THE WORLD ACCORDING TO KISSINGER
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The literary establishment has worked hard to dismiss Tom Wolfe’s novels. John Updike’s calculated put-down—that Wolfe’s fiction amounts to “entertainment, not literature, even literature in a modest aspirant form”—represents the intellectuals’ consensus, but is more revealing than intended. Literature, apparently, is not supposed to be fun: dullness and seriousness may not be identical but there is a strong and necessary correlation.

Wolfe’s four novels are nothing if not entertaining—so much so that even friendly reviewers tend to overlook their underlying seriousness. Wolfe is often given credit for creating the Reverend Reginald Bacon in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), published six weeks before Al Sharpton rocketed to infamy in the Tawana Brawley hoax. But few are willing to take the logical next step and admit that the ability to foresee human behavior—the ever-unfulfilled dream of the social sciences—presupposes a sound understanding of human nature. To concede that would be to accept an account of human nature that too often offends contemporary sensibilities.

Wolfe tells unwelcome truths about race, multiculturalism, modern art, masculinity, and much else. At least these get noticed. His heterodox insights on women have been entirely ignored, unseen behind the repeated insistence that he is unable “to write sensibly or sensitively about female characters”—thus Stephen Abell, representatively, in the *Times Literary Supplement*. “Wolfe’s women are mostly ciphers in short skirts, who adore male attention,” Abell continues, not noticing the tension between the two halves of his formulation. Perhaps Wolfe’s depiction of women is yet another instance of his trying to tell us something we don’t want to hear.

**Only the Best**

WILLIAM CROOKE AND SIR HERBERT RISLEY, two 19th-century English social scientists, coined the term “hypergamy” to describe their observations of inter-caste marriage in India. Women, they found, married up but never down. Crooke and Risley concluded (or assumed) that hypergamy’s root (in India, at least) is the male insistence on preserving the status of the patrimonial line. A decade ago, political theorist F. Roger Devlin revived the term and gave it a new twist. Far from being unique to India, hypergamy is in Devlin’s account universal and, what’s more, driven by female, not male, desires. “[W]omen,” he wrote, “have simple tastes in the manner of Oscar Wilde: They are always satisfied with the best.”

When properly channeled, hypergamy can be individually and socially beneficial. It encourages young ladies to become worthy of a worthy man, and vice versa. Yet off the leash, it spurs women in unhappy and self-indulgent directions.

This truth our culture cannot abide. That there are vices characteristic of men and not widely shared by women (violence, crudeness, skirt-chasing) is not merely acknowledged but rubbed in our faces. But any assertion of the converse is met with incomprehension, denial, and sometimes persecution. The writings of Tom Wolfe—who figured all this out on his own—are just about the only mainstream cultural product of the last 50 years to present an alternative view. Everyone missed it because Wolfe has consistently declined to be explicit, partly out of the good storyteller’s dictum to show rather than tell, perhaps also to protect himself from undue blowback. But it’s there, between the lines, and has been almost from the beginning of Wolfe’s career.

Consider the 1965 essay “The Woman Who Has Everything.” Helene is a rich young divorcée of 25. (Today she would be closer to
works by tom wolfe
discussed in this essay:

"the woman who has everything," in the kandy-colored tangerine-flake streamline baby. farrar, straus & giroux, 384 pages, $16 (paper)

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i am charlotte simmons. farrar, straus & giroux, 688 pages, $28.95 (cloth), $20 (paper)

back to blood. little, brown and company, 720 pages, $18 (paper)

40. at 25 our metro-gals haven’t even begun to think about, much less actually married, their “starter husband.” helene has divorced kurt because...well, for no discernable reason, although full custody of her son and “a great deal of alimony” no doubt helped smooth the passage. she is desperate to find another husband and to that end is fixed up with a great many men, all of whom she finds wanting for one trivial failing or another. not that she doesn’t sleep with them anyway. this detail wolfe slips in unobtrusively, so as not to shock the beehived matrons reading a broadsheet sunday supplement in 1965. but eventually her lovers display some weakness. like the “cotton exchange” lawyer wearing, to that picnic in central park, a shirt so obviously out-of-the-box brand new and bought for the occasion that the sleeve creases were still showing. or pierre wending his watch before climbing into the sack. no woman could possibly tolerate that. so out go cotton exchange and pierre.

