

Mark Llewellyn offers what might be considered a narrow definition of *neo-Victorian*: works that are set in the Victorian period or works that rewrite narratives from the period.¹ By this definition, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, by Tom Wolfe, fails to meet the criteria: the novel is set in the 1980s, and it does not reimagine any particular nineteenth-century narrative. Elsewhere, Llewellyn, writing with Ann Heilmann, suggests a more copious definition: “the ‘neo-Victorian’ is more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century.”² Jessica Cox argues that, early on, the neo-Victorian canon seemed to resist “the inclusion of popular fiction”—and Wolfe’s novel was undeniably popular.³ Eventually, this canon grew more porous, incorporating “works that self-consciously engage the nineteenth century.” This certainly describes *Bonfire*, a novel that supports, to some extent, Christine L. Krueger’s assertion that “we are in many respects post-Victorians.”⁴ In planning his first work of fiction, after a long and prolific career as a journalist, Wolfe decided to compose a Victorian novel—as if he were a nineteenth-century writer who happened to live in Manhattan in the 1980s. Before the emergence of neo-Victorian studies, in other words, Wolfe wrote a new Victorian novel.

Wolfe knew what he was doing. He was a journalist, not a scholar, although he earned a PhD in American Studies at Yale University in the 1950s. At least since W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley identified “The Intentional Fallacy,” critics have been

¹ Llewellyn, “What Is Neo-Victorian Studies,” 165.

² Heilmann and Llewellyn, 4.

³ Jessica Cox, “Canonization, Colonization, and the Rise of Neo-Victorianism,” *English* 66, no. 253 (Summer 2017): 104.

⁴ Krueger, *Functions of Victorian Culture*, xi.

wary of attributing too much to an author's supposed goals.⁵ Nevertheless, Wolfe was especially voluble on the subject of his intentions for *Bonfire*, and the evidence suggests that he fulfilled his aims. Brian Abel Ragen, in a book on the author, summarizes those aims: "Wolfe had for many years considered writing a novel, and the sort of novel he wanted to write was clear. His models were the broad, panoramic nineteenth[-]century novels that seemed to capture a whole society, novels like William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. His subject was also clear: New York."⁶ In an interview with *New York* magazine a few months after the novel was published, Wolfe explained, "I wanted to do a big book about the city of New York in the same way my idols, Balzac and Zola, had done big books about the city of Paris."⁷ Here is Wolfe again: "As I saw it, such a book should be a novel of the city, in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written novels of *Paris* and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels of *London*, with the city always in the foreground, exerting its relentless pressure on the souls of its inhabitants."⁸ The implication here is that New York was the successor to the great European cities of the nineteenth century; in order to write the definitive New York novel, therefore, an author must embrace a nineteenth-century form. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Sherman McCoy, during the fateful drive through the Bronx, perceives this very connection: "There it was, the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the irresistible destination of all those who insist on being *where things are happening*—and he was among the victors!

⁵ Wimsatt, Jr. and Beardsley, *The Intentional Fallacy*, 468–488.

⁶ Ragen, *Tom Wolfe: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 30.

⁷ Scura, *Conversations with Tom Wolfe*, 257

⁸ Wolfe.

He lived on Park Avenue, the street of dreams! He worked on Wall Street, fifty floors up, for the legendary Pierce & Pierce, overlooking the world!”⁹

If Wolfe had decided to write a new nineteenth-century novel set in New York City, what were his sources? James F. Smith proposes not a British novelist but rather the American writer Theodore Dreiser, especially his *Sister Carrie*, first published in 1900.¹⁰ In a perceptive piece published a little more than five years after *The Bonfire of the Vanities* appeared in volume form, Terry Teachout quotes Henry James on the subject of the novelist Anthony Trollope: “Life is vulgar, but we didn’t know how vulgar it is till we see it set down in his pages.” It is a perfect formula for Wolfe’s mode in *Bonfire*: the book allows its readers to see the vulgarity, the vanity of New York in the 1980s.

Wolfe himself identified other potential sources in a 1987 interview in (the not incidentally named) *Vanity Fair*: Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Charles Dickens. But it is Thackeray who perhaps looms largest in Wolfe’s conception of his first work of fiction. Its title refers to the historical bonfire of the vanities in fifteenth-century Italy as well as to Thackeray’s breakthrough publication, *Vanity Fair*, which appeared in monthly shilling numbers, from 1847 to 1848. Fellow novelist Thomas McGuane called Wolfe “our Thackeray”; according to Joseph Epstein, the American Thackeray also wrote a novel without a hero.¹¹ It should be recalled that Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* bore the subtitle *A Novel without a Hero* when it was published in volume form, and this subtitle suits Wolfe’s book with its array of anti-heroes: Sherman McCoy, the

⁹ Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, page 78

¹⁰ Smith, “Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire*,” 43–50.

¹¹ Scura, *Conversations with Tom Wolfe*, 202; Epstein, “Tom Wolfe’s *Vanities*”

philanderer; Lawrence Kramer, the lustful and vaguely corrupt prosecutor; and Peter Fallow, the dissolute journalist. But it is not just the formal qualities of *Vanity Fair* that find themselves in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*; *Bonfire* is itself Thackerayan. As one of Thackeray's characters says, "Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having!"¹² This sentence could appear on the dust jacket of Wolfe's novel, in which characters vainly pursue money, wealth, power, and sex; the object, once attained, is rarely worth the trouble.

Thus taking inspiration from Balzac and Zola, Dickens and Thackeray, Wolfe decided to write a new nineteenth-century novel set in New York City. It is worth pausing over what the author imagined this might entail. When he envisioned a nineteenth-century novel, it seems that he had a particular *kind* of novel in mind, one that thrived in the middle of the century: the long, complex, multiplot narrative. According to Franco Moretti's research, the form's heyday was 1846 to 1872, although there are earlier and later examples.¹³ Peter K. Garrett, in *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form*, argues that "[t]he most important possibility and primary function of multiplot narrative is clearly inclusiveness."¹⁴ This is very much Wolfe's mode in *Bonfire*. In an article in *Harper's Magazine*, he describes the process as "cramming as much of New York City between covers as you could."¹⁵ Inclusiveness, heterogeneity, and a multiple rather than a single narrative would be key features in Wolfe's brand of neo-Victorianism.

¹² Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, PAGE 607.

¹³ Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 32.

¹⁴ *Victorian Multiplot Novel*, 2.

¹⁵ Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," 45.

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