

Letters to the Editor

Thomas Wolfe

TO THE EDITOR:

AS Tom Wolfe's brother and the only surviving member of his immediate family I want to thank Robert Gorham Davis for his frank, critical review of "Thomas Wolfe" by Andrew Turnbull (Feb. 11). I do, however, contest and disagree with a few of Mr. Davis's statements.

Maxwell Perkins, my friend (through Tom), never in his association with Tom re-wrote a single line of Tom's manuscript, nor did he ever supply a transitional passage. Neither did Edward Aswell. That Edward Aswell did perform a monumental job, in editing alone Tom's vast mss. of what were "The Web and the Rock" and "You Can't Go Home Again" is true. It is also very true that the manuscript of these two books delivered to Aswell just before Tom left on his ill-fated Western trip in 1938 was not "a great mass of disordered manuscripts," as Mr. Davis wrote. Every page was typed. Much would have been changed had Tom lived. I know something about this as I had much correspondence with Mr. Aswell and examined part of the galleys. Both of these men were my personal friends for years.

Mr. Davis states that Tom's last illness "drove him in 1938 to his terrible — and really sought-for—death." I cannot forgive Davis for this conclusion. I was with Tom for six weeks in his Seattle, Wash., illness. I supplied the stationery and watched the door when Tom wrote the last letter he was ever to write to the man he loved, Maxwell Perkins: "I have wanted most desperately to live and still do. . . ."

It is Mr. Davis's so-called "false lyricism" that will carry Tom on and on. It is a part of his most important and appreciated writing. Davis says "reading Wolfe was intoxicating to the young of 20 and 30 years ago, while now he is almost completely cut off from the youth of today." What a comedy or tragedy of misstatement or error. I have talked with a few thousand students these past five years and they

were all reading Tom Wolfe. Tom's novels have not "dropped out of sight" as he says. Many thousands are published here and abroad each year. FRED WOLFE.
Spartanburg, S. C.

Mr. Davis replies:

In the matter of the manuscripts, I was following Richard S. Kennedy, whose scholarly study of Wolfe's methods of composition was based both on the manuscript collection at Harvard and on personal interviews with those who worked with Wolfe. In "The Window of Memory" he writes: "The hand

of the editor intrudes more often in 'You Can't Go Home Again' than readers have suspected. By this time, Aswell identified himself with Wolfe to the extent that he felt free to play author with the manuscript." Mr. Kennedy quotes passages of Wolfe's writing side by side with their extensive revisions by Aswell. He tells also how Aswell composed the italicized summaries which link the rearranged sections of the novel. In an interview Aswell informed Kennedy that when he went to work on the manuscript it was a "mess."

I sympathize fully with Fred Wolfe's feelings, for Thomas Wolfe meant a great deal to me personally at a crucial time. Along with D. H. Lawrence he gave me a sense of life and the possibility of life that I have tried not to lose. But in three decades of teaching undergraduates I have seen his influence almost vanish while Lawrence's remains strong. I explained this in my review by the deficiencies of Wolfe's particular kind of romanticism.

Both Mr. Turnbull and Miss Nowell describe in detail the fantastic disregard of health which led to Wolfe's fatal illness. But I agree that any easy identification of the self-caused with the self-willed shows disrespect for the mysteries of the human personality, and is not something a reviewer should venture.

In Dallas

TO THE EDITOR:

PERHAPS inadvertently, the quotation from my book "Six Seconds in Dallas" (Feb. 18) selected to accompany Fred Graham's review radically mis-

represents the claim of the book. "What does this collection of new evidence prove? It does not prove that the assassination was a conspiracy. . . ." But the context of the statement makes clear that the "new evidence" referred to is limited to those photographs and witness reports discussed in a final section of Chapter X. This evidence suggests the presence of two men on the sixth floor of the Depository during the shooting, but, as the section makes clear, should not be relied on by itself to prove a conspiracy. The use of this citation out of context serves to radically weaken the claim of the book. Let there be no mistake about that claim — I'm convinced that the evidence displayed in "Six Seconds in Dallas" makes the conclusion of a conspiracy inescapable.

Mr. Graham, the Supreme Court correspondent of The Times, apparently disagrees with this claim. Yet in disputing it he does precious little but reiterate the already discredited arguments of the Commission. For example, given new evidence drawn from an

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examination of a better copy of the Zapruder film than anything seen by the Commission, that in 1-18th of a second (between Zapruder frames 237 and 238) the Governor's cheeks puff, his right shoulder buckles, and his hair is disarranged, Mr. Graham reasserts the Commission's "delayed reaction" theory as an "explanation." Yet by doing so he misses the point. The "delayed reaction" theory is quite correct—people are hit by bullets and don't realize it for several moments. But it is also quite irrelevant to the evidence in question. The dramatic change we see occurring in 1-18th of a second has nothing to do with the Governor's recognition that he has been hit. On the contrary, the collapse of his shoulder, the forcing of air into his cheeks, and the disarrangement of his hair are all involuntary, physical effects of a bullet driving into his right shoulder and out his chest. The Warren Commission's "explanation," and Mr. Graham's reiteration of it, are quite beside

the point.

None of your readers, of course, can validate my claim since the original film and its copyright remain in private hands. Stating that the Zapruder film is "an incalculable asset of Time, Inc.," Life magazine has consistently refused to release the critical frames for public inspection. If Mr. Graham really wants to get to the bottom of this case, then I suggest he use his influence to get a look at Life's copy of the film. Even his eyes would be opened.

JOSIAH THOMPSON.

Haverford, Pa.

TO THE EDITOR:

Mr. Graham berates Thompson, a philosopher, because he "paradoxically ignores human factors and concentrates on physical, scientific evidence." Is this wrong? If there is anything definitely known about the assassination, it is the physical, scientific evidence. The human factors, as always, are the most elusive.

Graham does not contest the new physical evidence that Thompson offers. "A close study of the Zapruder frames showed that President Kennedy's head jerked forward and then violently backward as the top of his head is blown off." Graham pooh-poohs Thompson's careful calculations of the speed with which the President's head moved forward and then backward as "slender evidence." Any physicist can testify that this is the strongest possible evidence — physical fact. Unless Newtonian mechanics is radically wrong, the President was hit by two bullets *from opposite directions*. To produce this result, there had to be at least two assas-

sins, which means a conspiracy. Which is more likely to be mistaken: the law of conservation of momentum or the "larger logic of the Warren Report"?

GEORGE LAKOFF.

Cambridge, Mass.