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literary non-fiction represented by
Guy Talese's "A Serendipiter's
journey"**

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THE IMAGE OF NEW YORK IN AMERICAN LITERARY
NON-FICTION REPRESENTED BY GAY TALESE'S
A SERENDIPITER'S JOURNEY

Key words: American literary non-fiction, city image, New York, journey, street

Among frequently explored motifs and images of the American city, the ones undertaken by literary non-fiction writers have rather gone unnoticed or at least underestimated in literary criticism. Yet, they deserve the same attention and similarly thorough analysis as those present in fiction not only for the undoubtedly informational and thus documentary value rooted in writing based on the fact, but also due to the common sources of literary inspiration which they share with contemporary American novels, short stories and poetry. Here come such names as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway or James Agee that have been already placed within the pantheon of American literature, and which used to and still inspire both authors of fiction as non-fiction, also because their craft often originating from that of journalism.

Therefore, in the histories of American literature and journalism a pleiad of the 20th century writers such as for example Truman Capote, John Steinbeck, Joseph Mitchell, Tom Wolfe, Norman Sims, Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer and Gay Talese intermingle as all of them, in one way or another, blurred the distinction between fact and fiction.

Although nowadays listing these authors in the above sequence in one breadth sounds natural and even conventional, in the sixties (or at the turn of the sixties and seventies) of the 20th century the literary non-fiction trend had to overcome some obstacles connected with the rise of a distinct literary genre. Much controversy was stirred especially in the 1970s by Tom Wolfe and his rebellious announcement of the New Journalism as an alternative to both the old brand of reporting as well as to the novel whose decline had been then predicted. Stressing

the innovative character of the notion, Wolfe began to promote a set of rules that should be followed in order to differentiate the new trend from the traditional journalism, and at the same time, to make it a proper replacement for the obsolete and worn out fictional forms. The crucial requirements, as reminds Norman Sims in a collection of non-fiction pieces *Literary Journalism* were: “scene-by-scene construction, saturation reporting, third-person point of view, and a detailing of the status lives of the subjects”¹. According to one of the supporters of the New Journalistic trend, Gay Talese, it “demanded [...] a more imaginative approach”², and had nothing to do with, as some critics implied, “compromis[ing] the facts in the interest of more dramatic reporting” [FO vii].

That imagination-based attitude, developed almost a decade before Wolfe’s manifesto, was more or less instinctively employed by Talese in his non-fiction pieces later compiled and published as a book *Fame and Obscurity*. The first part of the collection, *New York – A Serendipiter’s Journey*, will serve as an example of a non-fictional treatment of the city which, next to “wandering, work, and family – [...] the things that happen all the time”³ constitute the core of literary journalism’s narratives.

As an everyday event, the city presents itself as nothing extraordinary, as not really prevailing theme in the American literary non-fiction of the second part of the 20th century. However, it can be certainly stated that, simultaneously, the city has always been pictured in manifold ways as a reflection of individual and personal experiences. Consequently, the reader of fiction as well as of literary non-fiction can encounter various New Yorks, L.As, Bostons or Chicagos, for instance the Los Angeles of Joan Didion, the Chicago of Theodore Dreiser or the New York of Herman Melville. In *A Serendipiter’s Journey* one sees New York City through the eyes of Gay Talese, once a newspaperman in “Esquire” and “The New York Times”, a practitioner of the New Journalism.

As such, Talese combines the older type of reporting with new techniques in order to achieve a “larger truth” which, in contrast to some plain truth, must be sought not only “through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organization style” [FO vii]. The factual aspect of the book appears as a solid foundation only upon which or starting from which “the real thing” can be created. The reader is confronted with much statistical data (both historical and current) expressed in percents, prices, addresses, proper names, exact dates, many of which like e.g. the number of fortune-tellers, monuments or book thieves must have been acquired through time-consuming and detailed research. All this information makes the writer a credible

¹ N. Sims and M. Kramer, *Literary Journalism. A New Collection of the Best American Non-Fiction*, New York, Ballantine Books 1995, p. 9.

² G. Talese, *Fame and Obscurity*, New York, Ivy Books 1993 [further as FO], p. vii.

³ N. Sims and M. Kramer, op. cit., p. 3.

chronicler of day-to-day life of the city whose size and variety need constant measurements and ordering.

The author also uses direct quotations, especially in dialogues short enough to have been easily recorded by a reporter witnessing quick spontaneous exchanges. Whether the organization style is rigid in terms of journalistic standards of the time, it is not so easy to judge, yet considerable fragments of the text are structured due to the classical writing strategies such as comparison and contrast, classification, definition and organizing the material according to the order of importance or chronology.