yet helene cannot shake the impression made on her by porfrio rubirosa. rubirosa is a man of slight accomplishment, nominally a “diplomat” in service to dominican tyrant rafael trujillo, as well as an amateur race car driver with a knack for not finishing. his true profession was womanizing, and he was very, very good at it. he married five times: once to trujillo’s daughter, twice to actresses, and twice to heiresses. that’s not counting a lengthy string of boldface-name bedmates. helene sees rubirosa at a party after a year’s absence. wolfe leaves ambiguous the nature of their relationship, though perhaps the phrase “absolutely marvelous hot labial looks” is meant as a clue. rubirosa trowels on his legendary charm, and

helene knows he means it because he doesn’t mean it. is that too crazy? you are a woman, he is a man. he would break up this stupid cotton exchange terrier universe just to love you. well, he didn’t, but he would. does one know what helene means?

surely part of what she means is that, after a taste of rubirosa, cotton exchange and pierre and bowl after bowl of oatmeal others just aren’t going to cut it.

supply and demand

the sexual revolution, universally assumed to be a boon for randy men, has turned out to be in at least one respect much more conducive to satisfying women’s preferences than men’s. men may have started it, or at least egged it on, hoping that with the old restraints gone, they would be free to indulge. but they forgot or never understood a fundamental law of nature: throughout the animal kingdom—up to and including homo sapiens—males merely display; females choose. when a woman’s choice is completely free of all social, legal, familial, and religious boundaries, she prefers to hold out for “the best.” hence a constrained-supply problem arises.

four years ago, a university of north carolina co-ed lamented to the new york times that the sex imbalance on college campuses (nationally, 43% male, 57% female as of fall 2014) is even worse for girls than it looks. “out of that 40 percent, there are maybe 20 percent that we would consider, and out of those 20, 10 have girlfriends, so all the girls are fighting over that other 10 percent.”

probably she was being either polite or self-congratulatory by stretching her eligibil-
stellar: a Middle
Christian and the destruction of an ancient
patrimony that has been a vital
link to the very birth of Christianity.

The Concept, Time, and Discourse
Alexandre Kojève,
193 pp., $19,
at the abortion
debate, Sterrett,
author of book, A
Second, reveals
the unreason-
able, ard
against abor-
tion even in the difficult circumstances.

Sterrett takes as the title of
his book a word meaning the willingness
and capacity we have of being able to
learn something we did not
know, which has not the same connota-
tion as “learning,” which is what happens
to us when we are taught something.
than praising the former. Yet he is careful to do both. He extolls womanly virtue perhaps most clearly in The Right Stuff (1979), his non-fiction account of the early space program. Its first chapter—entitled “The Angels”—is a paean to the fortitude and supportiveness of the astronauts’ wives. Nor does Wolfe shrink from letting us know that too many of their husbands, whose courage and patriotism he palpably admires, rewarded that loyalty with rampant infidelity.

Martha, too, is a sympathetic figure—and not merely because Charlie chuckled her in late middle age for a much younger model. Martha had been a devoted wife and a good mother. She also appears to be one of only two characters in the book not motivated by pecuniary or purely personal considerations. Granted, such magnanimity may come easily from letting us know that too many of their husbands, whose courage and patriotism he palpably admires, rewarded that loyalty with rampant infidelity.

Yet Martha is not—quite—an angel. Wolfe hints that she was not entirely blameless in the dissolution of her marriage: she somewhat knowingly let herself go and stopped exerting much effort to maintain her husband’s affections. Post-divorce, her solution to superfluity is to attach herself to a man she doesn’t love, or even respect, because his mere presence renders her visible again to women for whom the only thing more pathetic than a woman without a man is a woman who had one, lost him, and can’t get another. Martha must get herself through the ordeal of sex with Ray Peepgass by imagining not just Charlie, but Charlie as he was 33 years prior: a college football superstar whose “massive muscular body...had scarcely an extra ounce on it back then.”

Martha was sufficiently well brought up to have felt embarrassment over “going all the way” with Charlie on their first date. She was also honest enough to admit, if only to herself, her own culpability:

[No matter what Martha Starling’s better self thought of what she had done,]

it also presses university administrators to make campus sexual assault tribunals even more unfair to males than they already are. The accused—and they are always males—are denied an attorney; can’t confront accusers, or sometimes even learn who they are; and aren’t allowed to present exculpatory evidence. Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz recently said of his university’s policy that it “was written by people who think sexual assault is so heinous a crime that even innocence is not a defense.” The much ridiculed Antioch College code from the early 1990s, which required “affirmative consent” for every minute act—“May I touch your left breast?” “May I touch your right breast?” and so on, until she bolts in disgust—is now state law in California. Late last year, an iron triangle of journalists, activists, and left-wing bloggers whipped the nation into a froth over a campus gang-rape story so seec-through preposterous it’s a wonder it took a whole ten days to self-destruct. Our ruling elites are dumber than the Bourbons: they’ve learned nothing, remember nothing, and will believe anything.

