

THOMAS WOLFE'S ROMANTIC AFFINITY FOR GERMANY

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THOMAS WOLFE'S ROMANTIC AFFINITY FOR GERMANY

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Criticism of Thomas Wolfe's work during his lifetime and immediately after his death is often impaired by a high degree of irrational emotionalism. Critics are usually either defensively enthusiastic (like John Skally Terry, Wolfe's New York University colleague from North Carolina, in his introduction and footnotes to Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother¹) or disparaging (like Bernard de Voto, Wolfe's bitter critic, in "Genius is Not Enough"²).

Today, however, criticism tends towards a healthier objectivity, perhaps because we are farther away from the problems of Wolfe's time. His generation had to become cognizant of the fact of world citizenry; today's has to cope with the problems of it. Whereas Wolfe's generation was just awakening to the inevitability of United States involvement in world affairs, we have gone on to the problems of a nuclear space age. Wolfe's protagonists, Eugene Gant of Look

¹Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother, edited by John Skally Terry (New York, 1943). Hereinafter referred to as Letters to His Mother.

²Bernard de Voto, "Genius is Not Enough," The Saturday Review of Literature (April 25, 1936), 3-4, 14-15.

Homeward, Angel³ and Of Time and the River,⁴ and George Webber of The Web and the Rock⁵ and You Can't Go Home Again,⁶ advocates of earlier social and political passions, can now be regarded more calmly.

Richard S. Kennedy, in The Window of Memory, The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe,⁷ succeeds in bringing the man, his work, and his myth into plausible perspective. Though basically sympathetic to Wolfe, Kennedy is scrupulously thorough in his portrayal. Using notes collected from Wolfe's friends, relatives, and acquaintances, Wolfe's writing and criticism thereof, published and unpublished, domestic and foreign, Kennedy has produced a reasonable picture of Wolfe as man and author.

Unlike predecessors, who generally ignore Wolfe's political attitude, Kennedy discusses the awakening of Wolfe's social and political conscience, particularly that wrought in Wolfe by Nazi Germany. He does not, however, study Wolfe's Germany through Webber's trips to Munich in The Web and the Rock and to Berlin in You Can't Go Home Again. To date there has been no work which deals significantly with the growth of Wolfe's political views.

³Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York, 1929).

⁴Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York, 1936).

⁵Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock (New York, 1939).

⁶Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York, 1940).

⁷Richard S. Kennedy, The Window of Memory, The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1962).

He was reared with a mild loyalty to the Democratic party which he retained during presidential elections throughout his adult life. In 1928 he supported Alfred E. Smith for president and registered disgust at Herbert Hoover's election. In 1933 he attended Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration.⁸

Among the political ideas which occasionally caught Wolfe's fancy was Marxism. While working with Wolfe on Of Time and the River, Scribner editor Maxwell Perkins had to keep Wolfe from transforming the a-political Eugene Gant into a socialist. He argued that much of Eugene's story was written long before Wolfe had ever heard of Marx.⁹

There is detailed evidence of Wolfe's gradual change in attitude in his novels and also in the correspondence: Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother and The Letters of Thomas Wolfe.¹⁰ Excerpts from the still-unpublished pocket notebooks and letters to Aline Bernstein are used extensively by Kennedy and also by Wolfe's longtime agent Elizabeth Nowell in her Thomas Wolfe, A Biography.¹¹

⁸The Letters of Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1956), edited by Elizabeth Nowell, pp. 150, 365-366. (Hereinafter, Letters.)

⁹Maxwell Perkins, Editor to Author, The Letters of Maxwell Perkins, edited by John Hall Wheelock (New York, 1950), p. 98.

¹⁰Letters.

¹¹Elizabeth Nowell, Thomas Wolfe, A Biography (Garden City, New York, 1960).

In Of Time and the River, the material based on Wolfe's early travels in Europe contains no hint that the American author noticed anything vitally wrong with the European political situation. His letters show though that his growing awareness of the German body politic began before his literary treatment of the Weimar Republik Munich of 1928 in "Oktoberfest,"¹² and continued through his final dramatic rejection of his second homeland in "I Have a Thing to Tell You."¹³

There is a romantic but very real drama in Wolfe's association with Germany, which he always regarded as "'his father's country'--the place from which his paternal ancestors had come. He wanted to see it and absorb it because it was a part of his own roots."¹⁴ Wolfe was fascinated by the cultural aspects of the nation. His training in German language and literature began during his childhood while he attended the North State Fitting School in his home town of Asheville, North Carolina, and continued through his completion of his A. M. degree at Harvard in 1923,¹⁵ at which time he wrote to his mother that he would like to live in Germany. Since her

¹²The Web and the Rock, pp. 622, 650-695.

¹³"I Have a Thing to Tell You," New Republic (March 10, 1937), 132-136; (March 17, 1937), 159-164; (March 24, 1937), 202-207; revised for You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 619-706.

¹⁴Nowell, p. 120.

¹⁵Kennedy, pp. 33, 50.

financial aid was necessary, he emphasized these two major advantages: (1) the American dollar would go further in a country financially bankrupt as the result of the first world war, and (2) his plays would sell better to a public in the habit of frequenting stage rather than motion picture theaters.¹⁶

Hence, it seemed quite natural that Wolfe's first trip abroad would be to Germany. However, in 1924, when "young Americans were settling in Paris to write,"¹⁷ Wolfe went there, too, ignoring Harvard psychology professor Langfeld's¹⁸ appraisal of France as an "inferior" country.¹⁹ Wolfe had earlier accepted the professor's idea that Germany was superior to all other nations. However, when he finally journeyed from France to Germany he became dubious. He wondered whether Langfeld was correct in his assertion that only a minority of Prussian Germans had fostered World War I.²⁰

¹⁶Letters to His Mother, pp. 48-49. ¹⁷Kennedy, p. 94.

¹⁸Dr. Herbert S. Langfeld was assistant professor at Harvard from 1915-1922. He is listed in American Men of Science, A Biographical Directory, edited by Jaques Cattell, III (New York, 1956), p. 390.

¹⁹Letters to His Mother, pp. 48-49.

²⁰Ibid. Wolfe's skepticism has been justified by the Germans themselves, the vast majority of whom "still believed with unabated stubbornness in the cause of the Fatherland and the inevitability of its final triumph" as late as 1917. Only the insistence of Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff successfully halted the fighting. Klaus Mann, The Turning Point, Thirty-Five Years in This Century (New York, 1942).

Wolfe wrote:

I was afraid to enter far into the country--for a long time I hung upon its borders. I visited the cities along the Rhine, . . . I went into Bavaria. During all the time I had been in Germany, I had always been placed so that freedom and escape lay not over four hours away by train.²¹

Wolfe overcame some of his fear, and began to take pride in his ability to speak and read German. In 1927, he wrote to Homer A. Watt, chairman of the English department at Washington Square College of New York University where Wolfe taught, that he was buying German books and "devouring" the German language in "gluttonous gobs."²² A year later in response to editor Perkins' first inquiry about the manuscript of Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe could not refrain from mentioning that he had learned to read German "fairly well," and that he had "learned something of their multitudinous books."²³ As late as 1932, Wolfe willingly claimed linguistic proficiency in both French and German.²⁴ However, Kennedy writes that Wolfe could,

in his middle years, read and speak French, but his German was always very poor. Although nearly half of the books in Wolfe's personal library are French or German, the pages of many of them are uncut. The titles represent a striving after European culture rather than a capture of it.²⁵

²¹Nowell, p. 120.

²²The Correspondence of Thomas Wolfe and Homer Andrew Watt, edited by Oscar Cargill and Thomas Clark Pollock (New York, 1954), pp. 37-39.

²³Letters, p. 158.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 342-343.

²⁵Kennedy, p. 41.

Wolfe relied on Scribner editor John Hall Wheelock to check his German grammar in the galleys of Look Homeward, Angel.²⁶ He had adopted the land, not the language.

In 1935, Wolfe went with Martha and William E. Dodd, Jr., children of the American ambassador to Germany, to visit Weimar. Wolfe described Germany as

that wonderful and lovely old town that seems to me at least to hold in it so much of the spirit of the great Germany and the great and noble spirit of freedom, reverence and the high things of the spirit which all of us have loved.

He wrote this to Perkins "because you and I have often talked about Germany and the German people whom you do not like as much as I do."²⁷

Wolfe's love was returned by a land where his translated works were read avidly and where he was celebrated as he never had been in the United States.²⁸ One German writes that

when Thomas Wolfe, a stranger from America, came to Berlin a few years ago, minds harassed by politics, Nazi and otherwise, suddenly took fire. An earthquake shook the Prussian barracks as Wolfe appeared like Pan, crowned with melodious and chaotic words, a mountain walking like a man.²⁹

²⁶Letters, p. 188.

²⁷Ibid., p. 460.

²⁸William W. Pusey, III, "The German Vogue of Thomas Wolfe," The Germanic Review, XXIII (April, 1948), 131-148.

²⁹(Author not given), "Ex-German," The Saturday Review of Literature, XX (August 26, 1939), 8.

Wolfe recorded the Byronic popularity which he enjoyed in his Letters,³⁰ and, fictionally, in You Can't Go Home Again.³¹ George Webber's success story is based on trips Wolfe made to Berlin in 1935 and 1936 in order to spend royalty money which Hitler would not allow to leave the country. At this time Wolfe's works were "profusely displayed in faultless translations in the windows of Berlin's innumerable bookshops."³²

Klaus Mann, son of Thomas, who met Wolfe in New York City, was to write later that

there is at least one American genius I knew. . . . Maybe he was not a mature, fully developed genius. The idiom he created may have been rugged and redundant. But it is his idiom, strikingly and compellingly so. It bears the marks of valid and authentic intuition.

He further describes Wolfe as undoubtedly "the only great and authentic voice" to follow Melville and Whitman.³³

Wolfe's natural aversion to publicizing the few political opinions he did have gave him a longer German publication history than most non-German writers of the thirties. However, he was forced from his position by Germany. The adulation with which he was greeted in Berlin filled his need for praise but could not assuage his conscience. The

³⁰Letters, pp. 459-463.

³¹You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 621-625.

³²"Ex-German," p. 8.

