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New Journalism and Truman Capote's In Cold Blood

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NEW JOURNALISM AND TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *IN COLD BLOOD*

Abstract

New Journalism was a response to the new competitive situation brought about by the new forms of narration in the postwar era introduced by the mass media besides being the successor of a long-term American tradition in literature. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) is often considered to be a magnum opus of New Journalism, which attracted considerable attention in terms of the aesthetic and theoretical questions it raised. This article mainly scrutinizes the possibilities of fictionalizing the reality and of the capability of the author to offer a new form of writing reconciling the mass-mediated forms of narration and aesthetics of conventional fiction with references to the Capote's efforts to transform literary aesthetics.

Keywords: New Journalism, Realist Fiction, American Literature, Literary Aesthetics

YENİ HABERCİLİK VE TRUMAN CAPOTE'NİN *SOĞUKKANLILIKLA* ROMANI

Özet

Yeni Habercilik, savaş sonrası dönemde medya tarafından yaratılan yeni anlatı formları ile rekabet etme gerekliliğine karşı geliştirilmiş edebi bir tepki olduğu kadar Amerikan edebiyat geleneğindeki gerçekçi akımın da yeniden gözden geçirilmiş bir halini sunar. Truman Capote'nin *Soğukkanlılıkla* başlıklı romanı Yeni Habercilik akımının önemli örnekleri arasında yer alır ve ortaya koyduğu estetik ve kuramsal sorular bağlamında yoğun bir ilgiye mazhar olmuştur. Bu makale, Capote'nin edebi estetiği dönüştürme çabaları bağlamında gerçekliğin kurgulaştırılması ve medyanın sunduğu yeni anlatı türleri ve geleneksel kurgu estetiğini uzlaştırma bağlamında yazarın olanaklarını tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni Habercilik, Gerçekçi Kurgu, Amerikan Edebiyatı, Edebi Estetik

New Journalism and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*

In an age of racial lynchings, political assassinations, and legitimized xenophobia as well as the overwhelming violence of the American war machine in the Second World War and Vietnam, the 20th century infringed the imagination of the writer:

“whose hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (Roth, 1977: 29).

Having been deprived of an ethical ground, the writer of the postwar America lost their credibility and status to the new modes of narration in the entertainment industry. They inevitably voiced an edgy dissent against their being stranded between personal experience and public events as Saul Bellow put it “private life cannot maintain a pretense of its importance” (Bellow, 1977: 69). Many writers concluded that history itself was an absurd fiction, a massive plot dissolving the sense of stable reality. For Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, reality has a meaning only when used between quotation marks and he believes that “every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch-cheat Nature” (Nabokov, 2002: 5). Ursula Le Guin famously noted “At this point, realism is perhaps the least adequate means of understanding or portraying the incredible realities of our existence” (Le Guin, 1979: 58). Consequently, they turned their faces to reality “stripping off the human agency both in terms of the author and the reader” (Bellow, 1977: 53) and explored new forms of writing, taking shelter in speculative fiction or reinventing realist fiction with a voluntary retreat from social and political phenomena in either case. As the appropriation of social reality into the world of fiction became virtually impossible, the social realist novel, as a genre on the verge of exhaustion, could no longer grasp the surreal lunacy and pains of the postwar world.

In the wake of such a bedazzlement with the representation of reality in fiction and debates around the death of the novel, New Journalism entered the stage like a *deus ex machina* as “the de facto literature of postwar American literature” (Weber, 1980: 9). Although there has been a common consensus that Tom Wolfe coined the term New Journalism in his book *The New Journalism*, a collection of his articles published in 1973, the controversies around the formal, stylistic, and contextual framework of New Journalism have not been resolved. One reason for such confusion is that the birth of New Journalism coincided with the discussions around the death of the novel. Indeed, the death of the novel had quite prematurely been announced at the beginning of the 20th century and a variety of critics and authors ranging from Henry James to T.S. Eliot, Ortega Y Gasset, Walter Benjamin, John Barth, and Philip Roth among many others have joined the debates around the death of the novel, particularly realist novel, in terms of its aesthetic quality and taken for granted capacity to reflect social reality (Mete, 2018: 55-57). (There should be a thesis statement emphasizing a correspondence between New Journalism and Capote's work)

