

THOMAS WOLFE'S SPIRITUAL GROWTH
AS A KEY TO HIS NOVELS
by
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A Thesis
submitted to the faculty of the
Department of English
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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in the Graduate College
University of Arizona

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AS A KEY TO HIS DOCTRINE

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SIGNED:

Joseph Maurice Collier

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Adverse critics have dwelt loud and long on lack of structural unity, selection and restraint in the novels of Thomas Wolfe. Bernard De Voto, the critic who probably rankled Wolfe more than any other, summed up and rejected Wolfe's first two novels with the phrase, "Genius is not enough."¹ He objected to the lack of form in the sprawling books. He said there was no internal structure, no plot, and no selectivity of experience.

However, other reviewers came to Wolfe's defense. They said Wolfe was not a writer to whom rigid rules of literary craftsmanship could apply. Trying to get Wolfe, who considered himself the voice of all America, to mold his expression into a tightly-knit novel of two hundred pages was like trying to force Whitman's Song of Myself into a sonnet or Melville's Moby Dick into a short story. To take away Wolfe's expansiveness, lyricism, verbosity and subjectivity was to rob him of the features which achieved for him popularity and literary recognition. After all, Mr. Geoffrey Stone asked, how could one expect Wolfe to show selection and restraint when the absence of these two qualities had won him fame?²

¹ Bernard De Voto, "Genius Is Not Enough," The Saturday Review of Literature, XIII (April 25, 1936), 3.

² Geoffrey Stone, "In Praise of Fury," The Commonweal, XXII (May 10, 1935), 36.

With strict structural form lacking, could a controlling image, the development of an idea or the personal growth of the hero serve in its place as a unifying force? Yes, the reviewers agreed, if such an image, development or growth could be found. Robert Penn Warren, in 1935, became one of the early critics to search for the image. After a thorough investigation of Wolfe's second novel, Of Time and the River, he concluded that Wolfe's expressed idea of searching for a spiritual father, for some knowledge external to his need, was not the total expression of a controlling image which would give unity to his book.³

Four years later, John Peale Bishop discussed the door symbolism which Wolfe uses throughout his works. He points out that Wolfe's plaintive cry in the introduction to Look Homeward, Angel for "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door" becomes a steady wail which permeates all of Wolfe's books.⁴

In 1941, beginning with the appearance of Joseph Warren Beach's thesis that Wolfe's life was that of "The Search for father" and the "Discovery of brotherhood,"⁵ the studies that searched the works of Wolfe for a controlling idea greatly increased in number. In the next five years, many periodical

³ Robert Penn Warren, "A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," The American Review, V (May, 1935), 203.

⁴ John Peale Bishop, "The Sorrows of Thomas Wolfe," The Kenyon Review, I (Winter, 1939), 13.

⁵ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction: 1920-1940, pp. 173-215.

articles and sections of books dealt with the problem. "A spiritual evolution" through four books was the verdict of Thomas Lyle Collins in 1942.⁶ Also, in 1942, Alfred Kazin saw Wolfe's books as a battle of a modern warrior against society in which the proponent dies without victory--"rooted in a conviction of decline and fall, of emptiness and dissolution."⁷ John Miller Maclachlan, in 1945, traced the growth of Wolfe through the problems of childhood to "the triumphant finale of You Can't Go Home Again." The discoveries of Mr. Maclachlan were that Wolfe came to a realization of his responsibilities as an artist and to an awareness that virtues of a folk culture "may nevertheless become the instruments of oppression."⁸ In 1946, Frederic I. Carpenter stated his belief that "the idea which controlled Wolfe's life and writing was the American dream of freedom and democracy."⁹ Herbert J. Muller, in the first full-length critical study of Wolfe, published in 1947, conceived of Wolfe as an American mythmaker and asserted that the central theme of his entire work was the search for knowledge and philosophical meaning out of a jumble of undigested or indigestible facts. The search carries the symbol of

⁶ Thomas Lyle Collins, "Thomas Wolfe," The Sewanee Review, L (October, 1942), 502.

⁷ Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, P. 482

⁸ John Miller Maclachlan, "Folk Concepts In The Novels of Thomas Wolfe," Southern Folklore Quarterly, IX (December 1945), 183.

⁹ Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Autobiography of an Idea," The University of Kansas City Review, XII (Spring, 1945), 179.

a "spiritual father" and ends in a discovery of peace by discovering the meaning of humanity.¹⁰

It had appeared to me from having read the works of Wolfe that the central idea of his books coincided closely with the tenets set forth in Mr. Beach's and Mr. Muller's studies, that is, that Wolfe's life was one of growth from an egocentric child to a sympathetic adult and from a seeker of some spiritual need and wisdom to a finder of that need and wisdom in a recognition of the necessity for artistic service to humanity. In the studies of Mr. Beach and Mr. Muller, as well as in the periodicals, ideas of Wolfe's controlling principles are stated with a minimum of recourse to internal evidence or to sustained direct quotations from the original works. This is understandable, as the major studies deal with much more than the search for a central idea, and the limitations of space in articles prohibits lengthy quotations for corroborative evidence. Therefore, this thesis has been undertaken to test the validity of the ideas set forth concerning the pattern of growth and search in the works of Wolfe as seen in the studies American Fiction: 1920-1940, by Mr. Beach, and Thomas Wolfe, by Mr. Muller.

In brief, Mr. Beach explains the life of Wolfe as traveling from a feverish search for wisdom, happiness, love and fame--all to be found in the symbol of a "spiritual father"--

¹⁰ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe, P. 6.

to a calmness and certainty of purpose. Muller takes Wolfe's own statement in The Story of a Novel that the theme of his life was the search for a father and a home, for "the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."¹¹

For purposes of this thesis, Thomas Wolfe's search for a "spiritual father" will be considered through the symbolism of three doors. The three doors are love, fame, and discovery.

The validity of such a study as this, in which internal evidence is to be of major importance, can be judged only if the works of the writer are largely personal or autobiographical. This condition is fully met in the works of Thomas Wolfe. It is unlikely that any other American novelist wrote more, or nearly as much, about himself in his novels. Thomas Wolfe appears as Eugene Gant in his first two novels, as George Webber in the last two. His father, W. O. Wolfe, is W. O. Gant, while his mother, Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, is Eliza Gant. His brother, Ben, remains Ben. His home town, Asheville, North Carolina, is pictured as Altamont, Catawba; the university at Pulpit Hill is the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where Wolfe received his Bachelor of Arts degree. The watch which he receives from his brother Ben as a gift on October 3, 1912, is

¹¹

Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe, p. 6.

inscribed to Eugene on his twelfth birthday. Wolfe was born October 3, 1900. Mrs. Jack, Lloyd McHarg and Foxhall Edwards, three major characters in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, are all fictional counterparts of real-life people whose experiences are those which Wolfe had with their originals. All these identifications are generally accepted by students of Wolfe. That Wolfe was an autobiographical writer was long acknowledged by everyone except Wolfe. He insisted that all writing is autobiographical, but it is the artist's imagination which gives the creation worth. However, he could not refute the charge that he drew heavily upon his own life before beginning the imaginative coloration.

These two comments have been taken from many representing the customary and accepted view of Wolfe's work:

"The events of his story derive their meaning entirely from their effect upon the central autobiographical writer."¹²

"Wolfe's work was so exclusively autobiographical, dealing with the members of his own family almost as intimately as with himself, that his readers frequently spoke of his characters by their first names and discussed their experiences not as figures in fiction, but as real people--which is precisely what they were."¹³

¹² W. M. Frohock, "Thomas Wolfe: Of Time and Neurosis," Southwest Review, XXXIII (Autumn, 1948), 350.

¹³ V. F. Calverton, "Cultural Barometer" Column, Current History, XLIX (November, 1938), 47.

CHAPTER II

LOVE

Wolfe, in the first of his posthumous novels, The Web and the Rock, describes a college argument between Jerry Alsop and George Webber over the comparative merits of Dostoevski and Dickens. Alsop, a dogmatic leader of a select literary group, has just concluded his favorite argument in support of Dickens. The argument is that Dickens presents a "rounded pictuah" of life. George heatedly retorts that the rounded picture is nothing more than romantic sentimentalism, but that Dostoevski, through Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov, shows that man does not die for romantic love, but lives for love of life, love of mankind, and that through love his spirit and his memory survive, even when his physical self is dead.

