

# THE STRANGE CASE OF THOMAS WOLFE

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CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1949

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ONE bright sunny afternoon in the fall of 1921 (and I am tempted at this point to interpolate a couple of lines from the old song "Duna" and to sing with the poet:

When I was a young lad  
Before my hair was grey . . .)

—anyway in the fall of that year Mr. Lee Overman Gregory, of Salisbury, North Carolina, and I were ambling down Kirkland Street in Cambridge, swinging our green bags, on our way home from the law school, where we were both first-year students. As we approached our rooming-house at 40 Kirkland Street, the front door of the adjacent house at No. 42 burst open and a tall, raw-boned, gangling youth erupted. He was six feet six inches in height, loose-jointed, thin as a rail, and shambling of gait. His black hair was shaggy and in disarray—his clothes unkempt and too small for his huge frame. He seemed in a state of excitement and abstraction as he lumbered past us with a muttered greeting to Gregory—

"Who in the world is that?" I asked.

"That," said Lee, with a grin, "is Mr. Thomas Clayton Wolfe. Haven't you met him?"

I had not theretofore met Tom Wolfe, and, while I saw him on a number of occasions thereafter, I never had but the slightest acquaintance with him. It so happened that most of my close friends that year were North Carolinians; there were half a dozen or more in the law school and a similar number in the business or other graduate schools. Almost all of them lived in our house or the one next door, and, as they were a gregarious outfit, I came to know them pretty well. Wolfe seemed to be in and yet not of the group. Occasionally he would lounge into a room full of eager disputants and sit in on a discussion for a short time, but he seemed aloof, moody, and not much interested in the endless arguments of first-year law students. The social life of graduate students of that day was meager enough, Allah knows, but Wolfe apparently took no part in what little there was. His life seemingly was spent in the stacks of Widener Library, and, when he emerged, he appeared to be largely oblivious of the world around him. I saw him occasionally that winter. The following summer Lee Gregory married and moved to an apartment. Wolfe meanwhile had moved over to Trowbridge Street. I never saw him after that year, and my principal recollection of him is that of my first meeting and of the strange appearance which he made.

In 1943 Charles Scribner's Sons published Wolfe's letters to his mother, and more recently, beginning in December, 1946, and concluding in February of this year, a number of his letters to Mrs. Roberts, his Asheville schoolteacher, were published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Standing alone, it seems to me that these letters hardly contain material of sufficient literary value to merit publication. Their significance derives entirely from the fact

that they are Wolfe's and that they give a wealth of information about details of his own life and shed additional light upon his emotional state, particularly during the period of his literary productivity. It is the emotional rather than the intellectual which is dominant in Wolfe's work and the principal significance of the letters, it seems to me, lies in the revelation they make of the extent to which this emotional dominance prevailed in his private life as well as in his writings. In 1926, for example, in a letter to Mrs. Roberts about his unhappy home life and his debt to her, he says:

My overloaded heart was bursting with its packed weight of loneliness and terror; I was strangling without speech, without articulation, in my own secretions—groping like a blind sea-thing with no eyes and a thousand feelers toward light, toward life, toward beauty and order, out of that hell of chaos, greed, and cheap ugliness—and then I found you, when else I should have died, you mother of my spirit who fed me with light. Do you think that I have forgotten? Do you think I ever will? You are entombed in my flesh, you are in the pulses of my blood, the thought of you makes a great music in me—and before I come to death, I shall use the last thrust of my talent—whatever it is—to put your beauty into words.

Again, in April, 1930, he writes his mother from New York:

I am proud of my people, proud of my pioneer and mountaineer and Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry, and proud of the place I came from, although I have been told they do not want me back there, and that I am no longer welcome. As I walk through the crowded and noisy streets of this immense city, and look at the dark swarthy faces of Jews, Italians, Greeks, and all the people of the New America that is roaring up around us here, I realize more keenly than ever that I come

from the old Americans—the people who settled the country, who fought in its wars, who pushed westward.

. . . . .  
One half of me is great fields and mighty barns [of Pennsylvania] and one half of me is the great hills of North Carolina. I will write you again before I go. I send my love, and my hope that this finds you well, strong and happy.

Some critics have professed to find in this division of loyalties—this struggle between the practicality of the Pennsylvania Dutch farmer and the romanticism of the North Carolina mountaineer—the key to the restlessness and yearning for the unattainable which is the essence of all Wolfe's writing.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to shedding light on Wolfe's private life, the publication of the letters to his mother and to Mrs. Roberts raises certain questions which are fundamental in literary criticism and about which opinions may differ widely. These may be stated briefly as follows:

*First.* How closely may a novel conform in plot and incidents to the life of its author and in character delineation to the real people of his acquaintance without losing the quality of being a work of creative art? Stated differently, how autobiographical may fiction be?

