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The relation between the poetic concept and autobiographical memory in the works of Thomas Wolfe

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THE RELATION BETWEEN THE POETIC CONCEPT
AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY IN THE WORKS OF
THOMAS WOLFE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
College of the Pacific

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. Thomas Wolfe's literary output includes four long novels and a vast number of short stories and poems. In addition to this he left a great deal of manuscript which is still in the process of being examined and assorted. His four long novels have drawn the greatest attention, for it is in these that he has done his finest and most provocative work. In each one Wolfe is the central figure, and through his eyes we are allowed to see the world as he saw it. It is because of this that the charges of egotism, paranoic tendencies, genius, immaturity, and plain mediocrity have been hurled at him. From the statement of Sinclair Lewis that Wolfe might live to be the greatest writer that America has yet produced, to Canby's "I think that this novel Of Time and the River like many fiery and ambitious American books . . . is an artistic flop,"¹ Wolfe has been analyzed and interpreted by critics, near critics, and uncritical sentiment. The most consistent criticism leveled at him is that whatever success he may have attained is due to autobiographical memory, and that

¹ Henry Seidel Canby, Review of Of Time and the River, The Saturday Review of Literature, March 9, 1935, pp. (529)-530.

if he laid aside the tools of subjectivity, his work would have only an ordinary prosaic quality.

It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate that Wolfe's accomplishments were due not to autobiographical memory but instead to a supreme intensity of poetic feeling and tremendous scope of power and imagery--to show that Thomas Wolfe was an artist who was abundantly rich in word range, a master of characterization and of creative imagination, thereby to refute the claim of those who narrow his potentialities merely to those of an autobiographical nature.

Importance of the study. By a careful study and investigation of the methods, aims, and results of a writer, an honest and sincere evaluation can be made. There is need for an impartial analysis of Thomas Wolfe's work in order to judge clearly the basis of his greatness. In so doing, we may be able to reach far below the workings of a novelist and discern the true motivations and qualities which have at times resulted in such a lyrical cry. As Thomas Wolfe is conceded by a majority of literary critics to be one of America's outstanding writers, an attempt to establish his talent as an outgrowth of an innate sense of creative imagination and poetic fervor has an intrinsic value.

To make a study of one of America's finest authors

who wrote during our country's most ambitious era of fiction is to find the expression of our modern life in America, for through our great writers of fiction can be felt the vast throb of America's hopes and sorrows, joys and despairs. To explore the detail of Wolfe's artistry is to feel with and through him life as it really is. Therefore, the importance of this study is twofold--one aspect growing out of the other, for the study of literature cannot be separated from its relation to society. It is in life itself that literature finds its source. This is especially true of the twenties and thirties, as our American novelists were not writing of the past or the future but of their own times.

Most writers of fiction have chosen their point of view, their theme, and their materials with the deliberate intention of staying outside, so that the result may have as much detachment and objectivity as possible. When we study Thomas Wolfe we realize that there is no such term as esthetic objectivity, for he is attempting to present the whole of life with its every experience. The significant difference, however, lies in the fact that he cannot remain a dispassionate observer but instead finds himself interlocked with all of life's manifestations and disclosures.

The central character in all four novels is always

Thomas Wolfe, describing his childhood, his adolescence, and his manhood. There is no real attempt to disguise this fact, although he uses the names Eugene Gant and George Webber to identify himself. In his works he does change names and places, but it is only a thin disguise and was not made to give the impression of true fiction.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Every great writer has drawn forth tremendous amounts of criticism, both just and unjust. It is quite obvious, after perusing such criticism, that a writer can be made to appear either superior or inferior to what is actually the case, and Thomas Wolfe is no exception.

His opening thrust into the literary field fell like a bomb in the midst of a stunned world, and it was not long until the forces of critical action were lined either for or against the new aspirant. As each succeeding work came from Wolfe's pen, the sides became more clearly drawn, leaving two schools of thought: one which believed Wolfe a genius and artist, and the other which maintained that he had flashes of greatness, but lacked the smoothness, consistency, and form of a great writer, coupled with the charge that whatever success he might have attained was due to the fact that his writing was largely autobiographical.

One of Wolfe's most consistent critics is Bernard De Voto, who maintains that "Genius is not enough."¹ De Voto's main concern is to judge Wolfe's work as a novelist.

¹ Bernard De Voto, Forays and Rebuttals (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936), pp. (324)-333.

He goes on to show that Wolfe's writing is incomplete and disordered--that by all our standards of form, Wolfe is not writing a novel.

Percy Holmes Boynton² has made a study of Thomas Wolfe, decrying his lack of taste, form, and maturity. It is Boynton's belief that Wolfe's egoism was a prominent factor in undermining a fine style and necessary sincerity. Coupled with this trait is Wolfe's great aptitude for redundancy, which, to this critic, destroys whatever effect Wolfe might have been trying to achieve. However interesting all this may be, it is singularly noteworthy to remember that Boynton apparently forgets himself and compares Wolfe with Byron, Whitman, and Twain--an extremely dubious indictment, indeed.

Carl Van Doren, in The American Novel, contributes an interesting point in his criticism of Thomas Wolfe. Disregarding the shallow analysis of De Voto, Van Doren maintains that if we search carefully enough in the four long novels we can find a

. . . tumultuous series of scenes held together by the unity of a single giant hunger and desire, charging forward without sense of direction, haunted by the perpetual image of time as an infinite river in which men live their short and trifling lives, so soon

² Percy Holmes Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1940), pp. 204-224.

forgotten in the universal flood.³

There is excellent basis for this provocative thought, for it shows that Wolfe, while not caring at all for the form of a novel, did have in mind a vast universality of theme which transcends and makes unimportant the small, occasional, perfectly fashioned stories produced by writers of lesser stature.

Alfred Kazin quotes John Beale Bishop as saying "Wolfe's aim was to set down America as far as it can belong to the experience of one man."⁴ This strikes at the heart of the matter, for Wolfe was determined to express himself as completely as possible in terms of his experiences. Kazin goes on to state that "He was not 'celebrating' America as Whitman had done; he was trying to record it, to assimilate it, to echo it to himself."⁵ This, however, is only partly true, for Wolfe, like Whitman, had a fundamental belief in democracy but, realizing that many of our actions are inimical to the democratic ideal, made an attempt to expose the hypocritical shams.

³ Carl Van Doren, The American Novel (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 348.

⁴ Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 472.

⁵ Ibid., p. 476.

There have been numerous periodical articles dealing with Wolfe--book reviews and critical analyses. But in all this vast morass of material there was lacking an inquiry into the real source of Wolfe's prose poetry. Was this source the result of an innate feeling of intensity and literary fervor, or could he never have written anything but an elaborated autobiography? It was because of this unanswered question that I have undertaken this investigation, for it seemed highly desirable to examine and analyze Wolfe's works as fairly and completely as possible.

It is significant in our time, ten years after Wolfe's passing, to attempt a critical appraisal of one of our most discussed writers, for a true artist is never completely understood (if ever) until he has been not only read, but studied and analyzed.

CHAPTER III

HIS LIFE

Since the problem is to show that Wolfe's autobiographical memory was not the sole explanation of his talent, it is important that some of his life be known and understood.

Thomas Wolfe was born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina, the son of a dreamer and drunkard stone-cutter and a miserly, greedy, real-estate-mad mother. He had three older brothers and one older sister. The environment created by two parents who would willingly have sacrificed their offspring for drink and mammon had its effect upon the children, and such a conflict of ideals was not only disquieting but confusing.

As a child Tom was very unhappy. He never entered into sports with the others, but being shy, temperamental, and eccentric, he stayed away from such display. School found Wolfe as tormented as at home. The boys and girls, as well as his own brothers and sisters, believed him to be somewhat queer. But the youngster escaped into the world of books, the imagination of poetry and ideas. He read almost everything he could find, including Ridpath's History of the World and Kipling's Jungle Book. After devouring practically all the books in the local small

town library and several years of studying in a local private school, at the age of fifteen, Tom advanced to college. He was sent by his father to the University of North Carolina, where he was graduated after four years with an A.B. degree.

At the University he was a dynamo of energy. He debated, declaimed, became a member of the Phi Kappa Phi fraternity, wrote plays, edited student publications, held office, and by his third year was a leader in everything he chose to enter. His classmates voted him the finest writer, the wittiest and most original of them all.

From Chapel Hill he went to Harvard and was soon a member of the famous Baker "47 Workshop." Here he wrote three unsuccessful plays, read omnivorously, and received his M.A. From there he went to New York University as an English instructor. Professor Homer Watt, the head of the English Department there, detected the great talent of Wolfe and encouraged him. Teachers at Columbia enjoy telling how Tom gave of himself unstintedly to his students, regardless of their ability. With unusual impartiality he worked on ninety compositions each week. His criticisms were often longer than the paper itself. In addition to this he would go home to his apartment exhausted from his teaching and frequently write all night. Fortunately a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1930 gave him more

time to spend on his writing.

While traveling in Europe, Tom stayed for lengthy periods of time in England, France, and Germany. He has written quite freely about these experiences, and we are told of his attempts in England and France to find seclusion and quiet so he could write. He had a great fondness for Germany and felt at home there. The dark forests and the dark music seemed to have an enchantment which filled him with a wild, fierce joy. It was with a great sense of pain and disillusionment that he returned to Germany in the early thirties to discover the cruel power and corruption that had pervaded the land. Always tremendously perceptive, Tom drank in all the horrors, the abuse, and the brutality of the Hitler regime. It helped to fashion for him a newer, more mature philosophy of life.

While returning to the United States, Tom met a woman who was to become the greatest influence he was ever to know. She was a Jewess, at least fifteen years older than he. Through her capacity as a top stage set designer, she was able to fashion contacts for him that he would never have been able to secure for himself. They fell in love, and although she was a married woman, they continued a tempestuous affair which carried him to the heights of happiness and to the extreme throes of despair.