New Journalism was not only a response to the new competitive situation brought about by the new forms of narration introduced by the mass media but also it was the successor of a long-term American tradition in literature. Indeed, the early examples of American writing, documents, journals, diaries, and even fictionalized hagiographies of Puritan forefathers were immature examples of non-fiction when *belles-lettres* literally meant documenting the social scene in an aesthetic fashion (Baym, 1995: 81). In this sense, New Journalism was a return to Puritan aesthetics, based on direct statements of the facts in the form of fictionalized confessions of the masses. On the other hand, New Journalism, or non-fiction as christened by Truman Capote, was supposedly a radical break with the earlier forms of realist fiction, tending to create a free interchange of historical data and imaginative fiction leading to docu-fictional dramas (Ruland and Bradbury, 1991: 382). Applying fictional techniques to non-fiction materials such as the manipulation/distortion of point of view, scenic narration, use of dialogues, and the recording of details, the journalist-writer redefined the boundaries of writing fiction while writing for popular magazines with a literary sentiment seeking to prove that journalism could surpass traditional forms of fiction. On the other hand, New Journalism was a deliberate deviation from the journalistic reporting techniques that claim an aesthetic value as well. John Hollowell notes that “[t]he new journalism differs from the conventional reporting practiced in most newspapers and magazines in two main ways: (i) the reporter's

relationship to the people and the events he describes reflects new attitudes and values (ii) the form and style of the news story is radically transformed through the use of fictional devices borrowed from short stories and novels" (Hollowell, 1977: 23). By incorporating historical events or personae into a fictional context, New Journalism revived the ancient debate on the authenticity of written texts, suggesting a new interpretation of writing that reality and history can exist only within textual boundaries and therefore the truth can be only revealed by fictionalizing it. The New Journalist aimed not only to convey information like a historian but inevitably experimented with the distortion of factual observations through the writer's imagination and offers only an apocryphal portrayal of reality that substitutes the material reality (Nightingale, 2006: 40).

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is often considered a magnum opus of New Journalism, which attracted considerable attention in terms of the aesthetic and theoretical questions it raised. Considering the debates on the credibility and agency of writer in an age when the author was apparently dead, linguistic concerns about the centrality of language in the workings of subconscious and representation of the reality, and the reader's agency in the production and consumption of literature, Capote's *In Cold Blood* provides an insightful case to contemplate on the (im)possibility of representing the real and reflecting it through writing. Following a lead he happened to encounter on a third-page news report, Capote traveled to Kansas to investigate a multiple murder committed by two ex-convicts, Richard Hickock and Perry Smith. He spent six years interviewing the murderers, the townspeople and the officers as well as compiling eight thousand pages of various documents ranging from private letters of the criminals, diary accounts, and direct quotations from the interviews to the court statements. Besides being an impressive journalistic record, the novel was hailed as the pioneer of a new genre and an original mastery of artful historicization of fiction and fictionalization of history. It was first published in the New Yorker magazine, like the classical journalistic masterpiece John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, in four episodes each of which focused on a different phase of a "crime without a motive" referring to a vast amount of documents as well as based on a cinematic cross-cut narration switching back and forth between the main narratives. Capote deliberately aimed to elaborate a story of universal suffering of the self and an exploration into the nature of innocence and evil. To compensate for the writer's relative impotence and inadequacy as a moralist and an eye-witness for his age, Capote strived to put his artisanry into action to establish that reporting had an aesthetic value besides its social functions, and that "reporting is an art form, can be an art form, people who are reporting are artists and can be artists as much as a novelist can be" (Weber, 1980: 20) to "create a new art form, and the form, demands that writer be completely in control of fictional techniques, which means that to be a good creative reporter, you have to be a good fiction writer" (Weber, 1980: 74).