*Second.* How far is an artist, specifically a novelist, justified in going in the utilization of actual events in the lives of his friends and acquaintances as incidents in a novel or in the faithful portraiture of their actual characters and idiosyncrasies? In other words, where does the artist's social responsibility begin and his literary license end?

*Third.* How economical of his material may an author be? May he tell the same story over and over again?

1. See Joseph Warren Beach, *American Fiction, 1920-1940* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 184.

*Fourth.* How much inconsistency may we allow between the professions of belief or expressed ideals of a novelist and his own conduct in daily life? How closely should he practice what he preaches?

In order to understand why these questions are pertinent, it is necessary to review briefly Wolfe's career.

He was born at Asheville, North Carolina, on October 3, 1900. His father, William Oliver Wolfe, was a stone-cutter who ran a small cemetery monument works, and his mother, Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, was the owner and proprietor of a boarding-house in Asheville which she operated under the rather incredible title of "The Old Kentucky Home." Tom was the youngest of eight children. His mother apparently was a very hard-working woman, a shrewd business operator intent upon making a fortune in real estate speculation and in the profitable operation of her boarding-house. Apparently, also, she gave little time or attention to the rearing of this youngest son. Tom's father, on the other hand, in spite of his native Pennsylvania Dutch traits, seems to have been something of a ne'er-do-well. He refused, ultimately, to live in his wife's boarding-house, preferring to keep his own independence in the little place he had built with his own hands when he first migrated to Asheville. Tom was shuttled back and forth between these two menages, and with some bitterness he says of himself in a letter to Mrs. Roberts: "I was without a home—a vagabond since I was seven with two roofs and no home."<sup>2</sup> His father had a prodigious memory and an obsession for Shakespeare and the Elizabethan poets. His long and frequent recitations

2. Letter to Mrs. Roberts from New York, May 30, 1927 (*Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1946, p. 66).

from their works kindled in Tom a love of reading, and the boy's freedom from supervision allowed him free rein to indulge it. Before he was fifteen he had devoured almost the entire contents of the Asheville Public Library.

When he was eleven years old, his precociousness attracted the attention of Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Roberts, who were just then inaugurating their private school at Asheville, and they persuaded his mother to send him there. It is noteworthy that she assented only after spirited bargaining and when she had succeeded in effecting a substantial reduction in Tom's tuition. He seems to have been very happy here, and his subsequent tribute to Mrs. Roberts as a source of stimulation and inspiration is heart-warming.<sup>3</sup>

At fifteen he entered the University of North Carolina. His career here was a mixture of early unhappiness and later triumph. As a freshman his awkwardness, immaturity, and lack of social poise made him the butt of considerable bucolic buffoonery, and he was quite miserable. Overcoming this in time, he became a "big man on the campus"—editor-in-chief of the college paper and a member of the Honorary Senior Society. Here he wrote his first published work—a play called *The Return of Buck Gavin*, the product of a playwriting course, which was produced by the local college drama club, the "Carolina Players," with Wolfe in the lead. Based upon my observation of his awkwardness and general ungainliness two years later, this performance must have been terrific!

In any event, this modest histrionic triumph was enough to shape Tom's future career. His father wanted

3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.



him to study law, but Tom was determined to be a playwright. William Wolfe would have none of this nonsense and cut him off with the proverbial shilling. He refused thereafter to pay any part of his son's expenses. But Tom succeeded in persuading his mother to underwrite the venture, and in September, 1920, a few months after his graduation from the University of North Carolina and a month before his twentieth birthday, he enrolled in the Graduate School at Harvard and became a member of George Pierce Baker's famous "47 Workshop" course in playwriting. Wolfe was obsessed with the idea that he had to be a playwright, but this, as one of his critics has put it, was like trying to put a strait jacket on a whale. Professor Baker, however, was impressed with his vitality and originality and encouraged his efforts. He even produced one or two of Tom's plays in the experimental theater. But the New York producers were either hostile or apathetic. The Theatre Guild indicated a mild interest in one of his plays and suggested that he revise it, shortening it, reducing the number of characters, and making it conform more closely to the conventional stage form. This Tom indignantly refused to do.

In 1922 Wolfe took his M.A. degree at Harvard.<sup>4</sup> His mother, who originally had agreed to finance one year of graduate study only, was annoyed that this had been stretched to nearly four, and she refused any further financial aid. Out of necessity Tom reluctantly accepted an appointment as instructor in English at New York

4. The *Harvard Alumni Directory* (1940) gives the date of this degree as 1922. However, in a letter written June 9, 1923, to his mother Wolfe speaks of taking an examination, apparently in a final course. It may be that the degree was conferred in 1923 as of 1922. In any event, he remained in Cambridge until February, 1924.