Before the affair ended in unhappiness for both of

them, she had the insight to realize his great genius, and because of her faith in him, he goaded himself on, overcoming time and time again the terrible fear that perhaps he couldn't write.

He died in 1938 at the age of thirty-seven, a weary, overworked writer. Driving himself relentlessly and furiously, he died, tired by his ceaseless desire to create.

CHAPTER IV

METHOD OF PROCEDURE

In order to substantiate the hypothesis that Wolfe's success resulted from great poetic power and masterful creative imagination rather than mere autobiographical memory, it will be necessary to demonstrate with illustrations and interpretation. The question arises: What differentiates the great Artist from the average? With what qualities is he endowed? There are certain fundamental requisites which a great writer must possess, certain manifestations of creative artistry, of which the greatest, if he is fortunate, is poetic intensity; second is characterization, or the ability to create and develop individuals who are seen vividly and appear to possess the elements of real life; dramatic power is essential in order to transmit movement and fidelity to life's great moments and truths; a writer having the ability to transcend his own experiences and attain the high level of universality contains within himself a supreme requisite of greatness. It will be our objective to demonstrate that these qualities which Wolfe possessed are all creative and imaginative.

CHAPTER V

PROSE POETRY

The outpouring of lyrical expression, the music of beautiful phrases, stems from a strong imagination and fecund ear. The lyrical element of poetry is the poet's greatest outpouring of his own personality expressing the subjective element and intensity of his own emotion.¹ The response to the influence of environment results in a sudden harmony of beauty enclosed in emotion. Out of his joy, sadness, and wonder emerges an image of his perception, brought forth through the medium of language. He is literally forced to give expression by the powerful forces within himself. In simple terms the lyric is a cry elicited by the fresh picture of beauty. As the poet feels more deeply and experiences more of the wonders of life, his outpouring becomes richer, more meaningful. No mood is too complex, for its greatest characteristic is intense personality. But the true and great poet has the power to transpose the small and select amount of beauty in his vision into a universal and infinite storehouse from which anyone may draw.

Wolfe is first of all a poet, a lyric poet of

¹ Carleton Noyes, Harvard Classics Lectures (P. F. Collier and Son Corporation, New York, 1914), pp. 55-57.

extraordinary intensity, with a sensitivity to word music, to rhythm and cadence² which is never static but is dynamic. These qualities are conducive to exciting experiences engendered by the words themselves.

A tremendous amount of Wolfe's work is rhapsodic or lyrical prose, poetic passages celebrating the moods, manners, scenes, thoughts, and ideas of a nation. There are strange, moving reveries and chants of time, and death, and the mystery of man's existence upon the earth. Their rhythms and long catalogues demand not a paragraph but a full page to be truly effective.

Wolfe established his great theme by means of poetry, constantly repeating it with variations throughout his four long novels. We shall take up the theme and his treatment of it later. Now we shall concern ourselves with the poetic treatment of his ideas. His great novel, for all his work consisted ultimately of one large, comprehensive entity, opens with the prose poem:

. . . A stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces.

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has

² John Hall Wheelock, Face of a Nation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. v.

looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on the most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?

O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.³

From the very beginning it is apparent that Wolfe is imbued with the poet's vision of life. It is a romantic concept, for he was a romantic poet concerned not only with the obvious but with man's struggle with himself and his environment. The language is steeped in symbols: "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door;" for like every genuine artist, Wolfe has a deeper quarry, meanings that transcend the obvious.

As Wolfe opens his second book, he continues and expands his great theme.

. . . of wandering forever and the earth again
. . . of seed time, bloom, and the mellow-dropping
harvest. . . .

Where shall the weary rest? . . . what doors are open for the wanderer? And which of us shall find his father, know his face, and in what place, and in what time, and in what land? Where? Where the weary of wandering can find peace, where the tumult, the fever, and the fret shall be stilled.

. . . O flower of love whose strong lips drink

³ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 2.

us downward into death, in all things far and fleeting, enchantress of our twenty thousand days, the brain madden and the heart be twisted, broken by her kiss, but glory, glory, glory, she remains: Immortal love, alone and aching in the wilderness, we cried to you: you were not absent from our loneliness.⁴

This is the cry of the romantic, the passion of the heart seeking the brotherhood of man. The shadow of melancholia pervades the theme, yet the voice of hope and warmth of life are evident. Wolfe's romanticism is not an escape from life but a medium by which life is given meaning and beauty. His strain of loneliness, which is used with variations, eventually instills in the reader a haunting, magical note of the mystery of life itself. It becomes obvious that the author is possessed of a strange foreboding concerning the destiny of his fellowmen.

He continues on into a strange, magical world which resembles the enchantment of Coleridge:

. . . the train . . . rumbles on through the dark forests of the dream-charged moon-enchanted mind its monotone of silence and forever . . .
.....

. . . and finally, in that dark jungle of the night, through all the visions, memories, and enchanted weavings of the timeless and eternal spell of time, the moment of forever--there are two horsemen, riding, riding, riding in the night.
.....

Horsed on the black and moon-maned steeds of fury, cloaked in the dark of night, the spell of time,

⁴ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 2.

dream-pale, eternal, they are rushing on across the haunted land, the moon-enchanted wilderness, and their hooves make level thunder with the train.⁵

Wolfe's usages of terms evoking the strange, dark mystery of supernatural beauty indicate the romantic's tendency to deal with matters highly charged with emotion.

What is this dream of time, this strange and bitter miracle of living? Is it the wind that drives the leaves down bare paths fleeing? Is it the storm-wild flight of furious days, the storm-swift passing of the million faces, all lost, forgotten, vanished as a dream? . . . Is it the one red leaf that strains there on the bough and that forever will be fleeing?⁶

Here is Wolfe's treatment of the element that has appealed to countless other writers--Time. The abstract quality has been made concrete with Shelleyean images of wind, storm, faces, leaf, and bough. He has achieved the effect of having us see and realize Time exemplified by everyday events.

The old earth went floating past then in the first gaunt light of the morning, and it seemed to be the face of time itself . . . the old earth--field and wood and hill and stream and wood and field and hill--went stroking, floating past with a kind of everlasting repetitiveness, and the train kept making on its steady noise that was like silence and forever--until it seemed that they were poised there in that image of eternity forever--in moveless movement, unsilent silence, spaceless flight.⁷

⁵ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 75-76.

⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

Wolfe continues his poetic method of creating images of an abstract idea. We are spectators of concrete time, observing as it glides by on its inexorable way.

The great maw slowly drinks the land as we lie sleeping: the mined banks cave and crumble in the dark, the earth melts and drops into its tide, great horns are baying in the gulph of night, great boats are baying at the river's mouth. Thus, darkened by our dumpings, thickened by our stains, rich, rank, beautiful, and unending as all life, all living, the river, the dark immortal river, full of strange tragic time is flowing by us--by us--by us to the sea.⁸

To Wolfe, Time is a central subject, which he deals with in three different ways. It is the obvious present, ever moving on to the immediate future. It is the storehouse of experience, each moment controlled and affected by the past of the individual. Lastly, it is the unchanging, the eternal, against which man's life seems minute and brief. It is in keeping with Wolfe's concept that he treats time as a poetic theme, for basically it is the poet more than anyone who rises above the analytical to heights of transcendent beauty and truth. But as Rascoe states, Wolfe makes a beautiful effort to arrest time and to catch in words not only beauty and loveliness, but the very evanescence of beauty.⁹

Two hundred more are buried in the hills of home:
these men got land, fenced it, owned it, tilled it;

⁸ Ibid., p. 333.

⁹ A. Burton Rascoe, Herald Tribune, March 10, 1935.

they traded in wood, stone, cotton, corn, tobacco, they built houses, roads, grew trees and orchards. Wherever these men went, they got land and worked it, built upon it, farmed it, sold it, added to it. These men were hill-born and hill-haunted: all knew the mountains, but few knew the sea.

.....

"Immortal land, cruel and immense as God," they cried, "we shall go wandering on your breast forever! Wherever great wheels carry us is home--home for our hunger, home for all things except the heart's small fence and dwelling place of love.

"Who sows the barren earth?" they said. "Who needs the land? You'll make great engines yet, and taller towers. And what's a trough of bone against a tower? You need the earth? Whoever needs the earth may have the earth. . . ."10

Here Wolfe is reminiscent of Whitman. Both sing the praises of our great nation in a musically cadenced verse form. The harmony is irregular, the rhythm is not consistent, but there is a definite swing, a recurrence of some recognizable element. Wolfe appears more lyrical, more musical as he imbues his phrases with his intense emotion. Change a single unit, and the effect is impaired.¹¹ Wolfe was intent upon the form of everything he wrote. Attempt reducing what appears to be repetition or redundancy, and the result will be a less majestic swing and a limited melody.

¹⁰ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 415.

¹¹ Edward C. Aswell, The Hills Beyond (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 363.

Herbert J. Muller states that it is difficult to deny the magnificent and effective eloquence of Wolfe's rhetoric.¹² Rhythm and resonance are the most outstanding aspects of Wolfe's lyrical phrases. It is possible to scan some of his passages:

All this has been upon the earth, and will abide forever. But you are gone; our lives are ruined and broken in the night, our lives are mined below us by the river, our lives are whirled away into the sea and darkness, and we are lost unless you come to give us life again.¹³

There is no doubt concerning the emotional quality which pervades Wolfe's output. Occasionally he would begin modestly and restrainedly, but as his theme went on he would rise and give vent to an unbridled dramatic beauty and terror:

The journey from the mountain town of Altamont to the tower masted island of Manhattan is not, as journeys are conceived in America, a long one. The distance is somewhat more than 700 miles, the time required to make the journey a little more than twenty hours.¹⁴

This, so far, is controlled, but soon Wolfe is suffused with emotion:

Who has seen fury riding in the mountains? Who has known fury striding in the storm? Who has been

¹² Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 31.

