps too strident—and upon reflection, Wolfe may have realized this. His article, "Tiny Mummies," is the only lengthy piece of his writing that has never been reprinted in book form. Shawn regarded Wolfe as an enemy right from the start. He refused to talk to Wolfe or to authorize others on his staff to talk to him; Shawn had to know he was asking for trouble.

What does Wolfe find so lacking in this still-influential, ambitious, and rich magazine? It is that its leader, an alarmingly shy and delicate man, a *New Yorker* lifer who refuses to have his picture taken, gives no interviews, plans his day so that he can go up in the elevator to his nineteenth floor office alone—is in fact a museum keeper, a mummifier, a preserver-in-amber, a smiling embalmer in a land of the walking dead.

Shawn, Wolfe tells us, has a soft, somewhat high voice. He seems to whisper. One gets within 40 feet of his office and everyone seems to be whispering—secretaries, messengers, everybody. Shawn himself slips along the hallways as silently as is humanly possible. He always seems to have on about 20 layers of clothes, about three button-up sweaters, four vests, a couple of shirts, two ties, a dark shapeless suit over the whole ensemble, and white cotton socks. His mission in life is to preserve *The New Yorker* just as Harold Ross left it . . . exactly . . . in perpetuity. Everyone who worked for Ross got lifetime tenure.

Why does Wolfe find this so offensive? First, *The New Yorker* style is exactly what Wolfe and the new journalism is not. Wolfe discovered new subjects and wrote about them in a flamboyant, original style, *his* style. He believed everything about *The New Yorker* writing was wrong. The passive-aggressive tone of its overediting had always limited the number of authors willing to submit stories. After John O'Hara, who wrote for *The New Yorker* for 38 years, the most used writers of fiction in its early days were Sally Benson (99 stories from 1929 to 1941) and Robert Coates. From 1935 to 1982 John Cheever sold the magazine 121 stories, but he always viewed his editor, William Maxwell, as a competitor who was trying to squelch him.

Wolfe called this committee-driven style the “whichy thicket,” by which he meant “all those clauses, appositions, amplifications, simplifications, qualifications, asides, and God knows what else hanging inside the poor old skeleton of one sentence like some kind of Spanish moss.” This was the product of the fact-checking, proof reading, style-controlling system Shawn had created to preserve—Wolfe would say embalm—*The New Yorker* style. One rebel in the system described it to Wolfe as a literary “auto-lobotomy.”

Further, Wolfe continued, the magazine was always overrated. He lists two dozen good writers who published in *Esquire* first, and another dozen who published first in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Twisting the blade, he reminds us that J. D. Salinger was published in *Esquire* before he came to *The New Yorker*. He concludes that for 40 years *The New Yorker* has paid top prices and achieved a strikingly low level of literary achievement. What the magazine does have is advertisements; it has the perfect audience for those who purchase Lincolns and Cadillacs.

I believe this assessment requires some comment. Shawn *had* made some important changes. He had committed the magazine to lengthy, aggressive, political and social reporting, publishing essays by James Baldwin, as well as Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring,” Thomas Whiteside’s examination of the risks of smoking, Richard Harris’s “The Real Voice” about Senator Estes Kefauver’s attack on drug industry pricing, along with a 50-page review by Dwight Macdonald of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, a seminal book on poverty in the U.S. and a catalyst for Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty.

At the time these long essays carried special weight because political essays and social advocacy had never been part of Harold Ross’s *The New Yorker*. Objectivity was assumed. Ross wanted humor pieces, profiles, and original reportage, but never essays or opinions. Shawn took the magazine from “never political” to “very political.” These new, long articles moved the magazine solidly to the political left, a position which it still holds. Shawn was changing the magazine in a major way.

For Wolfe, this was the literary establishment which he would challenge for the rest of his life, his own success being his ultimate victory. But the lines were drawn: Shawn would never allow anything resembling the “new journalism” into his magazine; its new home would be Clay Felker’s *New York*.

After Wolfe’s critique appeared, the *Herald Tribune* responded by giving space to sixteen writers who attacked Wolfe at length. His errors of fact were pointed out and the normally mild-mannered E. B. White, who refused to talk to Wolfe while he was doing his research, called Wolfe’s piece “contemptible” and “an act of particular savagery.” The *New Yorker* crowd hung tough: it took 22

years to make a change—after Shawn had turned 79 and the magazine had been purchased by Sam Newhouse in 1987. Shawn was finally replaced by Robert Gottlieb, who lasted only five years..

