The Long Goodbye:

TRYING TO SEE PAST THE INCREASINGLY HARROWING PLIGHT OF LONGFORM NONFICTION IN GENERAL INTEREST MAGAZINES

BY LAWRENCE WESCHLER

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Over the past decade, a certain kind of writing—and with it, a certain tenor of attentiveness—has been disappearing from the world. Common venues where writers might regularly publish and readers might reliably encounter such writing have been progressively leaching away. I am speaking of writing in the expansive tradition of Liebling and Mitchell, or, more recently, of Kramer and McPhee, Frazier and Kapuscinski. "Hiroshima," "Silent Spring," "The Fate of the Earth," "The Fire Next Time," "The Armies of the Night," "In Cold Blood," "Dispatches," many of Tom Wolfe's or Hunter Thompson's loopier extravaganzas—it is doubtful whether any of these could find homes in the current journalistic climate.

I am speaking here of magazines—not books. (Books are a separate problem.) As a writer, I am less concerned about publishing books that might get exposed to ten or twenty thousand readers already interested in a given subject, than in exposing hundreds of thousands of potential readers to subjects they had no idea they might find engrossing. As a citizen, I am recalling a time when moderately well-informed people around a dinner table found themselves ravenously parsing some subject they had *no idea* they would even

have been considering just a few weeks earlier—the travails of a minor league baseball manager, some geologist's flinty obsession, bats and hummingbirds, the plight of Ugandan Indian refugees in London, the escapades of an artist who draws money and spends his drawings—all on account of some uncannily rich common readerly experience. I'm mainly talking about the place of nontopical writerly longform nonfiction in general interest magazines (or of reporting that, when of urgent topical import, is allowed enough air and space to probe beneath the immediate surface clamors of the moment)—writing whose situation has, in the current publishing climate, become so dire as to be verging on extinction.

The magazine universe today is increasingly niche-slotted, peg-driven and attention-squeezed. There may be more magazines than ever before, but commercial forces appear to be enforcing an evermore frantic fragmentation of the readerly market. Surfers and advertisers interested in reaching surfers may have a half-dozen venues to choose from—but one is much less likely to find a beautiful extended surfing rhapsody exposed to a general audience owing simply to some writer's glorious quirky passion. That is, of course, unless surfing suddenly becomes momentarily "hot"—say, because some Tom Cruise surfing movie is about to be unleashed upon the world, at which point surfing articles will suddenly start cropping up everywhere at once, in a frenzy of rebound that soon leaves readers staggering under the effects of the surfing equivalent of insulin shock. Not to worry, though: the moment will quickly pass—and the articles themselves will in all likelihood have been fast and breathlessly efficient (if not especially memorable). Readers, after all, bore so easily nowadays—or, at any rate, editors seem convinced that they do; or maybe it's just that the editors, squeezed by increasingly convulsive demands on their own time, can no longer themselves sustain such leisurely spans of attention.

Over the past several months, I've been engaged in an e-mail correspondence with an expatriate American independent filmmaker residing in Ljubljana, Slovenia, of all places. I'd been raising many of these concerns

with him (recalling, for examples, how *The New Yorker's* old editor William Shawn used to delay the publication of profiles of directors whose films were about to come out for at least six months precisely because, as he put it, "It is the policy of *The New Yorker* to avoid topicality at all costs"). And my friend wrote back that that was not just a different time, it was almost a whole other world. In this one, he continued, "the funnels and the piping and the ducts and belts, the overall design strategies used to convey capital efficiently from the 'consumer' to all the correct bank accounts is becoming evermore frighteningly efficient." And the method is the same almost everywhere: "A short, sharp whiff of stimulation," as he put it, "followed by a hand in the back pocket. In short: crack."

What my friend likens to drug-pushing, I sometimes think of more in the terms of neo-Pavlovian conditioning. In either case, we are speaking of the death of the soul—or, at any rate, the successive parching of the staging ground of any sort of idiosyncratic readerly-writerly communion of souls.

The roots of the crisis transcend the machinations of any particular individual. Some of the forces are economic—the corporate consolidation of the magazine world (particularly under the pressure of shareholder expectations for never-before-dreamt-of profit margins), but even more so, the growing constrictions on most people's leisure time, occasioned, for example, by the decline of the one-income family, or at least the practical feasibility of most families being able to make ends meet on just one income.

Say what one will about the desperations (particularly for women) inherent in the 1950s-style household—superbly delineated in countless short stories of the time—but come Friday afternoon, back in the old days, the housework had been done, the shopping accomplished, and both the husband and the wife could look forward to a weekend during which they could easily take time to get lost in a long piece of reporting or reflection. (That, above all, was what the old *New Yorker* or *Esquire* used to be for—this business of getting-lost-in, of becoming unaccountably immersed, of losing all track of time in a readerly transport.) Nowadays, such weekends rarely pre-

sent themselves to most of the magazine's readers, particularly its readers with younger families.

Then, too, there are McLuhanesque forces at work. As early as 1980, Shawn used to say that the gravest threat to *The New Yorker* wasn't going to come from some other magazine but from television—and not so much because people would watch TV instead of read the magazine, as because of the way TV would inexorably destroy people's attention spans, such that they'd no longer be "capable of thinking long thoughts," as he put it ("and this," he went on, at a time "when things will be becoming more rather than less complicated"). How much more fearsomely lucid that insight appears today, when TV itself seems to be losing out in the face of the even more antsy, stutter-click culture of the Internet. (Most of the current web magazines—*Slate*, *Salon*, and the like—steer clear of articles longer than 1,500 words for fear of taxing their readers' capacities.)