¹³ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 333.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

mad with fury in his youth, given no rest or peace or certitude by fury, driven on across the earth by fury, until the great vine of the heart was broke, the sinews wrenched, the little tenement of bone, blood, marrow, brain, and feeling in which great fury raged, was twisted, wrung, depleted, worn out, and exhausted by the fury which it could not lose or put away? Who has known fury, how it came?¹⁵

Wolfe becomes exultant and drunk with the swelling chords of imagination. But even he is able to settle down and give us sharply etched images, such as this one concerning a small town:

. . . The lights burn, the electric sings wink and flash, the place is still horribly intact in all its bleak prognathous newness, but all the people are dead, gone, vanished. The place is a tomb of frozen silence, as terrifying in its empty bleakness as those advertising backdrops one saw formerly in theatres, where the splendid buildings, stores, and shops of a great street are painted in the richest and most flattering colors, and where there is no sign of life whatever.¹⁶

It is imagery such as this that illustrates the poetic fervor by which he manages to elicit the very feel of the American scene. This last quotation is quite different from the previous ones, but it does not lack for dramatic power, and, in addition, it embodies concrete and precise detail that does not lessen the emotional power but controls, points, and gives substance to it. Throughout the long, many-sided novels we are presented with a

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

mosaic of the sensual component parts of our American way of life: the streets of cities at midnight, the sounds of voices in schools, the arguments of families, the smells of blackearthed fields, the feel of cool steel on bridges, the roaring of a train through the wilderness of black night--these evocations are not mere scenery but are part of the rich and living stage of life itself.

John S. Barnes made a thorough study of Wolfe's writing, out of which arose a careful selection and arrangement of passages in cadenced verse.¹⁷ This could not have been done with the average novelist. At times Wolfe sounds like one of the Hebrew mystics:

We are the sons of our father,
 Whose face we have never seen,
 We are the sons of our father,
 Whose voice we have never heard,
 We are the sons of our father,
 To whom we have cried for strength and comfort
 in our agony,
 We are the sons of our father,
 Whose life like ours was lived in solitude
 and in the wilderness,
 We are the sons of our father,
 To whom only can we speak out the strange,
 Dark burden of our heart and spirit,
 We are the sons of our father,
 And we shall follow the print of his foot
 forever.¹⁸

Wolfe was a great admirer of Ecclesiastes, remarking

¹⁷ John S. Barnes, compiler, A Stone, A Leaf, A Door (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945).

¹⁸ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 869-870.

that that book seemed to be the noblest, wisest, and most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth and also this earth's most powerful expression of poetry, eloquence, and truth. To Wolfe, Ecclesiastes was the greatest single piece of writing the world has to offer. Wolfe's vision reminds one of Ecclesiastes in the lines:

Who owns the earth?
 Did we want the earth that we should wander on it?
 Did we need the earth that we were never still upon
 it?
 Whoever needs the earth shall have the earth;
 He shall be still upon it,
 He shall rest within a little place,
 He shall dwell in one small room forever.¹⁹

Wolfe's dithyrambic cadenced verse recalls the ancient Hebrew poetry, because much of the Hebrew literature was in cadenced verse. The translation of the King James version has managed to retain the magnificent quality of the original. The dominating form of this poetry is called rhyme of meaning, the repetition of parallel ideas. This parallelism unifies and molds, making a harmonized lyric form.

Wolfe's work has unusual usage of repetition of parallelisms; not only in these poems which are remindful of Ecclesiastes, but throughout his entire work, for he believed the poetry of the Bible to be superb and supreme. It is obvious that he didn't follow the beautiful, simple

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

style of the Hebrews, for it was not like Wolfe to simplify; instead, he tended toward elaboration and ornateness.

Wolfe's feeling for the color, music, and shape of words is remarkable. "There is no American writer to whom language means so much."²⁰ Occasionally his onomatopoeic words are not strictly onomatopoeic in themselves, but are significant for Wolfe. For instance, in the expression "the glut and hiss of tides," the term "hiss" is onomatopoeic, but "glut" is not. However, for Wolfe the word "glut" had the slap and suck of a powerful wave, thereby in his interpretation being onomatopoeic. Again in "the million sucks and scoops and hollows of the shore" Wolfe is not merely envisioning the static pictures of sand scooped out by the tide but the ocean itself in the actual process of carving them. By instilling the concept of sound into these visual nouns, he has condensed the work of countless years into a phrase which we are enabled to view in a moment. By the process of his prose, Wolfe is able to shape for our instant understanding not only the vastness of the world, but also its constant and eternal evolution.

In its characteristic rhetoric, flow, imagery, and

²⁰ Pamela Hansford Johnson, Hungry Gulliver (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 22.

choice of words, Wolfe's work appears to be subject to imitation; but the power of Wolfe's tremendous desire to transmit to the printed page the finest and most truthful interpretation of the greatness and meanness that he discovered is beyond counterfeiting.

The preface of The Web and the Rock begins:

Could I make tongue say more than tongue could utter! Could I make brain grasp more than brain could think! Could I weave into immortal denseness some small brede of words, pluck out of sunken depths the roots of living, some hundred thousand magic words that were as great as all my hunger, and hurl the sum of all my living out upon three hundred pages-- then death could take my life, for I had lived it ere he took it; I had slain hunger, beaten death!²¹

This is comparable in its force of imagination to a speech by Shakespeare's Hotspur:

By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon;
Or dive into the bottom of the deep
Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks.²²

Wolfe's words: pluck, sunken, depths, roots, hurl.
Hotspur's: leap, pluck, dive, deep, drowned, locks.
All these words imply descent into the mind to bring up the drowned idea.²³

A poet is comparable to a portrait painter, in that

²¹ Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. vi.

²² William Shakespeare, King Henry IV, Part I, Act I, Sc. iii (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1931), p. 526.

²³ Pamela Hansford Johnson, op. cit., p. 24.

he presents not exact duplicates but what he himself visualizes in his subjects. By demonstrating the attractiveness and beauty of the commonplace, he manages to eliminate the commonplace. This was one of Wolfe's greatest assets, for his emotion and imagination suffused the ordinary, thereby transposing it into a magical, thrilling thing.

Few poets can write verse that appeals strongly to many senses. Immediately Keats' The Eve of St. Agnes rises in our minds, with its

. . . candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates . . .²⁴

This appeals to our senses of smell, sight, feeling, taste, and hearing. Here is Wolfe:

Smoked bacons hung in the pantry; the great bins were full of flour, the dark recessed shelves groaned with preserved cherries, peaches, plums, quinces, apples, pears. . . . crinkled lettuces . . . The rich plums lay bursted on the grass; his huge cherry trees oozed with heavy gum jewels.²⁵

The comparison with Keats is not too unkind to Wolfe, for he has an enormous appetite for the sensual, spilling over the brim of his enthusiasm.

²⁴ George B. Woods, Homer A. Watt, George K. Anderson, The Literature of England, Vol. II (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1936), p. 296.

²⁵ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), pp. 68-69.

And the slant light steepened in the skies, the old red light of waning day made magic fire upon the river. . . . and now there was nothing but that tremendous monotone of time and silence and the river, the haunted river, the enchanted river that drank forever its great soundless tides from out the inland slowly, and that moved through all man's lives the magic thread of its huge haunting spell, and that linked his life to magic kingdoms and to lotus-land and to all the vision of the magic earth that he had dreamed of as a child. . . .²⁶

This passage possesses the ethereal loveliness of Shelley, coupled with the romantic strangeness of Coleridge. But in addition, Wolfe has permeated the atmosphere with language of his own. The effect is a sensuous, ethereal, magical, poetic combination which is haunting in its imagery. The embroidery upon which all this is stitched is the everlasting ubiquitous fourth dimension of Time.

The enrichment of his thought can be discerned, for Wolfe is not adding beautiful words as a cloak, but as a part of the thing itself. The framework of the river moving through one's life as time moves through everyone's life is quite apparent. Note the words Wolfe chooses to add beauty and meaning to his thought: "magic," "haunting," "red," "fire," "enchanted," "lotus-land," "vision." All these help to express his idea more beautifully, fully, freshly, for these terms do not hide the thought but enrich

²⁶ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 598.

it.

Wolfe's last work concludes with perhaps his most beautiful and evocative poem. It is the voice of prophecy crying in the wilderness:

Something has spoken to me in the night, burning
the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken
in the night, and told me I shall die. I know not
where. Saying:

"To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing;
to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave
the friends you love, for greater loving; to find a
land more kind than home, more large than earth--

"Wheron the pillars of this earth are founded,
towards which the conscience of the world is tending--
a wind is rising, and the rivers flow."²⁷

The passage opens with the author's repeated announcement of the revelation of his death. This is followed by a poem, beautiful and formal in its design (three pentameters, one hexameter, three pentameters), expressing the idea of joy and fulfilment after death. It is one of the most flawless conclusions to any novel in our language.

This strange supernatural knowledge of his imminent death is entirely free from fear or uncertainty. Instead, an atmosphere of peace pervades his thought, as though he were going to a greater and kinder dwelling place. The actual structure of the poem leads to the conclusion that

²⁷ Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 743.

the poem did not find immediate expression but had definitely been framed and worked out until the beauty and intensity were clear in his mind. First there are the converging rivers, and then above them are seen the uprights: "the tapers of the waning year, the pillars of the earth." Rather obscurely, perhaps, this structure is indicative of the pronounced visual quality so noticeable and prominent in Wolfe's writings.

No one knows for certain how Wolfe was so cognizant of his approaching death. Whatever the reason was, it adds a spiritual and final note of distinctive genius, for it is impossible to read this final poem and remain unaffected.

