

Note from the Editor . . .



Tom Wolfe. Norman Mailer. Two apostles of the New Journalism. And iconoclasts, challenging the conventions of both literature and journalism. As literary journalism does and must, because as Wolfe noted, the focus is on subcultures—subcultures often ignored, unobserved, undefined by both the *salon litterateur* and the *salon journaliste*. To his credit, Wolfe advocated for acknowledging and exploring the cultural Other, thus challenging dominant conventions blind or indifferent to its existence. And so the likes of Wolfe and Mailer were elevated, even deified, as new icons. Which was the problem.

Because like all icons, they too must be challenged. In such a deification there was a reason why the iconoclasts of the eighth century threw down the icons. To see if what we venerate will break, or continue to be worthy of our veneration. Or something in between, as in the collective case of Wolfe/Mailer.

That's what struck me as I read Roberta S. Maguire's account of Albert Murray, and how he challenged Wolfe/Mailer during the period of the New Journalism, as well as those who have attempted to turn journalism into a social science (please see page 9). He took Wolfe and Mailer down a peg or two because they could not begin to understand the African American experience, despite the fact that they wrote and dwelt on it, as Mailer did, for example, in his essay "The White Negro." And while Wolfe could dress up in his refined and elegant white plantation suits, his portrayals of blacks were hardly refined and insightful portraits. Rather, they were cardboard cutouts: objectified, inaccessible. And perhaps because of the white plantation suits, Wolfe inadvertently comes across as a bit of a cardboard cutout, too. Paradoxically, he becomes a caricature of the "status details" he so profoundly called for in journalism.

Nor were the social scientists of journalism any better. The result so often was to objectify, to alienate at a distance from what subjectivity perceives. What ensued was a picture of a people who could only be downtrodden, ghettoized. But what about those who weren't, and who were living vital, active lives in vital, active black communities?

Murray provided, then, an important corrective in challenging such icons, reminding us that our subjective interpretations are, after all, subjective, implying our human limitations. Or, as James Agee said in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "George Gudger is a man. . . . I know him only so far as I know him . . . and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is." That, of course, is also the virtue of an acknowledged subjectivity that has the prescience *to understand its own limitations* (true, Mailer gets better marks in this regard, except that his outsized ego can blind him to the Other), and why the

result then becomes a truer objectivity than that of the spurious “objective” journalism of twentieth-century fame. That was the strength of Murray’s insights into the limitations of what had become revered, journalism as social science, and those who had become revered, Wolfe and Mailer. To be sure, there have been important contributions—the “something in between.” But at the same time human endeavor is inevitably fallible.

There is an additional paradox in all of this, a paradox both maddening and illuminating that can only tease us with the possibilities: For all the limitations of our subjectivities, our subjective engagement with the aesthetics of experience offers one of the more promising ways for conveying the complexities of that very same isolating and objectifying science. This is what our colleagues Mateus Yuri Passos, Érica Masiero Nering, and Juliano Mauricio de Carvalho explore in their article on “opening up” the “black box” of science (page 27). In doing so, they make an important contribution by recovering for our consideration the observations of the French sociologist-of-science Bruno Latour. It was Latour who observed twenty-three years ago, before the present groundswell of scholarship in the study of literary journalism, that the genre provides one indispensable form for exposing what so often seems to be the impenetrability of science to the understanding of the lay reader. This is because when we follow via the aesthetics of experience the scientist as he makes his rounds, we imaginatively participate with him in his discoveries, his triumphs, and his failures. Imagine this: It’s 1904 and Einstein sneezes, interrupting himself as he pours a glass of Port wine for his old mother, Pauline, in the dining car of the train rushing between Berlin and Zurich. Opening his eyes, post-sneeze, he catches sight of a raven in flight. Now comes his *Eureka!* moment because on observing the raven recede across the sky he detects at the same moment the swollen Rhine River which he knows is moving at flood stage in the opposite direction of the train. Except that because his motion is south-bound the river doesn’t seem to be moving at all as it flows north. Which is disorienting. Dimly he recalls his earlier departure from the seeming solidity and centrality of the Potsdamer Platz where the crossroads of Europe converged (at least in 1904), and now how it’s a distant world slipping farther away. The world is in constant motion as he starts to pour the wine again while his mother says, “*Danke, Bertie,*” squeezing his other hand affectionately as if he were still a little boy. So that what emerges as he responds absentmindedly, “*Bitte, Mama,*” with his thoughts elsewhere, is his Special Theory of Relativity (that even as we move, the world around us moves independent of our own motion, because there is no fixed, unmoving Potsdamer Platz of the universe). Now we can begin to prise open the black box of science, making us imaginative participants in his moment of recognition (disclaimer: insofar as I know, none of this ever happened, and is only based on my own dim recollections of reading, however imperfectly, the theory many years ago).

