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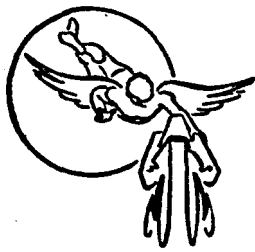
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*W. P. Albrecht*

TIME AS UNITY IN  
THOMAS WOLFE



ATTEMPTING A FORM to correspond with his perception of reality, the modern novelist frequently has abandoned the framework of time and space familiar in the nineteenth-century novel. As the novelist tries to convey his own sense of the passing and duration of time, he is likely to link moments of time not by succession but by the continuity of personality, feeling, or development. And, especially if clock or calendar time seems hostile to a desired permanence or security, the novelist may look for a time pattern, or metaphor, more compatible with his desires.

It is largely through his effort to find permanence in flux that the novels of Thomas Wolfe may be considered "modern" in their treatment of time. In Wolfe's novels time becomes a rushing, all-erosive river, which, nevertheless, may be arrested or turned back by the memory. Like Proust, Wolfe seeks to recapture the past through memory, including unconscious memory, and to show the sensations and moods that recollections of the past evoke in the present. Or again, like Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, he opposes a linear concept of time with a cyclical one, wherein the eternal is repeated through apparent change.

In Wolfe's novels, however, the recollection of the past is clearly labeled as such and is not, as in Joyce or Virginia Woolf, fused almost indistinguishably with the present. Of course some scenes, like the cross-sectioning of Altamont through glimpses of simultaneous actions, show the influence of *Ulysses*, but unlike

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Joyce, Wolfe almost always orients the reader in time and space. In itself, the cross-sectioning technique does not make these scenes any more clearly part of the recaptured past than the more traditionally handled scenes; it does not provide a solution to Wolfe's time problem.

Wolfe's metaphor of time, therefore, is not a refocusing that sharpens the meaning or relevance of past and present actions while blurring the usual co-ordinates of time and space. The kind of unity that such refocusing gives the action of *Ulysses*, for instance, is lacking in Wolfe's novels. Nevertheless, the feeling of time—of flux and permanence—unifies each of the completed novels and the four novels considered as one. This is clearly not a unity of cause and effect as found in *Madame Bovary* or even a unity of character development as found in *Of Human Bondage* or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but a relating of action to time through image, myth, and symbol.

Wolfe was concerned, first, with the individual and, later, with society in relation to time. His first problem was that of the individual seeking stability in an ever-flowing river of time. This problem he temporarily solved through creativeness, which in a sense recaptured Eugene's past, made Eugene aware of growth, and gave his life direction. But creativeness was not enough. Eugene still faced the problem of his relations with other people. Neither as a man nor as an artist, he discovers in *Of Time and the River*, could he really escape behind the wall of creative solitude that he was building in *Look Homeward, Angel*. His relations with other people once more involved the time problem: time stood in the way of the relationships he desired; it did not let him gain from people all the love, pleasure, knowledge, significance that he wanted. But Eugene and, even more definitely, George Webber discovered, partly through the creative process, that certain human experiences are typical of all human experiences, that identification with the archetypal

could bring a man something of the stability he desired. George could never achieve a sustained love for any individual, but sympathy with and understanding of many people enabled him to feel, at the close of *The Web and the Rock*, that he belonged to the great family of earth, no longer isolated in time and space.

Yet neither Eugene nor George, in recapturing the past through creativeness or identifying himself with the buried life of all men, could make time stand still. The forms of life—plant, animal, social—die when they cease to grow. Only growth with time permits life. At the end of *Look Homeward, Angel* Eugene realizes that he can go home to the past only for the materials of his memory, not for his old ideas, his old loves, his old self. At the end of *You Can't Go Home Again* George knows that neither he nor the democracy of which he is a part can go home to its past, but can live only by flowing onward with the river of time.