³³Klaus Mann, The Turning Point, Thirty-Five Years in This Century (New York, 1942), pp. 298, 348.

Germany which accepted him was the same one that converted him from a disinterested Nonpolitiker to a writer clearly concerned about the danger of appeasement and willful blindness to the Nazi threat. After a glimpse of the Nazi terror, he had to reject it, and, in so doing, reject the fame that he had always desired. Wolfe had found a country as romantic as he himself, had fallen in love with it, was feted by it, and then had to quit it. With George's goodbye kiss to the Nordic Else von Kohler, Wolfe symbolically wishes Germany a loving but final farewell.

His earlier rejection of his mistress Aline Bernstein, with the assertion that she endangered his artistic freedom, is similar to his more complete rejection of the poison that was Nazi Germany. He could see in 1936 that his German friends were so determined to stay in the Fatherland that they became increasingly blind to the evil that they were too intimidated to resist.

Wolfe wrote friends urging them to see Europe before it was too late, and, unusually enough, wrote and mailed satirical letters to editors which illustrated his abhorrence for fascism in Spain, and his recognition of the need for collective security against the Axis powers.³⁴ His tone and attitude towards life deepened. His response was not a logical treatise but an emotional appeal in the form of

³⁴Letters, pp. 752-754.

"I Have a Thing to Tell You." When it was published, Wolfe's name disappeared from the German national bibliography.³⁵ At least one of his German friends feared that his name, too, would disappear from the register of German citizens because Wolfe remained unconscious to the hurt he caused with his too-accurate portrayals of actual people. Heinz Ledig-Rowohlt, associate of Wolfe's German book publisher Rowohlt Verlag, lived in constant fear that the Nazis would realize that he was the real-life prototype for the meek librarian, Franz Heilig. When relating Nazi atrocities, Ledig-Rowohlt habitually prefaced his story with the phrase "Nun will ich Ihnen 'was sagen." When Wolfe borrowed this for his German title of "I Have a Thing to Tell You," Ledig-Rowohlt was sure that the Nazis would see the connection. Only after 1945 could he acknowledge that Wolfe was right to produce such an authentic account of the evil of the Third Reich.³⁶

In 1946, Schau Heimwärts, Engel, Hans Schiebelhuth's translation of Look Homeward, Angel, was reissued, and, by the following year, Pamela Hansford Johnson, in Hungry Gulliver (an amended reprint of Thomas Wolfe, A Critical Study), comments that "the Germans indeed appear to have

³⁵Deutsches Bücherverzeichnis 1941-1950, XXV (Leipzig, 1954), 39-42; and XXVI (Leipzig, 1955), 1068-1069.

³⁶H. M. Ledig-Rowohlt, "Thomas Wolfe in Berlin," American Scholar, XXII (Spring, 1953), 185-201.

made to date the only exhaustive studies of Wolfe's work."³⁷ That this interest has continued through the late fifties is shown in Elmer D. Johnson's bibliography, Of Time and Thomas Wolfe.³⁸

This paper, centered primarily on George Webber's 1928 Munich days, so similar to Wolfe's own, is limited to Wolfe's first impressions of Germany. Like author Wolfe, Webber is indifferent to political environment, a fact which heightens the impact of the later change of heart. Though aware of the deteriorating political situation, Webber was willfully naive on his return in May, 1936.

George has seen Germany several times but not since 1929. Nowhere in the "Oktoberfest" is there any evidence that Webber is aware of the government. But in 1936, he recalls that during the 1928 visit

he had stayed for a while in a little town in the Black Forest, and he remembered that there had been great excitement because an election was being held. The state of politics was chaotic, with a bewildering number of parties, and the Communists polled a surprisingly large vote. People were disturbed and anxious, and there seemed to be a sense of impending calamity in the air.³⁹

³⁷Pamela Hansford Johnson, Hungry Gulliver, An English Critical Appraisal of Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1948), pp. 123-124.

³⁸The full title is Of Time and Thomas Wolfe, A Bibliography with a Character Index of His Work (New York, 1959), p. 14.

³⁹You Can't Go Home Again, p. 621.

This is insight which author Wolfe gained during a 1930 Freiburg trip when he was so depressed about the reception of Look Homeward, Angel that he compared his heart to "a Black Forest." While on the outskirts of some of the most traumatic occurrences of history, he considered German politics a better topic for discussion than his book.⁴⁰

This introduction is the first of six chapters of the thesis. Various aspects of Webber's stay in Munich are dealt with in the next three chapters. Chapter II is concerned with the motivation, conduct, and result of Webber's Faust quest, and Chapter III with the alternating reactions of sympathy, hostility, revulsion, fear, and warmth which George feels towards the Bavarians at the popular Oktoberfest. The culmination of George's irrationality in the fight, his antagonism towards but dependence upon the hospital staff, and his resolution of his inner conflict are discussed in Chapter IV. Chapter V is an examination of the German people and architecture that serve Wolfe as background and props for Webber. Chapter VI is a brief summary of the thesis with recommendations for further study.

For background material on the political climate of between-wars Germany, several of Thomas Mann's works will

⁴⁰Wolfe, Letters, p. 261.

be used: Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen;⁴¹ Doktor Faustus;⁴² "Nietzsche's Philosophie im Lichte Unserer Erfahrung";⁴³ and "Von Deutscher Republik."⁴⁴ An autobiography illustrative of the turbulence of this period in Germany is The Turning Point, Thirty-Five Years in This Century, written by Klaus Mann, Thomas Mann's oldest son and Thomas Wolfe's contemporary.

⁴¹Thomas Mann, Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen, Gesammelte Werke in Zwölf Bänden, XII (Oldenburg, Germany, 1960).

⁴²Thomas Mann, Doktor Faustus, Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde, Werke, VI.

⁴³Thomas Mann, "Nietzsche's Philosophie im Lichte Unserer Erfahrung," Werke, IX, 675-712.

⁴⁴Thomas Mann, "Von Deutscher Republik," Werke, XI, 809-828.

CHAPTER II

THE FAUST QUEST

In 1928, only a week before Wolfe was to set sail for Germany, his chief torture was a toothache.¹ The fictional George Webber leaves New York City for Munich in 1928, aware that he is fleeing from Esther and also from "all the tortures in himself." His choice of Munich "for his self-inflicted exile" is determined, as was Wolfe's, by a previous visit. George's travel plans include a casual "month or two" in England and France, countries which had played such an important part in the life of Eugene Gant. He would then "go to Germany and live there through the Autumn."²

Germany is the land of magic which draws Webber. To evoke the sense of fascination, Wolfe employs the words "haunting," "magic," and "dark mystery" throughout "October-fest" and "I Have a Thing to Tell You." However, in the Munich of 1928, Germany is uncorrupted; only later in the Berlin of 1936 does she become the Dark Helen which Webber had always pessimistically believed her to be.

Webber seeks a retreat in Munich, a town somehow enchanting without the qualities which give so many other

¹Letters to His Mother, p. 161.

²The Web and the Rock, pp. 621-622.

German cities a fairy tale charm. This last stronghold of anti-Hitlerism exists in "enjoyable sloppiness,"³ nearer the Danube than the Rhine. If the remainder of Germany is orderly and efficient and still envies Munich, as Webber asserts, it must be because, in the retreat offered by Munich, life is strangely enough stable, powerful, "solid, heavy, but not dull."⁴

Munich's climate eludes definition but conveys the feeling of baptismal freshness. Webber exclaims:

And Munich--it was the cleanest smell of all, the subtlest and most haunting, the most exciting, the most undefined. It was an almost odorless odor, touched always with a buoyant lightness of the Alpine energies. In Summer the sun would blaze down bright and hot from a shell-blue brilliance of shining sky. The hotter it became, the better he felt. . . . He seemed to be drinking in enormous draughts of the solar energy.⁵

Webber is filled with "lightness, exuberance, and vital strength." The air which he enjoys is quite different from that which his mistress Esther Jack is breathing while she stays in "the sweltering lassitude, . . . the heat-glazed skies and steaming blanket, the tainted and miasmic vapor of the New York heat."⁶

Distinctly different from either was that climate which Wolfe described to his mistress Aline Bernstein. Writing

³K. Mann, pp. 91, 261-262.

⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 650.

⁵Ibid., p. 652.

⁶Ibid.

from Salzburg, Austria, he complained of "the accursed weather of Munich" with its "leaden sky" and "thin wet sunshine." He found Munich's mid-October snowfall outrageous but was delighted by "the magic that is around Salzburg--all white--and lovely,"⁷ less than seventy-five miles away from the Bavarian capital. At this time, Wolfe had, he felt, escaped from possible imprisonment in Germany for his part in a Munich beer hall fight. His deprecation of Munich and enthusiasm for Salzburg are closely linked to the fight and its aftermath, which will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Munich, Webber's Lorelei⁸ of the spirit, has a charm comparable to Heine's Nordic siren who sits on her remote

⁷Letters, pp. 147-148.

⁸Heinrich Heine's "Lorelei" is reproduced below in the form that it appears in Heinrich Heine's Sämtliche Werke, edited by Wilhelm Bölsche, I (Berlin, no date given), 91-92.

Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten,
Dass ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.

Die Luft ist kühl und es dunkelt,
Und ruhig fliesst der Rhein;
Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt
Im Abendsonnenschein.

Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet
Dort oben wunderbar,
Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet,
Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar.

Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme,
Und singt ein Lied dabei;
Das hat eine wundersame,
Gewaltige Melodei.

cliff enticing sailors with her constant hair-combing. The mountain that sparkles in the evening sunshine⁹ is dreamily present in Webber's view of the Alps. George could feel, "there against the South, an hour away, the shining magic of the ghostwise Alps. He could not see them but he breathed them in upon the air, he smelled the mountains, the clean, high ethers of the Alpine energy." Webber claims that no one sees the Alps from Munich except on picture postcards of the city which were done by an imaginative photographer who "put them there because, like Monk (Webber), he felt and knew that they were there."¹⁰ This dreamlike quality pervades the whole of the passage on Munich, the German heaven, and resembles Wolfe's recurring dream in which he lived his life "in foreign luxuries of green and gold" and dreamed his "life away in ancient Gothic towns."¹¹

Munich lives in seasons and in time. The passage from summer to autumn, part of her natural charm, is nostalgic,

Den Schiffer im kleinen Schiffe
Ergreift es mit wildem Weh;
Er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe,
Er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh.