## Early Journalism

Wolfe seldom spoke about politics, but of course his Virginia upbringing and his college choice of Washington and Lee (he was accepted at Princeton but chose to be closer to home) suggests a conservative inclination. He is the grandson of a confederate rifleman. Wolfe is a conservative with a small “c,” that is, a person who believes that if society has something that is worth saving, that people should be slow to throw it all over satisfy the latest fashion, theory, or new, new thing. That is, society and art should work to conserve what is good.

After college Wolfe was disturbed that most East Coast intellectuals looked down on what they considered to be the culturally predominant attitudes of the 1950s—God, Country, and Tradition, all middle class values. In an October 2015 *Vanity Fair* piece, Michael Lewis reported that when Wolfe was writing his doctoral dissertation at Yale his dean wrote him:

I am sorry to say I anticipate that the thesis will not be recommended for the degree . . . The tone was not objective but was consistently slanted to disparage the writers under consideration and to present them in a bad light even when the evidence did not warrant this.

Three Yale professors could not believe that such a well-mannered young man would ridicule some of the biggest names in American fiction. His thesis was on the League of American Writers of the late 1930s, which promoted itself as an anti-fascist group, but was in fact run by the Communist Party. This was Wolfe’s second offense against the liberal establishment, in which he attacked their idols and institutions—all of them. In addition to attacking *The New Yorker*, he attacked their writers, academia, the entire New York City art movement, the liberals’ favorite architects (Bauhaus), their cultural icons, Black political hustlers (“Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers”), and Al Sharpton (model for the fictional activist Reverend Bacon in *Bonfire*).

In addition to politics, Wolfe discovered in his earliest days as a writer a Happiness Explosion flourishing all around him. He did not scold. He realized that there was enough money in the 1960s for optimistic but overlooked people—young and old—to burst out of their boxes, and Wolfe sought them out. The rebellion he saw did not appear to come from the traditional motives of

alienation, but simply because all sorts of strange people wanted to be happy winners for a change. It all began with Wolfe's essay for *Esquire* in 1963 with the preposterous title "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm). . ." The story was about the California automobile Kustom Kulture movement pioneered by George Barris and Ed Roth. But the subject was matched by Wolfe's lavish, over-the-top style, littering the page with capital letters, exclamation points, and italics, and itself inspired by the car-as-a-new-art-form movement he was writing about.

These were people alive with vitality—Ken Kesey's freaked-out 1939 International Harvester school bus and the Merry Pranksters ("The Bus," and "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test"), the La Jolla surfers, the Pump House gang, and the entire city of Las Vegas. One day, seated on the podium with Gunter Grass and Alan Ginsberg at a Princeton University symposium on the 1960s Wolfe realized that "kids" were tired of hearing learned voices tell them how miserable things are—Viet Nam, poverty, alienation and the rest. The bug had infiltrated the rich too. Wolfe recognized a longing on the part of the upper classes to capture the vitality of the lower orders; hence, the phenomenon of Baby Jane Holzer, and his story about her, "The Girl of the Year" (1964). Here was a Park Avenue socialite wedded to a real estate heir who had become an Andy Warhol starlet and a pop-culture sensation.

Wolfe's later support of George Bush (who awarded him a Medal of Arts and National Humanities Award) and his more recent support of Donald Trump came long after he had become a marked man for his politics. His frequent appearances on William Buckley's "Firing Line" (as far back as 1970) also counted against him. In 2004 he told *The Guardian* that "the liberal elite hasn't got a clue." But all this came later.

## **The Art World and the Practice of Decadence**

*The Painted Word* (1975) is a send up of Abstract Expressionism, the art of Jackson Pollock and the art theories of Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) and Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978), the art critic (after 1967) for *The New Yorker*. Theory, the written word, Wolfe argued, has too much power. (Morley Safer, long a host of CBS's "60 Minutes," would make the same point.) Thus, a person might not necessarily like a work of modern art unless a critic told him or her that he should like it. The art world had become one to which the public was no longer invited, Wolfe wrote, "the game is completed and the trophies distributed

long before the public knows what has happened . . . the beau hamlet, Cultureburg,” has already discovered and certified all you need to know. Back in 1963 Wolfe had recognized that art was becoming the religion of the most fashionable New Yorkers.<sup>1</sup> This was even more true a decade later.

Wolfe claims that today’s artist must surrender his own ideas to fit the theory if he expects to sell for real money. Of course he must also separate himself from the bourgeoisie, the abhorred middle class. Pop art, too, was always ironic, campy—“a literary-intellectual assertion of the banality, emptiness, silliness, vulgarity *et cetera* of American culture.” It operated from the same playbook. The real tragedy, Wolfe feels, is that the theorist and art critic are running the show—they are in charge—not the artist, not the natural audience for art—and the resultant artistic production has suffered in the process. “Artists,” Wolfe asserted hopefully, “can benefit from what I have written.”