Cautionary Tales

The disgraceful sexual marketplace that roils today’s campus is the theme of I Am Charlotte Simmons (2004), a novel that provoked gales of ill-natured, and not entirely harmless, ridicule. This courtly, white-suited old man goes back to school 50 years after his own graduation and is shocked—shocked—to find students drinking and having sex! Wolfe’s attackers reacted with the customary reflex of a Clinton caught red-handed: deny, deny, deny. Then, in the next breath, insist that the awful spectacle you’ve just witnessed is old news. And not really all that bad. Normal, even. Admireable! Kids blowing off steam! Sowing wild oats before they hunker down for demanding jobs at Goldman, McKinsey, Skadden, or some startup in the Valley.

A raft of non-fiction books—A Return to Modesty by Wendy Shalit (1999), Unprotected by Miriam Grossman (2006), Unhooked by Laura Sessions Stepp (2007), Hooked by Joe McIlhaney (2008), and many others—have made the empirical case against the ravages of today’s youthful bacchanalia. But only Wolfe has taken us inside the skulls of the participants, leading to his greatest creation to date, a character as fully realized as, say, Emma Bovary (whom, not coincidentally, Wolfe uses as a plot device).

“I wrote it to be an Uncle Tom’s Caboo for young women,” Wolfe told me in an interview. And, on one level, the book does appear to be a cautionary tale about the dangers to “good girls” from a fetid environment. Laurie McDowell, Charlotte’s only high school friend, goes off to North Carolina State and is immediately corrupted upon arrival by a “culture” for which her religious, backwoods upbringing is no match. Beverly Amory—Charlotte’s rich, spoiled roommate—arrives at Dupont University (the novel’s fictional elite campus setting) already corrupt and proceeds to spiral downward in a whirlpool of booze, bulimia, and casual sex.

Charlotte’s fate, by contrast, seems almost positive. At novel’s end, she has snagged a top athlete for a boyfriend, along with a choice seat in the basketball arena, and is being courted by the hottest sorority on campus. To ram home Charlotte’s meteoric ascent in conventional status, Wolfe has star professor Dr. Victor Ransome Starling—a Noble laureate, no less—trudge past her up the steps on his way to the nosebleed section. Charlotte is stronger than Laurie: she resists total assimilation to
Charlotte’s decent and religious but dangerously cloistered parents. Depression he endured after a 1996 heart attack and quintuple bypass. It was no doubt excruciating, but he nonetheless managed to make good use of the experience. Charlotte’s descent into the abyss is as gripping as any novel penned in fiction.

Charlotte is an extraordinary girl, and it takes an extraordinary confluence of misfortunes—many of them seemingly contrived by the university for the purpose—to bring her low. Dupont, like virtually every college today, has not merely abandoned in loco parentis; it actively promotes every kind of vice. Also culpable, improbably but unmistakably, are Charlotte’s decent and religious but dangerously cloistered parents.

Charlotte could talk to Momma about menstruation, hygiene, deodorants, breasts, bras, and shaving her legs or armpits, but that was the limit. When it came to matters such as whether or not she should hook up in even a minimal way with a Channing or a Brian and whether or not girls who kept it until they got married were becoming rare, Momma closed any such line of inquiry as soon as Charlotte tried to open it up, no matter how indirectly, since there was nothing to discuss.

This stiff-arm strategy may have befitted an earlier age, but applying “Just Say No” to the college hook-up scene is akin to bringing a Nerf bat to a nuclear war. Charlotte enters Dupont utterly unprepared and unequipped for the moral squalor she finds there. Even Charlotte’s considerable virtues—including faith, intellect, and industry—prove insufficient to withstand sustained assault.

Yet Wolfe also quietly shows that Charlotte is not simply a victim. Like a tragic heroine, her own bad choices contribute to her fall. Charlotte feels a thrilling, taboo attraction to her high school’s drunken, chaw-spitting bad boy, Channing Reeves, whom she professes to despise, and carries that crude taste with her to Dupont. She is a little too proud of her figure, especially her legs, and the effect she knows they have on men. She teaches herself to dress provocatively and becomes something of a tease. In her hubris, she is certain she can manage young men’s hormone-charged advances but badly miscalculates her ability to control her own.