Ich glaube, die Wellen verschlingen
Am Ende Schiffer und Kahn;
Und das hat mit ihrem Singen
Die Lorelei gethan.

⁹"Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt/Im Abendsonnenschein."
ll. 7-8.

¹⁰The Web and the Rock, pp. 651-652.

¹¹Thomas Wolfe, The Story of a Novel (New York, 1949), p. 69.

"ein Marchen aus alten Zeiten"¹² which is repeated yearly.

August had come and August ended. Something had gone out of the day, something was fading from the sun. There was a sharpness of the Autumn breath at night, a sense of something waning rapidly, just the spirit yet, warm sunlight still by day, but something going, fading, going, a premonitory sadness in the soul. Enchanted Summer was departing, was fading south to Italy.

Early in September the nights were chill, and sometimes he heard a scratching of dry leaves. Sometimes would come a breath of wind and then a leaf would scratch and scamper on the pavement. And someone would hurry past. And he would hear the leaf again, the splash of waters in the fountains, somehow different from the sound of fountains on a Summer's night. He would still go at nights and sit outside in the gardens of the Neue Borse. There were still people at the tables on the terrace. The gardens were almost bare. His feet would crunch sparsely on the dry gravel. The doors and windows of the great cafe were closed. Inside, the place was crowded. The orchestra was playing. The air already was a little thick, thick with the warmth of food and people, thick with music, thick with beer. But he would sit out on the terrace, hearing a leaf that scratched across the gravel, feeling at length the ghost of Autumn in the air.¹³

This passage on the idyllic beauty of 1928 Munich has no equal in Wolfe's treatment of Nazi Germany.

The magic land of enchantment nearly destroys Faust. Just as the Lorelei sits on a mountain top charming the sailor to a watery grave, so does the beautiful Munich offer George a dangerous enticement to possess that which he craves most--the intellectual and artistic life of Germany. George shares Esther Jack's interest in paintings

¹²Heine, "Die Lorelei," l. 3.

¹³The Web and the Rock, pp. 652-653.

and architecture, but he apparently had a blind spot where music was concerned. This made little difference; he had enough to occupy himself with.

George conducted his search erratically, prompted by an unseen Mephisto. The hunger that his Waterwitch awakened in him "he had felt from the moment he had entered Germany, a hunger that Munich had intensified, that Munich had concentrated and enlarged. For that was what the place had done to him, that was the "kind of place that Munich was."¹⁴ Like the sailor, Webber looks only upwards towards his goal,¹⁵ and, while he is looking, the mystery and magic that haunt him almost prove the final blow to his sanity. His shipwreck does not involve loss of life. He has more at stake. His sickness is his soul. Webber's Faust quest, followed seriously, can only lead to self-destruction.

George is no more able to free himself from his inhuman, guideless nightmare than is the sailor able to steer clear of the Felsenriffe. George is like the astronomer who falls in a well while visually exploring the heavens.¹⁶ In this he is no different from the twentieth-century German who sought beauty and ignored reality.

¹⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 658.

¹⁵"schaut nur hinauf in die Höh," l. 20.

¹⁶Aesopus, "The Astronomer," Aesop without Morals, translated by Floyd W. Daly (New York, 1961), p. 110. ✓

had in
bibliog.

Several German philosophers and writers, including Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Thomas Mann, have commented ominously on the impracticality of their countrymen. In "Die Lorelei," Heine predicted that this sentimental romanticism on the part of his fellow Germans would be their downfall. Friedrich Nietzsche, much abused for the perverted Nazi usage of his concepts, begged his countrymen to shift their attention from the ideals of philosophy and music to the business of survival. In the twentieth century, Thomas Mann, in his Doktor Faustus, pictured Germany as a brilliant, demented composer who sold his soul for the ability to compose a perfect work.

When Wolfe was finishing Of Time and the River in 1933, the Faust legend "carried an intense personal meaning for him." After seeing a performance of Faust in Vienna, he wrote Aline Bernstein that "Faust's own problem touches me more than Hamlet's--his problem is mine."¹⁷ Perhaps Wolfe was right when he wrote that his problem was that of "modern life,"¹⁸ or more accurately, the problem which M. F. Ashley Montagu recently remarked is that of the modern educated man of western civilization, who is taught to prefer knowledge to wisdom.¹⁹

¹⁷Wolfe, unpublished letter to Aline Bernstein (November 18, 1928), as quoted by Kennedy, p. 207.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹M. F. Ashley Montagu, "The Meaning of Education, The University in the Cross-Currents of Change," speech at the 75th Year Convocation--1890-1965, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas (February 16, 1965).

Kennedy describes Wolfe's search, which is closely paralleled by Webber's, as follows:

Roaming restlessly, despondent about the fate of "O Lost,"²⁰ in a mental jangle about his voluntary breach with Aline Bernstein, he hunted furiously through bookshops and art museums, joined Rundfahrten, visited shrines, attended festivals. His pocket journals became crammed with comments on art and literary criticism, comparisons between European and American literature, lists of French and German books and authors, paintings viewed, cities toured. In a new upsurge of world-devouring hunger, he was maddened by the knowledge that his reading could only be "a spoonful of the ocean of print."²¹

Webber, too, is caught up with the quantity and not the quality of books. Whereas Eugene spends his time "pulling books out of a thousand shelves and reading in them like a madman," pressed on by the "thought that other books were waiting for him,"²² George occupies himself hating the German writers for producing so much that he cannot possibly read it all and then unconcernedly producing more.²³

George pursues the arts, literally possessed by a desire, he realizes, so selfish that the isolation his greed causes is damnation itself. He wanted "to get his hands upon the palpable and impossible body, the magnificent plenitude, of a whole groaning earth, to devour it, to consume it, to have

²⁰The original title for Look Homeward, Angel.

²¹Kennedy, pp. 169-170.

²²Of Time and the River, p. 91.

²³The Web and the Rock, p. 660.

and hold it for his own forever."²⁴ Caught in what Wolfe called "the terrible net of human incapacity,"²⁵ George suffers from Eugene's "mad hunger of the youth of man"²⁶ which affects him "like some enormous consumption of the soul and body for which there is no cure."²⁷ His voracity, quite insatiable, is all-inclusive. He "would surfeit himself with everything that he could buy, with everything he could afford, with everything that he could see or hear or could remember, and still there was no end."²⁸ Webber echoes the more eloquent Eugene, who, during his college days, "wanted to devour the earth." Eugene was like the child who does not want to go to bed at night because he might miss something:

In the midst of a furious burst of reading in the enormous library, the thought of the streets outside and the great city all around him would drive through his body like a sword. It would now seem to him that every second that he passed among the books was being wasted--that at this moment something priceless, irrecoverable was happening in the streets, and that if he could only get to it in time and see it, he would somehow get the knowledge of the whole thing in him--the source, the well, the spring from which all men and words and actions, and every design upon this earth proceeds.²⁹

²⁴Ibid., pp. 659-660.

²⁵Kennedy, p. 207.

²⁶Of Time and the River, p. 90.

²⁷The Web and the Rock, p. 659.

²⁸Ibid., p. 660.

²⁹Of Time and the River, p. 92.

Though ten years older than Eugene, George did not want to miss anything either. To Joseph Warren Beach, Webber was one whose "emotional unbalance of adolescence was unduly prolonged into the period of manhood."³⁰ Webber is aware of the madness of the "thirst that gulps down rivers and remains insatiate,"³¹ but unable to subdue it.

His greed is a source of shame as well as agony to him. He records, "It cannot be told about, it can never be described, it cannot be called a name. It was appalling, it was revolting, it was loathsome and disgusting."³² George's avariciousness is identical to his author's. In 1928, Wolfe complained that the "desire for it all comes from an evil gluttony in me--a weakness, a lack of belief."³³

This desire Wolfe shared with protagonist Eugene-George. Eugene's is a redeemable dream, but George's is damned. Eugene is a young college student, acting his age, unperturbed by any practical thoughts of sustenance. His "wild extravagant belief" that he could complete "a program of work and living that would have exhausted the energies of 10,000 men"³⁴

³⁰Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York, 1941), pp. 214-215.

³¹Of Time and the River, p. 90.

³²The Web and the Rock, p. 658.

³³Wolfe, Pocket Notebook 6 (October 24 to November, 1928), as quoted by Kennedy, p. 170.

³⁴Of Time and the River, p. 92.

is tempered by humor, a sign that he has not lost all perspective. While George meets frustrating defeat angrily, Eugene dreams facetiously of financing his ventures either through the aid of a rich, young, beautiful widow, who would "fall in love with him, marry him, and be forever true and faithful to him while he went reading, eating, drinking, whoring, and devouring his way around the world,"³⁵ or by writing a book or play which would mint him the necessary fortune to live unimpeded.

George's dream is marred not merely by escapism, but by his bland unwillingness to be honest. In ten years he cannot allow his view of the world to be tempered by time. Malcolm Cowley describes this mental malady as a "professional deformation," an attitude which Wolfe kept to enable him to portray a character so long that eventually he could not eradicate it from his own personality,³⁶ just as Leslie A. Fiedler maintains Hemingway did when he became his big-daddy type.³⁷

The frequent occurrence in "Oktoberfest" of the phrase "hunger of mind and spirit" illustrates that Webber's desire

³⁵Ibid., p. 93.

³⁶Malcolm Cowley, "Thomas Wolfe," Atlantic Monthly, CC (November, 1957), 212.

³⁷Leslie A. Fiedler, Waiting for the End (New York, 1964), p. 15.

to "utter" the "unutterable"³⁸ might well have been Wolfe's.³⁹ Wolfe uses it so often that it becomes almost a conversational filler of the sort which Mark Twain urged the novice learning German to use to avert embarrassing conversational lags.⁴⁰ A similar passage in which the effectiveness is diminished through repetition is that of You Can't Go Home Again in which the nervous, multilingual Berlin librarian, Franz Heilig, cannot speak without preceding his statement with, "May I tell you somesing, Chorge."⁴¹

The chapter "Pension in Munich" ends on a note of hopeless damnability. Neither books nor countryside have proved a substitute for human companionship. "He hated the family of earth to which he himself belonged because he himself belonged to it, because its blood was in him, his in it."⁴²

³⁸The Web and the Rock, p. 661.