Wolfe’s big nonfiction book, *The Right Stuff* (1979), was about the Project Mercury astronauts and the early phases of the NASA space program. The book glorified the culture of the test pilots, the ultimate boy’s club with its own set of unwritten laws. Drinking and driving fast cars and a cavalier treatment toward women coexisted with what Wolfe recognized and respected—“the right stuff,” required to daily risk one’s life. To Wolfe this, not the art world, was where boundaries were being pushed. Certainly this was not the kind of subject that the *literati* of the day (Norman Mailer, *The Executioners Song*; Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold*) were writing about. They wanted to tell us what was wrong with America; Wolfe was telling us what was right. Again he was moving against the grain of intellectual fashion.

Wolfe continued to send up the fashionableness of the art world throughout his career. His last novel, *Back to Blood* (2012), contains a delicious chapter called “The Superbowl of the Art World,” in which he takes on Miami’s December Art Basel—“a moment of money and male combat”—where the superrich come to compete, always accompanied by their female “A.A.’s” (art advisors). What does the A.A. in question here think of her client population?

They were a wriggling, slithering, writhing, squiggling, raveling, wrestling swarm of maggots rooting over and under one another in a heedless, literally headless, frenzy to get at the dead meat. She learned later that they were decephalized larvae. They *had* no heads. The frenzy was all they had. They didn’t have five senses, they had one, the urge and the urge was all they felt. They were utterly blind.

<sup>1</sup>Tom Wolfe, “The Saturday Route,” *New York*, November 17, 1963.

Just take a look at them! . . . the billionaires! They look like shoppers mobbed outside Macy's at midnight for the 40-percent-off After Christmas Sale . . . No they don't look that good.

## Fiction

Wolfe's first novel, *Bonfire*, published at the age of 57, was a blockbuster. As a late literary arrival, he was an outsider, out of the loop of established critics and a challenge to the fiction establishment. His novel was Dickensian in its size and its cast of eccentric characters, and he celebrated his fascination with many of the nooks and crannies of New York City—which he unapologetically identified as the greatest city of the twentieth century. It was also a city of classes and—as it always had been—deeply divided by ethnicity. The critic Terry Teachout, who had been following Wolfe from the beginning, identified him in his obituary as “a card-carrying member of the Grand Old Party of Reality.”

Wolfe wanted to invigorate fiction, a dying genre, and he did not believe film had to win. The problem was simple: “Dreiser, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner probably didn't have four years of college between them, but from 1950 on, the great majority of novelists came out of university writing programs . . . for the postwar realist the only valid experience was his own.” He continued, “We need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, hog-stomping, Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property.”

The novel was not dying of obsolescence but of anorexia. “It needs food. It needs novelists with huge appetites and mighty, unslaked thirsts for America, as she is right now.” Movies are team enterprises that can show you all sorts of wondrous things, but film is constrained by time and by its addiction to technology and, thus, can't explain anything. That's why people will come out of a movie and say, “it wasn't nearly as good as the novel.”

I liked *Bonfire* very much, but I had an unusual perspective in that I was a smaller version of the “master of the universe” bond salesman Wolfe writes about. I was selling corporate bonds at Lehman Brothers at that time and living on Park Avenue, so I saw some of the trading room and after hours drama Wolfe describes.

I felt and feel now, that Wolfe got everything essential right about Wall Street and the bond business, although he made some stunning errors of detail. For example, his protagonist, Sherman McCoy, was a salesman, and salesmen cannot make or confirm a trade—ever. Only a trader makes that commitment; the salesman simply relays the trader's decision, and traders don't usually talk



directly to customers. This was an important detail in the novel and Wolfe got it wrong.

About the same time Oliver Stone was working on *Wall Street* (released in 1987), a film with a similar theme. John McGinley, who had an important role in that movie, spent a couple of days sitting with me and a young salesman at Lehman so he could observe how bond trading desks operate. McGinley made himself familiar with the business and the movie was generally accurate in its small details.

Yet Wolfe's book shows far greater understanding because even while he missed some details, he got all the important stuff right.

The movie, on the other hand, was a typical Hollywood cliché. Its theme—insider trading—was totally irrelevant and was never part of Sherman McCoy's bond world. Insider trading flourishes in the world of stocks and Ivan Boesky, not bonds. Stock prices can change very quickly, but bond prices don't. Inside information has less value.