Then there's the self-fulfilling effect of more concise, peg-driven, niche-slotted prose. For want of any other sort of exposure, taste and stamina, not surprisingly, have each been atrophying at evermore precipitous rates. An interesting experiment in this regard is currently under way at *The New Yorker*, whose newest editor, David Remnick, seems much more attuned to the old

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style, the old rhythms of attention, than was his predecessor, the celebrated Tina Brown. (Back at Princeton, he was a student of John McPhee's.) He also seems much more willing to entertain subjects of no immediate topical interest. And yet at least across his first 18 months, he appears almost as constrained in terms of word-length as was Brown—or, to phrase it differently, he seems constrained by the demographics and attention spans of the readership she created and then bequeathed to him. If one wants to know how many readers would sit through a three-part series on geology, say, or two

consecutive long pieces on a high-wire fracas in the Freud Archives, one needn't speculate: the experiment has been done, and the answer is roughly 475,000 (the number of subscribers *The New Yorker* steadily retained, year after year, with the highest re-subscription rate of any magazine in the world, throughout the Shawn and Gottlieb eras). The upscale advertising strategy behind the Tina Brown-Steve Florio recreation of the magazine required a near-doubling of the magazine's subscribership, to around 850,000; the target was met, in part through ludicrously low subscription rates, but also through celebrity-driven, topical and radically shorter content. In the process, *The New Yorker* appears to have shed almost half its original readers, and not by accident: this was the intent. Tina Brown understood that for her to forge the subscriber base the master strategy called for, she'd have to shed thousands of old, deadwood readers (the sort of people scandalized by the new shorter, peppier, more topical style), and such attrition was welcomed in-house as further proof that she was on the right track. (The fact that the advertising side of the equation never panned out, with disastrous results for the bottom line, is a separate story and a separate issue.) The upshot of this strategy is that Remnick, no matter his personal tastes and inclinations, is to a certain extent saddled with Brown's readership—the vast majority of whom wouldn't know what to make of a return to the sort of word lengths required by the kinds of pieces the former magazine's readers used to luxuriously lose themselves within.

Sometimes, lollygagging, I find myself pondering whether all this is in fact inevitable, whether there might be no way out of the progressively strangling gyre. For starters, one would have to postulate whether there is anyone besides myself—or, rather, whether there are sufficiently many people—who longs for such a way. I'd argue yes. I regularly talk to writers anguished about their steadily constricting access to venues for the kinds of things they'd like to be writing about. (One of my friends, a highly accomplished literary journalist, says he feels like he's camped aperch a steadily melting ice floe.) And I'm not just talking about accomplished writers. I often teach courses in "The

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Fiction of Nonfiction"—most recently at Princeton, Columbia and Sarah Lawrence—and my students likewise worry about ever finding a home for the kind of thing they'd like to be doing. I warn them that, given the current environment, my class may be of no more practical value to them in their lives than a course in abstruse mathematics. More to the point, though, I regularly talk to *readers* who long for a common culture, a readerly universe in which they weren't continually being addressed as a pack of salivating dogs. As one of my friends recently complained, "Don't editors realize that if writing is good, readers will want to read more rather than less of it?"

Assuming one could identify the potential audience for some such new (old) publishing venture—a magazine, say, whose slogan could be, "Tell me something I don't already know" (could any current magazine fly under such a banner?)—how might such a thing actually come into existence? One such way could be by taking an already-existing magazine and tweaking it (widening its literary ambitions or its frequency of publication or its circulation—or all three) in ways that would bring it closer to the sort of publication I longingly envision. Or else one might think about starting a new journal from scratch.[1]

But, in fact, would the new venture necessarily even need to be a magazine, as conventionally understood? Might not the new information technologies, whose influence in this regard have thus far been proving so balefully pernicious (in all the ways previously alluded to), themselves hold a key to a possible way out? Perhaps the famishing of a readerly common culture is but a morbid transitional phase. I'm reminded of Gramsci's classic observation about how "The Old is dying and yet the New cannot be born; in this interregnum, a variety of morbid symptoms appear." Perhaps a new age is dawning in which cleaner, more efficient and common-sensical "toll booth" or "money box" technologies will allow Net surfers to purchase, virtually on impulse and for a nominal fee (under a dollar), a major piece of writing by a McPhee, say or a Diane Ackerman—and enough of them will prove willing to do so to make the operation financially viable both for writers and publishers.

One could imagine, for instance, a bi-weekly digest (available electronically or in print) that would review currently available offerings, maybe providing a few-thousand-word sample. (Note: few writers particularly savor the prospect of posting their original drafts over the web, unedited and unchecked. The ideal new venture would feature fully-edited, fully fact-checked and processed pieces of writing. Huge savings, however, might accrue to the venture because paper, printing and postage costs would be avoided.) Until now, the technology hasn't been there to attempt such an experiment on any mass, self-sustaining basis—but the time may be rapidly approaching.

Of course, any such venture would require at least an initial outlay of support—either through venture capital or foundation grants. (Virtually all current high-end, general-interest, wide-circulation publications rely on corporate or foundation subsidies.) But Lord knows terrific fortunes have recently been amassed, in large part amid the very information technologies whose short-term effects have been proving so relentlessly corrosive. Perhaps some of these new multimillionaires—or maybe even just one, someone with a strange, unaccountable itch, a mysterious hankering, a longing, once again, for longueur—will one day….

Or then again, maybe not. Probably not. And this entire piece of wistful speculation will just end up having to be filed in the Annals of the Former World.

[1]A particularly hopeful development along these lines has been the recent response to Dave Eggers' splendid *McSweeney's Quarterly*, whose cover (alongside such claims as "Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans, Printed in Iceland" and the note that "This journal has been proofread but not by Paid Professionals") once sported the motto "Editing for space is too easy to be moral," and another time veritably boasted how its editors were continuing to be "Relying on: Strength in Numbers, provided those numbers are very, very small."