It has been often suggested that Capote's *In Cold Blood* should be considered as a work of literature rather than pure journalism with its "use of imagination, its shaping of the facts, and its manipulation of the reader's responses to the characters and events" it is still obvious that Capote's fiction only produced "an impure hybrid between fact and fiction" (Lehtimäki, 2005: 69). On the other hand, Capote 'contaminated' his self-proclaimed non-fiction novel and intentionally violated the conventions of realism by employing an omniscient narrator, penetrating into the minds and dreams of the characters, and inviting the reader to complete the story to conceal the factual inadequacy of his text. In other words, Capote betrayed his own claim of writing a true account of a multiple murder by constantly turning to an artistic demystification, symbolization, and conventional novelistic practice. By adopting the voice of a reporter, Truman Capote has assumed the role of a novelist, thus fictionalizing not only the facts but also his role as a journalist, shifting the narrative mode from facts and thoughts to mythical allusions and assumptions, from the omniscient voice of the classical realist author to the journalistic note-taking of the messy heresay.

In this regard, *In Cold Blood* raised much controversy than admiration and stirred "a symptomatic theoretical confusion between fictional status and literary merit" (Lehtimäki, 2005: 66). Apart from the widespread rumors about being a "literary shark" exploiting the tragedy and the murderers' situation and distorting the facts in *cold blood* (why are the initials in lower-case letters?), Capote was harshly criticized for his self-entitled agency that knew no ethical boundaries, interchangeably assuming the roles of the historian and the philosopher to his own liking. Indeed, the foremost traditional role of the author in realist fiction was confined to a scientific objectivity and neutrality to faithfully reflect American society as it was and the author had to cope with social reality by eliminating his mediation and intervention at any level (Waugh, 1984: 19). On the other hand, Capote's *In Cold Blood* bore the traces of an old fashioned sensitivity in its strictly impersonal narration on the surface. Capote managed to disguise his presence in the novel as the omniscient storyteller by using source markers, impersonating himself as an anonymous journalist talking to Perry's father or visiting the murderers in prison, an acquaintance talking to the townspeople, an eyewitness in the courthouse and even talking through multiple story tellers in the novel.

Indeed, Capote was supposedly intending to strip his identity from the novel and characters to present an objective narration in line with the prerequisites of realist fiction. However, since the techniques of reporting in New Journalism urged the writer to go to the bottom depths of the material and seek out not only what was said and done but what was thought and felt, a kind of in-depth reporting that got inside the characters, Capote inevitably became an integral part of the story as the mediator of the narration. Capote offered his readers an interpretation of the events and characters whose judgmental voice as an author was distinctly felt in the refabrication of the events and in the selection and arrangement of the material. In fact, Capote was obviously stalking a story, preferably a murder story for its crashing tragedy as the prodigal son of the postwar American literature. He had reached a point in his career where the expectations of the readers and the publication houses were urging him to come back with just another best-selling miracle. The tragic massacre in Holcomb arrived just in the nick of time to allow him to freely explore the *terra incognita* of New Journalism since Capote had no choice but to invent larger-than-life characters, add some poetic justice to the story of a brutal murder and runaway, and prefer a peaceful resolution at the end of the novel that would provide him with the opportunity to regain his fame as a distinct artist and a glamorous celebrity in literary circles in New York.