Delivered of this sophomoric pronouncement, George grumbles some more about altruism and humanitarian love for exactly sixty-seven pages and then lapses into a romantic soliloquy which much better describes a concept that held true for most of Wolfe's life. The soliloquy, which pictures George with a rich mistress and richer library, (containing five or six thousand volumes) ends: "Thus, being loved and being secure, working always within a circle of comfort and belief, he would be celebrated as well. And to be loved and to be celebrated--was

there more than this in life for any man?"¹

Until he finally admitted the personality assassination perpetrated by Hitlerism, after his last trip to Germany in 1936, the love in the life of Wolfe was almost totally the love of Wolfe for himself. Even in his grand affair with "Esther Jack," he receives much more love than he gives.

For purposes of this thesis, I have assumed three main types of love. The first is the love involved in a close friendship, the second the love between the sexes, and the third the love which is part of compassion for suffering mankind. The first two types are personal, the third impersonal and oftentimes abstract. All three types of love will figure in this discussion with the first two categories largely treated in this chapter and the one on Fame, and the third in the last chapter.

Love given to or withheld from a child, psychologists say, often determines the child's entire future pattern of behavior. The love in Wolfe's childhood, as pictured through the character of Eugene Gant, is most paradoxical. As he reveals in Look Homeward, Angel, he was the youngest of seven children and grew up among a group of virtual neurotics. W. O. Gant, shallow disguise for W. O. Wolfe, Thomas' father, is a brawling, loquacious, classic-quoting drunkard who bellows and sniffles

¹ Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock, p. 292. (Henceforth, this book will be referred to as The Web).

by turns; Eliza Gant is a parsimonious model of eternal patience--collecting old bottles, string, real estate, queer boarders and abuse from her husband; Steve, the oldest brother, is a no-good bum; Helen is a curious combination of self pity and selfless enterprise; Luke is a stuttering salesman who wants to be known as nothing more than good old Luke, the fellow who would give you the shirt off his back; Ben is the quiet, morose one who hates all his family except Eugene and dies at twenty-six with pneumonia in his lungs and anger in his heart. Little time for love in this family, and yet Mrs. Wolfe has revealed that Thomas wasn't weaned until three-and-a-half years old.

Eliza Gant's efforts to keep her youngest a baby always were of no avail. Eugene grew up and as he grew one thought grew with him until it became an obsession--escape. To Eugene, escape meant the North and the train that carried him "towards the great world cities of his hope, the fable of his childhood legendry, and the wild and secret hunger of his heart, his spirit and his life."²

For Eugene had too long been "a stranger in a noisy inn,"³ too long a stranger at school with a herd "merciless at the hunt,"

² Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River, p. 27. (Henceforth, this book will be referred to as The River).

³ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel, p. 83. (Henceforth, this book will be referred to as Homeward).

(Homeward, p. 92) too long a funny "little freak wandering around with your queer dopey face," (Homeward, p. 143) too long a hill-bound mountaineer with tears in eyes at the sounds of whistle-wails.

Look Homeward, Angel is not a story of love. It is a story of the sensitive clashing with the brutal. It is little wonder that Eugene's years at Leonard's private school during his early teens "bloomed like golden apples" when weighed "against the bleak horror of Dixieland his mother's boarding house, against the road of pain and death down which the great limbs of his father had already begun to slope, against all the loneliness and imprisonment of his own life which had gnawed him like hunger." (Homeward, p. 217).

Eugene spent four years at the Leonard's school after his mother's reluctant decision to finance the venture. To Mrs. J. M. Roberts [Mrs. Leonard] Wolfe often gave the high compliment of being the polestar of his destiny. To her he owed the first and most important peek into the classics. From her he learned the glory of poetry and had opened to him the unending, happy vistas of life in company with great minds. She was one of the very few in Asheville to recognize the sensitive flower among the philistine weeds and he was grateful to her for it. If there was anyone in Asheville during his youth that he loved, it was frail, scholarly Mrs. Roberts. Yet in later years they were to become enemies and remain so until shortly before Wolfe's death, because of his literary credo

that insisted on people being disguised but little in his books. Mr. Roberts was a dull academician who "was simply the mouthpiece of a formula of which he was assured without having a genuine belief." (Homeward, p. 222). It took a long time before Mrs. Roberts forgave Wolfe's heavy-handed treatment of her husband in Look Homeward, Angel. Wolfe never really stopped admiring Mrs. Roberts, however. She was the bright light in an otherwise lustreless childhood.

Episodes could be heaped one upon the other to paint vividly the story of family struggle, envenomed hate, distrust and lack of love in the Gant household. Look Homeward, Angel, is the recounting of these episodes and the struggles of an "odd" child to escape their repetition. This is not to say that there is no family affection, no love, but the incidents are rare, and the reader has the same feeling when they happen as the children did when Old Man Gant showed some sign of affection toward Eliza--a feeling of shame and embarrassment. There is no doubt, too, that Thomas held some love for his mother--even if it mostly arose from appreciation of assistance given. His letters to his mother abound with gratitude and solicitations for her health and well-being. However, Wolfe's many statements to the contrary, it is practically impossible to agree with his belief that Eliza Gant shone forth from Look Homeward, Angel as a courageous woman. The impression is rather that of a property-mad and money-mad woman who never forgot acquisition even at the expense of her family's discomfort [the

cold, impersonal Dixieland as example], and even in the face of sickness and death within her family.

If one episode of the strife between brother and brother, son and mother in Look Homeward, Angel can exemplify the entire lack of love among the Gants, it would probably be the one which takes place while Eugene is home during Christmas vacation in his sophomore year at the State University at Pulpit Hill. Brother Luke insults brother Eugene, but Eugene fights brother Ben. After the fight, in the frigid atmosphere of the Gant kitchen, Eugene bares seventeen years of unhappiness. He says:

"I know now that I shall escape; I know that I have been guilty of no great crime against you, and I am no longer afraid of you."

"Why, boy!" said Eliza. "We've done all we could for you. What crime have we accused you of?"

"Of breathing your air, of eating your food, of living under your roof, of having your life and your blood in my veins, of accepting your sacrifice and privation, and of being ungrateful for it all."

"We should all be thankful for what we have," said Luke sentimentally. "Many a fellow would give his right eye for the chance you've been given."

"I've been given nothing!" said Eugene, his voice mounting with a husky flame of passion. "I'll go bent over no longer in this house. What chance I have I've made for myself in spite of you all, and over your opposition. You sent me away to the university when you could do nothing else, when it would have been a crying disgrace to you among the people in this town if you hadn't...I've given you a fair value for your money; I thank you for nothing."

"What's that! What's that!" said Elize sharply.

"I said I thank you for nothing, but I take that back."

"That's better!" said Luke.

"Yes, I have a great deal to give thanks for," said Eugene. "I give thanks for every dirty lust and hunger that drawled through the polluted blood of my noble ancestors. I give thanks for every scrofulous token that may ever come upon me. I give thanks for the love and mercy that kneaded me over the washtub the day before my birth. I give thanks for the country slut who nursed me and let my dirty bandage fester across my navel. I give thanks for every blow and curse I had from any of you during my childhood, for every dirty cell you ever gave me to sleep in, for the ten million hours of cruelty or indifference, and the thirty minutes of cheap advice.... And now at last I am free from you all, although you may hold me for a few years more. If I am not free, I am at least locked up in my own prison, but I shall get me some beauty, I shall get me some order out of this jungle of my life: I shall find my way out of it yet, though it take me twenty years more--alone."

"Alone?" said Eliza, with the old suspicion. "Where are you going?"

"Ah," he said, "you were not looking, were you? I've gone." (Homeward, pp. 503, 504, 505)

Eugene went to look for love--the magic word which would open to him the eternal door.

Wolfe's second novel, Of Time and the River, deals little with the theme of love. He is not crying the lack of love as he did in Look Homeward, Angel, but the scheme of the second book includes rare opportunities for love.