The new approach thanks to which this “larger truth” about New York could be found, already reveals itself in the very title of Talese’s collection. Firstly, the author decides to take the role of a serendipiter – a person whose “discoveries” rely on accident and are unexpected. His searching the city is spontaneously or rather deliberately random, or at least organized due to a logic which appears not typical of a hot news-hungry reporter. What lies in the centre of his interest are not mere everyday events – the focus of the New Journalism – but people, places and phenomena that are somehow hidden, undercurrent and underestimated. For Talese, they are this time the major points of reference according to which New York will be perceived and defined. During his journey as a serendipiter, he describes the city in terms of “things unnoticed”, “the anonymous”, “characters”, “odd occupations”, and “the forgotten”. Within the first category the reader can come across cats, and their customs, ants, doormen, telephone operators as well as the so called second Statue of Liberty the existence of which is not even known to the majority of New Yorkers. The rhythm of the city is naturally paced by the clock, yet here one has a chance to observe what happens in New York not at noon, rush hour or on a Saturday night, and not with celebrities, but who dashes to work at dawn and how the city changes between midnight and early morning. So, “New York is an entirely different city at 5 a.m.” which is “Manhattan’s mellowest hour”, the time of “tired trumpet players and homeward-bound bartenders” [FO 7]. In order to convey convincingly the atmosphere of those hours between day and night, the writer employs the already mentioned saturation reporting recommended by Wolfe. He selects some characters, like that of a Western Union Wake-Up Service operator, Mrs. Mary Woody, who every day at 6 a.m. phones many New Yorkers to get them out of their beds, or Mr. Mackey, a masseur who at 7 a.m. starts visiting his discretion-seeking well-off clients in Manhattan. Some of the chosen, for example Mrs. Woody, have been just shortly interviewed by the author; some others, like Mr. Mackey, trusted the author, agreed to be observed and to reveal more about his past and present life. As Talese admits, within this saturation technique, he tried to “follow [his] subjects unobtrusively while observing them in revealing situations” [FO vii], that is when they felt comfortable enough to show what was going on in their minds.

Apart from the somehow “unnoticed” New Yorkers (cleaning ladies, truck drivers) who appear on the streets when everybody else sleeps, there are also moments that usually do not attract attention and are expected to pass quickly – rainy days. Yet, a meticulous observer of the city life realizes that they also influence the metropolis’s pulse and looks:

dates are broken [...], taxis are harder to get, [...] some New Yorkers are morose with rain, others prefer it [...], and say that on rainy days the city’s buildings seem somehow cleaner – washed in opalescence like in a Monet painting [FO 9],

[...] a rainy day in New York is a bright day for umbrella and raincoat salesmen, for hat-check girls, bellhops and for members of the British Consulate General’s office, who say rain reminds them of home [FO 10].

Any change in the surroundings or weather then, like a “certain slant of light”⁴, of Emily Dickinson’s poem, is able to transform the viewer’s perspective of a place and connect it with a new individual image.

In a somehow Dickinsonian manner, Talese tends to open the chapters and some of the paragraphs of the book with evocative, sometimes defining, statements which most frequently refer to New York. One time it is a “city of movement” [FO 14], “a town of hard work, too many cars, too many people” [FO 14], another time it is “a great city for committees” [FO 30], “a city of scantily clad women in windows” [FO 31], “a city of silent movie stars and old fans who rarely recognize them” [FO 74], or “a city where one splash in the papers is not enough” [FO 75] to gain longstanding fame, and where it is not good to belong to the aged.

The power of the above mentioned openings does not only result from the impressive number of possibilities in which the city is pictured. Their literary impact is rooted in the beginning years of American literature, when the first settlers strove to make the bond between God and themselves stronger, and struggled to let God’s message be heard and remembered through biblically formulated repetitions. Talese as well wishes to draw the readers attention and have some of his own glimpses of the city “embroidered” in their memory. That is why he makes some words and phrases appear more frequently, or sound longer, especially at the beginning of sentences. “New York” predominates as it starts at least the half of the all passages of the collection (“New York is [...]”, “New York can be [...]”, “In New York [...]” [FO 32]); “at 5 a.m.” or any other hour [FO 7], “Eight Avenue”; “when”, “within” and some pronouns (“it”, “its”) serve as the examples of other vocabulary items repetitively used by the author.

The rhythm and energy of the city, first – indicated and then – stressed with the repetitions referring in particular to place and time, are additionally strengthened by means of the occasional usage of a Whitman-like enumerating technique. “New York is a city of 200 chestnut venders, 300,000 pigeons, and 600

⁴ S. Barańczak, *Biblioteka Poetów Języka Angielskiego. Emily Dickinson, 100 wierszy*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Arka 1990, p. 45.

statues and monuments” [FO 11], of “8,485 telephone operators, 1,364 Western Union messenger boys, and 112 newspaper copyboys” [FO 10], a place whose inhabitants “guzzle 460,000 gallons of beer, swallow 3,500,000 pounds of meat, and pull 21 miles of dental floss through their teeth” [FO 3]. The accumulation of details: occupations, activities and numbers gives an impression of the city as an endless and flexible organism, transforming and growing in an observer’s eyes, hardly possible to grasp as an entity.