³⁹Wolfe never was satisfied with "Oktoberfest." Elizabeth Nowell wrote to Edward Aswell, when he was attempting to compile the two copies of "Oktoberfest" along with the bulk of the manuscript of The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again for publication, that Wolfe "told me he was going to rewrite Oct. Fair--that he'd been too close to it when he did it." Kennedy notes that Aswell, in his attempts to preserve Wolfean form and content in these novels, closely followed Wolfe's outlines and Nowell's and Perkins' advice. Pp. 389, 390, 401.

⁴⁰Samuel L. Clemens, "The Awful German Language," A Tramp Abroad (Hartford, Conn., 1886), p. 611.

⁴¹You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 634-653.

⁴²The Web and the Rock, p. 661.

Webber, who "can find no end and seek no rest,"⁴³ could have said with his creator, "We learn restraint too slowly."⁴⁴

It is again Eugene who best describes the emotional depression that accompanies such failure. He says,

when it failed in this attempt, his spirit would drown in an ocean of horror and desolation, smothered below the overwhelming tides of this great earth, sickened and made sterile, hopeless, dead by the stupefying weight of men and objects in the world, the everlasting flock and flooding of the crowd.⁴⁵

The limitations of the flesh make George hate himself and his manhood. He wants to soar. Whereas J. Alfred Prufrock's trouble is timorous inaction, George's is the impossibility of completing planned action. He wants what he is not capable of. George

understood it all so well, because he had himself created it. He understood it all so well, because it had itself created him. He hated it so much because he had such deep and everlasting love for it.⁴⁶

George understood so well the self-belittling philosophy which he created and now believes. He does not value his worth. He knows intellectually that the hatred which he directs first towards the Germans, then mankind, and finally, himself, is the result of his self-opinion, but

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Wolfe, Pocket Notebook 6 (November to December, 1928), as quoted by Kennedy, p. 207.

⁴⁵Of Time and the River, p. 91.

⁴⁶The Web and the Rock, p. 661.

he does not really accept the fact until his hospital convalescence.

It was not unusual for Wolfe, a student of Horace Williams, the Hegelian philosophy teacher at the University of North Carolina, to speak in terms of opposites. Critic C. Hugh Holman wrote recently that Wolfe

grappled in frustrated and demonic fury with what he called "the strange and bitter miracle of life," a miracle which he saw in patterns of opposites. . . . The setting down of these opposites is the most obvious single characteristic of his work.⁴⁷

Concentrating primarily on his own troubles, George Webber views Germany as a sanctuary for a fugitive from life; it is the place to go when the world closes in, when he and Esther fight, and when he hates himself. He does not yet know Germany with the disillusioned clarity with which he sees the United States. His romantic nature is such that, though it damns him to frustration in Munich, it allows him eight years later to "suddenly" think with "intense longing" of this "second homeland," forgetting enough of the mental anguish of the 1928 trip that "after the years of labor and exhaustion, the very thought of Germany meant peace to his soul, and release, and happiness, and the old magic again."⁴⁸

⁴⁷C. Hugh Holman, Thomas Wolfe, Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 6 (Minneapolis, 1960), pp. 5, 11.

⁴⁸You Can't Go Home Again, p. 620.

His picture of Germany is mood dependent. It is beautiful when he first gets "home" to his retreat in 1928, but after he has been there a while, he discovers that he still cannot live with himself. George simply lives against a German background, insulated from companionship by his foreignness and ignorance of the language. He has no time for friends. His desire "to know everything, to be a God"⁴⁹--as Wolfe so aptly describes the Faust quest--ends for Webber in an irrational self-absorption. As Eugene records, "It is the brain that maddens with its own excess, the heart that breaks from the anguish of its own frustration."⁵⁰ George could not then have said, as author Wolfe once facetiously remarked to his sister Mabel, that going crazy is "not at all bad."⁵¹

⁴⁹Wolfe, unpublished letter to Aline Bernstein (November 18, 1928), as quoted by Kennedy, p. 207.

⁵⁰Of Time and the River, p. 90.

⁵¹Letters, p. 180.

CHAPTER III

FAUST AT THE FAIR

The setting for George Webber's encounter with the German people en masse is Germany's "most typical fair,"¹ the Oktoberfest. Though not so well known as Germany's wilder Mardi Gras, this festival survived the second world war with little change despite air raids which destroyed some of the major buildings on the Theresienwiese.² This harvest celebration is dedicated largely to the consumption of October beer. Each brewery has erected a great hall, some able "to seat several thousand persons." Carnival sideshows are also on the fields. Val Humar, writing in the travel guide Germany 1964, states that the

top attraction is the big parade that takes place on the first Sunday of the fest and includes gay beer floats and numerous folklore groups, particularly Gebirgsschützenkompanien (clubs of mountaineer marksmen), who come not only from Bavarian mountains but also from Tyrol, Styria, and Carinthia, in Austria. German ethnic groups from Switzerland and France (Alsace) also take part in the parade.³

¹Val Humar, "Prelude to Munich--Capitol of Bavaria," Germany 1964, edited by Eugene Fodor (New York, 1964), p. 282.

²Val Humar, "Exploring Munich--Stimmung Über Alles," Germany 1964, p. 301.

³Humar, "Prelude," p. 282.

This is the fair which the pensioners tell George about "with that elaborate jocoseness that men use towards a child-- or a foreigner who speaks the language badly." Simultaneously attracted and repelled, George listens eagerly. He is like the small child who smiles nervously as he waits to buy a ticket at the gate of the Halloween scare show. Webber is prepared to "come close to the heart of this people,"⁴ but he expects to find it black like his own. His depiction of the German populace, with whom he later claimed to have the "most natural, instant, and instinctive sympathy and understanding,"⁵ makes little sense without considering Webber's inner turmoil.

Though his desire involves more than simple egocentricity, his vision of the Germans is narcissistic. The dark barbarism he sees in the "second homeland of his spirit" makes suspect his spirit and first homeland. He is oblivious to and out of tune with his fellow man because of a self-hatred which must be resolved before he can even see others, much less love them. Although the boarding house has offered him the security of comparative seclusion, once at the fair he can no longer hide behind the facade of intellectual pursuits. He is impressed by the Bavarians' slow, unangered motion but cannot bear the "enormous contentment" with which the crowd

⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 662.

⁵You Can't Go Home Again, p. 620.

moves. He cannot lose himself and become "part of the great beast" around him. Impatient because he is hungry, Webber notes,

their heavy bodies jostled and bumped against one another awkwardly and roughly. . . . They roared out greetings or witticisms to one another and to everyone; they moved along in groups of six or eight, men and women all together with arms linked.⁶

He feels "a sense of horror" at the chained man show which came "as a climax of an unceasing program of monsters and animal sensations. . . . For a moment it seemed to him that there was something evil and innate in men that blackened and tainted even their most primitive pleasures."⁷ Critic Pamela Hansford Johnson writes that despite Webber's political ignorance and indifference, "he would not be George if he did not [feel] something oppressive and evil beneath the roaring and extravagant and beaming life about him."⁸ Only later, in his record of Nazi horror, "I Have a Thing to Tell You," does Webber truly consider evil innate not just in those festive Bavarians but in all mankind. Any sinister quality in "Oktoberfest" is implied in overtones and then not as "impending calamity," visible only during the high points of the fair. It is when the crowd of "Prositers" are gathered in the big tavern that he feels fright.

⁶The Web and the Rock, p. 664.

⁷Ibid.

⁸P. H. Johnson, Study, p. 67.

Webber's contact with the Germans is so limited that what he sees as dangerous and primitive does not involve any intimate knowledge or close friendship with people. None of those with whom he associates--Heinrich Bahr, the girl at the dance, the nurse--justifies the evil he imagines. The surgeon Becker might, if Webber's objectivity has not completely deserted him once he is physically hurt. Most have no real existence outside of their interrelation with the young Faust and are seen wholly in his shadow. They are much more in the shadow even than Esther, whose "fleeting glimpse of reality" is seen through George's "dark and distorted mirror." With the exception of Becker, who is kept primarily off-stage, these Germans share Esther's "role of holding the lamp that shines down upon" Webber.⁹

Unwittingly George desires to be part of the "multitude, however painstricken" because the damnation of "moral and physical isolation" that author Klaus Mann fears for himself¹⁰ is one that Webber experiences. It would be false to say that Webber's aloofness is completely deliberate. His physical unattractiveness, clumsiness, and even shyness alone would be no barrier to friendship, but his haughtiness is a match for the Germans' own. George is outside the circle and too proud to admit that he wants in.

⁹Ibid., pp. 86, 111.

¹⁰K. Mann, p. 362.

With an indifference that is suspect, he clings to his individuality by denying that he is doing more than tolerating Heinrich Bahr's enthusiasm and not indulging his own when they ride the toy automobiles on an electrified floor. So that there can be no doubt, he observes, "Finally Heinrich was content."¹¹ His amusements cannot be simple, for, unlike his predecessor or quite generally himself, he is determined to be a complex man, and the entertainment must flatter his ego. The shy, reticent German may, with easy simplicity, enjoy the fair, but George must stay apart.

George is incapable of easily initiating friendships, damned by the same incommunicability suffered by the speaker in The Wasteland. Though the hyacinth girl is very beautiful, he cannot speak. The words catch in his throat. She comes back to him with these words:

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.

He remembers

Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.

George's Meer is also leer. George is ignored, pretty much as an oddity, whereas the speaker is accepted with the arms of bliss, and finds them skeletal. George suffers at the

¹¹The Web and the Rock, p. 663.

fair "the one unbearable humiliation," exclusion "from the collective venture."¹²

How closely Webber's emotional state actually parallels Wolfe's is revealed in a November 1, 1928, letter to Aline Bernstein, in which he wrote that she was the only person with whom he could and would communicate. He added,

My being-alone-ness has become a kind of terrible joke--I have somehow lost all power of breaking my own silence. . . . I live in a strange world-- I will brood for an hour over a map of Vienna that I carry in my pocket, studying the vast cobweb of streets.¹³

He records that one time he got a cab driver to take him to the Sportplatz, a football field on the edge of the city. Once there he paid the surprised cab driver and rushed off before the man had a chance to question him. From there, Wolfe writes,

I walked on and on, straight up the long sloping street that seemed to reach to the Magic Mountains-- the soft hills of the Wiener Wald looming against the horizon. It was All Saints Day: most of the shops were closed and the people were out in force. They were almost all walking in the same direction as I was--towards the Magic Mountains. The shutters were down on most of the little shops, and everything had a strange quietness, it seemed to me.