I am not a big fan of *A Man In Full* (1998), but it has the perfect title for the biography that will be written someday about Donald Trump. For Trump it was always the man, rather than specific policies, which overwhelms us. He IS the man in full. Ferguson is correct: he could easily be a character in one of Wolfe's novels. As Maggie Haberman has written in the *New York Times*, "Tom Wolfe envisioned a Donald Trump before the real one came into tabloid being."

I dropped everything else I was doing to read *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004). Wolfe's timing was perfect in identifying the still run away university arms race for nationally ranked athletic programs, the state-of-the-art work-out facilities, stadiums, pools, gymnasiums and the like—turning the university into a sort-of Four Seasons Resort and Spa. And, yes, he identifies folly that can accompany the excitement of super-stud athletes and feminine hardbodies, all seduced by the freedom and luxury of big time university life.

But the book annoyed me in many small ways. First, for a man in his 70s, Wolfe took too much interest in the fraternity cult of hard-body-hot-guys, "the pecs, abs, bulging delts, traps, lats, tri's, bi's, obliques . . . the great slabs of muscle . . . the latissimi dorsi fanning out like a giant stingray . . ." the pure fashion of pumping iron and sweating on treadmills. The same might be said for the tireless hooking up of his desperately partying young women. Enough already.

Likewise, the apparently healthy, intelligent Charlotte Simmons's inability to find any sympathetic girlfriends in her university rings false. There are thousands of young women with real academic interests, not rich enough to play in the Greek life, but who live together, enjoy schoolwork, and have boyfriends. Even Duke,

which is supposed to be the model for the fictional Dupont University, can't be that bad . . . for men or for women.

It didn't help that at the end of the book Charlotte makes the worst possible decision for her life, settling for being the much admired girlfriend of a star athlete. Discouraging nonetheless.

Wolfe's relationship with the university has never been made clear. Many of his own writings could have been front and center in college courses on nonfiction prose, the new journalism, culture history, and the arts. But literature professors never let this happen. So his audience was largely outside academia. It is sad that Tom Wolfe, one of the most prominent culture critics of the last sixty years, has been ignored by the academy.

But neither did Wolfe confront squarely the failings of the modern university, which are now quite clear. The subject of *Charlotte Simmons* is her generation, about hooking up, about sex and power, the big themes of his other three novels. Dupont University is merely the battleground.

Wolfe points out the obvious anti-intellectualism of most universities and the dumbing down of the curriculum (the tyranny of reduced expectations), but not their greater failings: financial greed, political brainwashing, intolerance for viewpoint diversity, belittling of religious practice, lack of respect for free speech, or collective cowardice. These are the real issues—the university problem is grown-ups, not kids. But this is not what *Charlotte Simmons* is about.

*Back to Blood* is something different. Its central characters, particularly Nestor Comacho, the Cuban-American police officer trying to do the right thing in a racial and politicized environment, are easily liked. Most importantly, the book's basic thesis—in a crumbling culture blood ties are all you have left—is an important issue today. His usual critics hated the book, but the review in the *Miami Herald*, which was not treated well in the novel, was refreshing. It concluded:

Plenty of outsiders have tried to capture the spectacle that is Miami, and some, like Joan Didion (*Miami*, 1987), have succeeded to an extent. But nobody has ever conveyed the intricacies of the city and its roiling cultural cauldron with such breathless, gaudy literary acrobatics as Wolfe does in *Back to Blood*.

## The Word

It is no surprise that Tom Wolfe matured as an artist. Dostoevsky wrote four great novels, and his last, *The Brothers Karamazov*, was his best. Now in his 80s, another long novel for Wolfe was out of the question. Instead he added a

concluding coda, a final, brief affirmation of what 80-plus years had taught him. He ended his career well.

*The Kingdom of Speech* (2016), a thoughtful but still amusing send-up of Darwin and his friends, along with Noam Chomsky's linguistic subtleties, is that coda. This was Wolfe's final attack on the idols of progressive liberals. It is also a backdoor statement of faith.

The book's thesis is simple. Evolution cannot explain man's unique gift of speech and abstract reasoning. Natural selection doesn't do it, and there is no evidence that it evolves. From what? But speech is not simply one of man's several unique attributes. It is the attribute of all attributes, it is 95 percent of what lifts man above the animals.

What's more, the efforts to fit speech into evolutionary theory, which have consumed careers of many of the greatest minds for 150 years has produced nothing. Nothing at all. And the experts know it. A scientific paper in 2014, authored by eight heavy-weight evolutionists in the fields of linguistics, biology, anthropology, and computer sciences, conclude that "the origins and evolution of our linguistic capacity remain as mysterious as ever." There has been an explosion of research on the problem, but "all it has produced was a colossal waste of time by some of the greatest minds in academia."