This impossibility of laying hold of the city of New York as a whole is naturally embedded in its perpetual transformation, “multiple histories and a myriad of coexisting and competing presents”⁵. However, what contributes to it as well is the role undertaken by the author and the manner in which it is performed. The latter one is straightforwardly declared by Talese as a journey and as such, it imposes specific conditions, both chances and restrictions, on the writer and the reader. Probably, the most significant benefit of the journey scheme of a city exploration is the fact that a wanderer shows an initiative in searching for new experiences, expresses openness towards upcoming impressions, and does not allow to be passed by what is worthy of notice. Moreover, he can often appear at a few city locations in a relatively short period of time which signifies some ability of combining plots of the narrative, and/or shifting from one to another. Thus, in *A Serendipiter’s Journey* readers have to follow the narrator’s steps, perhaps even take sudden and unexpected turns, and stop where they would not choose for themselves. The beneficial part of such a journey, though, can be an element of surprise and discovering a different point of view, a route through the city proposed by a new guide. It must be also taken into consideration that the followed traveller is actually one of a “myriad of users [who] write and rewrite the city as »their« space – creating fragmentary stories that link and intersect with other fragmentary stories”⁶. Consequently, the reader is exposed to that writer’s peculiar story, here, to the New York of Gay Talese.

The streets and plazas he wandered through, in contrast to some of their dwellers, are not either unnoticed, anonymous or forgotten. One can easily spot Eighth Avenue, Times Square, Potter’s Field and the New York Public Library on any map of the city. Walking along New York’s streets confirms some literary scholars’ conviction that “the street has a central value in city experience”⁷ and that “the open space of the street [as] the antithesis of the room – that classic space of drama and the novel”⁸ can be treated as a perfect environment of a literary non-fiction writer. In fact, exploring an urban space as a passerby/city traveller

⁵ D. Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures*, Buckingham, UK, and Philadelphia, Open University Press 2003, p. 54.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁷ P. Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*, New York, Oxford University Press 1986, p. 135.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

not only reflects the American concept of “the trio: movement, city, road”⁹, but echoes the European idea of the flaneur popularized in the 20th century by Walter Benjamin.

The strolling activity seems highlighted as a natural element of the city life, not only to the serendipiter but also to some of the characters he encounters during his journey. Especially, when weather conditions allow it, walking crowds dominate New York’s views (“women stroll by in billowy dresses” [FO 24] and “people who do not wish to hurry [...], walk in the shade” [FO 24]), and the writer’s usage of relevant vocabulary (stroll, walk, roam). Occasionally, a special attention is paid to more devoted strollers who, through their occupation of e.g. street musicians, somehow help Talese to prove the existence of the New York City flaneur. One of those local artists even declares to “have been roaming through the streets ever since” [FO 43], thus picturing himself as a kind of a veteran from whom the serendipiter could probably receive some useful instruction. It is emphasized that despite the street musicians have certainly been long-time strollers, they “never go back to the same street twice in one year” [FO 43]. As a result, a powerful message is conveyed that the multitude of New York’s road connections provides a city walker with virtually endless cognitive possibilities.

As an urban flaneur – an “artist, and a »stroller«, an amateur, street detective”¹⁰, Talese is not indifferent to the sensory aspect of New York City, which can be perceived another “tract” or “route” on the author’s personal city map. It must be remembered, however, that the New York of Talese is first of all, a compilation of the images made available by the people he met during long or sometimes unplanned and brief encounters. Therefore, the reader finds out that:

New York can be a temporary blend of irritating sights and unexpected sounds. The irritant can be the sight of an Alfa-Romeo double-parked in front of the Colony Restaurant with ‘MD’ plates; the joy can be from the noise of a Negro pounding a piano in the middle of Sixty-first Street [FO 32].

It is likely that this particular conclusion was drawn on the basis of the writer’s observation when he was just passing by the described scene. Yet, there also a probability that the information was gathered from another passer-by or a person residing in the neighbourhood. The same approach can be ascribed to the sense-based glimpse of Eighth Avenue which is pictured as a

sad, sick street whose neon lights dangle over the dandruff of bartenders and focus on smoking prostitutes, sailors’ hats, and beer bottles that occasionally smash against jukeboxes... [...]. Actually, the street equals to a blend of the Garment Center’s racket, the Port Authority’s bus fumes, steam from the Pennsylvania Station, and the garlic of a dozen pizzerias [FO 68].

⁹ P. Swirski, *All Roads Lead to the American City*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press 2007, p. 84.

¹⁰ D. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 62.