However, for the first time excepting his delightful oasis at Mrs. Roberts' school Wolfe learns he has a capacity for the love involved in a close friendship. He pictures Eugene as exulting in companionship with fellow Harvard students who also received the brands "queer" in their hill-encircled or farm-bound home towns. Although the celebrated Professor

Hatcher's drama class is lampooned, Eugene forms a very close friendship with strange Francis Starwick, the professor's assistant. He also forms a friendship with another student, wealthy Joel Pierce, whose importance is that a trip to the Pierces' palatial mansion on the Hudson convinces Gant that wealth can be a dreadful thing--a philosophical conviction which remarkably stays with both Eugene and George Webber through the lifetimes of the author's fictional creations. It is remarkable because most of the philosophy in the novels shifts from book to book, and even chapter to chapter. Eugene wanted fame, yes, but accompanying wealth seems to be of little consequence. The apartment building fire in You Can't Go Home Again, which forever finishes his affair with opulent Mrs. Jack, is merely a clincher to his feelings on the evils of money.

Finally, toward the end of Of Time and the River, Eugene falls in love with a European traveling companion, Ann, and after a ludicrous session of oaths, pawing and pleading, he extracts from her the secret of her love for Francis Starwick. His disappointment turns into genuine sorrow for the girl because Eugene admits to himself what he had known all along-- Francis Starwick is a homosexual.

The underlying importance of Starwick, whose exploits with Eugene may be considered a central theme in Of Time and the River, is that Starwick for most of the book exemplifies everything the impressionable Eugene wanted for himself. To Gant, fresh from the hills of North Carolina, Starwick is the

epitome of brilliance, wit, cosmopolitanism and sophistication. To be loved and admired like Starwick is all that Gant desires. Of course, the admiration and love of Starwick by others is undoubtedly divided, but in Eugene's blindness for his hero, this fact escapes.

Eugene first meets Starwick shortly after he arrives at Harvard. Friendship blossoms immediately, Starwick's incommunicativeness about his past life notwithstanding. Intellectual discussions over glasses of wine and long walks are the order of business. Eugene is fascinated by Starwick's mannerisms, peculiarities of speech marked by a high, shrill voice, and his determination to combat and conquer with a truly great talent the insensible Philistinism of America. However, the two friends have an argument and see nothing of each other for several months until they meet again in Paris. The friendship is renewed with full vigor, manifesting itself in one drunken round after another, and finally a motor trip through part of the continent in company with Eleanor and Ann, both from Boston. After the scene with Ann, Eugene finds Starwick, tells him bluntly what he is, and then throws him against the side of a brick building. As fragile Starwick collapses, so does Eugene's ideal image, momentarily. His first and very close friendship in the world outside of the mountains has ended in the discovery of a friend's perversion. The love he had for Starwick has turned rotten. However, the writing of the "Starwick" affair does not dim Wolfe's conviction that love is one of the two

requisites for a happy life. He realizes that the search must be started again.

One thing that does emerge from Wolfe's association with "Starwick" is a hate of a sophisticated pessimism that is fatal to any creative endeavor. "For in Frank's works were implicit every element of the resignation, despair, and growing inertia and apathy of his will." (The River, p. 711) Wolfe's disgust at "Starwick's" resignation was to stand him in good stead later when mountains of manuscripts were piling up with the fear that nothing of what he had written was good.

At the end of his second book, the search for love begins anew and hints of the grand passion are given.

There is no doubt that the love affair of George Webber, who supplants Eugene Gant in the last two novels, with Mrs. Esther Jack is one of the most drawn out, intimately detailed descriptions of the ecstasies and pitfalls of love in American literature. It encompasses about the last half of The Web and the Rock and the first half of You Can't Go Home Again. Both books total 1,362 pages. There are a few quarrels which necessitate brief separations and one big quarrel which causes a rather lengthy split, but it is safe to say that the dominant theme of approximately 680 pages is love.

The affair with Mrs. Jack, at first, spells the answer to hundreds of dreams he has had since he read his first romance

and had his first concrete idea of what the ideal lover should be like. She is, he is certain, the one to love him, to make him feel secure, to allow him to work within a circle of comfort and belief. Mrs. Jack is wealthy, talented, vivacious and very much in love with George Webber. Certainly, she was that love to which his whole life was directed. Fame would come soon now, he was sure, because the first door in his search had been opened.

To trace even briefly the fantastic courtship of George Webber for Esther Jack is a huge task. Here, I have attempted to choose representative passages which suggest the tempestuous course of this affair between a young man of 24 returning from Europe with no immediate future except that he wants to write, and a matronly Jewess whose future is unlimited because it is based on substantial success as a well-known stage designer for New York plays.

They meet on a ship carrying both back to New York. After the first night:

She became the most beautiful woman that ever lived--and not in any symbolic or idealistic sense--but with all the blazing, literal, and mad concreteness of his imagination. She became the creature of incomparable loveliness to whom all the other women in the world must be compared, the creature with whose image he would for years walk the city's swarming streets, looking into the faces of every woman he passed with a feeling of disgust, muttering:

"No-no good. Bad...coarse...meager...thin...sterile. There's no one like her--no one in the whole world can touch her!" (The Web, p. 314)

After a few dates with Esther and the renting of a mutual

working room, Wolfe writes:

A miraculous change had been effected in Monk's life, and, as so often happens, he was scarcely aware at first that it had come. He did not see at first the meaning that Esther had for him. It was not merely the fact of romantic conquest that had wrought the change: in its essential values it was probably this fact least of all. Much more than this, it was the knowledge that for the first time in his whole life he mattered deeply, earnestly, to someone else. (The Web, p. 389).

Yes, this was most certainly his door after a loveless childhood and an adolescence marked with one close friendship which had decayed at the core.

What did love do?

At evening, when he was alone, he would rush out on the streets like a lover going to meet his mistress. He would hurl himself into the terrific crowds of people that swarmed incredibly, uncountably, from work. And instead of the old confusion, weariness, despair, and desolation of the spirit, instead of the old and horrible sensation of drowning, smothering, in the numberless manswarm of the earth, he knew nothing but triumphant joy and power. (The Web, p. 447)

When the patches of grey shadow began hovering over their affair, George admitted:

Esther did not change. She was just the same. The fault was in himself, and in his growing knowledge that, for him at least, love was not enough, and that a love which made him so dependent on her, which made him feel, without her, hopeless, helpless, and a thing of no account, was, for such a man as he, a prison of the spirit--and his spirit, needing freedom, now began to hurl itself against the bars. (The Web, pp. 485, 486)

Wolfe writes already that "love was not enough," but there are still 450 pages to go before he closes the door irrevocably and admits the fact.

First came the quarrels and initial separation. In one of the last quarrels in The Web and the Rock, George, a strange mixture of tender love and bitter anger, screams at Esther. The

scene is really an eruption of what has been bothering him for some time and which bothers all young artists who profess genius but produce nothing saleable. This is taken from the parting chapter:

"That the good man--the real artist--the true poet-- should be done to death--"

"Oh, done to death, my eye!"

"--by the malice and venom of these million-dollar apes and bastards of the arts and their erotic wives! 'Oh, how we do love art!'" he sneered. "'I'm so much interested in the work you're doing! I know you have so much to offer-- and we ne-e-d you so-o,'" he whispered, almost speechlessly, "'and won't you co-o-me to tea on Thursday? I'm all al-0-0-ne--' ...The bitches! The dirty bitches!" he bellowed suddenly like a maddened bull, and then, reverting to a tone of whining and seductive invitation, "'--and we can have a nice, long talk together! I so much want to talk to you! I feel you have so much to gi-i-ve me.' Ah, the filthy swine! And you, you, you!" he gasped. "That's your crowd! And is that your game, too?" His voice threaded away to a whisper of exhausted hatred, and his breath labored heavily in the silence. (The Web, pp. 602,603)

Wolfe was a resentful young man at this time. His play-writing venture had failed (drama being a medium exceedingly foreign to Wolfe's lavishness), and the manuscript of Look Homeward, Angel was going from publisher to publisher. His splenetic invective hurled itself at "Esther" whose capacity for enduring it and returning for more is incredible. Finally, Webber decides that the only way he is going to lose Esther is to put an ocean between them. Accordingly, he leaves on a second trip to Europe. The Web and the Rock ends with Webber in a Munich hospital suffering from injuries received in a fight.

Although not immediately concerned with the subject of love, a Joycean dialogue in the hospital between Wolfe the man

and Wolfe the mirror's reflection has concern for the thesis as a whole because it shows that Wolfe is growing up. The man sees his battered face--the face of his lost kinsman with cupped hands calling mournfully across the deep chasm--

'Son, where are you?' That was a good time then.'

"Yes," said Body. "But--you can't go home again." (The Web, p. 695)

It is possible that at this moment Wolfe understood the broader implications of life, that he ceased to be a brooding boy and became a discerning man. It is possible, also, that Wolfe dropped his alter ego and forgot his wounded sensibilities.