It was amazingly like a dream I used to have of a dark street, and dark shuttered houses. There was only one bit of light and sound in the street that came from a carnival. I was in this carnival riding the merry-go-round, surrounded by noise and lights and many people. Then it seemed that I was looking through the bars of a bright wooden gate into the

¹²K. Mann, p. 362.

¹³Letters, p. 148.

dark street (from the carnival). In this street, there was no sound, no vehicles, no traffic except a great crowd of people all walking silently and steadily in the same direction. They did not speak with one another, they turned their faces neither to right nor left--not even as they tramped past the gate of the carnival and the white light fell over them. I know that in that white light the faces of these people looked thin and ghastly-sallow and damned; and what their march meant, and all that silence I could not say, but I felt that death and doom and the end of all things was there in that place; but whether it was I who was dead in that carnival, or these strange phantom shapes from whom I was cut off, I could not say either.

This dream came back to me to-day as I walked up that long street with the people all tramping steadily towards the country. And strangely enough, when I got into the outskirts of the city, and the buildings were uneven and scattered about with much open ground, ugly and messy as the outskirts of great cities are, I began to come on shabby little carnivals--only a little merry-go-round and a few swings, grinding out old Schubert and Strauss tunes incessantly. Then I went on and on; the hills were very close and beautiful now; I was on their fringes; and I could see the edges of Vienna right and left, vast and smoky and roughly circular.¹⁴

How fitting that it should be All Saints' Day when the Viennese were all out quietly walking towards the Magic Mountains. The reality is almost as strange as the dream. In The Web and the Rock, George was as alone in "the veils and planes of shifting smoke that coiled and rose in the great hall like smoke above a battlefield,"¹⁵ as if the noisy company had suddenly and completely hushed.

The scene itself is not new to Webber. Previously he had tried inebriation nightly when culture failed to satiate

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 148-149.

¹⁵The Web and the Rock, p. 669.

him in the day time. But he was unable to leave "die Sorgen zu Haus."¹⁶ Webber "felt a terrible jubiliation, a mad lust, the unsated hunger filling him."¹⁷ Yet he does not approve that the main interest in the fair is that "offshoot of cereal production."¹⁸ He asks:

"Why beer? Why have they come here to drink beer? Why have all these great sheds been built here by the famous breweries when all Munich is renowned for beer and there are hundreds of beer restaurants in the city?"

"Yes," Heinrich answered, "but--" he smiled and emphasized the word--"this is October beer. It is almost twice as strong as ordinary beer."¹⁹

There is no echo in Webber's account of Wolfe's initial delight with the "communal spirit" of German tavern life. Wolfe saw not the "beer-fumed feeders,"²⁰ but rather "the place sloppy and powerful with beer and smoke and the great cheerful dynamic vitality of their 1200 voices."²¹ He intended to take advantage of being free from prohibition,

¹⁶Trink, trink, Brüderlein, trink!
Lass doch die Sorgen zu Haus!
Trink, trink, Brüderlein, trink!
Zieh deine Stirn nicht so kraus!
Meide den Kummer, und meide den Schmerz,
Dann ist das Leben ein Scherz.

This copy of "Trink, trink, Brüderlein, trink!" is from The German Song Book (August, 1961), p. 179. Both it and "Ein Prosit! Ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit" are readily recognized by Americans who have been to Germany, but copies are extremely difficult to find in print.

¹⁷The Web and the Rock, p. 661.

¹⁸Humar, p. 282.

¹⁹The Web and the Rock, p. 667. ²⁰Ibid., p. 669.

²¹Wolfe, as quoted by Kennedy, pp. 152, 160.

rebelliously scheming to sail on a German boat straight to the Fatherland so that he could live uninterruptedly on German food and beer. This, however, is Wolfe, not Webber, in a spirit of bravado, indulging a desire to break established mores.²² Later, however, Wolfe found the night club crowds of Germany stale and unimpressive.²³

Protagonist Webber thinks that he might have found the end of all Unendlichkeit.²⁴ To him the people who joined hands to form the "human rings all over that vast and murky hall" had an "almost supernatural and ritualistic" meaning. He considered the rings themselves "something that belonged to the essence of a race" which he regards as "dark and strange as Asia." This latter might be the inaccurate concept of the Huns as ancestors of the Germanic tribes rather than the Teutons, or reference to the brutality associated with the adjective "hun."

The barbaric forest, the setting for the primitive German tribes, places Webber in a period "older than the old barbaric forests" with prehistoric man. He finds himself surrounded by "something that had swayed around an altar, and has made a human sacrifice, and devoured burnt flesh,"²⁵ man, indeed, but primitive, with a barbarism

²²Letters to Mother, pp. 161-162.

²³Letters, p. 141.

²⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 661.

²⁵Ibid., p. 669.

reminiscent of Tacitus' day when the sole occupation of the German man was fighting.²⁶ The tavern can be related to the knights' medieval hall, a large banquet room matted with straw to absorb the discarded victuals, debris, and possibly to cushion the fall of men.

Webber did not view lightly the "fast, furious, rowdy, and unconfined" humor of the fair or consider innocent the music the Bavarian bands played.²⁷ He watched in horror while the entire tavern-full of Germans "roared out the great drinking song" and the hall "shook to their powerful bodies, and as they swung back and forth it seemed to Monk that nothing on earth could resist them--that they must smash whatever they came against."²⁸ Webber's response to this primeval scene is identical to that of Kitty Fremont, the heroine of Exodus. While listening to a girl sing Biblical Hebrew at a pre-dawn breakfast with a camping party of young Jewish warriors near Palestine, Kitty is startled. She considers this "no army of mortals," but rather "the ancient Hebrews," "the army of Israel;" "no force

²⁶Tacitus, Dialogus Agricola and Germania, trans. by W. Hamilton Fyfe (Oxford, 1908), pp. 96-98.

²⁷For a description of the characteristic humor of the fair, see Humar, p. 282.

²⁸The Web and the Rock, p. 669.

on earth could stop them for the power of God was within them!"²⁹

Though Kitty feels the Jews' power impersonally, George feels that the Germans are closing in on him as they sing their toast to congeniality.³⁰ Kitty has the same sensation of awe for the Jews as George has for the very group that did so much to annihilate them. Kitty's removal from twentieth century is still in historic time, whereas the uncanny feeling that George experiences takes him back to something buried deep in man's past. He "thought of all that was familiar to him and it seemed far away, not only in another world but in another time, sea-sunken in eternity ages hence from the old, dark forest of barbaric time."³¹

The effect upon George is so profound that he suddenly feels as though he has been awakened from a dream to find himself surrounded by "a ring of savage, barbaric faces bent down above him: blond-braided, blond-mustached, they leaned upon their mighty spear staves, rested on their shields of toughened hide, as they looked down."³² In this nightmare George longed for the cynicism, dishonesty, and pettiness

²⁹Leon Uris, Exodus (New York, 1958), p. 371.

³⁰"Ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit," The German Song Book, p. 89. The words repeat like a medieval charm:
Ein Prosit, ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit,
Ein Prosit, ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit.

³¹The Web and the Rock, p. 669.

³²Ibid.

of the French; of the fog, the drizzle, the bitter beer, and the horsy-faced women of England.³³ He not only derided the Germans, he feared them.

Webber was satisfied that he had found what he had been looking for that night at the tavern, that this was indeed the cleared ring in the forest, and that he really sensed a basic barbarism. Before, he had found it only suggested by the architecture, smothered in politeness by the pensioners, hinted at in the expressed anticipation of the fair, and represented crudely in the carnival gimmick attractions. His reverie is interrupted by a friendly girl, who appears to be anything but the giantess of his imagination, who takes him out of fear into friendliness by reaching across, insistently tugging at his arm, bringing his mental activity into focus on persons rather than on people. She introduces him to her escort and the others in the group. With Heinrich's nodded approval, he joins them in dancing, thus breaking down barriers. Then Monk gets pleasantly drunk, and with occasional aid from Heinrich, plods happily and fearlessly in German through a pretense that he is from many different places. He enjoys the girl's confusion. She

eagerly tried to find out who he was and what he did. He teased her. He would not tell her. He told her a dozen things--that he was a business man,

³³Ibid., pp. 669-670. Webber's criticisms of the French as well as of the English are straight from Wolfe's letters during his stays in those countries. Letters to Mother, p. 166.

a Norwegian, an Australian, a carpenter, a sailor, anything that popped into his head, and Heinrich, smiling, aided and abetted him in all his foolishness. But the girl clapped her hands and gleefully cried out "No," that she knew what he was--he was an artist, a painter, a creative man. She and all the others turned to Heinrich, asking him if this was not true. And, smilingly, he half inclined his head and said that Monk was not a painter but that he was a writer--he called him a poet. And then all of them nodded their heads in satisfied affirmation, the girl gleefully clapped her hands together again and cried that she had known it.³⁴

Thrilled by Heinrich's earnest repetition of the group's appraisal, "a poet, yes," Webber has found the acceptance and esteem which he has missed since severing relations with Esther Jack. Once again he has been taken simply, without introduction, as a verbal artist.

This is the one truly light action of the "Oktoberfest." The pretty girl was a dream, and Webber preferred to keep her that way with an unspoken fear that knowing her and her friends would somehow break the spell. He let them disappear tragically into the romance of that moonlight night, choosing the poignant regret of a final farewell to the alternative of better acquaintance which would have involved both action and disillusion on Webber's part. They took leave "with warmth, with friendship, with affection in the hearts of all of them." Though Webber would never again see these nameless young people whom he felt he had known "forever,"³⁵

³⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 670-671.

