

# Profiling New York the British way

by Matthew Guice

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## **The Bonfire of the Vanities**

by Tom Wolfe

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1987  
690 pages, hardbound, \$19.95.

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Just as the blurbs on the cover and quotes from critics trumpet this as the Establishment-approved first novel of a Yale American Studies graduate who has served his time in trendy journalism, so the style and content make it clear that the author was intent on depicting for a British intelligence audience the current state of affairs in America's largest city.

In plotline, this novel inverts Richard Wright's *A Native Son*. Sherman McCoy is a rich White Anglo-Saxon Protestant bond salesman in his 30s who imagines himself "a master of the universe." He lives on Park Avenue with his social climbing wife and their daughter, who attends "the best" private school, and he is having an affair with the sexy young wife of an aging Jewish millionaire. One day, by the misadventure of taking a wrong turn at the Triboro Bridge, he finds himself, his mistress, and his Mercedes in the wilds of the Bronx, and then partially responsible for a hit-and-run accident that results in the death of the victim, a young black man, who was trying to rob them. As the case is picked up by a grasping black minister, then a drunken British reporter, then by a power-hungry Jewish District Attorney and his horny assistant, the story turns into "A Black Honors Student Struck Down in His Prime by an Uncaring Park Avenue Socialite Millionaire." Like Wright's hero, Bigger Thomas, Sherman McCoy moves with increasing horror through this nightmare, his life and wealth stripped slowly from him, to finally achieve a blissful elevation as he meets his fate. Sherman's "satori" comes when he recognizes the addictive joy of raw violence, which insight turns him into a "professional defendant," rather the opposite of Bigger Thomas, who has to remove himself from a violent world to find internal peace, awaiting his death.

In execution, this novel is Dickensian in too many ways to ignore. As with Charles Dickens, much of the humor, outside of dialogue, stems from the funny names of the char-

acters; Reggy Bacon is the name of the "Reverend Chickenwings" with palm outstretched to the white elite he denounced; Peter Fallow is the perpetually hungover British journalist; Caroline Heftshank is one of his intimates in the British colony; Nunnally Voyd is a homosexual novelist; Mrs. Bavardage (French for "chattering" or "gossiping") is a socialite hostess; Curry, Goad, and Pesterall are a Wall Street law firm, etc. As with Dickens, the sub-plots weave around the central plot with glittering abandon. As with Dickens, the upper classes stroll from dinner party to country club without much noticing the misery of the lower classes, but the class struggle is evident everywhere.

One suspects that, as with Dickens, the author was paid by the word. A purposeful editor could have reduced this to 400 pages simply by deleting the space spent in translating the vernacular dialogue of lower class characters into proper ("British") English or commenting on their errors of pronunciation, grammar, or syntax.

## **Dickens versus Poe**

But there is another parallel to Dickens. Tom Wolfe does not understand Edgar Allan Poe, but Poe would have understood Wolfe far more than Wolfe would find comfortable. A person versed in Poe's method can predict everything Tom Wolfe will write after the first few chapters, as Poe predicted with Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*. In the *Bonfire of the Vanities* there is a scene at a dinner party, however, where Wolfe gives away the game. The "Nobel short listed" British poet, Aubrey Buffing, himself dying of AIDS, speaks to the assembled Park Avenue elite about why America deserves an epic poem. After bemoaning the lack of "vitality" in modern poets, and praising Poe, he shocks his listeners into silence by recounting the story of "The Masque of the Red Death." He ends this tale by saying, " 'Now, the exquisite part of the story is that somehow the guests have known all along what awaits them in this [seventh] room, and yet they are drawn irresistibly toward it, because the excitement is so intense and the pleasure is so unbridled and the gowns and the food and the drink and the flesh are so sumptuous—and that is all they have. Families, homes, children, the great chain of being, the eternal tide of chromosomes mean nothing to them any longer. They are bound together, and they whirl about one another, endlessly, particles in a doomed atom—and what else could the Red Death be but some sort of final stimulation, the *ne plus ultra*? So Poe was kind enough to write the ending [of the epic about America] for us more than a hundred years ago.' "

This certainly is not Poe speaking, whose story explains the behavior of oligarchies at the culmination of crises brought on by their own rejection of natural law, nor is it merely a character in a novel exposing his own flaws by a flawed interpretation of a famous work of art. This is Wolfe himself speaking, identifying himself with that elite and seeking to universalize the moral beyond its author's intent as a means

of excusing him and his kind from changing their behavior.