This brings us back to our paradox, in that we lay people can engage science in a meaningful way subject to the writer's subjectivity selecting from the aesthetics of experience—the sneeze, pouring the glass of Port, perhaps the silhouette of Burg Maus on its promontory slipping silently past us. In other words, in the attempt to convey the “absolutes” of science we are, paradoxically, reduced to doing so subjectively—by means of the inherently subjective medium of language. This is what physicist Niels Bohr had in mind when he engaged in a contrarian if good-natured discussion with his friend Einstein on the nature of physics and the universe. When the latter said, “God does not play dice with the universe,” Bohr is reported to have responded, “Einstein, stop *telling* God what to do!” Of course, when Einstein tells God what to do, he is also telling himself what he wishes to believe. This recalls in turn what Bohr's protégé Werner Heisenberg said, “What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of *questioning*.” Bohr had the last word on the matter when he simply noted that physics “concerns what we *say* about Nature,” and not, he makes clear, what nature *is*. *To tell, to question, to say*. Thus we detect the intrusive nature and filter and other implications of language. Conveying science depends on the writer's selection of the details of the aesthetics of experience and not on science alone, despite the desperate efforts of some in science to seek the safety of their arguments in objectified and alienated isolation by pretending that language is transparent. Which is why I've never understood the social scientific disposition to measure the language of journalism with numbers. Numbers are themselves language and not somehow separate from it. What we end up with is language as a reflection measuring language as a reflection in what reminds me of distorting mirrors in a funhouse reflecting off each other, each reflection, of course, a further distortion of some original now lost in an abstract ether impenetrable to a layperson. Add two tablespoons of smoke, stir, and we can take refuge in our own mystification.

Thus the virtues—and limitations—of subjectivity, of one person explaining his or her relations to another and the world, which, if it's not evident by now, bears an uncanny resemblance to Einstein's theory. Modest, but objectively credible because it makes no claims to *omniscience*. Hence, the paradox.

These were some of my thoughts as I read the examination by our Brazilian colleagues. And it makes me wonder why creative writing and journalism programs haven't rushed to develop programs that apply literary journalism to understanding science, if for no other reason than as a societal obligation to open up the “black box” of science.

Challenging the icons of the New Journalism and opening the black box of science are a couple of the articles you will find in this issue. Amy Snow Landa provides an uncanny echo of Latour, Passos, *et al.*, when she calls for using texts of literary journalism to engage in discussions of

medical bioethics (page 47). Once again we see different worlds, subcultures, the cultural Other, one of medical science and the other of ethics, seeking dialogue by means, in this case, of a literary journalism. Moreover, Pablo Calvi introduces many of us to the modern Latin American tradition of the *testimonio* (page 63). While he notes that it bears a resemblance to the Anglo American New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and was roughly contemporaneous, nonetheless it emerged for very different reasons. Thus, Calvi contributes to our comparative understanding of the genre. Finally, our former president of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, David Abrahamson, provides some parting thoughts on what the exploration of literary journalism has meant for him as a teacher in recent years (page 87). He notes how he had to become a student again, discovering that he had to dispense with some of the time-honored traditions of professional journalism in order to embrace older, even more time-honored narrative traditions dating back at least to classical Greece. Indeed, back to the storyteller in her prehistory cave reciting—her voice rising then lowering ominously around the embers of the dying fire—the story of the tribe's travail since Eden. Abrahamson's is a reminder that sooner or later we must all reexamine and challenge our assumptions.

To be iconoclasts, in other words. To see if what we venerate will break, or continue to be worthy of our veneration. Or something in between.

— *John C. Hartsock*

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