

THE DEATH MOTIF IN THE EUGENE GANT NOVELS OF THOMAS WOLFE

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ABSTRACT

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Thomas Wolfe, particularly in his first two novels, often wrote of death with great insight into its temporal implications for the artist and mankind. Wolfe understood that death was an integral part of life and used his talent to explore the reality of death and its meaning. Wolfe's explorations lasted for the entirety of his life and helped him to arrive at an interpretation and appreciation of life. Wolfe's views on death were also largely responsible for the frenzied manner in which he wrote and lived. This being so, this paper examines the death motif in the works of Thomas Wolfe with particular regard to Wolfe's interpretation of life.

Emphasis is placed on Wolfe's first two novels, Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River, in which the protagonist, Eugene Gant, experiences the deaths of his brother and father, Ben and W. O. Gant. The deaths have a profound affect on the psyche of the protagonist and require him to understand and ultimately come to terms with death. Integral to the protagonist's concept of death is his obsession with the passing of time and the eternity of the universe. This idea is examined in detail. The penultimate chapter details the protagonist's application of death to the fabric of American life. The study concludes with Wolfe's final observations on death (expressed in his

last novel, You Can't Go Home Again) in which his views are tempered by the social and political convulsions of the nineteen-thirties.

I

OF DEATH AND THOMAS WOLFE

1

Thomas Wolfe's childhood was not a very happy one. For much of his childhood Wolfe observed disease, dying, and death. His older brother Grover died when Wolfe was three; another older brother, Ben, died when Wolfe was eighteen. During Wolfe's teenage years his father was dying from cancer. Added to these gloomy facts was the environment in which all of this took place. When Wolfe was five years old, his family was split in two when his mother purchased a boarding house. Wolfe went to live with his mother while his father maintained the family's original residence. With this as his background, it is no surprise that young Tom assimilated a concern for death.

In 1923, when Wolfe was a student at Harvard, he penned the following in a letter to his mother:

I went downtown Sunday night and saw the crowds usher the New Year in. Everyone seemed happy, there was much noise and shouting, but, somehow, the coming of the New Year always brings sadness to me — I don't know why. Man is such a mortal, perishable creature, and it seems a little like flaunting the news in his face that he has one less year before he too is dust, with tree roots twined among his bones.

In the same letter Wolfe remarked how incredible it was that his brother Ben whose "flesh that once I touched, that held me on its knees, that gave me gifts, and spoke to me in tones different from those of anyone

else, is now unrecognizably corrupted in the earth."² The inevitability of death touched Wolfe's consciousness to such an extent that the young man felt that he had little time to waste. For Wolfe death became the raison d'être for hard, relentless work in the face of his ever-shortening life. Wolfe's work was a reflection of a life that was an uncontrolled paroxysm that grabbed at and absorbed everything within its ken. All of this was digested and somewhat recklessly regurgitated into the books that contain his writing.

Wolfe wrote his mother in 1923 that a man "should carry the fear of death forever in his heart -- for that ends all his glory, and he should use it as a spur to ride his life across the barriers."³ Two months later he wrote (to his mother):

The underscheme of all life is tragic. Only fools and stupid swine rush about bellowing and squealing about their happiness -- something no one ever had; something that never existed; something weaklings are always whining about. But some of us may do something with our lives before our flesh must fill the mouths of worms⁴

Andrew Turnbull, in his biography of Wolfe, wrote that:

Wolfe was familiar with death ... early experiences had brought it home to him, while his spitting blood at Harvard had heightened his consciousness of his own mortality and quickened his desire to do something overwhelming and death destroying with the life he had. In the anthology of English verse he had used in his teaching at N.Y.U. so many of the underlinings relate to death, burial, and the swiftness of time. The phrases "when I'm dead and buried" and "I've got to hurry" were often on his lips and if his friends told him not to be ridiculous that he had years and years ahead of him, he would say, "No, I've got to hurry to get it all down. They say I'll write myself out, but I won't live that long."⁵

The thought of an early death plagued Wolfe until the end of his life and indeed, Wolfe was right -- he died in 1938 a few weeks short of his thirty-eighth birthday. In the last years of his life (this in

1935) Wolfe wrote in one of his notebooks that "something has spoken to me in the night, and told me to lift up my heart again and have no fear, and told me I shall live and work and draw my breath in quietness and told me I shall die, I know not where."⁶