CHAPTER VI

CHARACTERIZATION

A great number of critics and writers are convinced that the main purpose of a novelist is the creation of character.¹ When we turn to Wolfe's vast stage we are confronted with a gleaming mosaic of individuals that is the very stuff of life itself. The great number of characters gracing his pages, by their colorfulness, their variegated and diversified individuality, are remindful of the supreme master of characterization, Charles Dickens. When Wolfe adds qualities such as the vital spark of life and the distortion of life's values, the characters assume proportions suggestive of Shakespeare. The great pictures of Wolfe's people show them all to be extraordinary, but somehow the effect of disbelief is never attained, for the conditions and motives that surround and influence them give to each the smell of life; we believe in them. Each character has enough individuality so that there is no confusion. Even Robert Penn Warren, who in the main criticizes Wolfe adversely, maintains that Wolfe's basic talent lies in his remarkable portraiture.²

¹ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 206.

² Robert Penn Warren, "The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," American Review, May, 1935, p. 193.

We may not always delight in some of the amazing characteristics of the strange individuals, but we easily believe their truth. The personality of Gant is such that we cannot question the authenticity of his drunken tirades and eventual mistreatment of his wife, Eliza, while he is chanting obscene verses and realizing tremendous satisfaction in her terror. Eliza's useless thriftiness and property transactions are not pleasant bits of family history, but as her character unfolds, it leaves small room for doubt or refutation. Brother Steve's immorality and uncleanness leave us with the desire to open a window for refreshment; but we are able to see the terrible truth attached to his being and are left troubled, but believing. The innocent attractiveness of Ann emerges through the pages of the French tour. She is a "good" girl, but not in the sense of primness nor puritanism. We catch a breath of sweetness and light, discernible through the haze of Parisian debauchery. The large, bustling figure of Alsop, the college intellect, who is enamored of Dickens for the wrong reasons, who opposes Dostoyevsky for ignorant ones, may be intolerable, but is certainly live and understandable.

Thus, Wolfe creates a teeming, exciting, realistic cast of characters so individualistic there can be no confusion concerning their identity, for no two are alike.

Their speech, with numerous qualities of timbre and accent, their own intimate gestures, their own wild, sweet, crazy, intemperate ideas differentiate each person.

The most powerful figure that Wolfe delineates is Oliver Gant, father of Eugene Gant (Thomas Wolfe). Gant is an ungodly, godlike figure, magnificent, grotesque, and woefully human. The contradiction which is in every man is manifested in his fondness for ritual and order and in the raging upheaval and tempest of his disordered life. A great characterization is one that can be seen vividly; Wolfe had an innate feeling for selecting the feature or gesture which is indicative of an individual's personality. Not only do we get the general impression of Gant as he rages through the house cursing, denying, beseeching, and sniveling, accompanying his drunken tirades with his selfish gargantuan lusts and weaknesses, but the importance of his large strong hands is also apparent. In a single sentence we see Gant as he waits in the hospital, slowly dying of cancer.

Thus, as he sat there now, staring dully out across the city, an emaciated and phantasmal shadow of a man, there was, in the appearance of these great living hands of power (one of which lay with an enormous passive grace and dignity across the arm of his chair and the other extended and clasped down upon the handle of a walking stick), something weirdly incongruous, as if the great strong hands had been unnaturally attached to the puny lifeless figure of a scarecrow.³

³ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 84.

Again: ". . . his great hand of power quietly dropped upon his cane."⁴ ". . . and Gant covered his fingers with his own great hand."⁵

And suddenly Helen remembered Gant's great hands of power, and strength, and how they now lay quietly beside him on the bed, and lived and would not die, even when the rest of him had died.⁶

In these expressions of the power of Gant's hands, we find disclosed the significance of life. For the world of manual labor, of family, of abundance, and wild language is all made possible by the magic of his artistic hands. We realize that Gant was no ordinary human being; he had within him great reservoirs of passionate feeling for life at its fullest and at its meanest.

In addition to this, Wolfe brings out in rich dialogue the ridiculous and impossible rhetoric of Gant, which is filled with chicanery and self pity. "Merciful God!" he wept, "it's fearful, it's awful, it's croo-el. What have I ever done that God should punish me in my old age?"⁷ As the character of Gant is unfolded, the convincing reality of his dialogue becomes increasingly evident.

⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

⁵ Ibid., p. 239.

⁶ Ibid., p. 250.

⁷ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 27.

So well done is Wolfe's account that we feel the speech has a ring of truth.

But Gant's roaring rhetoric was not all of preposterous invectives and deceit, for Gant was a dreamer as well as a drunkard. His great artistic temperament was not expressed by his smooth, perfect, working hands alone, but by his love for literature. Gant would read aloud to Eugene by the hour; his favorite passages were Hamlet's soliloquy, Marc Antony's funeral oration, the banquet scene in Macbeth, and the scene in Othello just before Othello strangles Desdemona. From this florid and moving array of poetry and drama came Gant's thundering and sonorous renditions, interspersed with his own particular style of epithet. It was all part of a turbulent, lusty, but aesthetic appreciation thwarted by a practical minded wife. Here is a Homeric figure, a frustrated adventurer, boaster, whiner, Gargantuan eater and drinker, maker of tirades, dying of cancer yet having the eternal quality of life possessed by all the great characters of literature.

Just as Gant was a many-sided characterization, so is Eliza, his wife and Wolfe's mother. Her materialism is obvious in her mad wish to accumulate real estate. Eliza dominates the household, driving Gant out to another lodging, holding tight hands on the family purse, and

dealing out moral strictures concerning the virtue of frugality.

As with any well drawn figure, Eliza displays more than her acquisitive materialistic nature. Wolfe realizes the difficult task his mother had in enduring Gant. It was due, in part, to this that Eliza strove desperately and selfishly to possess security and stability. In spite of meanness, cheapness, and greed, she has indomitable courage, managing to stand fast in the face of death, age, and a bewildering husband. Her small acts, such as throwing out her hand in a loose and powerful gesture, pursing her lips before speaking, muttering "Why, pshaw!", procrastinating, never coming to a decisive point, are inevitable and consistent aspects of her being.

Wolfe has a natural flair for the art of mimicry. In his creation of Uncle Bascom we are introduced to another remarkable character. All of Wolfe's leading characters are unusual as they take on the personalities of Brobdingnagians--great in stature, tremendous eaters, prodigious in their passions, unlimited in many ways. Uncle Bascom had some of the qualities of Oliver Gant: the furious speech, strong intelligence, and blazing passion. In addition, his was the embodiment of a group of amazing eccentricities. His epithets "Oh Vile! Vile!" and "Phuh! Phuh! Phuh!" are not accessories, but intimate revelations

of a desperately strange figure. When Uncle Bascom ushers his visitor to the door howling farewells into the terrible desolation of those savage skies, while his little old wife snuffles and cackles and whoops into her pots and pans in the kitchen, we are confronted not only with the ridiculous but also with the incongruous. Muller points out that at first glance Wolfe's world may look a great deal like that of Dickens or Sinclair Lewis, but on a closer probing, it may be discovered that Wolfe's eccentric characters are not mere caricatures or satiric types. They are much deeper than that. They are more complex, much more individualized. Their inner lives and histories provide them with qualifications that could enable them to step out of the book and into our own world. Thus Wolfe combines the methods of two great writers: Dickens and Dostoyevsy. When we first meet the irrepressible Uncle Bascom, he is outrageous and irresistible. Upon further reading we discern that he is not merely an enjoyable puppet but one who has fascinated us enough to invite us into his own private world.⁸ We discover the thought and feeling, the emotional content, behind his strange and ludicrous facial expressions, his foolish howls. Suddenly we are in the world of Dostoyevsky

⁸ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1947), pp. 46-47.

and are discovering the history of man's loneliness, his dignity, his grandeur and despair.

This emphasis on the incongruous is one of the distinguishing features of Wolfe's writing. We have seen it in Gant, in Eliza,⁹ and we get it in such people as the ugly, dreary Abe Jones, a dully intellectual and joyously poetic soul, his personality wrapped in a sea of Jewish murk--yet a real friend, a kind, good, and real person. In Francis Starwick Wolfe portrays a rare individual, intellectual, cultured, yet corrupt in his very fineness. His foppish way of repeating "Quite!", and the repulsive praise of everything French, coupled with his maddening phrase, "The whole thing's there," are special traits symbolical of individualism.

In Wolfe's (Eugene's) sister Helen, the constant stress on incongruity is continued. She is childless, and therefore needful of a release for her tremendous vitality. She goes on blindly in the service of others, attempting to exhaust her immense generosity. She needs praise for this, and conversely, enjoys knowing that her efforts are unappreciated, with the result that her great kindness, which she throws out lavishly upon the world, is confused. She seeks peace of mind, which, if attained, could never

⁹ Cf. Supra, p. 36.

be tolerated.

Nebraska Crane, the Cherokee Indian who played as a youngster with George Webber (Eugene Gant--Thomas Wolfe) and later became a major league ball player, is one of the finest characterizations in all Wolfe's work. Aswell made a thorough investigation concerning the identity of Nebraska Crane, only to discover that he never existed except in the mind of Wolfe.¹⁰ Wolfe created him as other less "autobiographical" writers have created, by the observation of a great many people. Wolfe was able to construct a personality which lives, but which has no actual counterpart. The creation is a real baseball star who can be accepted even by ball fans.

There are other individuals of free invention. Randy Shepperton, George Webber's staunch friend, represents another purely creative venture. The character is convincing in Wolfe's portrayal of sympathy, understanding, and loyalty. And there is old Judge Rumford Bland, an evil, vile, blind userer who exploits the defenseless and ignorant negroes. Out of Wolfe's shame of the South's most flagrant evil came Judge Bland, its representation at its worst. The character is remarkably real, ugly, and despicable.

¹⁰ Edward C. Aswell, The Hills Beyond (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 357-58.

All Wolfe's principal characters have their own unforgettable and recognizable accents and looks; all are heard and seen by their idiom. Wolfe seemed to possess a super vision which enabled him to observe people in their several artistic dimensions. He turned people around and viewed them from various perspectives. He added a third dimension, giving them substance as well as the appearance of life.