³⁵Ibid.

they are as unforgettable as those Eugene Gant saw as he rode the train north to college.³⁶

Monk and Heinrich walk arm in arm home, still excited and unwilling for the evening to end.

It was a glorious night, the air sharp, frosty, and the street deserted, and far away, like time, like the ceaseless and essential murmur of eternity, the distant, drowsy, wavelike hum of the great Fair. The sky was cloudless, radiant, and in the sky there blazed a radiant blank of moon. And so they paused a moment at their dwelling, then as by mutual instinct walked away. They went along the streets, and presently they had arrived before the enormous, silent, and moon-sheeted blankness of the Old Pinakothek. They passed it, they entered on the grounds, they strode back and forth, their feet striking cleanly on clean gravel. Arm in arm they talked, they sang, they laughed together. . . . They walked the streets. . . . The moon blazed blank and cold out of the whited brilliance of the sky. And the streets were silent. All the doors were closed. And from the distance came the last and muted murmurs of the Fair. And they went home.³⁷

Webber realizes that he shares with his quiet, lonely companion "the sense of something priceless and unutterable, a world invisible that they must see, a world intangible that they must touch, a world of warmth, of joy, of imminent and impending happiness, of impossible delight that was almost theirs."³⁸ They are like the mathematician for whom infinity is always almost within reach. Though still trapped, Webber for one brief moment is exhilarated and free from the horror

³⁶Of Time and the River, p. 26.

³⁷The Web and the Rock, pp. 671-672.

³⁸Ibid.

of his enthrallment. This is the high point in his struggle to attain.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIGHT

The acceptance Webber found that moonlight night, the happy flight into fantasy and excessive joy, is closely followed by a fight motivated by a fear as intense as was that joy. Once again beer was drunk and congeniality toasted. Once again Webber feared those "savage faces in the old dark forest of barbaric time." But this time no pretty girl was present to quell his fear with friendship. There was only a "swinelike face" with "red pig's eyes" which belonged to the "hulking fellow next to him."¹

A possible real-life prototype might be the loquacious "great fat boy" in the Munich tavern who, perhaps incited by Wolfe's nationality, contrasted crass Americans to esthetic Europeans. While thus discoursing, the German "swilled down liters of beer and gorged himself with the fourteen different meats and sausages of a delicatessen aufschnitt," an inconsistency between word and action not lost on Wolfe, who commented derisively, "There is not a picture or a book in the world for which he would have foregone a liter of his

¹The Web and the Rock, pp. 673-674.

beer."² This real-life picture is much more believable than the literary derivative.

Webber himself tends to be rather vaguely portrayed. He appears to be an aloof and observant Faust, a querulous hospital patient, a being split into a quarreling body and soul, but he is not real as a hard-fisted brawler. Webber does not tell what happens. He reflects that "what happened then he did not know. In that quick instant, he wonders, had he swung out and smashed his great stone mug" into that repulsive German's face? He knows that "there had been a fight--a murderous swinging of great mugs, a flash of knives, the sudden blinding fury of red, beer-drunk rage."³ His resulting head wounds, identical to author Wolfe's, are pretty serious for an encounter which was written off much later as "that foolish episode."⁴

Such abruptness seems strange for an author who usually has his protagonist enact the minute details of his author's life. Strange or not, at the hospital Webber thus dismisses his adventure in favor of a gloomy meditation on time, which contrasts strongly with his preoccupation with the barbarism of the Bavarians and of their amusements. The sole function of the fight seems to be to get Webber to the hospital so

²Letters, p. 149.

³The Web and the Rock, pp. 673-674.

⁴You Can't Go Home Again, p. 621.

that he can react. The fight is actually the other phase on the manic-depressive cycle which had just before carried Webber to such heights of ecstasy.

Wolfe was even less informative when he wrote his mother that he was "injured in Munich and had to go to the hospital for several days." Without mentioning the cause of his injuries, he described their nature briefly and concluded the note with a brief travel itinerary,⁵ hardly calculated to soothe an anxious parent. In his first communique to Perkins, Wolfe wrote about his fight, and in a letter to inform Mrs. Roberts of the acceptance of Look Homeward, Angel for publication, he wrote that he wanted to tell her of his "stay in Munich and the strange and terrible adventure at the Oktoberfest (with all its strange and beautiful after-math)."⁶

With less lyricism but greater candor, Wolfe admitted feeling foolish about that European trip to Chapel Hill classmate, Benjamin Cone:

What mistakes I failed to make in Paris, I managed to make in various other parts of the continent before I was through. . . . Even as recently as last October I got into difficulty with some nice German people in Munich which ended in a broken nose, a head laid open by a beer stein, several days in a hospital and convalescence in Oberammergau.⁷

⁵Letters to His Mother, p. 173.

⁶Letters, p. 166.

⁷Ibid., pp. 192-193.

Wolfe promised in a lengthy missive to Aline Bernstein written before the fight to "write again from Munich but not a history next time."⁸ In the next letter, which was even longer, he related that as he left a hall late one night after too many liters of beer, a man grasped his arm amiably. With an inexplicable "excess of exuberance," Wolfe knocked him over a table and exited slowly but elatedly into an enclosure. There Wolfe fought the man and his friends in the rain and slime until they were dragged apart, and the author realized that it was blood, not rain, streaming down his face. Once during the fight a woman clawed at him screaming, "Leave my man alone!" This stuck in his brain, giving him an overwhelming sense of remorse. A worse moment yet was when he saw the same woman lying prostrate in the police station and feared that she was dead. He thought that he "would never be able to remember how it happened." His remorse was replaced by a fear that he had killed the man or the woman and would be tried for murder. He could not bring himself to ask about either. He felt safe only after he had crossed the border. Once in Austria, he commented disdainfully on Munich weather. Even the snow was prettier in Salzburg than it had been in Munich.⁹

⁸Ibid., p. 141.

⁹Ibid., pp. 144-146.

Shortly thereafter, Wolfe's initial response to Maxwell Perkins' interest in "O Lost" was seeming indifference. Nowell reasons that the twenty-eight-year-old, yet unpublished writer refused to be excited for fear of ultimate failure in negotiating for publication. She adds that his remorse over the fight and his complete involvement in a great struggle with his own soul were so great "that he could concentrate on nothing else."¹⁰

Since Webber had begun by anticipating barbarism, just as Wolfe had when he described the Germans he "did not like," the fight might be considered the climax and conclusion of the adventure; but, like boys testing each other through fighting and then becoming friends, Webber, as well as Wolfe, in a peculiar sort of way had really come to terms and begun his friendship with Germany, having found the limits he sought. When he looks back to the Germans as a people with whom he feels such empathy, his evaluation is more than memory clouded by the passage of time. During the intervening years he has had time to realize that the Germans had generally left him alone to resolve his own problems.

Finally, George Webber is too worried about his own battered condition, physically and mentally, to worry about that of his opponent. He is forced to look within and take stock, to re-evaluate the forces which had led him to his

¹⁰Nowell, pp. 126-127. See also Kennedy, p. 170.

shattering combat. Only then is he able to see that he had actually isolated himself from society, so completely that he was able to communicate only through pain.

There could be no easy romance about Webber's hospital stay, no heroism for having narrowly escaped death. In fact, "he had at no time been in any danger. His fears were phantoms of his dark imagining, and he knew this now." So he is left "with nothing for him to do but lie and wait and look up at the ceiling" and listen to the rain.¹¹ Though George only hears the rain from his hospital room, his author fought in it. Still Webber could imagine, in imagery that smacks of the real fight, "the shambles of the mud and slime that must be there in all those lanes and passages that had been beaten, trampled, battered down beneath so many feet."¹²

Wolfe uses rain as does Ernest Hemingway--to convey moods of sadness and regret. In A Farewell to Arms, it rains for Frederick Henry when he fights with jaundice and Nurse Van Campen, and when he is separated from his mistress Catherine, once by military service and again by death, at which time he "left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain."¹³ In The Web and the Rock, Webber concentrates

¹¹The Web and the Rock, p. 673.

¹²Ibid., p. 674.

¹³Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (New York, 1949), pp. 148-151, 163-166, 342-343.

on the monotone of a rain, which is an abrupt transition after the dry leaves of October. With bedridden boredom, he hears in the drizzling patter "the weary reek of time" and, like the living dead, finds his confinement "like waiting without hope for nothing."¹⁴ His restless pursuit halted, he listens to "rain on sodden leaves."

The occasional intrusion of carnival sounds upon his consciousness does not break the deadening atmosphere, any more than does the wooden crucifix in his room,

nailed with tormented claws, the splayed, nailed feet, the gaunt ribs, and the twisted thighs, the starved face, and the broken agony of Christ . . . that image, so cruel in compassion, so starved, so twisted, and so broken in the paradox of its stern mercy, the fatal example of its suffering.¹⁵

This artifact should arouse more than complacent indifference in Webber, a descendant of the Pine Rock Baptist Joyners, who observes both it and his nurse "with a sense of strangeness and uneasy awe," but still finds his stay an "eternity of dreary waiting" and the room "a blank of time and memory,"¹⁶ empty of vitality. His prison-like confinement makes him view the staff as would a difficult and contemptuous inmate: the surgeon Becker as the warden; the mother superior and the nun, his assistant jailors; and the faithful Johann, the lockup man. He turns his attention to the emptiness

¹⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 673.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 676.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 675-676.

of Oktoberfest entertainment; he thinks of "the gorging, drinking, swaying, singing throngs, their faces gleaming redly in the body-heat of steaming, smoke-filled air."¹⁷ Parallels can be drawn between the emptiness of the fair entertainment and Webber's life--inside, shallow excitement; outside, bloody slime and broken face.

The rain signified to George "that another hour for all men living had gone by, and that all men living were just one hour closer to their death." This startling reminder of his own mortality is emphasized for him by the clock which "struck out its measurement of mortal time with a solemn and final sweetness."¹⁸

Previously the beast was man, but now "it was the silent presence of the ancient and eternal earth that lay about him . . . in the darkness like a beast now drinking steadily, relentlessly, unweariedly into its depth the rain that fell upon it." Inconsequential man is that "one small tongue of earth that juts into the waters of time and crumbles in the tide and melts in dark waters."¹⁹ So is individuality swallowed up in the great leveler of dark-watered time. Whether the waters obliterate all life, or the general flow of life continues though the individual is wiped out, man is in either case the victim.