The preface to his last book, You Can't Go Home Again, heightens the possibility.

There came to him an image of man's whole life upon the earth. It seemed to him that all man's life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man's grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory came from the brevity and smallness of this flame. He knew his life was little and would be extinguished, and that only darkness was immense and everlasting. And he knew that he would die with defiance on his lips, and that the shout of his denial would ring with the last pulsing of his heart into the maw of all-engulfing night.⁴

However, Wolfe had to have one more try at all-engulfing love before the smallness of his flame burned out. He had to have one more effort before a thought expressed long ago that love was not enough became transformed into conclusiveness. On

⁴ Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again. Introduction. (Henceforth, this book will be referred to as Home Again).

page seven of You Can't Go Home Again, George Webber renews his affair with Mrs. Jack.

But things were not quite the same between them as they had once been. Henceforth he was determined not to let his life and love be one.... He would keep love a thing apart, and safeguard to himself the mastery of his life, his separate soul, his own integrity.

Would she accept this compromise? Would she take his love, but leave him free to live his life and do his work? That was the way he told her it must be, and she said yes, she understood. But could she do it? Was it in a woman's nature to be content with all that man could give her, and not forever want what was not his to give? Already there were little portents that made him begin to doubt it. (Home Again, p. 11)

The next few months, however, are too filled with elation to worry about Mrs. Jack's possessiveness. The publishing firm of James Rodney & Co. have decided to publish his first book Home to Our Mountains [Look Homeward, Angel]. Fame has beckoned.

George was now seeing Esther Jack every day, just as always, but in his excitement over the approaching publication of Home to Our Mountains and his feverish absorption in the new writing he was doing, she no longer occupied the forefront of his thoughts and feelings. She was aware of this and resented it, as women always do. Perhaps that's why she invited him to the party, believing that in such a setting she would seem more desirable to him and that thus she could recapture the major share of his attention. At any rate, she did invite him. It was to be an elaborate affair. Her family and all her richest and most brilliant friends would be there, and she begged him to come. (Home Again, Introduction to Book II)

George, after several refusals, finally accepts the invitation. "The brilliant party was staged exactly a week before the thunderous crash in the Stock Market which marked the end of an era." (Home Again, Introduction to Book II) The party also marked the end of George's love for Mrs. Jack.

Prize attraction at the party was to be Mr. Piggy Logan,

who was the rage that year.

He was the creator of a puppet circus of wire dolls, and the applause with which this curious entertainment had been greeted was astonishing. Not to be able to discuss him and his little dolls intelligently was, in smart circles, akin to never having heard of Jean Cocteau or Surrealism; it was like being completely at a loss when such names as Picasso and Brancusi and Utrillo and Gertrude Stein were mentioned. Mr. Piggy Logan and his art were spoken of with the same animated reverence that the knowing used when they spoke of one of these. (Home Again, p. 221)

The party was "a notable assemblage of the best, the highest, and the fairest which the city had to offer," (Home Again, p. 231) and among which George moves very self-consciously and uncomfortably into a chapter entitled "A Moment of Decision."

In this "Moment," George Webber sees that the people with whom he is mingling have cried indignant protests against exploitation of the poor, but:

The whole tissue of these princely lives, he felt, these lesbian and pederastic loves, these adulterous intrigues, sustained in mid-air now, floating on the face of night like a starred veil, had none the less been spun from man's common dust, of sweated clay, unwound out of the entrails of man's agony.... Could he as a novelist, as an artist, belong to this high world of privilege without taking upon himself the stultifying burden of that privilege? Could he write truthfully of life as he saw it, could he say the things he must and at the same time belong to this world of which he would have to write? Were the two things possible? (Home Again, pp. 261, 262)

George thought of other young writers who had accepted some part of life for the whole, some fragmentary truth or half-truth for truth itself, some little personal interest for the large and all-embracing interest of mankind. If that happened to him, how then, could he sing America?

The problem was clearing up now. In the exhilaration of this moment of sharp vision the answers to his questions were beginning to come through. He was beginning to see what he must do. And as he saw the end of the road down which, willingly, hopefully, even joyfully he had been traveling

with Esther, he saw, too-swiftly, finally, irrevocably--that he must break with her and turn his back upon this fabulous and enchanting world of hers--or lose his soul as an artist. This is what it came down to. (Home Again, pp. 262, 263)

It was the day after the party--a party marked conspicuously by the bumbling farce of Piggy Logan and a fire in the apartment building--that George lets Esther, the still-adoring, optimistic, possessive Esther, know that they are through. "With a sick and tired heart," he ends the affair.

There is to be only one more love--the love involved in a close friendship--in Wolfe's brief life. This friendship is with Maxwell Perkins, the man who did so much in nurturing Wolfe's genius and adapting mountains of manuscript into publishable books. This friendship with Mr. Perkins will be described in the last chapter.

The final, irrevocable break with "Esther," for all practical purposes, ends the story of Wolfe's love between the sexes. There were not many affairs and, in fact, the one with "Mrs. Jack" was the only grand passion in his life. He had seen in her everything he cherished--romance, culture, fame--and when the dream collapsed, it is safe to assume that future love of the same type was rendered almost impossible. At least, for the remaining eight years of his life, no mention is made of any serious love affair. It seems that when he said goodbye to "Esther," he also closed the door on one of his polestars. Love found in humanitarianism was to follow, but he had discovered--along with his artistic integrity--that love of one person for another, even when that love is all engulfing, does not create a fulness and fulfillment of life.

CHAPTER III

FAME

At the age of eleven, Eugene Gant admitted to himself that he would never make a good athlete. He could never accept defeat and failure as a good athlete should.

He wanted always to win, he wanted always to be the general, the heroic spear-head of victory. And after that he wanted to be loved. Victory and love. In all of his swarming fantasies Eugene saw himself like this--unbeaten and beloved. (Homeward, p. 204)

Fame was to be Thomas Wolfe's goal for many years. It was to take him to Harvard University, for:

He had gone north in the face of the family's suspicion and hostility. He intended to become a writer in the face of their belief that a writer was a man "like Lord Byron or Lord Tennyson or Longfellow or Percy Bysshe Shelley"---a man who was far away from them. Moreover, he had given up a respectable teaching job in Asheville to become such a man---and meanwhile to live off the family's bounty---and he had made this decision in the face of William Oliver Wolfe's mortal sickness.¹

Desire for recognition and fame made him write his mother as early as 1923 that "I know this now: I am inevitable. I sincerely believe the only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease or death."²

¹ Maxwell Geismar, Introduction to The Portable Thomas Wolfe (New York: The Viking Press, 1950), p. 7.

² Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother, Edited with an introduction by John Skally Terry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 49.

In the same year, a month later, Wolfe writes that "Nothing else matters to me now; the world's my oyster and I will open it and know the whole of it."³ In 1924, writing to Mrs. J. M. Roberts, he tells of refusing to allow a former professor at the University of North Carolina publish his play, Buck Gavin, in a collection of plays:

I believe his eagerness to publish the little play comes from a suspicion that I'm going to get famous in a hurry now-- God knows why!--and he wants to ticket me, so to speak. This is a rotten thing to say, but it's my honest opinion.⁴

Finally, the quest for fame was to keep him struggling through the dark years preceding publication of Look Homeward, Angel, when he had discovered he would never be a playwright and was not sure he was a novelist.

At the age of twenty-nine, with publication of Look Homeward, Angel, a degree of fame was his. The book did not have sensational sales, but steady and gratifying ones. It was one of the most discussed novels of the year, and favorable critical opinion outweighed unfavorable. All in all, he was a young writer to watch.

Then the storm struck--a vicious, tornado-like squall arising from his home town of Asheville. The mountaineers saw

³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴ "Writing is My Life, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to Mrs. J. M. Roberts," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXVIII (December, 1946), 64.

themselves in Look Homeward, Angel, and did not like what they saw. Wolfe weathered the storm, but its viciousness left deep scars that were to be covered only shortly before he died. In the Asheville storm lies one of the two central points of this chapter, for it is my thesis that Asheville's reaction to Look Homeward, Angel so tainted Wolfe's first touches of fame that from then on fame could never be an exclusive goal. Praise without praise from his home town folk was unsatisfactory and incomplete, and therefore not the goal of life. Of course, other factors combined to cement the failure of the goal, such as "the cheapness and petty selfishness of those who haunt the famous,"⁵ the lion hunters, and the observation of what fame had done to Sinclair Lewis [the character of Lloyd McHarg]; but basically, the event that forever extinguished Wolfe's second polestar was the reaction of Asheville to his first novel.