Wolfe takes us back to the 1830s and Thomas Malthus, Alfred Wallace, Sir Charles Lyell, and Charles Darwin, all but Wallace a class of British gentlemen "better known in the past as the landed gentry," who didn't have to *do* anything, who didn't have to work a day in their lives. Here is Wolfe's account of the early life of Charles Darwin.

Robert Darwin (Charles's father) paid for his son to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh (the boy dropped out), then sent him to Christ's College at Cambridge to become a clergyman (the boy dropped out), then had to settle for the boy dropping down to the bottom at Cambridge and barely getting a bachelor of arts degree (without honors or the vaguest idea of what to do with his life), and then begrudgingly paid for the boy to enjoy a five-year voyage of exploration, or sightseeing, aboard a boat named for a dog, His Majesty's Ship *Beagle*, to prepare him for a career in the field of—as far as Dr. Darwin could tell—nothing.

The trap that Darwin and his followers fell into, Wolfe tells us, was cosmogonism, the compulsion to find the ever elusive Theory of Everything, "an idea or narrative that reveals everything in the world to be part of a single and suddenly clear pattern." Cosmogony, which literally means "world birth," is

found in the first book of the Bible which begins before the creation of the material world, in which only a spirit or force called God exists. Unfortunately, most other cosmogonies lack an almighty creator. Rather, they tend to imagine an animal of some sort. Darwin was in love with the fact that his theory of evolution was a Theory of Everything.

Wolfe then introduces us to Noam Chomsky, who in the 1950s, when he was a graduate student, was able to harden the study of linguistics into a real science, not a mere social science, and became its leader. Wolfe reminds us that Chomsky did not exhaust himself with dangerous and unhealthy field work in primitive places. He knew only one language, English. Rather, Wolfe tells us, Chomsky “was relocating the field to Olympus. Moreover, he was giving linguists permission to stay air conditioned. They wouldn’t have to leave the building at all, ever again . . . no more trekking off to interview boneheads in stench-humid huts. And here on Olympus you had plumbing.” Here he claimed to discover a universal grammar, an inborn part of all of us.

This worked quite well until 2005 when a grimy field worker, Daniel Everett, published a 25,000-word article in *Current Anthropology*, explaining his field work with a tiny tribe, the Piraha, located in Brazil’s vast Amazon basin. Everett argued that there was no universal grammar, and that this tribe’s grammar came from their culture, not from any preexisting mental template, which was central to Chomsky’s theory. MIT’s linguistics department went ballistic over this assertion, and the battle was joined. Nine years later the struggle was concluded: speech is not something that had evolved in the way the motor-skills of our hands or our hairless body had evolved. Speech is man-made, and it explains our power over all other creatures in a way evolution all by itself can’t begin to. It is an artifact; it is made by man.

Wolfe also realizes that man does not need a Theory of Everything to be hopeful. Never mind waiting for that heavenly pie in the sky. Wolfe concludes, “[People] will believe whatever is convincing. Jesus offered great hope. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The meek shall inherit the earth and ascend to the right hand of God. This from the Sermon on the Mount, is the most radical social and political doctrine ever promulgated.”

William Buckley would have been pleasantly amused, and not at all surprised by Wolfe’s conclusion. Wolfe tells us that speech may soon be recognized as the Fourth Kingdom of Earth, following animal, vegetable and mineral. “To say that animals evolved into man is like saying that Carrara marble evolved into Michelangelo’s *David*.”

## A Last Word—Roots

It is possible to trace Wolfe's literary tradition back to the time of Savonarola's original bonfire of the vanities, his book burning in 1497. Here I would turn to Savonarola's Dutch contemporary, Desiderius Erasmus. What could be a more thoroughgoing portrayal of the self-glorifying, self-infatuated nature of the human ego than Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*? Folly's praise of herself there shows clearly the emptiness of human ambition and the foolish striving for preeminence.

Yet Erasmus recognized that society will lose much of its energy and vibrance without this exuberance, and Wolfe knows this too. He is not a puritan. As Folly's sister, self-love, announces: "He who does not please himself effects little." Wolfe's central figures are dynamos of energy. They can be seriously misguided, or like Nestor Comacho, quite heroic.

The Greeks had the same idea. Their hero is a man who by his extraordinary career has pushed back the horizons of what is possible for humanity. He is not a flawless man, but his flaws are inseparable from the virtues which enable him to become a hero.

Sound familiar?