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, to dramatize the individual lost and then found in relation to time, Wolfe uses the myth of pre-existence-and-return, and with it the usual Platonic contrasts of dark and light, many and one, isolation and union, imprisonment and freedom, shadow and reality. The images of loss or transience are dark, and in relation to lost or passing time man is only a "ghost" or "phantom," a "stranger" isolated from others and even his own true self. "Memory" links Eugene with a better time—a time of security and certitude suggested by the "golden" abundance of Gant's Pennsylvania. (Similarly, in George Webber's memory the "warmth and radiance" of his father's North has been woven with the "darkness" of the Joyner's South.) But even while "imprisoned in the dark womb" of his mother, Eugene began to lose the "communications of eternity." Those better times, like any past time, are in themselves irrecoverable, and in his loss Eugene becomes a "stranger" in the "insoluble prison of being," a "phantom" destined to wander homeless and friendless in a darkened world.

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Lostness in relation to past time cannot, of course, be completely separated from lostness in relation to what Wolfe, in *The Story of a Novel*, calls "time immutable"; for it is the latter that sweeps away past, present, and future. In *Of Time and the River* and *The Web and the Rock* time immutable is symbolized by the river. The river of time suggests both transience and permanence. Time passes, and with it man's life. But time is also eternal in its flow, so that it becomes the immutable background for mutable life. In either sense it is usually dark, like the darkening or fading past, like the tragedy of man's strangeness and evanescence. It is a "dark eternal river" in which man is a "phantom flare of grieved desire."

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, and less completely in *Of Time and the River*, permanence in flux and reintegration with the past are achieved through the act of literary creation. Wolfe's creative experience is best described by Wolfe himself in *The Story of a Novel*. In Paris in the summer of 1930 he felt the "naked homelessness" that great cities always caused him, and in sheer effort to break the spell of time and distance that separated him from home, Wolfe's creative process began. Recalled by the image of some "familiar, common thing" in the past, "the million forms and substances" of Wolfe's life in America swarmed in "blazing pageantry" across his mind, issuing even from the "furthest adyt of his childhood before conscious memory had begun," yet transformed with the new wonder of discovery; and confronted by these blazing forms, Wolfe set himself the task of bringing them to life in a "final coherent union." In *The Story of a Novel* Wolfe explicitly names the "door" of his search as the door to creative power.

This process is dramatized in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Again the images of dark and light suggest *lostness in time* and *being found*. Along with his sense of time as a fading light, Eugene finds within himself a living pattern of certain experiences originally separate in time but fused by imagination beyond the

distinctions of the time-space world, the "many" become "one." ". . . These images that burnt in him existed without beginning or ending, without the essential structure of time." They have a "white living brightness" compared with "the ghostliness of all things else." It is among these living images that Ben, although dead, takes his place, no longer a ghost, but bright and alive. "And through the Square, unwoven from lost time, the fierce bright horde of Ben spun in and out its deathless loom." A horde of Eugenes, too, "which were not ghosts," troop past. "And now the Square was thronging with their lost bright shapes, and all the minutes of lost time collected and stood still."

Eugene has not only recovered Ben but found himself. The symbols of "ghost" and "angel" suggest, respectively, a spirit lost in death and a spirit secure in eternal life. In *Lycidas* the Angel is asked to look nearer home and to have pity on the drifting corpse of Lycidas. By analogy Ben's role in *Look Homeward, Angel* would seem to be the angel's, while Eugene is Lycidas; but throughout the novel Ben is also a ghost in that, like every person, he cannot be known even to his brother. In the last chapter he is restored to a "life" that he did not have while alive; he is no longer a ghost because no longer a stranger. At the same time he is also an angel in the sense that he can now direct Eugene "home." "You are your world," says Ben to Eugene, directing him to the bright world of fused experience. Ben is not explicitly named "angel," but the identification is further implied by the stone angels' coming to life when Ben returns. In their marble deadness, the angels in the shop stand for Gant's frustration as an artist. But with Ben's return the angels come alive and with them Eugene's creative power. The title, therefore, is appropriately addressed to Eugene as well as Ben.