CHAPTER VII

DRAMATIC SCENES

Some of the most vivid and convincing scenes of fiction are found in Wolfe's novels. Wolfe had a large talent for the dramatic. But this dramatic interpretation is not to be confused with the melodramatic, for the impression gained is a oneness with the intensity of the characters sufferings, wrongs, and joys.

A scene which, in some respects, Wolfe treated with the feeling of a great tragedy is the death of Ben, his favorite brother. Ironically, Wolfe attains greatness not by his lyricism, or by emphasizing the gravity and perplexity of the unknown, but by careful attention to truth, and as Muller¹ points out by incongruous detail. The scene is that of "Dixieland," Eliza's boarding house which stands for all her cheap, miserly acquisitiveness, and to which she has sacrificed her family. Old Gant, who is dying of cancer moans, "To think that this should be put upon me, old and sick as I am. O Jesus, it's fearful--." ²

Eliza, the mother, aimlessly busies herself with useless kettles of hot water, still hoping that Ben will

¹ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 50.

² Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 539-557.

not die, but more upset because she knows Ben does not wish to see her. Helen, Ben's sister, tired by her constant care of Ben, fluctuates between resentment at her parents and grief and pity. Eugene (Thomas Wolfe), usually involved in fury, horror, and despair, finds that even in his deepest mood of hate there are a dozen shafts of pity. Luke, another brother, manages to rise above the sham of convention to heights of sincerity. When the family finally goes to the bedroom where Ben lies dying, they somehow manage to come together in a rare relationship of love and bravery, beyond all the disorder and abhorrence of death itself. The cigar chewing doctor informs them that Ben's life is over and departs. Bessie Gant, a distant relative, states in a matter-of-fact and somewhat ugly and triumphant tone that it will be a relief to get this all over with. Eliza, the mother, dazed, sits and holds Ben's slipping hand while Gene stumbles to the other side of the bed to pray to a God in which he does not believe. As the death rattle ceases, Ben, in a sudden resurrection and rebirth, fills his lungs with air and opens his eyes which are filled with a vision, a flame, a glory. He then passes unafraid into death. The scene is a magnificent resolution of involved and tangled harmonies which have a powerful effect on the dominant chords of emotion.

John Chamberlain³ compares the death of Ben with that of Madame Bovary, maintaining that Wolfe's scene is more intimate, bringing a sharper emotion of recognition to one who has been through a similar event. In addition, he maintains that Wolfe's rendition is substantially richer.

What follows this death scene is an extraordinary, outlandish expression of love and sorrow, laughter, hysteria, and the practical, pagan arrangements of the funeral. It reflects Wolfe's passion and artless devotion to life.

It is McCole who comments on the gloriously vital and unforgettable scenes in these novels. One may not like them, he states; in fact, there is the possibility that the reader may even be repulsed by some of them, but under no circumstance can anyone be indifferent to them. They are some of the most powerful scenes in American prose.⁴

In the dialogue of everyday conversation, Wolfe manages with ease to achieve a natural, yet excellent effect.⁵ His ear appears to be perfectly attuned to daily speech, while his eye is ever alert to the particular individual

³ John Chamberlain, "Review of Look Homeward, Angel," The Bookman, 70:432, December, 1929.

⁴ C. John McCole, Lucifer at Large (New York: Longman's, Green, and Company, 1937), p. 239.

⁵ Pamela Hansford Johnson, Hungry Gulliver (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 28.

characteristic.

Wolfe's mother and his older sister, Helen, are at the railroad station to see him off to college. Eliza, sad, nagging, an obvious hinter, is having a few remarks with her disillusioned, childless daughter. They are in the process of referring to a forty-four year old who has recently borne a child. Helen, with an attitude of joking, implies there might still be a chance for herself.

"Chance!" the mother cried strongly, with a little scornful pucker of the lips--"why, of course there is! If I was your age again I'd have a dozen--and never think a thing of it." For a moment she was silent, pursing her reflective lips. Suddenly a faint sly smile began to flicker at the edges of her lips, and turning to the boy, she addressed him with an air of sly and bantering mystery:

"Now, boy," she said--"there's lots of things that you don't know...you always thought you were the last--the youngest--didn't you?"

"Well, wasn't I?" he said.

"H'm!" she said with a little scornful smile and an air of great mystery--"There's lots that I could tell you--"

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, turning towards his sister with an imploring face. "More mysteries!...The next thing I'll find that there were five sets of triplets after I was born--Well, come on, Mama," he cried impatiently. "Don't hint around all day about it... What's the secret now--how many were there?"

"H'm!" she said with a little bantering, scornful, and significant smile.

"O Lord!" he groaned again--"Did she ever tell you what it was?" Again he turned imploringly to his sister.

She snickered hoarsely, a strange high-husky and derisive falsetto laugh, at the same time prodding him

stiffly in the ribs with her big fingers:

"Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi," she laughed. "More spooky business, hey? You don't know the half of it. She'll be telling you next you were only the fourteenth."

"H'm!" the older woman said, with a little scornful smile of her pursed lips. "Now I could tell him more than that! The fourteenth! Pshaw!" she said contemptuously--"I could tell him--"

"O God!" he groaned miserably. "I knew it!...I don't want to hear it."

"K, k, k, k, k," the younger woman snickered derisively, prodding him in the ribs again.⁶

This is a perfect, realistic record. Helen's "hi, hi, hi," and "K, k, k, k," are more derisive than words, comment, or the usual laughter symbols.

Wolfe's employment of repetition creates a mood in the reader's mind. For instance, "banter" is used three times; "sly," twice; "scornful," three times; "imploing," twice; "groaned," three times. It is an extraordinarily effective trick of emphasis which, at times, results in the cinematic. The writer concentrates on Eliza's face as if it were a close-up. Her lips "pucker" are "reflective," are scornfully "pursed," a "faint, sly smile" flickers at the edges. The use of the word "lips" four times in a short measure of time is not superfluous, but clarifies the effect.

⁶ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 6-7.

The speech of Wolfe's characters is the speech of real men and women. It is not the invention of melodrama but renders, instead, the convincing intensity of their own feelings, the incomparable depth of their sufferings and wrongs. No other writer has caught the pitiless candor of talk between relatives and intimate associates when freed from society's conventions--the furious recriminations and subjective self-justifications, the mad invective, the blazing passion of anger, in which things are said which can never be recalled, and scars imposed which are beyond remedy. The quarrels between Eugene and his mother, the mother and family, between George and Esther are among the most real scenes of fiction.⁷

The moments of quiet, calm intelligence are also finely depicted. Perhaps the one that is most piteous⁸ is when Gant, almost dead, tells Eliza that no one can cook chicken as she can. After all the sorrow, shame, and distress that Gant has brought Eliza during her lifetime, it seems an extremely small thing and nothing to make up for all the injustices; but it is the psychological moment to bring to Eliza a feeling of unbearable joy, and she rushes from the room, unable to contain herself.

⁷ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), pp. 208-209.

⁸ Wolfe, op. cit., pp. 256-257.

CHAPTER VIII

THOMAS WOLFE'S MYTH

According to Mark Schorer, a myth is "a large, controlling image. . .which gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life, that is to say which has organizing value for experience."¹ Myths are not invented nor organized in order to get around the realities of life but are a process by which life can be regulated and accepted. Facts cannot always speak for themselves; a system is required which will give them meaning and interpretation. A myth is not merely a figment of someone's imagination, which can be easily destroyed, but embodies symbols of deep underlying principles of our essential lives, the problems of truth, religion, honor, and love.

Muller states that all imaginative literature may be understood as sophisticated mythology.² In the beginning was the word as "mythos," the ancient, established account of the world's origin and nature; the "epos," or symbolical narrative developed from this, and then last came the "logos," the word as rational explanation. The three stages compare with the growth of language, from literal

¹ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 4.

² Loc. cit.

concreteness through metaphor to abstraction, and finally are relative to the development of thought and knowledge. It can be said that today literature, philosophy, religion, and science are still myths founded on a great scheme of imagination and finally expressed in metaphor. The complete truth cannot be ascertained from any one; all are segments from experience, variations of the greatest of all metaphors--reality. If it follows that one of these is the basic truth, then it readily follows that all the others are obvious myths. Our own society is based upon myths and would be hard pressed to function without them. Tradition encompasses faith, ideals, goals that unify groups and form its way of life.

The development from myth to heroic legend, to romance, to realistic story, may be traced in literature. All great literature, in one way or another, is similar to myth. Thomas Mann says that the mythical is the typical, the primeval norm of life.³

Thomas Wolfe makes a deliberate use of the myth and from the very beginning believed that he belonged with the mythmakers. The main theme of Wolfe's entire writing is a man's search for a father. In his own book The Story of a Novel he states:

³ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

From the beginning . . . the idea, the central legend that I wished my book to express had not changed. And this central idea was this: 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 to find 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.⁴

His specific theme is the main problem which faces the writers of today, living in a realistic age which proudly faces the facts of life but paradoxically is overwhelmed by them. As our age of modern knowledge embraces various facts and figures with no relation to each other, we need a steady, understandable mythology. Thomas Wolfe achieved a gradual enlargement of his own personal legend into a great national myth.

It is true that he started, as a great number of other young authors, to write the story of his own life, but gradually raised his level until the greatness of America became the background for his legend. One of the significant events which matured and gave greater depth to Wolfe's thinking was the terrible depression which began in 1929. The inconsistency of the few idle rich who wallowed in their wealth while others suffered in rotten poverty opened Wolfe's eyes to some of our glaring materialism and sometimes selfish greed. Observing this national

⁴ Thomas Wolfe, The Story of a Novel (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 582.

catastrophe, Wolfe saw the bravery and resoluteness of the average person, and began to feel more that he was one of them. It drew him partly away from his subjectivity and united him with his fellow man. It was then that he wrote an outline of his role as a mythmaker:

The life of the artist at any epoch of man's history has not been an easy one. And here in America, it has often seemed to me, it may well be the hardest life that man has ever known. I am not speaking of some frustration in our native life, some barrenness of spirit, some arid Philistinism which contends against the artist's life and which prevents his growth. I do not speak of these things because I do not put the same belief in them that I once did. I am speaking as I have tried to speak from first to last in the concrete terms of the artist's actual experience, of the nature of the physical task before him. It seems to me that the task is one whose physical proportions are vaster and more difficult here than in any other nation on the earth. It is not merely that he must make somehow a new tradition for himself, derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of American life, the structure of his own design; it is not merely that he is confronted by these problems; it is even more than this, that the labor of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him.