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wolfe was exposed to a form of Hegelian dialectic that revealed the world to him in terms of opposites. This gave Wolfe's work the Hegelian structure of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis particularly in reference to the death motif.⁷ Wolfe extracted meaning out of life by comprehending a thing's opposite and thereby believing himself to arrive at a manifest truth once the opposites were stated.⁸ To Wolfe, therefore, understanding life meant that it was necessary to understand, or try to come to terms with death. This is the reason why the protagonist in Wolfe's writing is passionately preoccupied with life and, in the first two novels (Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River)⁹ in particular, with death. Wolfe adopted Hegel's dialectic as a framework in which to attempt an interpretation of the world, yet remained confused and troubled by the complexity of life. In 1921 he wrote to his philosophy professor, Horace Williams, at Chapel Hill:

Mr. Williams, at times my heart sickens and sinks at the complexity of life. I know I haven't looked through yet; I am enmeshed in the wilderness and I hardly know where to turn. Your words keep haunting me almost even in my dreams: "How can there be unity in the midst of everlasting change?" In a system where things forever pass and decay, what is there fixed, real, eternal?¹⁰

At Chapel Hill Williams upheld Truth, Goodness, and Beauty as absolutes. Wolfe felt that this view excluded Ugliness, Evil and Falsehood — truths without which the duality and conflict in the

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world seemed to pale.¹¹ In his notes Wolfe asked "What is real?" and answered, "Anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in any way That man is a fool who in his climb for knowledge seeks to build beyond and apart from the facts of this world."¹² Yet, as Turnbull writes of Wolfe:

... the question Williams had posed — How can there be unity in the midst of everlasting change? In a world of decay what is fixed, real, eternal? — continued to haunt him. Perhaps he could square the circle. Might it not be possible to march through the thick of life, immersing oneself in all its horrible and lovely detail, and yet achieve some degree of permanence and universality?¹³

This is exactly what Wolfe attempted to achieve in his art. Once, having recognized that man is caught in the river of everlasting change, doomed to flay about as his days diminish, Wolfe realized that by grasping life "in all its horrible and lovely detail" and transposing his experiences into art, he would indeed achieve a measure of unity and permanence amidst everlasting change.

The essence of the death motif in Wolfe's books may be seen as a structural, and in Wolfe's life, a very real mechanism in which to seek truth and meaning in life. As a seeker of truth, the Wolfian protagonist comes face to face with death and, unlike many other men, he does not deny death as young men are wont to do, nor does he shelve the thought for re-examination some twenty or thirty years hence when, in middle age, many broach the topic. Instead, Wolfe and his protagonist from the very beginning absorb death, dissect it, and examine its component parts in order to understand what life means. For Wolfe, life has little meaning without death. Life (thesis) and death (antithesis), are rigorously examined in order to achieve truth or at least a measure

of understanding (synthesis). From the very start of his writing career, Wolfe established the basic and definite parameters in which to mold his art.

Eugene Gant's encounters with death in Angel contribute greatly to his maturation. One death after another in the first twenty-one years of his life causes him to suffer emotional shock and depression. Eugene must face death so that he may be able to face life. The nearness of death compels Eugene to conquer his own self-estrangement. Consequently, the fear of death and its attendant dread and despair of nothingness can only be overcome by a fervent if somewhat desperate reaffirmation of life. Richard Steele has commented that "Look Homeward, Angel is a record of a search for the unknown. The unknown, in this case, is Eugene's lack of knowledge of his own existence in relation to the outside world, humanity, and to the inside world, himself."¹⁴

Eugene, with his insatiable hunger for life, must know everything that is happening in the lives of other people and mentally records shared experiences — not necessarily for the value of the experiences themselves — but rather to become familiar with them so that he will fear less his own aloneness and ultimate death.¹⁵ In his first novel, Wolfe embarks on an intensive journey of soul-searching in order to find a resolution to his attitudes about death. In his life and writing (the two are inseparable as discussed below) Wolfe moved from an "early fearful and traumatic reaction to death" to an "ultimate philosophical acceptance of the inevitable fact of it."¹⁶