In "God's Lonely Man" Wolfe again describes his creative process as breaking through the dark isolation of time to unite the creator with a bright permanence. But even in his creative-

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ness the lonely man is still lonely. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Eugene has only exchanged one kind of loneliness for another: the inescapable, involuntary loneliness of all humanity for the voluntary loneliness of the creator. In *Of Time and the River* the "spell of time," although it has recaptured the images of life in America, becomes an "evil dream." Remembered human relationships are not an adequate substitute for actual human relationships. Time immutable, as well as past time, denies Eugene and later George the complete and significant relationships they are seeking. The people they want to know, like the books they want to read and the women they want to love, are all too many and the time too short.

Wolfe's solution of this problem is necessarily symbolical; unable to know the plurality of experience, Eugene and George must choose the representative singular, the symbol. This solution is implied by the subtitle of *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life*. The "buried life" of Matthew Arnold's poem is the essential self wherein all men are one, brothers not strangers, a self which is realized in moments of love which, in turn, make man articulate and give his life direction. Again, as in the pre-existence-and-return myth, there are the familiar opposites of the many and the one, isolation and unity, false self and true self, weakness and power. The ending of *Look Homeward, Angel* stresses the articulateness and the direction rather than the unity and the love, although the latter are implicit in the final interview with Ben. In *Of Time and the River* Eugene clearly recognizes, with pleasure, that the commonality of man's experience resists the sorcery of time and space. Especially during those days in Tours when the bright images of America rush back into his consciousness, Eugene feels the similarity of all human experience everywhere and the consequent abridgement of the time and space that separate him from home. Many a scene in the little French towns seems to Eugene "intolerably near and familiar . . . and something that he had always

known." As he rediscovers "the buried life, the fundamental structure of the great family of earth to which all men belong," he is filled "with quiet certitude and joy."

It is this archetypical quality that George feels deeply in the experiences of the little, unknown men in *You Can't Go Home Again*. The face of his neighbor across the street, "immutable, calm, impassive, . . . became for him the symbol of a kind of permanence in the rush and sweep of chaos in the city. . . . That man's face became for him the face of Darkness and of Time. It never spoke, and yet it had a voice—a voice that seemed to have the whole earth in it." The man's face is a symbol of permanence in flux, but still dark in its suggestion of the pain and struggle that must precede a final peace. In the last two novels the frantic race with time gradually subsides as George realizes that to know a part of the earth well and to understand the life of that part is to know the whole earth. Through a sympathetic identification George, in *The Web and the Rock*, has come to love "life" and his "fellow men" and to feel at one with "the family of the earth."

The permanent and qualitative, therefore, may be found in the temporary and quantitative, for transient multiplicity reflects timeless uniformity. The repetition of the archetype through numberless forms is a cyclical concept of time inherent in the pre-existence-and-return myth and in the metaphor of the buried life. With the cycle of time Wolfe frequently unites the earth symbol, which usually suggests permanence. Earth's cycle of growth preserves for Eugene something of past time, for after Ben's death Eugene knows that Ben will "come again . . . in flower and leaf. . . ." Growth as the solution to the time problem is further suggested by the "self" to which Ben directs Eugene's search, a self of accumulated experience which has not simply been but which is always becoming. Eugene's and George's delight in train rides and Wolfe's frequent image of the train rushing through the night in time with time imply even



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in the earlier novels that synchronism was the magic needed to break the spell of time. It is to this conception of permanence in change—of growth with time and the repetition of eternal forms through growth—that Wolfe turns for his final solution of the problem of the individual and society in relation to time.

Like the other novels *You Can't Go Home Again* ends with a kind of soliloquy, but compared with the endings of the other novels, George's closing letter to Foxhall Edwards is a straightforward piece of exposition with less than usual of narrative, scene, image, or symbol. But the symbols of time still appear. The river has its beneficent aspects; time as "Flow" has become definitely good. The earlier George, like Eugene, had tried to fix time or turn it back: to keep the past, to hoard up all experience within himself, to halt time until all space was his. Now George knows that "the essence of faith is the knowledge that all flows and that everything must change." Such immutability as man may attain is in growth.