University's Washington Square College. Here he spent two years teaching freshman English. These were grim and unhappy years for Wolfe. He was submerged in the petty routine of teaching composition and correcting themes on such inspiring topics as "My Last Year at Flatbush High." To a man of his temperament this must have been agony—and as an old English teacher myself my heart bleeds for him. At the same time Wolfe was slaving prodigiously to produce the drama that he was convinced would ultimately bring him fame and fortune. He taught all day and wrote all night.

In 1926, after completing his second period of instructorship, he sailed for England, took two rooms in a little square in Chelsea, and began work on a book. Why he abandoned the drama he himself never seemed to know. His letters to his mother give no explanation. Early in 1926 he writes her in some excitement about prospects for the production of one of his plays. The next mention of his literary activity is a casual line in a letter from London written August 28, 1926: "I am living here now writing my book."

In *The Story of a Novel* Wolfe speaks of this period:

By day I would write for hours in big ledgers. . . . At night I would be in bed . . . and hear the solid leather footbeat of the London bobby as he came by my window, and remember that I was born in North Carolina and wonder why the hell I was in London.

At the beginning of 1927 Wolfe returned to New York and resumed teaching and writing. For the next two years he was wholly absorbed in the effort to earn a bare living and complete his book. Finally it was done and he sought a publisher. After several disheartening rebuffs he

met Maxwell Perkins, of Scribner's, who recognized the merit of the work, but also its shortcomings. Nevertheless, Perkins was farsighted enough to realize that its imperfections could be ameliorated and thereupon offered Wolfe his first contract—and a five-hundred-dollar advance royalty which was badly needed. For eight months thereafter Wolfe and Perkins labored to trim the size of the immense manuscript. As originally submitted it was over 400,000 words long; as finally published in October, 1929, *Look Homeward, Angel* was still almost 250,000 words in length.

The reception accorded this first novel was enthusiastic in general, despite the denouncements of a few critics. Asheville, however, boiled with anger and indignation. One old lady who had known Wolfe since his birth wrote him that she would enjoy seeing his "big overgroan karkus" dragged across the public square. She also informed him that his mother, on reading the work, had "taken to her bed, as white as a ghost" and would "never rise again." Even Mrs. Roberts resented the personalities involved, and there is a six-year gap in his correspondence with her. Wolfe might have shrugged off any single attack upon him, but dozens of citizens wrote him wrathful and threatening epistles, and the cumulative effect of this was upsetting and depressing to him. He describes it in detail in his fourth novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*.<sup>5</sup>

In February, 1930, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship award, and on the strength of this and his royalties from the first novel he returned to Europe, where he lived

5. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940), pp. 335 ff.

until the spring of 1931. During this time he wrote incessantly and returned to New York with three or four hundred thousand words of manuscript. He took a little basement room in the Syrian quarter of Brooklyn and buried himself for the next three years, writing without pause. In *The Story of a Novel* he says of this period:

At the end of the day of savage labor my mind was still blazing with its effort, could by no opiate . . . be put at rest. . . . I prowled the streets . . . and the staggering impact of man's inhumanity to his fellow man . . . in a world in which the rich were still rotten with their wealth left a scar upon my life, a conviction in my soul which I shall never lose.

In 1935, after he and Perkins had again labored for months to reduce the length of the manuscript, Wolfe's second novel, *Of Time and the River*, was published. A week before its publication, certain that the book would be a horrible failure and that he had made a "pitiable fool" of himself, Wolfe sailed for Europe again. After a few months abroad he returned to New York and was plunged into a period of frustration and vexation which lasted for two years. It is not clear from his letters and other available data just what occurred, but it apparently was something like this: During the period of his *Sturm und Drang* in South Brooklyn, Wolfe had not only completed *Of Time and the River* but also had written a number of other works—short novels, long short stories, and sketches—and had virtually completed the manuscripts of the two very long novels published after his death. He was not at all satisfied with the financial return he had received from *Look Homeward, Angel*. Whether or not this dissatisfaction was justified is not altogether certain. Wolfe's attitude toward his personal finances I shall

mention later. In any event, believing that Scribner's were not paying him what his work was worth, he began to cast about for other markets and agents, and this led him into a variety of troubles. He seems to have used very bad judgment in selecting people to assist him in his project. He intrusted several manuscripts to a young man from New Jersey, who sold some, pocketing the money, and refused to surrender the others. Wolfe had to sue him to get them back. He was sued by another agent for breach of an alleged agency agreement; he and Scribner's were both sued by some other "men of bad will" who alleged libel; and still others extorted money from him under threats of libel suits and of revealing supposedly salacious material. This took up his time, interfered with his work, made him irritable, and, worst of all, cost him money. Like many a layman coming into violent collision with legal processes for the first time, he was inclined to blame his troubles not on his own inexperience or bad judgment but on the lawyers—particularly those who were trying to help him. In writing to his mother in April, 1937, he says:

As you know, I have been fighting all along the line for the past year or so with crooks, parasites and lawyers. The lawyers now assure me that "we" have come out splendidly on all fronts and in fact won a glorious victory. I don't know who "we" means but as nearly as I can figure it, it means principally the lawyers.