In order to fully appreciate Wolfe's work we must be reminded that Wolfe was, for the most part, an autobiographical writer. There is a consensus amongst Wolfe scholars that Wolfe wrote about himself and that his experiences and thoughts were written down as a personal chronicle in which the protagonist is always Wolfe himself rather than an objective fictional character. Accordingly, many of the experiences we find in Wolfe's letters, notebooks, and indeed, in his life is that which is written in his books. This fact facilitates matters and also presents a problem. On the one hand, we can examine Wolfe's biography, notebooks, and letters as material that complements and, in many instances, is integral to and continued in the body of Wolfe's work. The problem is that much of his work (Angel being the closest to an exception) suffers from a lack of unity and direction. Wolfe was obsessed with "getting it all down," and was thus distracted from the artistic imperative of achieving unity and direction. Thus, while Angel is to the greater extent Wolfe's own work in terms of the absence of editorial tampering, the same cannot be said of his other novels. His second novel, River, was heavily edited by his first editor, Maxwell Perkins. Wolfe suffered greatly when writing this book as he attempted to shape a work that simply could not be contained within the covers of a book. Perkins was instrumental in wresting this book from Wolfe in order to get it published and sent it to the printer when Wolfe felt that the book was not yet completed. Even so, the book contains over nine hundred pages.

Wolfe wrote down whatever was uppermost in his mind. He cared

little for the planning, shaping, and rewriting that are the hallmarks of a carefully written book. As noted above, getting it down on paper was of cardinal importance. Elizabeth Nowell, Wolfe's first biographer, wrote:

The fact that most of Of Time and the River, The October Fair, From Death to Morning, and also large sections of The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again were among the things which he "got down" was only secondary to him. He simply poured out whatever happened to be uppermost in his mind, in separate chunks of first-person narrative, regardless of chronology or order, and with no connective material.¹⁷

Wolfe's last two novels (The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again)¹⁸ were published by his last editor, Edward C. Aswell. Aswell put these two books together from the reams of material that Wolfe left upon his death. Thus, Rock and Again contain material that Wolfe had intended to use in other books. A case in point is that Rock contains material that was originally intended for an unpublished book called The October Fair, material that was cut from River turned up in both Rock and Again. (As a result, much of the work in these two books was written with a hiatus of several years -- some of it is separated by six or seven years. Again does, however, contain much of Wolfe's last writing). The necessity of coherency demanded that Aswell write much of the material that connects what is often disparate pieces of work. Nonetheless, for the purposes of study we can, to some extent, overcome the patchwork found in Wolfe's last two novels by considering the four novels as essentially one book. Reading the four novels in succession (a considerable effort) renders forth the story of Thomas Wolfe from his earliest memories to the last year of his life. Also, we must remember that Wolfe's four novels were written in the last eleven

years of his life. They therefore contain some measure of unity inasmuch as they were written within a relatively short period of time during which Wolfe developed his interpretation of life and death.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. wrote that Wolfe/Eugene "is much the same person at the end of You Can't Go Home Again as he is when he leaves for the city after Look Homeward, Angel -- a little more sober and heavy-handed, perhaps, a little less fervent, but not really very much changed."¹⁹

Using this very plausible line of reasoning, we may say that Wolfe's views on death are well articulated by the end of Angel. The experience of death has wrought an undeniable and unalterable change in the psyche of the protagonist which will thereafter affect the Wolfian protagonist throughout the pages of his subsequent work -- with the obvious permutations that the accumulations of years necessarily imbue in the consciousness of the author. A final note from Rubin adds perspective to the points discussed above:

A good rule of thumb in the Wolfe novels is that the closer in age the protagonist is to Thomas Wolfe, the less believable he is as a created, fictional character. The only perspective Wolfe ever seems to have gained on his material as a novelist is that of temporal distance. That is to say, as long as he is reasonably older than his protagonist he is able to distinguish between the protagonist's values as a fictional character and his own as a novelist. But once this autobiographical distance is gone, he has no perspective from which to evaluate the character's motivations and actions except for those of the character himself. For the character is always himself.²⁰

Keeping this in mind, as well as the fact that the death motif is mostly developed in Angel and River, this paper will examine these two books in detail with reference to the latter two books in order to determine the direction Wolfe's views on death took in the last years of his life.