Occasionally, some impressions have a source which is different from that of the writer, but still it remains elusive and anonymous like in the following passage:

To some people, New York is best remembered by the smile of an airline stewardess at LaGuardia, or the patience of a salesman on Fifth Avenue; to others the city represents the smell of garlic in the rear of a Mulberry Street church, or a hunk of "turf" for juvenile gangs to fight over... [FO 14].

No matter how the writer constructs his narrative, in what proportions he combines the personal "interior" and "exterior" (other people's) images, he is aware that only through "accumulating urban stories from the multiple users of the city [...], piercing together their fragmentary readings, it may be possible to gain insights into the city and its »language«" ¹¹.

In *A Serendipiter's Journey* the language of the city is, on the one hand, this of the stroller's, reflecting the attempts to "write [his] own relationship with space" ¹². Simultaneously, considering that a city is made up from individual stories ¹³, its language echoes the vernacular of different districts, national and racial backgrounds, occupations as well as generations. A bus ride provides the author with a shift from a walker's to a passenger's perspective which enables to participate in this a little faster cycle of the city movement. The bus driver, trying to control the flow of secretaries, receptionists, white-collar workers, students and cleaning ladies, re-tells his everyday story by repeating: "Move to da rear of da bus, please; plenty a room in the rear" [FO 18]. He is ignored by the passengers but his monotonously chanted appeal gets "recorded" in Talese's New York narrative. On sunny days the city's sidewalks are accompanied with "Shine, mistah? Hey, mistah, shine?" [FO 23] yelled out by unlicensed bootblacks, representatives of the New York's "unnoticed". When it is hot in New York,

in neighborhood stores customers mark the heat by exchanging the usual cliché:
"Hot enough for you?
Hot enough for you?
You bet.
Hot enough for you?
Yeah.
Hot enough for you?
Si.
Yessuh.
Yeah.
Yeah.
Yeah."

And on and on it goes in New York, day after day; people have only the same thing to say to one another [FO 25].

¹¹ D. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 61.

¹² Ibidem, p. 60.

¹³ R. Finnegan, *Tales of the City. A Study of Narrative and Urban Life*, Cambridge University Press 2004.

Yet, next to the daily small talk, in New York the wanderer and a careful listener can hear quick dialogues of auctioneers and their clients, he witnesses long telephone conversations of real estate agents (several lines), listens to old New Yorkers' reminiscences which in the book are italicized and specially punctuated to reflect all the breaks, hesitations and moments of excitement:

Only cost a dime for a haircut in the eighties, he rambled. [...] Oh, I used to go down to Fourteenth Street and hear Maggie Cline sing, 'Throw 'Em Down, McCloskey. [...] They say Steve Brodie didn't jump from the Brooklyn Bridge... they're liars... I saw him... I was there. All day I could tell you about things... [FO 75].

It is the language of the city that marks the closing of *A Serendipiter's Journey* voiced by

the pushcart maker, the court buffs, the doormen, the midget wrestlers, the chauffer with a chauffer, the charwomen and telephone operators who say,
 "if only people would look numbers up..."
 and the subway announcer who says,
 "... watch your step getting off, please..."
 and the movie who shouts ,
 "Why, you're Nita Naldi!..."
 and the beer-drinking hobo who until his
 dying day will convince everybody but the
 gravediggers when he yells: "I'm no ordinary bum;
 I'm a classical
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 m..." [FO 80].

This (non-fictional but literary) image of the American city created by Talese aptly mirrors his and many literary non-fiction writers' belief that in the creative process "»there is no such thing as absolute truth« and »objective journalism«"¹⁴. Instead, there is a "point of view that sees many sides!"¹⁵. Consequently, the New York of Talese is a multi-sided picture that fulfills the author's purpose of catching and conveying "the wonderment of reality"¹⁶.

¹⁴ R.S. Boynton, *The New New Journalism. Conversations with America's Best Non-Fiction Writers on Their Craft*, New York, Vintage Books 2005, p. 377.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Summary

The Image of New York in American Literary Non-Fiction Represented by Gay Talese's *A Serendipiter's Journey*

The paper is devoted to the image of New York City created by a representative of American post-war literary non-fiction, Gay Talese. What is especially brought into focus in the analyzed *New York – A Serendipiter's Journey* is the approach the writer employs to present his personal picture of the city. Talese's attitude consists in combining some key techniques of traditional reporting with a more individual and imaginative treatment relying on a wanderer's/stroller's point of view. From the perspective of a city traveller New York is unconventionally pictured through its untypical and usually unnoticed aspects such as e.g. forgotten places and odd occupations. It is emphasized that the writer's image of the city actually results from a number of pictures accumulated in the course of his own and many other individual journeys. Finally, the paper accentuates the effectiveness of the literary journalistic technique of merging the non-fictional with the literary in order to convey the convincing and credible vision of reality.