And again, a year later, in writing his mother about a proposed compromise of some litigation in which she was involved, he writes:

Mabel spoke of a compromise with the bank and this might perhaps be the best solution. I have observed, however, that

lawyers themselves often propose a compromise: they are looking out for their end of it, they have found it profitable to get the thing over and done with in the easiest manner, collect their fees, and then go on to something else. It is a familiar part of their technique: I have had it happen to me—they alarm you with gloomy predictions of the possible outcome if you go ahead and carry the case to court, but after you have consented to the compromise and it is all over, they become very belligerent and tell you that they would have liked nothing better than to fight the whole thing through, and have no doubt they would have been successful.

During this period also he came to the definite parting of the ways with Scribner's. Again the facts are obscure. Wolfe was tremendously devoted to Maxwell Perkins, Scribner's editor. He appreciated the debt he owed him; he dedicated *Of Time and the River* to him; he wrote of him in the most respectful and affectionate terms. As late as June, 1937, he named him as executor of his will. Yet in the fall of the same year he broke completely with him and with Scribner's and went over to Harpers.<sup>6</sup> Perkins was the original of "Morton Foxhall Edwards," the character portrayed in *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*. This portrait of Edwards is one of the most striking and important passages of the latter work, and the book itself closes with an apostrophe to him in the nature of a confession of the hero's fundamental beliefs. Of many strange things about Wolfe, one of the

6. Incidentally, either Wolfe, like many testators, never got around to changing his will or he thought so highly of Perkins that he decided to continue him as executor in spite of this break. At any rate, *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, both posthumous publications, were copyrighted by Maxwell Perkins as executor, although published by Harpers. Wolfe of course had signed a contract with Harpers which his executor had to perform. It must have required some delicate maneuvering and diplomatic technique for Harpers to publish two novels for Scribner's editor-in-chief.

most inexplicable (at least to the outsider) is this sudden and complete break with Perkins.

Between December, 1937, and May, 1938, Wolfe and Edward Aswell of Harpers culled three books out of a mass of manuscript eight feet high. The first two of these were *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*. The last was a collection of short stories published—also posthumously—under the title *The Hills Beyond*. In May the job of excision and revision was completed, and Wolfe turned the proofs over to Harpers and left on a vacation trip through the West. Early in July he fell ill in Vancouver. Doctors hurried him east to Johns Hopkins for treatment. During his convalescence complications set in, and in September, following an operation, he died. He was not yet thirty-eight years of age.<sup>7</sup>

In evaluating Wolfe's work one of the first things to be considered is its enormous volume. He was for his years one of the most prolific writers who ever lived. Disregarding his early efforts in college publications and his dramatic productions, we find that his published works comprise roughly a million and a half words. *Look Homeward, Angel* is about 250,000 words in length, or almost four times that of the average novel. *Of Time and the River* is even longer—about 300,000 words. *The Web and the Rock* is about the same length, and *You Can't Go Home*

7. I have intentionally omitted from this brief sketch of Wolfe's life all reference to his relations with Mrs. Aline Bernstein. However, any biography must necessarily include this part of his life. Their passionate and stormy relationship lasted for years and was the central core of Wolfe's life from 1927 until 1936 or thereabouts. For Mrs. Bernstein's side of the story see her book, *The Journey Down*, published by Knopf in 1938. Beach (*op. cit.*, p. 186) observes that the chief difference between Wolfe's and Mrs. Bernstein's accounts of the relationship is that Wolfe paints himself much blacker than she does.

*Again* still longer—about 320,000 words. *From Death to Morning* is about 112,000 words; *The Story of a Novel*, *The Face of a Nation*, and *The Hills Beyond* account for the balance of the million and a half total.

In comparison, Victor Hugo in a long lifetime wrote only about two million words, of which *Les Misérables* accounts for 750,000. But Hugo published his first work, *Odes*, in 1821, when he was nineteen, and his last, *La Légende des Siècles* (third series) in 1883, when he was eighty-one—a span of sixty-two years. Wolfe's work was all done in twelve years—between 1926 and 1938.