Wolfe had anticipated some criticism, but apparently he was unprepared for its severity. In a letter to Mrs. J. M. Roberts, January 12, 1929, eight months before publication of Look Homeward, Angel, he predicted that "I am afraid there is much in the book which will wound and anger people deeply-- particularly those at home. Yet, terrible as parts are, there

⁵ Introduction by John Skally Terry to Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. XIV.

⁶ "Writing Is My Life, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to Mrs. J. M. Roberts," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIX (January, 1947), 44.

is little bitterness in it."⁶ Only two months before publication, Wolfe visited his boyhood friend, George McCoy of The Asheville Citizen.

Tom poured out, with intensity and eloquence, his hopes and fears for his first novel that was to come from Scribner's in October. He insisted that it was fiction; that he meditated no man's portrait. He asked that I understand this and explain it to his friends.... Here, then, was a plea for understanding, a plea made urgent in his mind by his foreboding of Asheville's reaction. He was concerned by the prospect, for he valued the good opinion of his native city. In a letter of August 17, 1929, he had said: "I think you will believe me when I tell you I value the respect and friendship of no group of people more than that of the people in the town where I was born, and where a large part of my life has been passed. I earnestly hope I may always keep it."⁷

There is little doubt, also, that Wolfe wanted his book to receive an excellent reception in Asheville in order to soothe the hurt of having been branded "queer" and almost worthless as a child in his home town.

In a note "TO THE READER" which prefaces Look Homeward, Angel, he took his last chance to help ease the expected reaction:

To these persons, he would say what he believes they understand already; that this book was written in innocence and nakedness of spirit, and that the writer's main concern was to give fulness, life, and intensity to the actions and people in the book he was creating. Now that it is to be published, he would insist that this book is a fiction, and that he

⁶ "Writing Is My Life, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to Mrs. J. M. Roberts," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIX (January, 1947), 44.

⁷ George W. McCoy, "Asheville and Thomas Wolfe," The North Carolina Historical Review, XXX (April, 1953), 200, 201.

meditated no man's portrait here. (Homeward, Preface)

For descriptions of immediate reaction to the novel in Asheville, I am heavily indebted to Mr. McCoy's article. He mentions that The Asheville Citizen review gave emphasis to the book as a work of literature, but that The Asheville Times review gave emphasis to the book as a realistic story.

It said, in part: "An amazing new novel is just off the press which is of great and unique interest to Asheville. This community in fact is going to be astounded by it. Some few well-known residents may be shocked into chills. Others will probably be severely amazed. Many others will snicker and laugh.

The main reason is that the book is written about Asheville and Asheville people in the plainest of plain language. It is the autobiography of an Asheville boy. The story of the first twenty years of life is bared with a frankness and detail rarely ever seen in print. The author paints himself and his home circle, as well as neighbors, friends and acquaintances with bold, daring lines, sparing nothing and shielding nothing."⁸

Mr. McCoy further describes the immediate furor:

For days and weeks and months the book was a lively topic on the streets, at club gatherings, bridge games, parties and teas. Conversations were started and carried on with remarks similar to these:

"Well, have you read it?"

"Isn't it awful?"

"Such a terrible thing to write about his own people!"

"He's a mad genius."

"Did you recognize so-and-so?"

"Now that Tom mentions it, I remember quite clearly that.."

⁸

McCoy, op. cit., pp. 202, 203.

These were the remarks of people who saw the book as an almanac of gossip, a collection of scandal.

The reaction of the community was not organized. It was simply the sum of its many parts, the personal viewpoints of the citizens. Depending on the individual, they expressed hurt, shock, anger, irritation, resentment, indignation, or disgust. They felt the mores of the community had been violated; that Tom had been disloyal to his own family, to his friends, and to his native city. His characters and incidents, they said, had been toothily disguised.⁹

However, Mr. McCoy points out that "there was a calmer group who looked at the book, and saw that it was, without dispute, a great contribution to literature."¹⁰

But, generally speaking, there happened what Wolfe had feared most in his letter to Mr. McCoy--he had lost the friendship of the people in the town where he was born. In his own family, a full cycle was run from hurt pride to a reassertion of pride in Wolfe's literary success. The friendship with Mrs. J. M. Roberts, however, whom he had once called the "mother of his spirit," was severed and was not to be renewed for eight years.

According to Mr. McCoy, Mrs. Roberts had written a letter to Wolfe after reading Look Homeward, Angel, which ended: "You have crucified your family and devastated mine."¹¹

⁹ McCoy, op. cit., pp. 203, 204.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

¹¹ McCoy, op. cit., p. 207.

Wolfe replied in a letter dated February 2, 1930:

"The saddest thing about all of this to me is not that some people have misunderstood the intention and meaning of my first book, but that some people I still love and honor have misunderstood me. I will not say a word against them-- the really sad thing is that we lead a dozen lives rather than one, and that two or three of mine have gone by since I was a kid in Asheville. If people now draw back when they see the man, and say: 'I do not know him. This is not the boy I knew'--I can only hope they will not think the man a bad one, and that they will be patient and wait until the boy comes back. And I think he will after the man has made a long journey."¹²

That the reaction of Asheville hurt Wolfe is plainly seen. The hurt he felt, Wolfe expressed many times in his own writings.

George Webber had written a book in which he had tried with only partial success to tell the truth about the little segment of life that he has seen and known. And now he was worried about what the people back in his home town would think of it. He thought a few of them would "read it." He was afraid there would be "talk." He supposed that there might even be a protest here and there, and he tried to prepare himself for it. But when it came, it went so far beyond anything he had feared might happen that it caught him wholly unawares and almost floored him. He had felt, but had not known before, how naked we are here in America. (Home Again, p. 329)

Among the letters Webber received was one from an old friend:

"...You have crucified your family in a way that would make the agony of Christ upon the Cross seem light in comparison. You have laid waste the lives of your kinsmen, and of dozens of your friends, and to us who loved you like our own you have struck a dagger to the heart, and twisted it, and left it fixed there where it must always stay." (Home Again, p. 336)

Then there was one from a sly and hearty fellow who thought he understood: "...If I had known you were going to write this kind of book, I could have told you lots of things. Why didn't you come to me? I know dirt about the people in this town you never dreamed of."

Letters like this last one hurt him worst of all. They were

¹² Ibid., p. 208.

the ones that made him most doubt his purpose and accomplishment. What did such people think he had been trying to write-- nothing but an encyclopaedia of pornography, a kind of prurient excavation of every buried skeleton in town? He saw that his book had unreefed whole shoals of unsuspected bitterness and malice in the town and set evil tongues to wagging. The people he had drawn upon to make the characters in his book writhed like hooked fish on a line, and the others licked their lips to see them squirm. (Home Again, pp. 336, 337)

In an impassioned, self-torturing letter to his brother-in-law, Randy Shepperton, George Webber pinpoints the despair that attended the many condemnatory letters he received:

"I have moments when I feel that I would give my life if I could un-write my book, un-print its pages. For what has it accomplished, apparently, except to ruin my relatives, my friends, and everyone in town whose life was ever linked with mine? And what is there for me to salvage out of all this wreckage?" (Home Again, p. 355)

One thing he salvaged out of the heaps of abuse was the recognition "that the young writer is often led through inexperience to a use of the materials of life which are, perhaps, somewhat too naked and direct for the purpose of a work of art."¹³

However, to his death, Wolfe insisted that Look Homeward, Angel was not autobiographical, "that it is impossible for a man who has the stuff of creation in him to make a literal transcription of his own experience."¹⁴ The people in Asheville never believed him, although they forgave him in later years. They had made Wolfe write that "my joy at the success my book had won was mixed with bitter chagrin at its reception in my native town."¹⁵

¹³ The Portable Thomas Wolfe, p. 572. Quotation taken from The Story of a Novel.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 573.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 571.