On the other hand, Capote, like his contemporaries, was deprived of the abilities and intellectual autonomy to write the truth. As literature merged with mass-mediated forms of narration, reality as represented by the author whose agency is manufactured by particular historical structures of literary canonization is also manufactured by the same structures of knowledge and power which are not conceived within "an ordered and fixed hierarchy but as a web of interrelating multiple realities" any longer (Waugh, 1984: 7). Considering the fact that storytelling has always been regarded a kind of shamanistic mediation between the truth and the ideal, and that "the apparent impersonality of the storyteller is always personal and discursive", one must agree that each story presents an unverifiable fantasy of the writer (Butor, 1977: 46). Therefore, though it heavily relied on the documents and factual testimonies, *In Cold Blood* could only be respected as a successful interpretation of an author who is only able to create versions of reality let alone keeping the historical records of their time. In this regard, Truman Capote, as an author, created a probable reflection, not a true representation, of what he witnessed and perceived. Holcomb town and the townspeople, the murderers, the federal agents, and the Clutter family, therefore, are mere fictitious creations of Capote's unscrupulous imagination: they never existed because once processed into a text, reality loses its originality and purity and the observer always changes the observed and its environment. The act of writing is fundamentally determined by the author's omnipresent "I/eye" which signifies much more than a grammatical expression in an attempt to create the characters and suspense so as to create a fictional coherence. The writer's "I/eye" can substitute the reality of the external world and transform the fictitious structures into the ideological revelations of the writer's presence and consciousness. In this sense, Roland Barthes, for instance, distinguishes historical discourses from fictional discourses and primarily targets the objectivity of traditional historiography by accentuating the conceptual differences between actual and representational. For Barthes, "historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration," and performative and ideological in nature (Barthes, 1981: 16-17). Moreover, Dario Villanueva suggested that narrative truth is utterly "a linguistic phenomenon, resulting from the skillful use of certain techniques, or 'truth devices' through which the text does not impose the evidence of truth, but rather establishes a verbal representation of reality" (Villanueva, 1992: 43-44). Therefore, the act of writing is merely a departure from reality that exists only in relation with the mechanisms of power relations which inevitably produce evil others and archetypal heroes. It has also been suggested that the art of fiction is inherently self-conscious and the use of language in fiction is identified with its distinguishability from a particular context, which means that the author creates symbolizations and significations beyond a clear-cut definition of palpable objects or reports of an eye witness (Waugh, 1984: 67).

Accordingly, Capote's use of metadiscursive narrative style is certainly diffused into his aesthetic concerns, personal intentions, and the content of his work. To illustrate the dual nature of Capote's new journalism, the novel is clearly divided into two parts with a sharp narrative distinction. In the first part, Capote reconstructs the whole story based on a variety of sources from eye witnesses to official documents, and he takes the liberty of fantasizing about the major characters, Perry and Dick, the murderers, and agent Dewey, the federal officer investigating the murder. Capote presents a universal story of Abel and Cain by fictionalizing the testimonies, a hide and seek between the good and the evil with a particular emphasis to empathize both parts. Capote recontextualizes the seemingly straightforward narrative of a homicide and its swift judicial resolution, constructing a mythical tale that explores the collapse of American innocence, the hypocrisy of the inhabitants of a small American town, and the growing distrust of traditional and social values during an era of significant societal change. Furthermore, Capote deals with the problematization of reality in his conscious attempts to create larger-than-life characters with psychological depth and archetypal symbolizations through his

justifications of the crime and romanticization of the murderers. His characterization of the actors and the landscape heavily relies on the inner monologues of the characters, especially Perry Smith and Dewey, as well as the dream sequences (Capote, 1994: 92-93), usually invisible to the eye and often contradicting with the positivism and empiricism of the realist fiction. Capote obviously experiments with the possible motives that create the good and the evil in the heart of America by portraying a dull Methodist family and two romantic rogue heroes disillusioned with the American dream. And while creating a universe of his own, Capote freely exploits the playfulness of language and uncertainty of authorial voice by approximating the unconscious drives and motives that might have led to this tragic event by moving through one reality to another. In other words, Capote creates a dream within a dream narration blending the real documents with ultimately personal narrations, the reporting techniques of new journalism and a jigsaw puzzle of the fictional techniques of 19th century romance and social realism along with the true to life characters and archetypal heroes with "serpentine eyes" and "the aura of an exiled animal" (Capote, 1994: 341), which is especially apparent when Capote intersects the reality and the dream sequences in the novel and invites the reader into this dream play.

On the other hand, Capote assumes the role of a journalist in the second part of the book. He provides a documentary account of the characters and the tragic events ranging from personal letters of Perry to official reports of the psychiatrists. Capote intentionally creates a suspension and doesn't end the first section of the book with a detailed account of what really happened that night. Likewise, he doesn't end the second section with an account of the deaths of Dick and Perry and makes up a reunion scene, a symbolic marriage of heaven and hell. Detective Dewey and Laura, a young maiden and a close friend of the Clutters, meet in a graveyard and leads the readers into contemplate on life and death, innocence and guilt, and vengeance and forgiveness with a sense of closure and return to where everything was started, the peaceful and quiet Kansas landscape.