Such is the nature of the struggle to which henceforth our lives must be devoted. Out of the savage violence and the dense complexity of all its swarming life; from the unique and single substance of this land and life of ours, must we draw the power and energy of our life, the articulation of our speech, the substance of our art.⁵

This is an excellent declaration of an epic purpose or objective. As no other American novelist has written so vividly, richly, and precisely of the vastness and vitality

⁵ Ibid., pp. 610-611.

of American life, the epic aim alludes to his own most contributive accomplishment.

In his first book, Look Homeward, Angel, can be detected the beginning of the myth. In his live, restless rhetoric can be felt the intensity and animation of the world about him. There was a certain charm, a magic which pervaded his atmosphere. Through his senses and emotions Wolfe managed a lyrical expression that achieved genuine eloquence. Already Wolfe intimated that he could not go home again, thereby giving somewhat of a universality to his theme, as many young men have felt this strange lost feeling. Wolfe was still thinking in personal terms; but in his second book, Of Time and the River, he began to come out of himself and realize that his own experience was, in reality, the experience of the world. He began to detect a worldwide state of loneliness. His American legend was growing.

His great individualized characters become living exponents of American types. The great figure of Gant is now a lost American, a symbol of those who have to grope blindly through a confusing and chaotic life to hunt forever a place of comfort and certitude. He becomes a symbol of that part of American life which has felt the taint of commercialism. Other characters are presented which emphasize the amazing paradox of our American way of life--

the cheapness, sordidness, and shallowness in the land of promise. As Wolfe continues, there is discernible a more sincere desire to discover, somehow, a central meaning in these strange and often turbulent contradictions. He is almost sickened to find that the noble concepts of truth and beauty are not abstract qualities obtainable in magical images, but in the down-to-earth hearts of common men, in the people and places warped and scarred and twisted, in the hard and hungry, in the rough multitude fierce with life. This is America.

The several different methods by which Wolfe arrived at the fulfillment of his dream, or legend, are extremely interesting. The theme of a man's search for his father consistently recurs throughout his four novels.

The image of the father, we see, repeatedly accompanies the image of a door. For a pilgrim, life is a search for a door that will open on truth and lay bare the secrets of the world. Beach⁶ considers the finding of this door to be the finding of one's father, and by so doing, to be no longer alone and fearful. All men are, by nature, lost and lonely in America. It is this loneliness that leads us to so many journeys--to so many futile efforts to solve our problems by some magic.

⁶ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 180.

Closely allied with the image of the father and the door is that of the word.⁷ Everyone in whom Wolfe is interested reminds him of the secret door, the magic word; they are closely connected with the object for which he is searching. The English family which Wolfe befriended demonstrates this:

Although he had never passed beyond the armor of their hard bright eyes, or breached the wall of their crisp, friendly, and impersonal speech, or found out anything about them, he always thought of them with warmth, with a deep and tender affection, as if he had always known them--as if, somehow, he could have lived with them or made their lives his own had he only said a word, or turned the handle of a door--a word he never knew, a door he never found.⁸

Because this is the story of a writer's life, the image of the word assumes particular importance. Wolfe found himself attempting desperately to define and express something immense and terrible in life which he had always known and felt. But he could not find the word to express it. As he progressed, Wolfe considered the writer as one who labors not for himself alone, but for all men.

The flight of the young writer from the South to the North is symbolical of the fact that no mere region is vast enough to encompass his image. His experience in the big city emphasizes his disillusionment with modern

⁷ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸ Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 652.

industrial America at its best and at its worst. His travels to Europe seemed, at first, to him to show a new way of life, a promise of beauty. The people there gave the impression of finding the answer to loneliness--a door. But Wolfe discovered that it was a foreign life, a world for others, not for him. He remained lonely. His loneliness became intensified as he wandered. He saw, now, not only the promise that Europe offered, but, far below it, the corruption, the old fears and superstitions. As a result, he began to realize that every society has not only good but evil.

In his novel Of Time and the River, Wolfe describes his journey back to America as an ecstasy, an experience beyond all others in hope and joy. His rhetoric rants, and we again discover that Wolfe's feeling for the wonderful magic strangeness of things familiar lends enchantment even to routine.

From his second book, Of Time and the River, we come to the third, The Web and the Rock. This deals considerably with the love affair Wolfe had with Esther Jack. As the writing develops, the affair becomes an allied part of his theme.⁹ She is not merely a lovely woman with whom Wolfe could find happiness; she, basically, is the ideal

⁹ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 100.

woman of his dreams--the dreams of the country boy who came to the city, the lonely boy from the South, the lost soul who is looking for the articulate tongue, the open door. The lovely woman became a symbol of the city. She was the city's daughter who was wealthy, secure, who belonged among the socially elite and the famous. Wolfe came to know the "magic island" through her, but found it idle, sterile, debauched, and hostile to the very art it patronized or exploited. Wolfe then discovered, or felt, that Esther was symbolic of all this corruption. She was beautiful, fresh, honest, but her devotion was divided; she was involved with this corrupt privilege and arrogance. When Wolfe finally broke with Esther, it was the personification of his break with the world of his youthful dreams.

The change that occurs here in Wolfe's writing is from subjectivity to objectivity. In his portraiture of Esther, he pays tribute to her charm, beauty, and dignity. His philosophy begins to include not only his own small horizon but universals. The complete mystery of life, the strange contradictions and paradoxes, the ultimate unity which embraces every inversion and antithesis is finally accepted by the author. In the reconciliation of opposites or discordants, which is essential to great art, Wolfe has finally risen to a new plane.

His fourth, and last, novel, You Can't Go Home

Again, shows the development of his deeper philosophy, as well as a more objective viewpoint. As the book progresses, his theme is of the man, the artist, who is unable to return to his past, but must reconcile himself with the present, always endeavoring to see hope in the future.

The stock market crash of 1929 sends Wolfe probing deep into the economic and philosophical elements of our country. No other American novelist has written a more comprehensive, searching analysis of the great depression.¹⁰ He attempted to see the disaster in terms of a large perspective, with historical background.

Wolfe's private affairs were no longer obscuring his vision. He saw things in a larger relationship. He saw the existence of evil, which has always been and will always be in society, because it is the prime condition of man's being. His belief is that we in America are now lost but that someday we shall be found. This ubiquitous evil is selfishness and greed, which blind chamber of commerce optimism will not cure. Only the "truth," the plain and searching light of truth, can set men free.

The final and most comprehensive statement of Wolfe's major theme can be traced intermittently in You Can't Go Home Again and in "God's Lonely Man," an essay on which he

Ibid., p. 137.

worked at different stages of his life. He maintains that he has lived about as solitary a life as a modern man could live. His final belief is that loneliness is the central and inevitable fact of human existence. In this loneliness is found the essence of human tragedy.¹¹

Wolfe says, "The most tragic, sublime, and beautiful expression of human loneliness which I have ever read is the Book of Job."¹² The entire Old Testament provides, probably the most profound literature of human loneliness of which the world has knowledge. Paradoxically, it is the tragic man who is the happiest. He loves life greatly and appreciates its wonder and glory. When we read the New Testament there is discernible a change in attitude. The loneliness is replaced by the new concept of love. Christ repeatedly emphasizes that He is the Son of God and all men are His brothers. The unity that unites everyone is love.

It is the main issue of Christ's teachings to eliminate man's loneliness and to replace it with the life of love. Though Wolfe knows that Christ's is the better way, he cannot accept it because of his firm belief that loneliness is the everlasting weather of man's life; love

¹¹ Thomas Wolfe, "God's Lonely Man," The Hills Beyond (New York: The Sun Dial Press, 1943), p. 186.

¹² Ibid., p. 190.

is only the rare, the precious flower. This is the ever-present theme of Wolfe's work.¹³

Loneliness forever and the earth again! Dark brother and stern friend, immortal face of darkness and of night, with whom the half part of my life was spent, and with whom I shall abide now till my death forever--what is there for me to fear as long as you are with me? Heroic friend, blood brother of my life, dark face--have we not gone together down a million ways, have we not coursed together the great and furious avenues of night; have we not crossed the stormy seas alone, and known strange lands, and come to walk the continent of night and listen to the silence of the earth? Have we not been brave and glorious when we were together, friend? Have we not known triumph, joy, and glory on this earth--and will it not be again with me as it was then, if you come back to me? Come to me, brother, in the watches of the night. Come to me in the secret and most silent heart of darkness. Come to me as you always came, bringing to me again the old invincible strength, the deathless hope, the triumphant joy and confidence that will storm the earth again.¹⁴

If it is true that the American way of life is anathema to the poetic concept, that is, is indifferent to the beauties and truths, but instead is addicted to the materialistic and small-minded trivialities, it is also true that the concept of America is replete with visions of vast triumphs, great eras of land movements, unforgettable traditions of great enterprises involving tremendous amounts of energy and wealth. This allows the individual to rise above the ground of individual self and

¹³ Ibid., pp. 194-195.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 197.

gaze across the vista of human drama, to realize his role of importance. Man always remains, even when cultures fade, when civilizations die, leaving the poet to realize his never ending theme in the richness, glory, and tragedy of man's destiny. It was to this universal drama of life that Wolfe turned, for in the United States he envisioned a greater and more abundant life for mankind.

Tocqueville maintained that writing in a democracy would ultimately prove to be futile and helpless because of the lack of sources.