The only comparable volume of literary production which comes to my mind is that of Honoré de Balzac, who published eighty-five novels—about five million words—in twenty-one years. Balzac died at fifty-one. In wordage he greatly exceeded even Wolfe. Possibly Scott's production is also comparable—I have not taken time to look into this. But none of these men died at such an early age. To use a modern phrase, Wolfe was "just getting into production" when he was cut off.

Wolfe was not unaware of the formidable bulk of his novels. As a matter of fact he took a rather sly pride in their size. In *You Can't Go Home Again* one of his characters, Nebraska Crane, a professional baseball player and friend of the hero's boyhood, calls him on the phone to congratulate him after the publication of his first novel. After preliminary greetings and badinage Crane says:

"We been readin' all about you—about that book you wrote. Myrtle's been tellin' me about it. She's cut out all the pieces from the papers. . . . That sure went over big, didn't it?"

"It's doing pretty well, I suppose," said George without



enthusiasm. "It seems to be selling all right, if that's what you mean."

"Well, now, I knowed it!" said Nebraska. "Me an' Myrtle bought a copy. . . . I ain't read it yet," he added apologetically.

"You don't have to."

"I'm *goin'* to, I'm *goin'* to," he howled vigorously. "Just as soon as I git time."

"You're a damned liar!" George said good-naturedly. "You know you never will!"

"Why, I *will*!" Nebraska solemnly declared. "I'm just waitin' till I git a chance to settle down. . . . Boy, you shore do write 'em long, don't you?"

"Yes, it *is* pretty long."

"Longest darn book I ever seen!" Nebraska yelled enthusiastically. "Makes me tard just to tote it aroun'!"

But let us return to our mutttons, which must be very aged critters by now.

Wolfe's work divides itself into two parts: *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, in which the central character is Eugene Gant, and *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, in which he is George Webber. Both characters are Thomas Wolfe, and one sometimes wonders why he bothered to give them different names—or in fact any name except his own. *Look Homeward, Angel* deals with the parentage of Eugene Gant, his boyhood, his life in Altamont, where his father was a stonecutter and his mother ran a boarding-house. Wolfe's father's name was William Oliver. Gant's father's name is Oliver. Wolfe's mother's name is Julia Elizabeth—Gant's mother's name is Eliza. The boarding-house which Julia Elizabeth actually ran was called "The Old Kentucky Home"—the fictitious boarding-house is called "Dixieland." The incidents which form the plot of the first novel—if

there is a plot, and certainly none exists in the conventional sense of the word—do not parallel Wolfe's life; they are his life step by step and incident by incident. Spurred on by his mother's insatiable greed and insistence upon his earning money, Gene has a 3:00 A.M. paper route in Altamont's (Asheville's) Niggertown at the tender age of ten. (So did Wolfe.) He attends public school until he is eleven—thereafter Mr. and Mrs. Leonard's private school until he is fifteen. He watches his beloved elder brother Ben sicken and die of tuberculosis. Here Wolfe did not even change his brother's name—Ben he dearly loved, and to him he dedicated *From Death to Morning*.<sup>8</sup> Eugene at fifteen matriculates at the University of Old Catawba. (Curiously enough, Wolfe never admitted that it was North Carolina where Eugene grew up; but since he traveled north to Virginia and south to South Carolina—which Wolfe speaks of with slurring contempt—it seems reasonably likely that such was the case.) At the state university, Eugene is at first miserable because of his immaturity, gangling appearance, and lack of social graces, but subsequently he overcomes these difficulties and—believe it or not—becomes editor-in-chief of the college paper. During the war he is too young for service and is excluded from participation in the Students Army Training Corps. He is very unhappy about this, but, being myself a veteran of the war in that theater of operations, I would say that neither Gene nor Tom knew his luck. In the summer of 1918 Gene is employed as a checker on the naval docks at Norfolk. So was Tom. The

8. *Look Homeward, Angel* is dedicated to "A. B."—unquestionably Aline Bernstein; *Of Time and the River* to Maxwell Perkins; *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, published posthumously, are not dedicated.

first novel closes with Eugene's graduation from the state university and his decision to go to Harvard for graduate work in the fall.

There is no need of multiplying instances. It is enough to say that *Of Time and the River* picks up the story of Gene's life as he enters Harvard, carries him through his three years at Cambridge, with emphasis on his work in Professor Hatcher's celebrated course in playwriting, through his instructorship at the New York University, his struggles to write for the theater, and the first year spent abroad. Again there is no conventional plot.