This is the point at which, George discovers, he and Fox must part. Fox is Ecclesiastes. He believes that mankind is condemned to irremediable evils. But George believes that "man's life can be, and will be better" if "Men-Alive," although only the creatures of Now and not forever, take up the battle of truth against "fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty, and need. . . ." George finds his own life a symbol of the growth that synchronizes man with the river of time, giving him the stability of time. Fox is "the rock of life"; George is "the web." Fox is "Time's granite"; George is "Time's plant." Fox is "mankind"; George is "Man-Alive." George is not denying Fox's kind of stability, but he is claiming validity for his own kind. "You and the Preacher may be right for all eternity, but we Men-Alive, dear Fox, are right for now."

Wolfe never abandons the river symbol—in fact, it occurs in the closing sentence of *You Can't Go Home Again* and on the last page of Wolfe's last and uncompleted novel, *The Hills Be-*

*yond*—but the circular rather than the linear concept of time gains in emphasis. Like Fox, George reflects some of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: “. . . Unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.” In his letter to Fox, George’s life has become a “circle,” which George feels he has now rounded out. His “whole experience” has swung round, “as though through a predestined orbit. . . .” As the earth, the symbol of permanence, manifests its life in the cycle of growth, so has George made his life a symbol of permanence. He had to work himself out of the “giant web” of the past, but with the “plant” of this recollectiveness finally “unearthed,” the “circle” of George’s life has finally “come full swing. . . .” This comparison of his cycle of creativeness with the earth’s cycle of creation suggests the organic vitality of his accomplishment—“complete and whole, compacted of the very earth that had produced it, and of which it was itself the last and living part”—and the resulting sense of integration with the earth.

The ultimate resolution is not, however, in George’s creativeness as a novelist. The themes of fraternity and movement with time are combined to resolve the problem of society. Like the individual, society must grow with time. To realize the brotherhood of man society must let its old forms die and create new ones. His visit to Hitler’s Germany has shown George that the disease of Nazism is a virulent form of the disease that has struck America. America is lost, and only through growth may she find herself. “. . . The enemy is single selfishness and compulsive greed,” and only through a change in the structure of society may the enemy be defeated.

I think that the life which we have fashioned in America . . . 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.

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The brotherhood of man, like the life-principle in nature, reveals its vitality in a succession of ever-changing forms.



Whether this pattern of man in relation to time is always adequately dramatized in character and action is, of course, an important question but one outside the scope of this article. The purpose here has been simply to analyze the time problem and to define the unity suggested by Wolfe's metaphors of time.

The unity of each novel, and of the four novels as one, is clarified by the opposition of the linear and the cyclical concepts of time. These two metaphors parallel each other throughout the four novels, the first representing the problem and the second its solution. The linear concept (that what passes is gone forever) is dominant in *Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, and *The Web and the Rock*. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, however, it is combined with the pre-existence myth: pre-existence in bright, permanent unity and descent to a dark, transitory isolation. The return to brightness, permanence, and unity, which historically is implied in the pre-existence myth, is suggested only at the end of *Look Homeward, Angel* by Ben's return in "flower and leaf" and more definitely by Eugene's creative memory and, through it, his integration with the past. Likewise, in *Of Time and the River* and *The Web and the Rock*, the river symbol is opposed by the recurrent representations of the buried life, although, despite the ending of *The Web and the Rock*, the emphasis in both novels is on flux, and the dark images of transience and isolation are dominant. Finally, in *You Can't Go Home Again*, the cyclical concept solves the problem of both the individual and society in relation to time. To suggest the apparent evanescence and disunity of man's life, the images of darkness persist, but the now-beneficent river, the fecund earth, and the cycle of growth emphasize man's permanence and men's organic unity.

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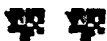
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