However faithful to the truth he may be, Capote hovers between the psychological subjectivity of the multiple literary discourses and the formality and objectivity of the journalistic discourse as a fiction writer and the eyewitness in the second part of the book. Paradoxically, the more Capote experiments with the language and the possibilities of the alternate representations of his subjects, namely, the more he tries to detach himself from the language of reality, the more he focuses on the details and seemingly unimportant significations of everyday reality, probably because the art of fiction has taught the reader to focus their attention the things that are usually taken for granted and thus making visible the invisible to the naked eye (Morson, 2006: 216). The abundance of details and their careful recording (the description of the landscape that introduces the peaceful and godforsaken the planet Kansas, people's clothes, physical characteristics, emotional reactions and manners, furniture, and buildings) are striking and enthralling instruments that Capote employed in *In Cold Blood* he inherited from literary realism of the late nineteenth century. While Capote used the details as the absorbing quality of creating an effect of realism to draw the reader inside the narrative, he also constructed an illusion of reality by using details in excess so that he could manipulate our attention into emotional and personal tensions rather than factual dilemmas and climaxes. Capote's portrayal of characters and places in detail primarily aimed to conceal the fact that the fundamental tensions of the story and the details about the murder and the execution were consciously played down to contribute to the broader emotional aim of the work (Dennis, 2017: 36), to evoke empathy for Dick and Perry as well as for the Clutters, to view them all as a "perfect set of symbols" (Weber, 1980: 48) besides being victims of a culture feeding on violence and intolerance. Moreover, Capote deliberately refrained from giving detailed descriptions of the feelings of the two murderers during the execution and focused mostly on the reactions of other people around so that he stars the convicts, especially Perry as the "the natural killer" (Capote, 1994: 55) as well as being a sensitive artist with his "guitar, and two big boxes of books and maps and songs and poems and old letters" "carrying that junk everywhere" (Capote, 1994: 14). Capote justifies their violent and cruel characters by inviting the reader into the intimate stories of their families or highlighting "sad childhood memories" of Perry who was physically and emotionally torn down in a nunnery (Capote, 1994: 132), which, Capote indirectly offers as an apology for Perry's violent hatred against religious people.

Indeed, textual representation of reality has always been a problem, and especially when American historical reality "inhabits a crazy house" (Mailer, 2018: 66) and when the incredibility and inhumanity of reality surpassed fiction. What Capote achieved in *In Cold Blood* was just another version of the world, not an objective representation and true account of what happened that night in Holcomb. Just like his blue-eyed character Perry who pretends to speak like someone he can't become (Capote, 1994, s. 146), Truman Capote, too, impersonates the role of a historical witness of a world he didn't belong to. He confronted an intellectual dead end while challenging the writer's dilemma whether he should be an agent of the truth, a historian, or he should delight his readers by providing multiple probabilities. Capote could only offer rumors, a distorted portrayal of reality, and a fictitious mis-en-scene of the eternal feud between the good and the evil, relying on the assumption that

history provides us an innocent, coherent, and decipherable universe proceeding in a linear timeline. Rather, it sounds more eligible to think that writing can only suggest “an illusory fragment of daily life, only one particular aspect of it, the one which allows us to isolate it as a literary genre” (Butor, 1977: 49) especially when non-fiction started to imitate fiction and pretended to be art. As John Barth suggested, the new fiction is the substitution of reality, a kind of in-betweenness, that best represents the condition of humanity in the world of post-whatever (Barth, 1977: 81). The primary purpose of the conventional realist fiction was the investigation of social reality and to incite a true to life confrontation with the harsh realities of life. New Journalism, on the other hand, was both a response and a contribution to the sense that a world of eternal truth no longer exists, the writer and the reader alike have been left alone with a series of constructions, deceptions, and impermanent structures. It was a desperate attempt to write down the truth, an attempt to unmask the invisible nature of human reality and the reemergence of the author and the self since the writing of truth is always external and depends on signs that belong to others.

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