In democratic communities, each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object; namely, himself. If he ever raises his looks higher, he perceives only the immense form of mankind. His ideas are all either extremely minute and clear or extremely general and vague; what he's between is a void.¹⁵

To bridge this gap was Wolfe's endeavor. He was not completely successful, for he realized the discrepancy in our society between the soaring, poetic American dream and its antithesis, the materialism and ugliness of everyday life. But he saw the problem clearly, realizing that the evils were not accidental.

Wolfe's superb poetry has been compared to that of Melville, but there is a greater likeness: Melville, too,

¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, cited by Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 166.

was dealing with a myth--the myth of evil. Moby Dick should be read not as a novel, but as a myth. A novel is a story, but a myth is a disguised way of demonstrating the world's terrors and desires. Once Moby Dick is discerned as a myth written as a story, its greatness becomes manifest.¹⁶ But Melville, too, was a poet of democratic ideals and concepts and revolted against the tyrannical abuse of authority.¹⁷ His awareness of America's "anti-poetic" tendencies drove him to grope deeply for the elemental problem of evaluation of man's imperfect society. This acute dismay at life's scene imprisoned Melville in an inveterate jail of torment from which he was never able to escape. He was never at home in the world.

Wolfe, too, felt this unbearable enchainment: ". . . from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth."¹⁸ He wandered, lonely and troubled, but eventually discovered the key to the door of freedom. This freedom was the fulfillment of the search of the sensitive artist in a society oftentimes indifferent, belligerent, and unbelieving.

¹⁶ Clifton Fadiman, Introduction to Moby Dick by Melville (New York: The Heritage Press, 1943), p. vi-viii.

¹⁷ Spiller, et al., The Literary History of the U. S. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 446.

¹⁸ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 2.

The writer has a singularly special role in a democracy, that of voicing its fundamental faiths and goals.

From the schizo personality of our civilization, which embraces both the practical and the esthetic, Wolfe was able to single out the values in each. He became convinced that a democracy, while embracing some weaknesses, never-the-less has the greatest to offer for the welfare of man. Fortunately, he rose above shallow arrogance and optimism, to realize that "man's fate is tragic because human sorrows are not the consequence merely of human evil, and--that the frailty of man is also the source of his dignity and worth."¹⁹ The tragedy, then, lies in the fact that there is a source lying beyond our own doing which sponsors man's sorrows. Our American democracy, being based upon the dignity and worth of man, allies itself closely with Christianity, thereby raising its status to that of ancient epics.

¹⁹ Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: New Directions, 1948), p. 185.

CHAPTER IX

IMPRESSION OF WOLFE'S LIFE UPON HIS WORKS

There has never been a more autobiographical writer in our American literature than Wolfe. His viewpoint is not objective, for he could not remain detached and view coolly the surrounding scene. But to interpret life as he saw and lived it is much removed from the mere recording of events.

Wolfe did not know the exact period of his life when he first felt the exciting urge to become a writer. When he was a youngster, the whistle of the roaring trains, hurtling their way through the great mountain country, filled him with the magic awe of wonderment concerning the world lying far and beyond these mountains. It was the beginning of those ceaseless thirsts and hungers which were to haunt him forever.

His love of great literature was fostered by the thundering tones of Gant, his father, as the stone-cutter rendered great quantities of poetry, infused with his own gusto and memorable rhetoric. Gant, in his roaring magnificence, was comparable to a great teacher who is so filled with enthusiasm and love for beautiful and eloquent poetry that his emotion has to be shared with the world. Wolfe was fortunate in this respect, for he sat at Gant's

feet, listening, awed and entranced, never to forget or lose the love of the power and beauty of language.

Through college, New York, Brooklyn, Europe, and back again, Wolfe took advantage of his magnificent sensory receptiveness which he developed to the greatness of Tolstoy. The influences of his family, his teachers, and friends are marked to the degree that they instilled and developed in him an insatiate hunger to devour the world's millions of experiences. When Tom was chosen to attend the local private school for superior children, the result was an enlargement and fulfillment of the appreciation of literature which had been instilled in him by his father. He began to feel that he had within himself a certain power of expression which someday would find its realization.

The terrifying experiences of the deaths of his brother Ben and his father, coupled with the commercial spirit of his mother's boarding house, "Dixieland," were reflected in Wolfe's personality by revealing to him the sorrow, pity, and power of family disunity and grief. To a mind so sensitive and susceptible, the result was in a furtherance of Wolfe's inherent perceptibility and impressionableness.

In the famous Harvard "Workshop" Wolfe's tremendous talents of observation and expression were encouraged by

Professor Baker. Here we see the beginning of Wolfe's insistence on seeing below the surface and superficiality of everyday life. The desire to explore beyond the triviality of polite conversation and obvious appearance of man has now taken hold of him. His quest for the answer to life has taken shape.

Wolfe's next important experience is as an English instructor at New York University. The mauling "man swarm," the vibrating materialistic values that are omnipresent, have their effect upon the young teacher and writer. Through it all he attempts to find the position of the artist, the creative genius, which he feels sure is his destiny. It is here that Wolfe has his first experience with the Idle Rich. A visit to a former college classmate's vast estate opens up the realization of the almost immoral unbalance of our economy, where there can be at one end a society lost in its ill-gotten wealth, and at the other extreme, wretched poverty. This is to have a decided influence upon his outlook on life. The exploitation of the poor for the benefit of the few results in the disclosure that he is more closely allied with the "manswarm" than he had realized.

The association Wolfe had with Esther Jack is of great importance to his writing. It is she who becomes his mother, wife, and mistress. There is no doubt that Wolfe

needed someone to prop up his ego, encourage his ability, and provide him with a semblance of a home. He had never received any encouragement at Dixieland, as his family had consistently looked upon a writer as a thing apart, someone like Tennyson or Poe, who, while endowed with a human's physical qualifications, were never-the-less abstract persons. Wolfe required someone who could accept him for what he was, a genius, but certainly a human one.

But even Esther had to go, in Wolfe's powerful, innate sense of artistic endeavor. For he begins to realize that art and honesty must have no conflict. Esther personifies the beauty in his life, but also the terrible falsity and immorality of the luxurious refinements of the privileged classes. It wouldn't be possible, he thought, to write truthfully of life as it is if, at the same time, he indulged himself in the same life. Was there not a higher devotion than this wealth and privilege? The artist cannot think of himself as a special breed, for "in order to belong to a rare and higher breed one must first develop the true power and talent of selfless immolation."¹ He must search "for the interests and designs of his fellow men and of all humanity."² It is the artist's work to help

¹ Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), p. 722.

² Ibid., p. 725.

provide the "plain and searching light of truth . . . the remedy, the only one, that could cleanse and heal the suffering soul of man."³

Thus can be seen the impress of Wolfe's life upon his art; the same influence that was brought to bear on Dickens, Tolstoy, and Melville, for their art was shaped to a degree by the attitudes and reflections which the world provided. The unforgettable episodes of one's life--births, deaths, disillusionment, surprise, defeat, hope, and despair--all these have great bearing on our life's journey. And a writer often transfers his opinions and attitudes through the medium of his art to the printed page. We are all a part of what we touch and feel and are impotent to remain entirely objective and aloof.

³ Ibid., p. 730.

CHAPTER X

THE POETIC CONCEPT

The creative artist is endowed with certain skills and accomplishments which are requisite to his profession. We have pointed out these skills; now we shall apply them to the ultimate and necessary last test of Wolfe's creative art.

The cataloguing of events cannot be considered poetry, as its extreme length would destroy immediacy; its succession of events unrelated to each other would ruin the desired feeling of unified existence. The complete description of a moment is not possible, as we exist in a world of myriad sensations. But the awareness of some important emotions and thoughts may be the foundation of a gigantic novel such as Marcel Proust constructed. By the use of small fragments of experience, he built a tremendous book, squeezing out every implication and connection. It is these quick moments which are the veritable stuff of poetry. For any artistic creation demands effort, and the mere facts of monotonous days and nights do not guarantee poetry. The nature of poetry is not the question of its origin but of its qualities after it is created.¹

¹ Donald A. Stauffer, The Nature of Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1946), pp. 59-60.

Croce maintains that poetical emotion is not indicative of the practical, because the relation between them is not deterministic, from effect to cause, but, instead, from material to form, which is incommensurable.² The instant it is raised to the realm of poetry, a sentiment that has actually been experienced is taken from its practicality and realism and placed in the world of poetry, where its reality can no longer be ascertained.

Poetic imagination is distinguished from memory in that it may be present in the original perception of the object which is recalled by memory; and secondly, it operates upon the objects which are recollected.³ The poet uses his imagination to see the object as a various number of things, as his mind is stirred by the calling up of associations and images previously seen. The materials supplied by perception and memory have led to images of new creations, of things which never had any but an imaginary existence. Each thought sends out the imagination to gather associations that enrich the conception far beyond what would be achieved by all the senses stimulated by the real presence of these objects themselves.

An emotion stated simply or directly is not, in

² Benedetto Croce, Ariosto, Shakespeare, and Corneille (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920), pp. 126-127.

³ William Allan Neilson, Essentials of Poetry (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), p. 33.

itself, true poetry. The poet must take that emotion, and add to it the ingredients of selection, vividness, and freshness. The metaphor is a prime requisite of poetic intensity. By singling out certain qualities of an object, verse is superior to prose because it does not try to explain something by simply telling it. Certain aspects require comparisons and parallels, as their real intensity would be missed by a mere reproduction in words. Therefore, metaphors and similes heighten the feeling, give body, and clarify the object. Wolfe's usage of the metaphor is quite prominent throughout his work, lifting his lyric cry to a high pitch. It is this saturation of lyricism which gives Wolfe's novels the quality of sublime imagery and harmonic tones of poetic music. It is the essential aspect which catches the eye, ear, and mind of the reader as he first comes in contact with the writer. Amazed and bewildered to discover these features in a novel, the reader finds himself swept along by this tide of emotional fervor.