In *The Web and the Rock* the name of the protagonist changes to George Webber, and Wolfe tells again the story of his childhood. The boarding-house disappears. Eliza becomes Aunt Maw. George's father is excluded from his life except as a disreputable shadowy background figure whom his mother's people will not let into the family circle. George again attends the University of Old Catawba with much the same experience as Eugene Gant, but more briefly told. This is really background material, and the significant part of the story opens with George's arrival in the city and his struggle to write—first for the stage and ultimately in the novel form. "The Web" is George's ancestry, environment, experience; "the Rock" is the city, or possibly the larger world of which the city is a part. This book carries George through his early period of lonely life in the great city, his intense night-and-day literary toil, his period of literal and social starvation, and later his feverish existence on the fringes of the theatrical world and in the rich, brilliant, but, to him, repulsive life of the cosmopolitan Jewish New York society to which his mistress, Esther

Jack, introduces him. It deals in detail with his affair with Esther, this protracted, semidomestic, impassioned, hotly amorous, coldly bitter affair which was the nearest George—Tom—ever came to marriage, and it ends with George's escape abroad and his collision with the burgeonings of National Socialism.

*You Can't Go Home Again* carries Tom Wolfe's own career on through his three-year exile in South Brooklyn, the publication of his first novel, his brief period as a literary social lion, his intellectual attachment to Foxhall Edwards, and his eventual break with him. It describes George's spiritual development and his ultimate conviction that in life there is no turning back—that you can't go home again:

The phrase had many implications for him. 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-sufficiency of "art" and "beauty" and "love," back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.

The novel closes with the expression of George's resolution to dedicate his powers not to the restoration of America to her former, lost estate but to the discovery of a new future for her. Wolfe seems to be at the portal of a new career in which he would crusade for a more perfect democracy. He says:

I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the

true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. And I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon. I think I speak for most men living when I say that our America is Here, is Now, and beckons on before us, and that this glorious assurance is not only our living hope, but our dream to be accomplished.

It is useless, of course, to speculate on what might have followed in this new phase—upon what the more mature author might have been—because shortly after he penned these words Tom Wolfe was dead.

The question still remains, and will, I suppose, remain for a long time, to what extent the autobiographical character of these books detracts from their merit as works of creative art. There must be, somewhere, at some point, a line of demarcation between fact and fiction. Carl Van Doren's life of Benjamin Franklin, for example, is conceded generally to be a splendid piece of writing, but it is not a work of *creative* art; it is not a novel, and changing the hero's name to Finkelstein and his home town to Pittsburgh would not make it into one. Nor is it any answer to say, as Wolfe does in the Preface to *Look Homeward, Angel*, that any serious work in fiction is necessarily autobiographical; that "fiction is fact selected and understood—fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose." It is true that "a man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create anything of substantial value," but the manner in which he uses it, the imagination he exhibits in the creation of his plots, the delineation of his characters, and the narration of incidents make the difference between the creative genius and the *True Confessions* hack. *Anna Karenina* was drawn

from the well of Tolstoi's experience; but it is not autobiographical.

One of the strangest things about Wolfe, it seems to me, is his bitter resentment at this criticism. Shortly after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* he writes his mother expressing his anger at people "who try to make of my book a diary of family and town history" and calling her attention to the fact that in the introduction he had clearly stated that the book was fiction and represented the writer's own picture of life. He seems to feel that his having filed this initial disclaimer removed all basis for valid criticism, and he observes that he will not talk to damned fools who ask him if So-and-so in the book is meant to be such and such a person living in Asheville.<sup>9</sup>

Closely akin to the question as to how autobiographical a novel may be is the question as to the degree of fidelity with which the novelist may be permitted to depict real persons in the portrayal of fictional characters. Here the artist treads on dangerous ground indeed. There is, of course, first to be considered the law of libel; there may even be involved that shadowy legal concept of the "right of privacy." But wholly apart from the legal aspects of the matter are there not also involved considerations of good taste and the artist's duty as a member of society? It seems to me that there are and that in both these respects Wolfe at times oversteps the bounds of propriety. Does the end justify the means? Does the preservation for posterity of the picture of old Gant reel-ing home, sodden with drink and shouting obscenities

9. *Letters to His Mother*, p. 189.

and vilifications at his own wife and children, justify the violation of these canons of good taste and social responsibility; or has Wolfe gone too far in thus depicting his own father? What about Eliza? Does his literary license justify him in portraying his mother as a garrulous, insensitive, money-mad old woman wholly oblivious of her duty to her husband and children? Apparently he himself felt the necessity of making amends on this score, for on November 30, 1929, shortly after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, he writes his mother:

I will send you a longer letter next week, in which I will speak of certain things you mentioned in your letter. I can only say here, in reference to one point in your letter, that it has never occurred to anyone with whom I have spoken here that *Eliza* was anything but a very strong, resourceful, and courageous woman, who showed great character and determination in her struggle against the odds of life. That is certainly the way I felt and feel about her, and since I wrote the book my opinion ought to be as good as any one's. Some of the most intelligent people in the country have read the book and think it is a fine thing, and that the leading characters are remarkable people—if this is true I do not think we should be greatly concerned with what spiteful and petty people in small towns think.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly some people in the small town of Asheville—be they spiteful and petty or not—thought Tom Wolfe had gone too far. Among them was Mrs. Roberts, his old schoolteacher, to whom he acknowledged he owed so much. She was deeply hurt at the picture which Wolfe drew of her husband as a dull and stupid disciplinarian “who thought that little boys who resisted him should be beaten” but who inflicted no chastisement upon his own children or upon the sons of his wealthiest and most

10. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

prominent clients. For six years after *Look Homeward, Angel* was published there was no communication between Wolfe and Mrs. Roberts. Then in 1936 Wolfe wrote his mother that he had had a letter from her which "I am afraid still showed resentment about what she thinks I said about members of her family."

Here again we find Wolfe taking refuge in his disclaimer. It is to be observed that he does not refer to Mrs. Roberts' resentment at what he said but at what *she thought* he had said about members of her family. There can, of course, be no question about what he had said. The words are there for anyone to read. Wolfe attempted to defend himself on the ground that these things were not said about Mr. Roberts but about a fictional character named John Dorsey Leonard. This belief that he can escape all social and moral responsibility for his actions by uttering the magical abracadabra of "All-resemblance-to-living-characters-is-strictly-coincidental" presents another of the strange facets of Wolfe's character.

I shall pass over the question of economy in the use of material very briefly. Wolfe has only one story to tell, and that is the story of Thomas Wolfe. He tells it repeatedly. Certainly, it seems to me, this is a defect in a writer of fiction. The queer aspect of the matter, to my mind, is that Wolfe seems unaware of the fact that there could be any other story; or, more accurately, he seems stubbornly to insist that all any writer can do is to tell his own story. If he is right in this—and I certainly do not believe he is—then it would seem that one telling should suffice.

The publication of these letters reveals certain traits of inconsistency between what Wolfe practiced and what he



preached. The most obvious is his attitude toward money and the people who have money. His scorn for gold is lofty and is nobly expressed:

The standards of national greatness are Henry Ford, who made automobiles cheap enough for us all, and money, money, money!! And Thomas A. Edison, who gave us body ease and comfort. The knave, the toady, and the boy-rich flourish. There are three ways, and only three, to gain distinction: (1) money, (2) more money, (3) a great deal of money. And the matter of getting it is immaterial.<sup>11</sup>

In writing from New York in 1923, he says: "What will remain of a civilization that reverences a man above all the poets because he can make a cheap automobile at \$500 each?"<sup>12</sup> Again, in writing his mother how he intends to live economically in Europe, he observes:

It is my intention to keep within \$100 a month, *once over*, and some people assure me the estimate is liberal. It does not mean, however, expensive hotels, first-class passage wherever I go and association with damn fool pork packers and chewing gum manufacturers from Peoria, Illinois. But I am ready cheerfully to forgo the companionship of these delightful swine for a few months. When I am in France, I shall keep just as far away as possible from all natives of this broad land of freedom and from everyone speaking or abusing the English language.<sup>13</sup>

This, one would think, is the language of the independent, self-reliant spirit who earns his own way by his own toil and owes not any man. This is a fellow who will have no truck with the privileged classes. But the publication of these letters leaves us a little puzzled.

11. "Writing Is My Life," *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1946, p. 62.

12. *Letters to His Mother*, p. 58.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Except for a few weeks in the summer of 1918, when he worked in Norfolk and managed to save a few dollars over his expenses, Wolfe never even approached the stage of being self-supporting until he was almost thirty years of age. As I have said, his father paid all his expenses while he was a student at Chapel Hill, and his mother financed his graduate study. But even then Wolfe did not begin to pay his own way. While teaching in New York he was constantly receiving money from his mother; his letters are filled with references to these gifts. Moreover, as soon as he completed a few months of work, he sailed for England. His vacation pay was not enough to cover his expenses of travel, and he seems to have managed badly with what little he had. The result is that all his letters to his mother from abroad are filled with urgent appeals—demands rather—for money and occasionally with bitter complaints when it is not immediately forthcoming.

On his return to New York a new element enters. He has a new apartment, one-half the rent is paid by his lady friend; he is careful to explain that she is going to use the big front room as a place where she can meet her business associates in the theater. However, he is offended by his mother's congratulations on having rich friends. He writes:

I think I am more to be congratulated on being unwilling to use them or gouge them, because they have cared enough for me to help me. I have worked much harder this year than at any time in my life—much harder, I believe, than most people ever work—and I have taken (only) enough to feed me. The garret (used occasionally by another person as a studio) has been given me.<sup>14</sup>

14. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Moreover, it appears that, while great wealth in the abstract is reprehensible, when Wolfe comes in personal touch with it, he not only is pleased but perfectly willing to accept its favors. Even Rotarians, at whom George Webber sneers, are acceptable in the flesh. Writing his mother from shipboard, he says:

An old Englishman named Adams, and his wife, have invited me to visit them at their home in Rye, England. Adams is mayor of the town—a very beautiful and famous village—and he is returning from the States where the Rotary Club has feasted him. He is a Rotarian.