They hurt Wolfe so badly that he was confused and "floundered on for seven years unable to organize his work."¹⁶ They made his fame "chameleon" because Asheville for him was "the centre of the earth" and "without the approval of Asheville there was no fame at all."¹⁷

So Thomas Wolfe set out to do the only thing he could--to write another book that would be a literary success both in Asheville and the world. He had not forgotten fame, he still coveted it,-and even the very next section within You Can't Go Home Again is "The Quest of the Fair Medusa." But to be the fulfillment of his life's destiny, there must be a roundness, a completeness. Until citizens of Asheville took him to their hearts, the circle was broken. This is how Thomas Wolfe felt when he retreated to Brooklyn and four years of loneliness while writing Of Time and the River. It was only after his experiences with Sinclair Lewis that fame, qualified by the reception of Look Homeward, Angel, is to be extinguished forever as the second star.

In the late summer of 1934 he sailed from New York, went straight to London, took a flat, and settled down to hard, intensive labor. All through the fall and winter of that year he lived in London in his self-imposed exile. It was a

¹⁶ Oscar Cargill, "Gargantua Fills His Skin," The University of Kansas City Review, XVI (Autumn, 1949), 24.

¹⁷ Cargill, op. cit., p. 24.

memorable time for him, a time during which, as he was later to realize, he discovered an entire new world. All the events, the experiences, and the people that he met became engraved indelibly upon his life. And the event which exercised the most profound influence upon him in that alien air was his meeting with the great American author, Mr. Lloyd McHarg. Everything seemed to lead up to that. And what made his meeting with Mr. McHarg so important to him was that now, for the first time, he met a living embodiment of his own dearest and most secret dream. For when Mr. Lloyd McHarg swept like a cyclone through his life, George knew that he was having his first encounter in the flesh with that fair Medusa, Fame herself. Never before had he beheld the lady, or witnessed the effects of her sweet blandishments. Now he saw the whole thing for himself. (Home Again, Introduction to Book V)

The relationship with McHarg actually starts in America when the great novelist, upon being interviewed about the success of his latest book, had instead talked of Webber's book, Home To Our Mountains.

Cuttings of the interview were sent to George. He read them with astonishment, and with the deepest and most earnest gratitude. George had never met Mr. Lloyd McHarg. He had never had occasion to communicate with him in any way. He knew him only through his books. He was, of course, one of the chief figures in American letters, and now, at the zenith of his career, when he had won the greatest ovation one could win, he had seized the occasion, which most men would have employed for purposes of self-congratulation, to praise enthusiastically the work of an obscure young writer who was a total stranger to him and who had written only one book. (Home Again, p. 537)

A brief correspondence follows, and McHarg promises to look up Webber after a forthcoming trip to the continent. George looks forward to the meeting with the anticipation of a child at Christmas. About four months later, he receives the long-awaited call. The novelist speaks in a clipped, cryptic, rapid voice over the telephone. The quality of the voice turns out to be an excellent harbinger of the mad events to follow. Webber soon discovers that McHarg is an extremely nervous man,

hearty and irritable by turns, spontaneous and jerky in his gestures, impatient when he is not talking.

George also sees immediately what had happened to McHarg.

He himself had gone through the same experience many times. McHarg, it is true, was a great man, a man famous throughout the world, a man who had now attained the highest pinnacle of success to which a writer could aspire. But on just this account his disillusionment and disappointment must have been so much greater and the more crushing. And what disillusionment, what disappointment, was this? It was a disappointment that all men know--the artist most of all. The disappointment of reaching for the flower and having it fade the moment your fingers touch it. It was the disappointment that comes from the artist's invincible and unlearning youth, from the spirit of indomitable hope and unwavering adventure, the spirit that is defeated and cast down ten thousand times but that is lost beyond redemption never, the spirit that so far from learning wisdom from despair, acceptance from defeat, cynicism from disillusionment, seems to grow stronger at every rebuff, more passionate in its convictions the older it grows, more assured of its ultimate triumphant fulfillment the more successive and conclusive its defeats.

McHarg had accepted his success and his triumph with the exultant elation of a boy. He had received the award of his honorary degree symbolizing the consummation of his glory, with blazing images of impossible desire. And then, almost before he knew it, it was over. The thing was his, it had been given to him, he had it, he had stood before the great ones of the earth, he had been acclaimed and lauded, all had happened--and yet, nothing had happened.

...Therefore this wounded lion, this raging cat of life, forever prowling past a million portals of desire and destiny, had flung himself against the walls of Europe, seeking, hunting, thirsting, starving and lashing himself into a state of frenzied bafflement, and at last had met--a red-faced Dutchman from the town of Amsterdam, and had knocked about with the red-faced Dutchman for three days on end, and now hates red-faced Dutchman's guts and would to God that he could pitch him out of the window, bag and baggage, and wonders how in God's name the whole thing began, and how he can ever win free from it and be alone again--and so now is here, pacing the carpet of his hotel room in London. (Home Again, pp. 560, 561, 562)

This is what George learns from the brief but cyclonic

relationship with Lloyd McHarg, that the more golden the success, the more dull the aftermath, the more exultant the elation, the more miserable the deflation. A hurriedly-planned nightmarish trip to the house of one of McHarg's friends in the London suburbs, in which McHarg alternately sleeps, awakens with a nervous vitality, and demands to be off and going again, climaxes George's lesson. It is not a new lesson. It is something George knew for a long time, but would only admit after seeing it happen to a person who had courted and won the greatest plaudits arising from Fame.

The Lewis incident convinces Wolfe that fame can never be a controlling principle of life. The Asheville reaction showed him that fame as he desired it might never be his because fame was not fame unless it extended to his home town; the Lewis episode shows him that fame is not synonymous with fulfillment, that it does not breed peace and contentment in and by itself, and answer the primary wants of man. He had found that fame is not the door.

CHAPTER IV

DISCOVERY

George Webber did not want to be around when his second book was published. He remembered the lion hunters and letters from his home town. He was gun-shy of publication dates.

Suddenly he thought of Germany, and thought of it with intense longing. Of all the countries he had ever seen, that was the one, after America, which he liked the best, and in which he felt most at home, and with those people he had the most natural, instant, and instinctive sympathy and understanding. It was also the country above all others whose mystery and magic haunted him. (Home Again, Introduction to Book VI)

The mystery and magic of Germany were to be alien to George Webber on this trip. He had read the newspapers about the country's political chaos, but refused to believe it was as bad as pictured.

And now, on the train from Paris, where he had stopped off for five weeks, he met some Germans who gave him reassurance. They said there was no longer any confusion or chaos in politics and government and no longer any fear among the people, because everyone was so happy. This was what George wanted desperately to believe, and he was prepared to be happy, too. For no man ever went to a foreign land under more propitious conditions than those which attended his arrival in Germany early in May, 1936. (Home Again, pp. 621, 622)

Propitious, indeed. Fame was with him. It "shed a portion of her loveliness on everything about him." (Home Again, p. 623) He had learned that Fame was not the answer

to his search, but in an enchanting, magic country at spring-time, it was nice to have along. The Germans had taken George to their literary hearts. Home To Our Mountains had been translated into German and met with instant success. The name of Webber was almost as well known in Germany as it was in America. The first weeks in Berlin, in company with Else von Kohler, a widow of the Norse Valkyrie type, were delightful.

Then, George began to hear ugly things. The cloud was gathering, the fog was settling, the rain was beginning to fall. At parties, when certain names were mentioned, there were embarrassment, anxious pauses, halting explanations. There were even whispers about Franz Heilig, an old friend of George whom he had met in Munich years before.

For the first time in his life he had come upon something full of horror that he had never known before-- something that made the swift violence and passion of America, the gangster compacts, the sudden killings, the harshness and corruption that infested portions of American business and public life, seem innocent beside it. What George began to see was a picture of a great people who had been physically wounded and were not desperately ill with some dread malady of the soul. Here was an entire nation, he now realized, that was infested with the contagion of an ever-present fear. It was a kind of creeping paralysis which twisted and blighted all human relations. The pressures of a constant and infamous compulsion had silenced this whole people into a sweltering and malignant secrecy until they had become spiritually septic with the distillations of their own self-poisons, for which now there was no medicine or release. (Home Again, p. 631)

Wolfe had seen people ill before. He had seen it in his four-year exile in Brooklyn during the height of the depression and, although not a social or political writer,

he captured in sections of You Can't Go Home Again dealing with this exile the terrifying and degrading aspects of sick America through his power of description. He recognized the brutal contrast between the derelicts in a public latrine in front of New York City Hall and the millionaires in the buildings of Wall Street a few blocks away. But he also recognized, as we may infer from the novel, the inherent confidence of the bulk of American people--their unwillingness to accept defeat and honor fatalism. He believed America had the seed to correct its own malady.