Wolfe's relentless desire to absorb everything as well as his cognizance of and preoccupation with the poignancy of life and death has been noted above. It is important to add the fact that both these considerations are reflected in Wolfe's understanding of his homeland. In reference to the former, Herbert J. Muller has accurately written that:

From the beginning, the greatness of America had been one of his main themes, if only because he needed a great subject to prove the greatness he so passionately and naively aspired to. In time he came, with increasing clarity and sobriety, to identify the legend of his hunger as an American legend, and to seek his image in the history and destiny of the nation.²¹

In reference to the latter point Muller notes that Wolfe

had a deep sense of the essential incongruities of man's life on earth, the perpetual disquiet that is also the dignity of the human spirit, the inevitable end of the endless seeking. He constantly dwelt on the incongruities of America, a land fabulous in its immensity and emptiness, its exultant magnificence and its desolating ugliness, its childlike innocence and its savage violence, its swarming busyness and its searing loneliness.²²

Keeping all of this in mind, it is quite appropriate that Thomas Wolfe's hallmark is the gigantic sweep of his work. He is, perhaps, remembered best as being the only American author who attempted an epical saga of the American experience. Wolfe wrote that "each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas."²³ Wolfe believed that men are to a great extent a reflection of the collective myth and substance of their ancestral and historical past. Wolfe had hoped to write a novel which would span several centuries of American experience

and would illustrate this idea. He never had the chance to write such a novel, but the seed of the American's ancestral and historical past is found in the body of his work using the Eugene Gant and George Webber (the latter the protagonist in Rock and Again) protagonist who records and interprets the American experience.

The history of America is a frenzied chronicle of blind ambition, great accomplishment, and bitter disappointment. In this respect, Wolfe is synonymous with America as he is the personification of the American chronicle. It would seem that death is a more poignant denial of life to the American than to any other race. Insofar as the American socio-economic collectivity is geared towards the development of the future, it makes sense that the American would be particularly cognizant of that which ultimately blots out the future. It is fitting, therefore, that the archetypal American -- Wolfe/Gant/Webber -- should be very concerned with death and as such, this important consideration merits examination.

II

CHANGELESS CHANGE

1

Throughout his adult life, Thomas Wolfe was plagued by the dilemma of the permanent and the impermanent. Wolfe thought that man was an ephemeral atom pitted against the implacable everlasting universe in which the earth is man's unchanging domain. Much of Wolfe's four novels is an attempt to define this dilemma and a subsequent effort to resolve it.

In Look Homeward, Angel the young protagonist, Eugene, is cognizant of permanence and impermanence or, in other words, of changelessness and change. Eugene conceptualizes this concern in terms of his notion of time which is later articulated as a concept referred to as "changeless change." In Angel, Eugene is troubled by the essential duality he observes in time -- that of fixity and change. In his hometown of Altamont Eugene finds solace in the mountains that encircle the town: "The mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change."¹ Eugene is aware of change (as evidenced in his own physical and intellectual growth, the change in his family when his mother purchases a boarding home, and the death of his brother Grover when Eugene was an infant)

but confesses that he understands neither growth nor change.² A moment later we learn that Eugene is awed by time with its "weird combinations of fixity and change."³ The boy thinks of

the terrible moment of immobility stamped with eternity in which, passing life at great speed, both the observer and the observed seem frozen in time. There was one moment of timeless suspension when the land did not move, the slattern in the doorway did not move, he did not move Only, these images that burnt in him existed without beginning or ending, without the essential structure of time. Fixed in no-time, the slattern vanished, fixed, without a moment of transition.⁴

Eugene is troubled by the phenomenon of fixity that his mind is able to capture whilst he is "passing life at great speed." He is able to suspend time while being aware of its passing. Such images strike him as being unreal as there seems to be a contradiction between that which is fixed in his mind and the fundamental rule of the universe that dictates all is passing, hence such images are troubling as their very presence in his mind exists "without beginning or ending, without the essential structure of time."