¹⁷The Web and the Rock, p. 674.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 675.

Left alone with his shadow, Webber turns from thoughts of death's proximity to his injuries. His body, which he had long scornfully blamed for his social ineptness, was now a broken image in an unbroken mirror. Webber's "rakishly tonsured skull"²⁰ was like Wolfe's, after his fight, with its "little stubble of black hair," which made him "look like a dissolute priest."²¹

Webber viewed himself with a detached objectiveness, mentally divorcing his mind from his body, observing the body as a being apart. Webber had in the past rejected "this grotesque figure." Now, however, he was confronted with a "battered mask" which "laughed with him" in the face of such complete destruction of pride and vanity. With this laughter came Webber's freedom from his emotional unbalance. He was able to exchange quips with his body, realistically examining his Puritan sensualism, and recognizing that he did, indeed, have physical needs and desires which must be recognized and accepted and which were made to appear unnatural only by the mind. Webber learned

that a spirit which thinks itself too fine for the rough uses of the world is too young and callow, or else too centered on itself, too inward-turning, too enamored of the beauties of its own artistic soul and worth to find itself by losing self in something larger than itself, and thus to find its

²⁰The Web and the Rock, p. 689.

²¹Letters, p. 143.

place and do a man's work in the world--too fine for all of this, and hence defeated, precious, fit for nothing.²²

In a dialogue between mind and body, the mind discovers that the body loves life and hates "death-in-life." George realizes "with wonder that he dwelt there in that place." He finally accepts the fact "that the demons of his mortal hunger would be inches and eternities from his grasp forever," realizing "that we who are men are more than men, and less than spirit." "What have we," Webber asks, "but the pinion of a broken wing to soar half-heavenward?"²³ This question is reminiscent in tone if not meaning of Eliot's "Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?"

The body rejects the mind's longing for the past, insisting the Worm of regret that keeps the spirit awake has never existed for the body, but perhaps began with the spirit as early as the crib. The mind's romantic "that was a good time then" and its desire to go home--to the wicker basket, to romanticism--is turned aside by the body's cryptic "You can't go home again."²⁴

Wolfe learned some of the same things from his hospital stay that Webber does. Kennedy writes that "late in the year, he began to exercise control. The time spent in the Munich hospital gave him opportunity to re-evaluate his life

²²The Web and the Rock, p. 692.

²³Ibid., p. 698.

²⁴Ibid., p. 695.

and to recognize the folly of intellectual greed."²⁵

Webber's acceptance of his body marks his philosophical passage from Plato to Aristotle, for

although the bleared and battered face might seem to be the visage of a madman, the spirit that dwelt behind this ruined mask now looked calmly and sanely forth upon the earth for the first time in ten years.²⁶

His worries about his physical being and appearance result in a physical and spiritual self-re-examination, which concludes with the hopeful note that Webber is willing, for the first time, to accept his body and himself. As Pamela Hansford Johnson states, "He wakes in a Munich hospital, at last at peace with himself."²⁷

²⁵Kennedy, p. 170.

²⁶The Web and the Rock, p. 693.

²⁷Johnson, Study, p. 68.

CHAPTER V

FAUST'S BACKGROUND--PEOPLE AND ARCHITECTURE

Unlike the relaxed, boisterous fair-goers, the pensioners on Theresienstrasse are overly-polite and cautious. They refrain from open discussions and hearty laughter in deference to the "threadbare gentility" of the Bahrs, the landlady's family. The property-owning bourgeois Bahrs willingly maintain a well-defined social hierarchy. The brothers are white collar workers who earn respectable livings, though their salaries are meager. They know their social position and respect that of others. By observing and listening to them, Webber becomes aware of the Germans' pride in their social order and its various divisions. He is pleased that the elite in German society includes the university-educated and educators as well as the military and professional men and aristocrats. Author Wolfe undoubtedly enjoyed greater respect in Germany for having taught at New York University than for coming from a family whose real estate ventures had in one generation taken the financial route to a higher American social position.¹

¹Kennedy, pp. 31, 33.

Though it is not unusual for Europeans to take pride in their social order, the Germans of 1929 clung determinedly to theirs. They were still suffering from the loss of the great battle (1914-1918) which they had believed so earnestly they would and should win. When the victorious Allies made as a part of the Treaty of Versailles that Germany form a kaiserless, republican government, they awakened in the Germans an extremely sentimental attachment to the Kaiser and to the past glories of the Fatherland.² With the removal of the idiotic Kaiser Wilhelm, the Allies had, in effect, removed the head both of government and society. The Germans fought to preserve what was left.

As Thomas Mann noted, the Germans never trusted the Weimar Republik. They could not forget its foreign origin. Too, they feared the word republic as profoundly and irrationally as most Americans did the word communism during the era of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950's.³ They were hence very hostile to the Weimar Republik during the twenties. In this explosive situation only one outstanding figure, Gustav Stresemann, was able to maintain a sane political balance. When he died in 1929, the way was open for the lunatic fringe to take control.⁴

²Thomas Mann, "Von Deutscher Republik," pp. 809-828.

³Ibid.

⁴Klaus Mann, pp. 230, 243-244.

George's 1929 Munich is not political. His world is populated by landladies, fellow boarders, peasants, and aristocrats, not by politicians. He observes his landlady and her brother Heinrich with a mixture of judgment and sympathy. He derives some satisfaction from the knowledge that Fräulein Bahr hypocritically murmurs about hard times and doles out skimpy meals to her pensioners while enjoying extravagant "teas" (actually small feasts) with her family. The pension meals probably seem smaller to George because he misses Esther's cooking so much. He is the small boy with nose pressed flat against the sweet shop window, who may go in to buy the object of his attention, but turn immediately with disappointment to the "maddening goodies" he missed.⁵ This backhanded tribute to Aline Bernstein's culinary skill⁶ is unhesitatingly corroborated by Aline Bernstein herself, in her version of her relationship with Wolfe, The Journey Down.⁷

Webber had previously imagined the pensioners, after the conclusion of dinner,

walking deliberately at first with dignified restraint, but quickening their footsteps perceptibly as they went on, until, as they turned the corner and went down the empty hallway towards their own door, they fairly broke into a run, frantically

⁵The Web and the Rock, p. 706.

⁶Letters, p. 142.

⁷Aline Bernstein, The Journey Down (New York, 1938).

fumbled at the lock, opened the door and closed and bolted it behind them, and then, laughing hysterically, fairly hurled themselves upon a sausage, greedily crammed the dainties of their guilty pleasure in their mouths.⁸

But although George considered "Mahlzeit" a farce, he was able to forgive his landlady. He sees her as lonely, trustworthy, and reserved. He speculates that if she had affairs that "turned out badly, she would have felt a deep and quiet hurt and kept it to herself, she would never have indulged herself or her friends in a hysterical neurosis."⁹ Using Fräulein Bahr as a model, Webber cannot praise enough "the kind of woman that one meets in Germany," because, though not pretty, she is "a kind that seems to be wonderfully lacking in the flirtatious tricks and feminisms" of pretentiousness and falsehood "which a good many American women have."¹⁰ One of these American women, the author's mistress, Aline Bernstein, attempted suicide in 1931, despondent about the outcome of her affair with Thomas Wolfe.

Webber, so very much like his author at times, likes to believe that he has found the perfect woman personified in Fräulein Bahr; to him the German woman is discreet, mysterious with the charm but not the deadliness of a Lorelei.

⁸The Web and the Rock, p. 657.

⁹Ibid., p. 656.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 655-656.

Wolfe was shaken by his brief, stormy affair with Thea Voelcker, a German illustrator, who, unlike his calm German ideal, suffered a mental and emotional shock after Wolfe broke off their affair, and, Nowell believes, later committed suicide over another unsuccessful affair.¹¹ Frau Voelcker appears, matching Nowell's description, in You Can't Go Home Again as Frau Else von Kohler.¹² Tall, blond with braided hair, she so fits Hitler's concept of the pure Nordic that it is difficult to believe that author Wolfe actually had a human prototype and not Hitler's stereotype in mind. Protagonist Webber lets Else go just as he did the pretty dancing girl and her friends at the Oktoberfest, with poignant regret.

At the Munich hospital, those living symbols of Catholicism--the nun and her mother superior--evoke a suspicion and awe in Webber probably owing to his protestant American Southern background. He would have considered the idea ludicrous that offering physical desire and suffering to God could bring greater joy than human satisfaction. To Webber the nun's garments are a "prison."

Surrounded by hospital whiteness and austerity, George fears ghosts. The nun's ethereal qualities startle him. He believes her an efficient, walking machine who finds life

¹¹Letters, p. 544. See also Nowell, pp. 329-331.

¹²You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 624-625, 628-629, 655-664.

a "shadow and exile" and is selfishly bent on her own salvation. Though her face is "pure, delicate, and good, for man it had neither mercy nor love nor passion in it."¹³

Webber insists that the nun is a stereotype of sterile passion. Convinced that she has no real concern for the living, he imagines that

the blood of the wounded, the pain of the suffering, the cry of sorrow, the terror of the dying, had made her neither hard nor pitying. She could not grieve as he did for the death of men, since what was death to him was life to her; what was the end of hope and joy and blessedness for him, for her was only the beginning.¹⁴

The cool hand that she lays on his forehead he finds impassive, indifferent to the affairs and illnesses of men. "He did not hear" when she spoke to him, Wolfe notes, with unintentional perceptiveness. George does not have the startling revelation of an agnostic who discovered, while living inside a French Benedictine monastery, that what is extraordinary about the scholarly monks is that they are so ordinary. He notes that "aside from a certain repose of movement and face, the men are indistinguishable from any others. Some are bald and fat, as if they had stepped from the pages of Rabelais or Balzac; some are tall and gaunt; some are ascetic in appearance."¹⁵ George sees only denial of the flesh.

¹³The Web and the Rock, p. 674.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 674-675.

¹⁵Griffin, pp. 18-19.