However, Wolfe pictures George as seeing, as the summer passed in Germany:

The evidences of dissolution, the shipwreck of a great spirit. The poisonous emanations of suppression, persecution and fear permeated the air like miasmatic and pestilential vapors, tainting, sickening and blighting the lives of everyone he met. It was a plague of the spirit--invisible, but as unmistakable as death. Little by little it sank in on him through all the golden singing of that summer, until at last he felt it, breathed it, lived it, and knew it for the thing it was. (Home Again, p. 633)

This "plague of the spirit" becomes only more depressing in the two major episodes which follow. On the day he is leaving Germany, George meets his old friend Franz Heilig again. In a voice compounded of cold venom and humor, Franz tells George that he may be expelled from Germany because he is a bastard and cannot prove he is of full Aryan blood. George is shocked, sorry, and even more convinced of the idiocy in the new regime. The second incident takes place on the train going to Paris. One of George's compartment

passengers is a sour, stuffy-looking little Jew who immediately receives the nickname Fuss-and-Fidget. Before the train reaches the border town of Aachen, however, Fuss-and-Fidget thaws out considerably, takes part in the genial conversation of all the passengers, and proves that beneath the irascibility is a nervous, but dignified human being. Reasons for the man's nervousness soon become apparent. He is captured at the border town for trying to get out of Germany with more marks than permitted and for being a Jew.

The man argued volubly but he had been arrested and:

As the car in which he had been riding slid by, he lifted his pasty face and terror-stricken eyes, and for a moment his lips were stilled of their anxious pleading. He looked once, directly and steadfastly, at his former companions, and they at him. And in that gaze there was all the unmeasured weight of man's mortal anguish. George and the others felt somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow guilty. They all felt that they were saying farewell, not to a man, but to humanity; not to some pathetic stranger, some chance acquaintance of the voyage, but to mankind; not to some nameless cipher out of life, but to the fading image of a brother's face. (Home Again, p. 699)

George Webber bade farewell to the dark land, the old ancient earth which he loved. The experiences of the summer had had a profound effect upon him. "He had come face to face with something old and genuinely evil in the spirit of man which he had never known before, and it shook his inner world to its foundations." (Home Again, Introduction to Book VII)

And with the shaking of the inner world, he also admits with finality after the long search that:

You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile, to escape to Europe and some foreign land, back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake, back home to aestheticism, to one's youthful idea of "the artist" and the all-suffering "art" and "beauty" and "love," back home to the ivory tower, back home to places in the country, to the cottage in Bermuda, away from all the strife and conflict of the world, back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for, back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time-- back home to the escapes of Time and Memory. (Home Again, Introduction to Book VII)

George Webber had become a man of the world. Because you can't go back, you must go forward--go forward with hope and confidence, even if the goal is unattainable, even if there is no denial that man's life is a tragic lot. It is this realization that prompts his long, sober letter to his dearest friend, Foxhall Edwards, a letter in which his pattern of growth is seen indelibly and his future course of action both as artist and man is traced clearly.

Foxhall Edwards [Maxwell Perkins] was undoubtedly the closest friend that George Webber ever had. Kind, firm, patient, he had discovered the genius in Webber and then nurtured it. He worked hour upon hour, month after month, suggesting, editing, convincing Webber that there was a fine book somewhere among the heaps of chaotic, rambling, unimportant passages which filled the bulky manuscript of Home To Our Mountains. As a team--Edwards suggesting, Webber rewriting and revising--they brought the hundreds of loose

ends together, connected the countless wild cries of youth into a pattern of adolescent frustration, and published a book acceptable, readable and saleable.

George knew how fortunate he was to have as his editor a man like Fox. And as time went on, and his respect and admiration for the older man warmed to deep affection, he realized that Fox had become for him much more than editor and friend. Little by little it seemed to George that he had found in Fox the father he had lost and had long been looking for. And so it was that Fox became a second father to him--the father of his spirit. (Home Again, p. 27)

After the publication of Home To Our Mountains, the friendship grew even more. Thomas Wolfe suffered severe literary pains in his attempts to write Of Time and the River. Five years elapsed between his first and second books--years of despair for Wolfe in the basement flat of a Brooklyn tenement. The world was waiting to see if he had been a "one-shot" artist, and Wolfe was writing prolifically to show the world he was not. But words piled upon words without any discernible pattern. He filled trunks with manuscripts, but not one book was emerging. Through these years, Maxwell Perkins guided, cajoled, assisted and kept up the morale of the worried author. Finally, Of Time and the River, just three times as long as the ordinary novel, was published. Wolfe acknowledged his debt in the dedication to:

MAXWELL EVARTS PERKINS, a great editor and a brave and honest man, who stuck to the writer of this book through times of bitter hopelessness and doubt and would not let him give in to his own despair, a work to be known as Of Time and the River is dedicated with the hope

that all of it may be in some way worthy of the loyal devotion and the patient care which a dauntless and unshaken friend has given to each part of it, and without which none of it could have been written. (The River, Dedicatory page)

Seldom does an author acknowledge so frankly his debt to an editor. Some critics construed the dedication as an admission of Wolfe's inability to write anything worthwhile without the revision pencil of Mr. Perkins. Some authorities believe that, because of Wolfe's anger at such insinuations, the split between writer and editor was caused. A study of the causes underlying Wolfe's decision to leave Perkins is outside the purposes of this thesis, although such a study would be interesting and rewarding. Thomas Wolfe gave his own reason in a letter written from George Webber to Foxhall Edwards:

"I have of late, Dear Fox, been thinking of you very much, and of your strange but most familiar face. I never knew a man like you before, and if I had not known you, I never could have imagined you. And yet, to me you are inevitable, so that, having known you, I cannot imagine what life would have been for me without you. You were a polestar in my destiny. You were the magic thread in the great web which, being woven now, is finished and complete: the circle of our lives rounds out, full swing, and each of us in his own way now has rounded it: there is no further circle we can make. This, too--the end as the beginning--was inevitable; therefore, dear friend and parent of my youth, farewell." (Home Again, p. 707)

This was the start of the letter, the letter that had been forming unconsciously in his mind for years. Webber had long known of Foxhall Edwards' fatalism. In a chapter describing the personality and philosophy of Foxhall, which

was written before George went to Germany, he tells that Foxhall has "a tranquil fatality of calm acceptance for things foreordained and inevitable." (Home Again, p. 493) But George does not at that time comment on the philosophy. With the scourge of Hitlerism still fresh in his mind, he knows now, however, he must comment and to do this is to say farewell to his old and dear friend.

George takes thirty-seven pages in doing it, in the great part of which he unfolds events which have shaped his life and thinking. Then he states his philosophy:

"The essence of Time is Flow, not Fix. The essence of faith is the knowledge that all flows and that everything must change. The growing man is Man-Alive, and his 'philosophy' must grow, must flow, with him. When it does not, we have--do we not?--the Unfixed Man, the Eternal Trifler, the Ape of Fashion--the man too fixed today, unfixed tomorrow, and his body of beliefs is nothing but a series of fixations." (Home Again, pp. 731, 732)

George defines Foxhall's philosophy as a "hopeful fatalism," based on "the way of life, the way of thought, of feeling, and of acting, of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes." (Home Again, p. 732) George cannot accept this philosophy:

"In everlasting terms--those of eternity--you and the Preacher may be right; for there is no greater wisdom than the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, no acceptance finally so true as the stern fatalism of the rock. Man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot. There is no denying this in the final end. But we must, dear Fox, deny it all along the way.

Mankind was fashioned for eternity, but Man-Alive was fashioned for a day. New evils will come after him, but it is with the present evils that he is now concerned. And the essence of all faith, it seems to me, for such a man as I, the essence of religion for the people of my

belief, is that man's life can be, and will be, better; that man's greatest enemies, in the forms in which they now exist--the forms we see on every hand of fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty, and need--can be conquered and destroyed. But to conquer and destroy them will mean nothing less than the complete revision of the structure of society as we know it. They cannot be conquered by the sorrowful acquiescence of resigned fatality. They cannot be destroyed by the philosophy of acceptance--by the tragic hypothesis that things as they are, evil as they are, are as good and as bad as, under any form, they will ever be.