At my table is young Hugh Tennant, aged 32, who is of one of the greatest families in England; he is a cousin to Lady Asquith. He is returning to England after five years at the British Embassy in Washington. He knows Asheville very well: when he got on the boat he told me he had just come from a visit to the Vanderbilt's—the Cecil's. He was Cecil's best man. He has offered to write letters securing admission for me to the Houses of Parliament, and other places.

Repeatedly he is entertained by Olin Dows, a former fellow-student at the "47 Workshop," at his magnificent Dutchess County estate and never fails to describe the lavishness of the place—two thousand acres and an eighty-room house. He even accepts the use of the gate-keeper's lodge as his own residence one summer. And in France he is a little brother to two rich English ladies who are being annoyed by importunate Frenchmen.

Now does this sort of thing detract from Wolfe's stature as a novelist? I presume that the question would not even occur to a European. But we in America, and possibly more particularly in the Middle West, have our own standards and conventions in such matters. A grown man should support himself; we find it hard to accept

nonconformity in this respect. Probably the answer to my question is that the work of the novelist should be judged on its own qualities and that the character of the novelist should have no bearing on it. Undoubtedly it should not; but undoubtedly it does.

Well, in the words of South Brooklyn—So what?

Let us admit that Wolfe is autobiographical, that he has but one story, that he was guilty of bad taste and unkindness in his revelation of the nakedness of his family and friends, and that he offended our sense of the proprieties in his willingness to let others support him. So what?

Thomas Wolfe has written some of the most beautiful lyric passages in English literature. I am not at all sure that he is a novelist, but I do feel pretty sure that his work contains the elements of great poetry. Consider this, for example:

October is the richest of the seasons:  
The fields are cut,  
The granaries are full,  
The bins are loaded to the brim with fatness,  
And from the cider-press the rich brown oozings  
Of the York Imperials run.

The bee bores to the belly of the yellowed grape,  
The fly gets old and fat and blue,  
He buzzes loud, crawls slow,  
Creeps heavily to death  
On sill and ceiling,  
The sun goes down in blood and pollen  
Across the bronzed and mown fields  
Of old October.

The corn is shocked:  
It sticks out in yellow rows

Upon dried ears,  
Fit now for great red barns in Pennsylvania,  
And the big stained teeth of crunching horses.  
The indolent hooves kick swiftly at the boards,  
The barn is sweet with hay and leather,  
Wood and apples—  
This, and the clean dry crunching of the teeth

Are all:  
The sweat, the labor, and the plow  
Are over.  
The late pears mellow on a sunny shelf;  
Smoked hams hang to the warped barn rafters;  
The pantry shelves are loaded  
With 300 jars of fruit.

Meanwhile, the leaves are turning, turning;  
Up in Maine,  
The chestnut burrs  
Plop thickly to the earth  
In gusts of wind,  
And in Virginia  
The chinkapins are falling.

There is a smell of burning  
In small towns in afternoon,  
And men with buckles on their arms  
Are raking leaves in yards  
As boys come by  
With straps slung back across their shoulders.

The oak leaves, big and brown,  
Are bedded deep in yard and gutter;  
They make deep wadings to the knee  
For children in the streets.  
The fire will snap and crackle like a whip,  
Sharp acrid smoke will sting the eyes,  
In mown fields the little vipers of the flame  
Eat past the black coarse edges of burned stubble

Like a line of locusts.

Fire drives a thorn of memory in the heart.

The bladed grass, a forest of small spears of ice,

Is thawed by noon:

Summer is over but the sun is warm again,

And there are days throughout the land

Of gold and russet.

But summer is dead and gone,

The earth is waiting,

Suspense and ecstasy

Are gnawing at the hearts of men,

The brooding prescience of frost is there.<sup>15</sup>

This man has made a sure place for himself in our literature. I do not think we should underrate Tom Wolfe.

15. *Of Time and the River*, pp. 330-31. Rearranged in verse form by John S. Barnes and so reprinted in *A Stone, a Leaf, a Door* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), pp. 144 ff.

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING, THE SEVENTH OF APRIL, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FORTY-SEVEN. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES WAS PRINTED BY THE CLUB FOR ITS MEMBERS IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FORTY-NINE.

**[ PRINTED  
IN U.S.A. ]**