The heart of the novel is the presentation, and tacit analysis, of Charlotte’s three suitors and her reactions to them. Adam Gellin is, on paper, ideal for Charlotte. Driven, curious, and intensely bright, he is the first person her own age Charlotte has ever met who is remotely her intellectual equal. He personifies for her—after her rude awakening to the ugly side of campus life—the exhilarating possibilities of “the life of the mind.” In pick-up artist terms, though, Adam is a “beta”—full stop. At 22, in the midst of Dupont’s exuberant and highly visible rolling orgy, he remains a virgin—a source of deep humiliation on which he never stops dwelling.

Jojo Johanssen by contrast is an archetypal “alpha male”: big, strong, muscular, aggressive, physically dominant—all traits which he employs to great effect on the basketball court, where he adds fame to his imposing presence, making him something of a demi-god.

Hoyt Thorpe illustrates the kind of “alpha” that has no analog in the animal kingdom. He...
is well-known—on campus, at least—but it’s hard to pin down exactly why. Partly his status derives from being the leading brother in Dupont’s most prestigious fraternity, Saint Ray, partly from his good looks, partly from the way he deliberately misleads others to overestimate his socio-economic background, but mostly it’s owing to his preternatural cool.

In the wild, and even on campus, if things were somehow to come to blows, a giant like Jojo would simply annihilate Hoyt. Hoyt’s (but not really) rich, socially dominant, and Nubile co-eds show up at the Saint Ray house were somehow to come to blows, a giant like Ray, partly from his good looks, partly from Dupont’s most prestigious fraternity, Saint Ray, to service Hoyt and his friends and don’t so consciously think it. But that urge to service Hoyt and his friends and don’t so consciously think it. But that urge is the subconscious motivator.

“Not even the sight of the boys in their Mechanics & Tradesmen’s Ban-Lon could turn off the girls to the presence of the astronauts,” was Wolfe’s comment in The Right Stuff on the dismal style of the two worst-looking of the Mercury Seven. “There were juicy little girls going around saying ‘Well, four down, three to go!’ or whatever—the figures varied—and laughing like mad. Everybody knew what they meant.”

Any girl and every girl may feel the impulse, the same way almost any man will neurologically respond to the sight of a beautiful young woman. But it took the complete stripping away of all restraint, plus the added kerosene of “sex positive” propaganda, to encourage thousands—millions—of girls to leap headfirst, without a trace of shame, into risky, self-destructive behavior that in every prior generation would have resulted in ostracization by peers, parents, co-workers, everyone. To say nothing of all the attendant medical and psychological risks.

Even Charlotte, the archetypal “good girl,” is not immune.

[S]he wanted to want Adam! She wanted to want to kiss Adam goodnight in a deeply committed way. Adam had an interesting mind, an exciting mind, an adventurous mind…. He was sweet and he really was smart…. She consciously wanted to be Adam’s friend, his close friend—no, it was more than that…she wanted to love him! That would solve so many problems! She could live the life of the mind and the life of romance in one and the same person! All things that really counted would come together! …[B]ut she didn’t love him, and she couldn’t force herself to love him…. She
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In his Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, Vincenzo Cuoco synthesized the work of Machiavelli and Enlightenment philosophers to offer an explanation for why and how revolutions succeed or fail.
didn’t feel butterflies in her stomach at the very thought of him…. If she did, she was convinced, love would drive all the cheap, smug standards of Cool out of her mind.

Adam is in fact worse than a simple nice-guy beta; he is what the professional pick-up artists term a “beta orbiter.” He hangs around Charlotte constantly, calls incessantly, and contrives deceptively random meetings. His supplication culminates in his playing nurse during her depression, cuddling her night after night—with their clothes on—without getting so much as a kiss on the cheek.