...You and the Preacher may be right for all eternity, but we Men-Alive, dear Fox, are right for now. And it is for now, and for us the living, that we must speak, and speak the truth, as much of it as we can see and know. With the courage of the truth within us, we shall meet the enemy as they come to us, and they shall be ours. And if, once having conquered them, new enemies approach, we shall meet them from that point, from there proceed. In the affirmation of that fact, the continuance of that unceasing war, is man's religion and his living faith." (Home Again, pp. 737, 738)

With this affirmation, Thomas Wolfe ceases to be the romantic egotist, the adolescent lyricist, the spokesman for himself, the searcher for the lost door. He is now the crusader bent on the lifting the weight of fear off the fearful, the chains off the enslaved, the need off the poor. Conversely, he is the undying opponent of Gestapos wherever they may be found, the exploiters and the fatalists.

The letter ends with a Credo:

"I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. And this belief, which mounts now to the catharsis of knowledge and conviction, is for me--and I think for all of us--not only our own hope, but America's everlasting dream. I think the life which we have fashioned in America, and which has fashioned us--the forms we made, the cells that grew, the honeycomb that was created--was self-destructive in its nature, and must be destroyed. I think these forms are dying, and must die, just as I know that America and the people in

it are deathless, undiscovered, and immortal, and must live." (Home Again, p. 741)

How Wolfe would have changed the social order, how he would have destroyed the self-destructive cells is unknown. Probably Wolfe did not himself know. He was not a political scientist. It may be that the morals which he called for in the battle--courage, honesty, and good-will toward men--are the "how." The "how" is unimportant. What is important is that Wolfe at last had seen what he believed to be the artist's role in a sick world, and that he was ready to take his place, elbow to elbow, with a humanity that he had once not been able to see because of his own egocentric shell.

He was not able to write that "I go so far as to say that an artist's interests, first and always, have got to be in life itself, and not in a special kind of life. His devotion, his compassion, his talent have got to be used for man and for the enrichment of man's estate and not for just one class or sect of man."¹

You Can't Go Home Again showed that "he had become adult enough to draw some age-old truths about life--truths as old and as valid as the mightiest of those in all great literature, from the Old Testament to Mark Twain--and to express these truths with humility, clarity, force, beauty

¹ "Writing Is My Life, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to Mrs. J. M. Roberts," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIX (February, 1947), 57.

and originality."²

Now, he looked forward to the future with optimism. Writing on March 1, 1938, six months before his death, he said: "I am standing on the shores of a new land, and if the old world is behind me, my heart somehow is full of hopes about the new one I shall explore, because I found out that although 'You Can't Go Home Again,' the homes of all of us, of every mother's son of us, are in the future."³

Into this future, brief as its days were to be, he entered, knowing that "he had made his peace, with his world and with himself."⁴ He had found the door.

² Burton Rascoe, "Wolfe, Farrell and Hemingway," The American Mercury, LI (December, 1940), 494.

³ "Writing Is My Life, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to Mrs. J. M. Roberts," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIX (February, 1947), 59.

⁴ Herbert Muller, Thomas Wolfe, p. 152.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to test the validity of ideas concerning Thomas Wolfe's spiritual search and discoveries as suggested by Joseph Warren Beach in his section on Wolfe in American Fiction: 1920-1940, and by Herbert J. Muller in his full length critical study, Thomas Wolfe. Both critics have likened the works of Wolfe to a young man's spiritual pilgrimage--a pilgrimage which ends at the shrine of brotherhood. Both critics, also, have taken Wolfe's own statement from his literary life as told in The Story of a Novel.

The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man's search for a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger to which the belief and power of his own life could be united.¹

Mr. Beach pointed out:

This image frequently goes along with the image of a door or gate. Life for the pilgrim is a search for some door that will admit him to reality and happiness; some gate that will open on truth and unbare the secrets of the world. To find this door is to find one's father; it is to be no longer alone and fearful; it is to find oneself and make one's way back to the warmth and security of

¹ The Portable Thomas Wolfe, p. 582.

home.²

The two doors of the search that patterned Wolfe's entire life were the doors of love and fame. Mr. Beach states of You Can't Go Home Again: "The last book is mainly a record of the process by which he was weaned from his two most persistent obsessions--love and fame."³ Speaking of Wolfe's pattern of growth as shown in the same novel, Mr. Muller emphasizes that "love and fame were not enough."⁴

Therefore, this investigator has used the door symbols of love and fame as means of testing the assumptions of Mr. Beach and Mr. Muller. In Wolfe's work, the internal evidence presented through a character is in reality the evidence applied to Wolfe himself. He was one of the most autobiographical writers of fiction of all time. The evidence assembled suggests the following conclusions:

1. Wolfe's childhood and adolescence were terribly unhappy because of the neurotic tendencies in his family, the insensible sneers at a literary dreamer, and the brand of queer. The scene in which he fights his brother Ben and disclaims his heritage was only one of several such episodes. It was only natural, then, that love--the desire to be wanted--

² Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction: 1920-1940, p. 147.

³ Ibid., p. 199.

⁴ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe, p. 147.

would be ground into his every fibre and would assume the proportions of an end in life. He receives this love from the woman who was the original of Esther Jack. It is a love that was all-embracing, all-possessive. It made Wolfe happy for many months. He was convinced that love, per se, was truly a goal, worth the wait and the search. The love dies, not only because Wolfe realizes that "Esther" epitomizes a society foreign to truthful creativeness. He has rejected the woman because of her society, but the experiences with her have also caused him to reject love as a controlling principle in life. This long and intimate affair, a thorough test of whether love of one person for another can ever be a fulfillment of life or an ultimate goal of living, has convinced him that it cannot be. He does not reject love between the sexes, but places it in a more confined perspective. This categorizing, in turn, opens his mind toward what might be his principle, his "spiritual father," his eternal door.

2. Wolfe's concept of fame for almost all his life was synonymous with happiness, with a completeness of existence and with a fulness of creative art. "Victory," "glory," "fame," all of these he wanted, and his desire is told frequently in his works. Fame was even more an obsession to Wolfe than to the average writer because Wolfe wanted to repay his family in full and more for the financial aid he needed and reluctantly received from them prior to publication.

of Look Homeward, Angel; he wanted to prove to them that they should be eternally sorry for their abuse to him when he was a child and the frequent allusions to a wasted life as a writer; most of all, he wanted to make Asheville retract their insinuations that he had been a queer boy and a dreamer who would never amount to much. When the novel was published, the violent critical reaction of Asheville dimmed the gold of glory to a lustreless yellow. He was to be accepted and praised in Asheville before he died, but in the interim he had learned that fame at most can only be an adjunct to happiness. It took the experience of watching Sinclair Lewis to convince him that fame does not answer anything, does not close any doors. For he saw in Lewis that fame must always mean just another "thirsting for some impossible fulfillment" (Home Again, p. 561), another search for some place that has no name, has no location, but is somewhere if it can be found. Something that only begins a chain of reactions, which become frantic and more frantic, is not an end. It cannot be the door.

3. Wolfe's discovery of brotherhood ended his search. His awareness of humanity and the need for artistic service to mankind is thoroughly and irrevocably awakened in Nazi Germany in 1936. His descriptions of the character Franz Heilig faced with the possibility of banishment because he cannot prove what race runs in his blood, of the little Jew captured, arrested and whimpering like a wounded animal, of

an entire nation afflicted with a malignant cancer of the soul whose major symptoms are decay of the cultural spirit and resigned acceptance of the creeping paralysis of fear, all paint vividly the basis on which he laid his discovery. Wolfe realizes that the danger--the danger of the same fatal cancer that had diseased Germany--also exists in America. He realizes, also, that the causes, single selfishness and compulsive greed, cannot be conquered by resignation or acceptance. His closest and dearest friend, Maxwell Perkins, is the type who does accept the "inevitable," and therefore Wolfe must end this beautiful friendship. When he does, in a sober, thoughtful letter, he also ends his search for the door, for the "spiritual father." His life is to be a task of unmasking the enemy's face of innocence and pointing up the deceit in the enemy's false words and lying phrases--all in the service of humanity.

This service was not to last for long. He died two years after the 1936 visit to Germany. But the final conclusion from this thesis must be that his spiritual growth had run full and complete and that he died a much more peaceful man than he lived. For he had found his "spiritual father."

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