Using poetic power as his main force, Wolfe casts over his characters the garments of greatness by making them figures of tremendous passion, hate, love, sorrow--all the ingredients of poetic tragedy. A deep feeling of life is reflected in the animation of dramatic characterization and situation, as Wolfe realizes all the complexities of mankind. The hulking figure of Gant, is

remindful of King Lear with his sense of the misery of life, the horrible conflict raging within him. Gant becomes a great figure in his rage, sorrow, ranting invective, and piteousness, because the passionate fury that drives him is great. The strange incongruities, the contradictions which are inherent in life are all found personified in Wolfe's characters and thought. A stable balance is brought about by the use of reciprocal tension. In other words, a sense of unity, vital unity, is achieved by the admission of conflict--good and evil.

Keats admired Shakespeare's treatment of the complexity of actual experience.⁴ The great figures of Shakespeare's tragedies represent complex human beings, with the relations between them giving the plays even more complexity. Greatness comes from the complexity, and comprehensiveness of conflicting emotions, thereby giving a sense of aliveness which is indicative of great poetry.

Wolfe's awareness of the basic incongruities of man's life is manifested throughout his every book and story. It is apparent not only in the great characters of Gant, Eliza, Bascom, and Starwick, but throughout the form and essence of his stories. Like Shakespeare, Wolfe gradually developed his art and thought until he was able

⁴ Stauffer, op. cit., p. 176.

to observe life as a whole. Only then was it possible for him to envision and catch the great diversity and complexity of the philosophy of good and evil. From the intense subjectivity of his early years, Wolfe managed to grow until his characters were not only individuals in the great drama of life but living symbols of humanity. In Wolfe's childhood, each little event had its place and importance, but soon his art and mind were to develop until the eternal struggle of good and evil transcended everything, and he emerged as a poet of greatness. Using his superb poetic power, Wolfe gave expression and form to his idealism and hope, attempting to forge the iron of supreme artistry called poetic tragedy.

In his great scenes Wolfe impresses the reader with the accurate rendition of the basic elements of personality. He is one of the few writers who can paint anything resembling a Shakespearian scene, striking strongly and surely the major chords of emotion, and presenting the whole great view of life and death. But Wolfe cannot only conceive but can execute in the grand manner. Many American novelists have the ability to strike single notes in a strong manner, but none can strike chords as vibrant, resonant, many-toned, and deep as Wolfe.⁵

⁵ Muller, Herbert J., Modern Fiction (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1937), p. 411.

One of the prime requisites of poetry is that of form, not a rigid, strict enclosure, but a basic shaping of materials. A number of critics have adversely criticized Wolfe for his lack of form, stating that his huge manuscripts were composed of odd bits put together by a competent publisher. Actually, nothing could be farther from the truth, for a close study of Wolfe discloses a certain form which is comprehensive and meaningful.

Possibly our twentieth century's finest formal poetic characteristic is that of musical organization--the repetition with variations of important images, characters, events, words; repetition of motifs; relation of repeated themes; contrasts and reinforced melodies.⁶ This concept of poetic form is indicative of Shakespeare's greatest art, although the casual, undiscerning reader may miss it. This can also be said of Wolfe, for we observe, after close scrutiny, a clear totality of theme and variations which have not been inhibited by a strict code of laws, but which have been allowed poetic expression and freedom.

Beach manages to grasp the vast significance of Wolfe's work by suggesting that Wolfe be considered not as

⁶ Stauffer, op. cit., p. 252.

a novelist but as a poet or composer.⁷ By referring to these musical forms, significance and meaning are given to the ostensible irrelevancies, and the characters and various situations are seen in a new light. Perhaps the basic trouble is the number of themes, related, but still distinct, woven together to form a pattern of great complexity. The hurried reader will pass over them, not recognizing them, or placing them in their harmonious whole. If it takes infinite pains and study to detect and determine the overall outline or structure, this is to Wolfe's credit, for it is, perhaps, a display of the highest art; that is, the concealment of the intense amount of preparation which must precede a work of art.

The quality of a tone poem, or of a Wagnerian opera, that Wolfe achieves consists of the central theme of the pilgrimage; the leitmotifs are the recurrent pictures of hunger, loneliness, the search for a father, of a door, a word by which to express oneself and embrace all life; the counterpoint consists of the strange and baffling inconsistencies and conflicts which are so much a part of mankind. The themes which are related are the pilgrimages of the Southern boy (North Carolina) to the North (Boston and New York), of the country lad to the large and magic city (New

⁷ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), pp. 178-179.

York), of the American to Europe--all these themes are shown against the inevitable backdrop of time and the river, the pilgrimage of man's strange life on earth.⁸

Examples of autobiographical characters occur often in literature, indicating correspondence between fiction and actuality. But it is wrong to confuse poetry and history or to suppose that features can be translated from one plane to another in more than an approximate manner.⁹ In poetry the imagination begins in actualities--occasionally from well-known individuals, like Cleopatra or Richard III, occasionally from people forever unknown; sometimes the author himself, sometimes from others. It may, likewise, begin from actual incidents, recorded or otherwise. But wherever the author is writing poetry, not history, wherever there is creative imagination, the real person or incident is only one element, along with others, in the integration of imagination, by which the actuality is transformed. Though still retaining some features, including names, the persons thus become types, having the greater beauty and significance belonging to the higher form of poetry.

Shakespeare's great history plays were based on

⁸ Muller, op. cit., p. 67-68.

⁹ Frederick Clarke Prescott, Poetry and Myth (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 120.

actual events, but to imply that his greatness depends upon that is to miss the importance and significance of the artist himself. The majority of his plots were borrowed, yet when the two (his play and its source) are observed together, the difference is so noticeable as to render the source almost ineffective, while one recognizes Shakespeare's as a work of art. The difference, of course, is the treatment. The tragedy of Hamlet is undoubtedly Shakespeare's most intimate revelation of himself, the play in which he has most infused his own thoughts and feelings.¹⁰ But the great drama Hamlet certainly would not be less great nor less poetic if its author had actually been a Prince of Denmark whose royal father was the victim of fratricide. The poetic treatment of the original Norse pagan myth is the contribution of Shakespeare, and therein lies his greatness. In the same light can be considered Dickens' great novel David Copperfield. Much of this, especially in the early portion, is autobiographical. But to explain the tremendous array of characters, the interwoven variations on the central theme, the humor, pathos, and tragedy, as a result of autobiographical memory is to forget, or to be indifferent to, the magnificent artistry of the superb Victorian novelist.

¹⁰ Baugh, et al., A Literary History of England (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948), p. 536.

Tolstoy's monumental work, Anna Karenina, includes much of himself, but it certainly can in no way be considered a "confessional" novel. It is didactic, but Tolstoy's method of teaching a moral was to dramatize and fictionize the thought. It should be remembered that Zola wrote his least successful novel when he composed principally from his notebooks,¹¹ and Zola was an extremely scientific note-taker.

There is no disagreement concerning Wolfe's work being autobiographical. This is apparent in almost everything he wrote. But his work is much more than mere transcripts of experience. Every character, every situation, has in one way or another been altered by the talent and personality of Wolfe himself. As in Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, and other eminent artists, the difference, of course, lies in the degree. No writer can write truly of things outside the area of his own experience.

It is wrong, therefore, to absolutely identify people in poetry. These actual people are the elements in the imaginative synthesis. Histories or biographies often can only be worked out by inference. Poetry is such only by virtue of its transcendence of actuality.

¹¹ Malcolm Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1936), p. 206.

Finally, there is the matter of Wolfe's myth. It is apparent that Wolfe was dealing with a myth, the great American myth. The great myths--Prometheus, Jacob and his sons, Christ's resurrection--are symbolical of the fundamental meanings of man's existence, the ageless and timeless cycles of life and death, love and justice. All great literature resembles, or becomes, myth in some way. The great allegories and symbolical poems, The Divine Comedy, The Faery Queen, Paradise Lost, Prometheus Unbound, and Faust, represent this point. Thomas Mann's Joseph story is a deliberate attempt to recreate a myth. So it is with Wolfe. His myth is the dominating theme of his long great novel, the search for a father and a home.

The creation of a myth signalizes the ability to rise above oneself to universals. Basso feels that the most important accomplishment of Wolfe is his ability to use the material of a section of the country and then surpass that regionalism by impressing his material with the quality of universality.¹² Witness Wolfe's success in such dissimilar countries as Soviet Russia and Hitlerite Germany.

So Wolfe's myth, too, is rich in associations. The air of mystery, the rich, haunting beauty which permeates

¹² Hamilton Basso, After the Genteel Tradition, edited by Malcolm Cowley (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1936), p. 209.

his tone poems, can be traced to this re-creation of age-old folk-lore and myth. The strangeness of the Unknown, the terribleness, rapture, and fear of the mystery of life, is the essence of his poetry. In myth, as in poetry, the imagination begins from actualities. It gradually rises to a creation of far greater beauty, imagination, and meaning, by methods and artistry.

Thus we maintain that Wolfe's work not only contains phrases of lyric beauty, but that his whole work is suffused with those qualities which are indicative of an authentic poet. His theme is constructed and maintained by the use of poetic passages, his characters represent the essence of all that the poetic concept implies; namely, an understanding of the vast perplexities, anti-thesis, incongruities, and inconsistencies in our society. The ability to universalize small themes is to attach importance, significance, and drama to life itself. None of these are representative of the purely inartistic and prosaic qualities of the writer who merely records impressions and observations, but, instead, offer conclusive proof of the poetic and creative instinct which reflects life at its truest and greatest. To take life's individual moments, to shape, mold, and fashion into gems of poetic intensity, and by so doing, to fit them into the larger framework of life, is to be an artist of great

ability.

It has been our effort to sustain the premise that Wolfe was a poet, that he worked in the poetic concept, and by the richness and magic of his words was able to transform the prosaic into a haunting, beautiful rhapsody of time and loneliness.

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