As the novel progresses, Eugene realizes that fixity is all too often supplanted by the relentless march of time. Given such conditions, life becomes rather meaningless as there is little that can be fixed — little (besides images) that Eugene can grasp and find meaning in. Eugene notes that his life with his mother is reduced to nothingness as he carries out his daily chores: "All of our life goes up in smoke. There is no structure, no creation in it We are passing away in smoke and there is nothing today but weariness to pay us for yesterday's toil. How may we save ourselves?"⁵ While in this frame of mind, Eugene observes the inexorable passing of time

which he can only understand in terms of chaos and death:

And Eugene watched the slow fusion of the seasons; he saw the royal processional of the months; he saw the summer light eat like a river into dark; he saw dark triumph once again; and he saw the minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death.⁶

In order that Eugene may come to terms with the chaos and inevitability of death that is necessarily inherent in the very movement of time, Eugene must find some unity in his life that only a sense of direction and purpose can give. This he must do by himself -- other people (especially members of his family with the exception of his brother Ben) can only be a hindrance. Feeling that his family has always stifled him, Eugene passionately hurls the following at his mother, Eliza:

The first move I ever made, after the cradle, was to crawl for the door, and every move I have made since has been an effort to escape. And now at least I am free from you all, although you may hold me for a few years more. If I am not free, I am at least locked up in my own prison, but I shall get me some beauty, I shall get me some order out of this jungle of my life: I shall find my way out of it, though it take me twenty years more -- alone.⁷

Once Eugene understands that he must live and work alone, he must next find some unity in his life -- unity which will be found in his work and will subsequently allow him to fuse his life, which he compares to "a great wave breaking in the lonely sea," into "a single articulation."⁸

In 1928, Wolfe wrote the following in his notes:

I am becoming more and more adjusted to my place in the world -- what it may finally be I do not know but I must build up out of chaos a strong sufficient inner life; otherwise I will be torn to pieces in the whirlpool of the world.⁹

The strong inner life was, of course, to be achieved through hard work,

but Wolfe was still trying to define his place in the perplexing environment as is shown by the pursuits of his protagonist. At the beginning of River, Eugene asks what is it that drives us forward: "That is it that we know so well and cannot speak?" He has no answer but posits the notion that "All we know is that the earth is flowing by us in the darkness, and this is the way the world goes And of the huge and secret earth all we know is that we feel with all our life its texture with our foot upon it."¹⁰ The problem of permanence and impermanence becomes poignant in Wolfe's second novel. There are many references to this duality -- perhaps the following is paradigmatic of Wolfe's/Eugene's dilemma:

And the great trains of America would hurtle on through darkness over the lonely, everlasting earth -- the earth which was only eternal -- and on which our fathers and brothers had wandered, their lives so brief, so lonely, and so strange -- into whose substance at length they all would be compacted. And the great trains would hurtle on forever over the silent and eternal earth -- fixed in that design of everlasting stillness and unceasing change.¹¹

11

Wolfe uses two metaphors to establish his universe of the permanent -- the earth itself and the river. Against these, man's brief life is pitted, which renders the duality of thesis and antithesis -- life and death. In Angel we learn of "the fumbling march of races to extinction" as "the giant rhythms of the earth" remain. "The seasons passed in their majestic processions, and germinal Spring returned forever on the land -- new crops, new men, new harvests, and new gods."¹² Man is just another changing phenomenon caught in the

macrocosmic flux of the changeless abiding earth. In the prose poem prologue to River, Wolfe introduces once again the duality of permanence and impermanence. We are told that the "dead tongue withers and the dead heart rots, blind mouths crawl tunnels through the buried flesh, but the earth will endure forever"¹³

In Wolfe's work the river represents the very blood of the universe. It is a phenomenon constantly moving yet changeless in its unceasing movement. It is full of "strange tragic time" which is impervious to the men whose "lives are ruined below ... by the river" Men are "whirled away into the sea and darkness, and ... are lost" until the river gives men life again.¹⁴ The river is thus a metaphor for the eternal universe:

Full with the pulse of time it flows there, full with the pulse of all men living, sleeping, dying, waking, it will flow there, full with the billion dark and secret moments of our lives it just flows there. Filled with all the hope, the madness and the passion of our youth it flows there, in the daytime, in the dark, drinking with ceaseless glut the land, mining into its tides the earth as it mines the hours and the moments of our life into its tides, mining against the sides of ships, foaming about piled crustings of old wharves, sliding like time and silence by the vast cliff of the city, girdling the stone isle of life with moving waters — thick with the wastes of the earth, dark with our stains, and heavied with our dumpings, rich, rank, beautiful, and unending as all life, all living, as it flows by us, by us, by us, to the sea!¹⁵