Against this pathetic show of non-virility, the allure of cool proves far stronger than the appeal of the mind. The first time Charlotte meets Hoyt, before he even knows her name, he tries to maneuver her into a one-night stand. This makes her indignant in the moment, but doesn’t stop her from pursuing him later; nor does seeing him brazenly dirty-dance with a hot blonde, right in her face and in front of her friends. Even after it’s all over with Hoyt, Charlotte can’t bring herself to feel anything more than a weak sisterly concern for Adam. Indeed, when Adam plunges into his own depression and begs her tomother him the same way he had babied her, she does so—briefly, grudgingly, irritably, out of a sense of obligation and nothing else. For Hoyt—who drunkenly took her virginity and then never spoke to her again—she retains a naïve affection unto the end, and even a level of self-delusion:

Ah, Hoyt. If only you would come take one last look at what you so cavalierly discarded, at what you once loved—and love her you did—I know it!—if only for an evening or a single hour or one brief instant.

Perhaps Charlotte—like Helene with Porfirio Rubirosa—will never get over Hoyt, notwithstanding her superstar, super-alpha boyfriend. But then, by the end, Jojo too is sucking up to her. She considers herself his “teacher…mentor…nanny.” One wonders how long they will last.

Charlotte’s final brief encounter on the arena steps with Professor Starling brings her story to a fitting end. She had greatly impressed this man and was given the extraordinary opportunity—especially for a freshman—to work as his research assistant. That chance has been squandered—along with the extraordinary potential that lifted Charlotte to Dupont in the first place.

Trading Up

In Wolfe’s latest novel, Back to Blood (2012), Magdalena Otero—it’s worth pausing to recognize that Wolfe is the most inventive namer of characters since Charles Dickens—is the clearest possible expression of hypergamy in action. As the story progresses, she “trades up”—or tries—to a succession of higher-status men. None of her exes cheats on her or mistreats her in any way. She simply becomes dissatisfied, sees a chance to do better, and goes for it.

When the curtain rises, Magdalena is partnered to nice-guy cop Nestor Camacho. Nestor has many things going for him, including an enormous upper body built by repeatedly climbing a 55-foot rope without using his legs. But he loses Magdalena by forgetting how he won her:

Suave he must have looked when he had to prevent this jebeta from passing the barricade across 16th Avenue at Calle Ocho and she put up this big argument…and then he smiled at her in a certain way and said I’d love to let you by—but I’m not going to and kept on smiling in that certain way and she told him two nights later that when he started smiling she thought she had charmed him into letting her have her way but then he stood her up rigid with but I’m not going to—and it turned her on.

By the time we readers first see them together, muscle-bound Nestor is all lovey-dovey mush. Magdalena is repulsed.

So she dumps him for Dr. Norman Lewis—whom, incidentally, she’s already spending the night. Norman is much older than Nestor and a decidedly inferior physical specimen. But he’s an americano with blue eyes and wavy light brown hair, plus a high-priced condo, a speedboat, and a national reputation, all of which confer a certain status—on her. “You want everybody to know that Dr. Norman Lewis is your boyfriend! Admit it!” Magdalena harangues herself. ‘[Y] ou want his picture all over the page by the time the 60 Minutes thing…is on. Right? You want them to know you possess that gorgeous blond, blue-eyed americano, that glamorous, famous Older Man!”

Russian oligarch Sergei Korolyov combines Nestor’s physique with levels of money, power, and fame that Norman can’t touch. Magdalena dives into Nestor’s bed after only their third meeting, and first real date—alacrity she is able to rationalize as “the modern sequence of love.” But she is scarcely afforded 30 minutes to revel in this fairy tale before it collapses into a putrid pumpkin. In the most humiliating fashion, Magdalena is smashed with the realization that she is but one in an endless series—“pumped and dumped,” as the pick-up artists say—an outcome any fool could and should have seen coming a light year away. But the lure of muscles, money, and a foreign accent….

When allure gives way to danger, the primal instinct to seek protection resurges and the formerly unexciting suddenly appears in a different light. Magdalena, fearing that Sergei might be involved in a crime, seeks the comfort of Nestor’s arms. “It was like he was being all manly and taking charge,” she gushes to a girlfriend later, “like he knew something about it and knew what to do. He was kind of…I don’t know…hot.”

From Helene to Magdalena—and many others in between—Wolfe’s women are not, alas, in their every action paragons of every known virtue. But they are real women—with real strengths, desires, and failings. Tom Wolfe lifts the lid off their ids to reveal that what motivates them is consistent and comprehensible—and quite different from what drives men. Because what he shows isn’t always pretty, we’ve preferred not to notice. In an era of collapsing marriage, rising illegitimacy, elite cheerleading for false rape accusations, and much else, it’s high time we started paying attention.

Michael Anton is a writer living in New York.
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