His feelings for the nun are not as intense as those which he entertains towards the aristocratic German whom he fears. Just as for George, Fräulein Bahr is the guileless Lorelei of German womanhood, so the surgeon Becker is the aristocrat par excellence. He could have been among those haughty men Webber saw riding on the various carnival machines, including the "heaving wooden horses of the merry-go-round,"¹⁶ though this would have been hard for George to believe since George thought of Becker, in surgical garb, as

an organism that was constantly buttoned to its thick, strong neck in butcher's robe of starched white, and no more to be imagined without this garment, in the ordinary clothing of citizenship, than one of the nuns in the high heels and trimmed skirts of a worldly woman.¹⁷

The doctor's physiognomy is a combination of the repulsive characteristics Wolfe noted in young and old aristocrats. Like the older ones who had "shaven bullet heads; small porky eyes, and three ridges of neck over the backs of their collars,"¹⁸ Becker has a "shaven, bullet head" and "creased neck," a "clipped brush of grey-black mustache," a "bald skull with its ugly edge of shaved blue skin," a "coarse,

¹⁶The Web and the Rock, p. 663.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 679.

¹⁸Letters, p. 128.

pleated face,"¹⁹ scarred like the young "militant aristocracy"²⁰ with "old dueling wounds."²¹

In all these things Wolfe sensed an inherent notion of superiority, which he despised, and he would startle such people by refusing to yield the right-of-way on the sidewalk. George was also critical; he considered Becker born to be at "his slaughter pen" where he could "limp along . . . probe thick fingers at a wound . . . hurl himself upon the maimed and wounded of the earth," and, "if necessary, to chisel upon their skulls, to solder together their broken plates, even to cut down to the living convolutions of man's thought."²² Wolfe did not speak so contemptuously of the renowned Dr. Friedrich von Muller, the surgeon in charge of the clinic at which Wolfe was treated.²³

Webber's contempt for Germans is not limited to aristocrats. The man Webber hit had "porky" eyes. George found the slaughter house not only at the hospital but also at the fair where he speculated on the enormous quantity of meat butchered for consumption by these "feeders." It is there that George sees what his author Wolfe criticized, a Germany

¹⁹The Web and the Rock, pp. 678-679.

²⁰Letters, p. 128.

²¹The Web and the Rock, pp. 678-679.

²²Ibid.

²³Letters, p. 147.

that lived "for nothing but to eat and drink."²⁴ Wolfe thought this "brutal beer-swilling people" at the fair strange representatives of a nation which had produced art that "far surpasses in delicacy and understanding any other nation." To Aline Bernstein he wrote:

Can you understand it? When I get up from a meal now, I feel that I have eaten something brought dripping to me from the slaughter house. . . . I did not know there was room enough in all Germany to support so many cows and pigs; the air is filled with the death-squeals of butchered swine.²⁵

Wolfe knew that the fair attendance was not predominantly aristocratic, and that not all overweight Germans were aristocrats. Nevertheless, he had more sympathy for the lower classes, particularly the peasants.

In The Web and the Rock, George considers the Bavarian peasant a pleasant contrast to the repugnant aristocrat. He believes the peasant mysteriously strong, confident, and virile, greatly blessed by deprivation, characteristics which author Wolfe as a child could have romantically ascribed to the American Negro. With superficial idealism Webber fancies the Bavarians free from "the thought and pain that waste away man's strength."²⁶ He sees them as an untroubled, unsophisticated people, animal-like in appearance,

²⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 668.

²⁵Letters, p. 141.

²⁶The Web and the Rock, p. 662.

unaware of unhappiness, and, in effect, subhuman. They "march" at the fair with "the springy step of the mountaineer," or perhaps of the mountain goat. George, who might as easily have been judging horses, notes that "these peasants had the perfect flesh and the sound teeth of animals." They had "smooth, round faces" which "wore only the markings of the sun and the wind."

George's sympathy is unrealistic and shallow. Coldly and callously he categorizes them in his attempt to cover the emotions of jealousy and instability they rouse in him. He considers his problems of the soul so much more difficult than their daily labor that he finds their soullessness enviable rather than pitiable, particularly since they read little. Webber envies the Bavarian "National Good Fellow," who appears on postcards as a benignly imperturbable and uncomplicated eccentric; and at the fair, bedecked in national costume, as a people rather than a person, to blow "the froth away from a foaming stein of beer."²⁷ George is impatient with them for never wearying "of the whole gaudy show" which his author had seen with disappointment as a "smaller and less brilliant Coney Island."²⁸ With some contradiction, Webber notes that the Bavarians consider "a visit to this magic city of Munich . . . a visit to the heart of the

²⁷Ibid., p. 650.

²⁸Letters, p. 143.

universe, and the world that existed beyond their mountains had no real existence for them at all."²⁹

Webber believes the architecture "the ectoplasm of the German soul." He combines language and attitude when he describes it as "guttural Victorian."³⁰ Germans, who ordinarily observed the petty refinements of gentility, gave themselves over to the October brew so much that they, like the architecture, were "Victorian fogged with beer." The "tremendous massivity that seems to be an essence of their lives"³¹ might be again found in the incalculable weight of the architecture.

The architecture of which George is speaking is not the Albrecht Durer and Nuernberg style with "great delicate gables, cross timbers, and lean-over upper-stories," which Wolfe liked. It is the one which Wolfe scornfully nicknamed the "Kaiser Wilhelm Deutschland uber [sic] Alles" style with "great broad avenues, great broad solid buildings, and rich shops."³² He thought the houses of this style rich, powerful, and ugly.

George was surprised that the awe which the German buildings conveyed was not the result of any spectacular

²⁹The Web and the Rock, p. 663.

³⁰Ibid., p. 653.

³¹Ibid., p. 664.

³²Letters, p. 138.

height or real massiveness, but "it was just the sense that there was in them a kind of weight that could not be estimated or measured in ordinary dimensional terms." Not skyscrapers, they are nevertheless cripplers--"molded by the fist of Wotan." He felt like a helpless child in a world of largeness, like Gulliver with the Brobdingnagians in this "world of immense objects whose dimensions he could neither master nor comprehend . . . He got the feeling at almost every door he entered that he was having to stand on tiptoe to reach up to the knob. And yet he knew this was not true."³³

An excellent example of the style is the pension on Theresienstrasse, a plain, "solidly-constructed," three-story building "without much adornment, but with something of that inevitable massiveness, the formidable ponderosity, that gets into almost all German architecture, and that American buildings do not have." Webber finds that by comparison the American Manhattan is a child's toy, and even the New York City post office now seems "a miracle of grace and soaring buoyancy."³⁴

Wolfe believed the German architecture an outward expression of the late nineteenth-century Germans' intention to "colonize the rest of the world" to give it "the advantages of a real civilization."³⁵ Feodor Dostoievsky describes the

³³The Web and the Rock, pp. 653-654.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Letters, p. 138.

German he saw during his stay in Germany in the 1870's as convinced "that no one can assume his place at the head of the world and of its renaissance."³⁶ The Russian and American novelists' criticisms vary in detail but not in character. The doctrine of German superiority which Dostoievsky found in the nineteenth-century German was little different in sense from that which Wolfe's Harvard psychology professor Herbert S. Langfeld expounded.

In The Web and the Rock, George's second homeland is a-political. His rank in the social structure is one accorded him by the middle-class Bahrs, bourgeoisie who could pride themselves that one of the elite was staying at their boarding house. George got no such respect from the only member of the elite he encountered. He despised and feared the educated aristocrat Becker. They are never on the stage at the same time, possibly because Wolfe sensed that George would have felt very insecure with this man who was purportedly his equal. He could not quite see, after all, that these representatives of a nation "predestined to lead the world"³⁷ are generally little people.

³⁶Feodor Dostoievsky, The Diary of a Writer, II, translated by Boris Brasol (New York, 1949), p. 564.

³⁷Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

It is not remarkable that George Webber observed so little about 1928 Germany, but rather that he observed so much. He had to find limits for himself before he could look beyond himself. Once he succeeded in doing so, through the fight and the subsequent hospital stay, he was ready to look at his surroundings. It is on that note that the book is concluded.

Although Webber and Germany shared some of the same faults, Webber was able to see Germany's with remarkable clarity but unable to see his own. He saw the pride and war-like nature of Wotan in the architecture, he sensed barbarism and hidden danger at the fair, but he could not examine the visibly present brutality in his own actions. He considered the Germans gluttons but could satiate his own appetite. He found their output of books maddening because he could not begin to read all that they had written. Basically, George was an idealist in serious trouble; the goals he set for himself were those of an adolescent.

Germany in 1928 is the home of this egocentric, childish hero, who is so lost in dream that he really is unconscious of those with whom he comes in contact. This is indeed George's story and not Germany's. Nonetheless, George has appropriately gone to a country wrapped in dreams of by-gone glory, which found its home somehow before the awful reality of the present, back in the "wicker basket" of golden days before the lost war was lost. The Germany of 1928 was therapeutic for George. Secure in a nation of romantics, he could reject romanticism, confident that his rejection would not destroy a philosophy which he had so long loved.

Recommendations

A further study of George Webber's relationship with Germany would show that the security offered him by Germany in 1928 was transient and that his rejection of Germany in 1936 rendered more profound the title of his last novel, You Can't Go Home Again. His involvement with Germany was emotional, and his subsequent break was painful. He was shaken out of his neutrality when he saw Naziism first-hand, but not out of the romanticism which had allowed the Nazis to take hold in Germany in the first place. So he was politically susceptible. The fatalism with which he gave Germany up for lost was basically no different in origin from that which allowed him to adopt her as a second home. Wolfe's rejection of the land which received him and his works so willingly

had in it the nature of a small drama, small because Wolfe was, despite his great sensitivity, only one of the political crowd. His Letters and You Can't Go Home Again would serve as primary sources for a continued study of Wolfe and Germany.

The political susceptibility of this American author who adopted Germany gave him a common ground with Thomas Mann, a German author who acquired American citizenship. Wolfe's primary appeal is to the emotions whereas Mann's is to the intelligence. But their appeals for Germany stem from the same source. The researcher would need an intimate knowledge of between-wars Germany. It would be impossible to deal with Thomas Mann without some understanding of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century German philosophers whom Mann cites frequently, and prerequisite for any study of Mann would be a facility with the German language.

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