Despite whatever men may do — "They'll build great engines yet, and grander towers" — the rivers will nevertheless flow to the sea, dispassionately passing by "all the million lives and deaths of the city."¹⁶

Men are pitted against an uncaring universe, forced to marshall their resources against an indifferent environment and are apparently rendered lost and confused in the endeavor. About one-third of the

way through River, Eugene is arrested with some friends on a charge of speeding and drunken driving. This incident illustrates the modality of rootlessness that life engenders in the lives of men. The police who arrest Eugene evoke "a whole history of this earth and people, monstrous, savage, and unutterable" Although the policemen incorporate "the savage and mindless energy of the earth itself, with all that was wild, sensual, fecund, cruel and good natured" they also make very evident to Eugene "the fear, the shame, the horror that had crushed them beneath its ocean weight of nameless and cowering dread" -- all of which, Eugene feels, has "broken or destroyed their souls."¹⁷ The incident not only has meaning in his perception of the lives of the policemen and of all men, but also drives home a rather poignant realization. This is the first time Eugene had ever been arrested and the significance of the arrest is found in the boy's coming face to face with "an immense and brutal authority in life, which he had seen before, but to which he had always believed himself immune." We learn that this is the first time Eugene had ever been subjected to an authority against which he is powerless: "he had believed, as every young man believes, that his own life and body were fiercely immune to every indignity of force and compulsion." Taking advantage of the incident, Eugene internalizes the experience as the security of immunity is now gone forever -- "And having lost it irrecoverably, he had gained something of more value." Coming out of the jail cell Eugene is conscious "of a more earthly, common, and familiar union with the lives of other men"¹⁸

Eugene understands that he, too, is caught in the jaws of an

implacable authority that had been reflected in the lives of the policemen; the "immense and brutal authority" in life is that which man is condemned to accept in exchange for life — a moment's breath of life in exchange for the consciousness of his own brevity (which in turn is subjected to an environment which is changeless and indifferent). Eugene is now able to identify with Everyman as he is, indeed, one of them. About one hundred and thirty pages before the incident described above, Eugene is rummaging through some old photographs of his father and identifies him with

the cold and terrible loneliness of man, and of the lost American who has been brought forth naked under immense and lonely skies, to "shift for himself," to grope his way blindly through the confusion and brutal chaos of life ... to wander blindly down across the continent, to hunt forever for a goal, a wall, a dwelling place of warmth and certitude, a light, a door.¹⁹

This, then, is the dilemma for all men, particularly Americans, and Eugene now understands that he, like all other Americans, must share in the dilemma.

In The Web and the Rock, Wolfe's third novel, mankind's dilemma is succinctly, if not somewhat vituperatively, stated in that the "immense and brutal authority" in life reduces a man to a "little match flare in the darkness" who "tries to give a purpose to eternity ... who will use the last breath in his lungs, the final beating in his heart, to launch his rockets against Saturn, to flash his meanings at unmindful stars."²⁰ The reason for man's ceaseless activity is simple: men are wise creatures, "they know that they are lost, they know they are desolate and damned together; they look out upon the tumult of unending water, and they know there is no answer, and

that the sea, the sea, is its own end and answer."²¹ Nonetheless, out of these seeds of apparent despair is born the flower of mythic dimensions:

It seemed to him that all man's life was like a tiny spout of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man's grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory came from the brevity and smallness of this flame, and that he knew his light was little and would be extinguished, and that only darkness was immense and everlasting, and that he died with defiance on his lips, and that the shout of his hatred and denial rang with the last pulsing of his heart into the maw of all-engulfing night.²²

The undeniable fact of man's inevitable death coupled with the shortness of his days requires men to endlessly seek knowledge in an attempt to intellectually transcend death. Wolfe wrote in his notes that man "cannot know all, nor see all. The only infinite, the only insatiable thing in man is hunger and desire ... it steepens him in his deepest hell. But it is also the greatest thing in him: it is the demon that can possess him, and that may destroy him."²³ At the same time (May, 1930) Wolfe wrote to friends that "Our effort is to wreak out of chaos and the impermanent hours some lasting beauty: the effort usually fails, but it is a thing for the strong and faithful to try for."²⁴ It would appear that Wolfe had finally come to define his own place in the indifferent universe. He recognized the ultimate futility of man's life on earth, but realized that in man's relentless quest for knowledge some "lasting beauty" could be chiseled out of the firmament of chaos. Wolfe undertook the task -- to transcend death, to order chaos -- in the form of his art. A month later, Wolfe wrote to his friend at Scribners, John Hall Wheelock, that he felt he had "got it -- the two things that haunt and hurt us: the eternal

wandering, moving, questing, loneliness, homesickness, and the desire of the soul for a home, peace, fixity, repose."²⁵