What is the basis of that behavior? The same as identified by the British intelligence profiling methods Wolfe utilizes in this novel. All characters' actions can be explained by Hobbesian—bestial—drives. Sex, money, family, power, prestige, avoidance of pain, or the occasional death-wish motivates them all into every action, every public sortie or utterance, however silly or whatever the outcome. Each character's frame of reference for the sex, money, etc. is defined by his or her ethnic or racial background. It is a world of each against all, only tempered by a tattered social contract and fast-fading traditions, and it is all coming undone at the seams.

No character is allowed to think of the future or base actions on a desire to leave something behind after this social structure topples. Were such a tendency to prevail among novelists, the only value books would have is for lighting primitive fires among the ruins in an illiterate future New York City. If the faction of Poe prevails, who would read Tom Wolfe?

## Felix Warburg's magic and the Kirkland case

by Katherine Kanter

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### Georges Balanchine, Ballet Master

by Richard Buckle

Hamish Hamilton, London, 1988

409 pages, with index, hardbound, £20.

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Mr. Buckle, a great admirer of the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, and author of a new biography of the Russian choreographer Georges Balanchine, is more than a perfervid Russophile—he is a conscious, witting part of the movement to hand over Western art, lock, stock, and barrel, to the Russians. I am led to say this, not only because I find it disgusting that any educated European should make himself into an apologist for what Sergei Diaghilev, a pedophile and one of the most depraved men of the century, has done to us in the West but also, because Mr. Buckle has a truly Soviet attitude toward historical facts. In the course of his 400 pages on Georges Balanchine, the Russian who founded the New York City Ballet, he mentions every person whom Georges Balanchine ever had anything to do with, except one.

That person is Miss Gelsey Kirkland, who studied at

Balanchine's school in New York, and was promoted by the choreographer himself to the rank of ballerina. In 1986, Miss Kirkland wrote an autobiography, *Dancing on my Grave*, which became a bestseller in the United States and was then republished in England, in Italy, and in Denmark, the harshest attack on Georges Balanchine ever put into print. She recalled that it was Balanchine himself who first introduced her to drugs, pressing amphetamines into her hand before her appearance in Leningrad, telling her they were just "headache pills." She stated that articles on Schiller's Aesthetics by Mrs. Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the wife of the controversial American politician Lyndon LaRouche, had pushed her to break with the drug world. Miss Kirkland, it now appears, has been "blacklisted" by the music mafia.

That Mr. Buckle does not see fit to include any of the above sticky facts, into his monumental work, smacks of nothing so much as the way Soviet historiographers write out of history undesirable persons and processes.

Not surprising, considering the kind of heavyweights who thrust Balanchine to the top, and it is worth wading your way through Mr. Buckle's work to get the full story: namely the banker Felix Warburg and his son, Edward; the economist and financier John Maynard Keynes; and the banker Nelson Rockefeller. Originally a Venetian family called "del Banco," the Warburgs, based in Hamburg and New York, led the Wall Street gang who backed the Nazi Party openly in 1920s and 1930s, less openly thereafter. They were the people who steered the pen when the *New York Times* spoke of the "imaginative leadership of Mr. Hitler," the people who financed the study of eugenics and race science in the United States. Keynes too, in his Introduction to the *General Theory* (1936), is unambiguously positive about the Hitler experiment—from an economic standpoint, of course.

As for the Rockefellers, a junior partner to the Warburg operation, Mr. Charles Higham, in *Trading with the Enemy*, has documented their dealings with South American oil during World War II; a good deal of Rockefeller oil seems to have found its way into the wrong hands.

Could Balanchine have been expected to know all that when, as a starry-eyed young man, he disembarked in New York in 1933, his ticket had been paid and his visa assured, as Lincoln Kirstein assures us, "by the magic of Felix Warburg"? The answer is, yes, he knew everything. Balanchine himself belonged to the "gods of Olympus."

Balanchine, who started his career under the Bolsheviks guided by Goleizovsky's "erotic gymnastics," was personally committed to destroying beauty, like his mentor and controller Igor Stravinsky. While Stravinsky, following Wagner, ignored tonality, ignored the major/minor relation, Balanchine ignored *effacé/croisé*. Without the major/minor relation, there is no such thing as real dissonance or modulation: Everything sounds like everything else. In Balanchine, that meant replacing the beautiful, dissymmetric *épaulement*, by the perfectly symmetric rectangular figure.