Wolfe attempted to find a measure of fixity in his work and was only at peace (if this was indeed at all possible for him) when he was deeply immersed in his work. In River, Wolfe's young artist-in-the-making, Eugene Gant, knows that in the "enchanted city" all "the frenzy and unrest of his spirit would find a certain goal and triumph, and toward which everything on earth, and all the hope and joy now rising in his heart, was tending."²⁶ His questing and loneliness are to be assuaged in his attempt to "wreak out of chaos and the impermanent hours some lasting beauty" Thus, coming to terms with or understanding life (thesis) and death (antithesis) leads to Eugene's and Wolfe's art (synthesis). Eugene's art will be the medium in which he will seek truth and understanding.

iii

In Of Time and the River, the permanence of the universe is articulated as "changeless change." To Eugene, changeless change is a fundamental rule governing the movement of the universe and lives of men. Like a river, the universe is constantly moving and constantly changing. Since change is eternal or "fixed" and "in unceasing movement"²⁷ it is by its very nature ceaseless and therefore changeless. Similarly, the lives of men are changeless in that mankind's frenzied and unceasing activity reverberates through the ages as "the still sad music of humanity ... made up out of our million passing lives ... as fixed and everlasting as eternity."²⁸ This is the modus operandi of

existence with which Eugene Gant must cope throughout Wolfe's first two novels.

The phenomenon of changeless change represents mankind's eternal dilemma for Eugene. Eugene understands that he, like all men living, is just a mere atom in the great scheme of things and must be swept along helplessly in the currents of changeless change. As he is a part of the universe that is always in a state of flux — as is his body on a microcosmic level — he is necessarily condemned to do little as he is tossed about amongst the waves of change. Like all men, he is held prisoner to "the immense and murmurous sound of time" which is "remote, essential, imperturbable and everlasting -- fixed and unchanging, no matter what men lived or died."²⁹

Eugene is, accordingly, rendered impotent in this world of ceaseless change and attempts to resolve (or at least live with) this dilemma by trying to consume everything he can get his hands on. He attempts to read, eat, and see all he possibly can and is rendered more frustrated and no wiser than he was before he started to do so. This is his futile attempt to make his dent in the universe of changeless change:

He was driven by a hunger so literal, cruel and physical that it wanted to devour the earth and all the things and people in it, and 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 world³⁰

Integral to Eugene's tenet of changeless change is his obsession with the duality of man's mortality and the eternity of the universe represented by the earth. Eugene's Weltansicht is partly formed by

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this situation insofar as his eternal restlessness is a futile attempt to come to terms with, or defy, a reality that must remain incomprehensible as the two (the mortality of man and the eternity of the earth) cannot be reconciled in his mind. As a result, Eugene is compelled to live within the world of himself and therein find his own reality.

At the very end of Angel, the ghost of Eugene's dead brother, Ben, tells him that he need not look aimlessly for meaning in the world. When Eugene asks Ben, "where is the world?" the reply is simply, "You are your world."³¹ Eugene admits that he has "died the hundred deaths that lead to life"³² -- the essence of the statement suggesting that Eugene has encountered the many disappointments, travails, and deaths of loved ones that life thrusts in one's path and has realized that all of it has inexorably lead him to life. The darkness the boy has encountered in life has made poignant the inescapable fact that he is indeed alive and acutely and somewhat zealously responsive to the myriad stimuli in which he is enveloped. Thus, Ben helps Eugene to understand the significance of his life in which the "hundred deaths" have been Eugene's vibrant and relentless struggle with death in all its incarnations -- in essence a life in which the struggle itself is revealed as the developing artist's somewhat reluctant but inescapable confirmation of life. (It must be kept in mind that, in the final analysis, every moment of life is a repudiation and the very antithesis of death. This is especially true for the artist who in the very act of creation endeavors to transcend death for eternity).

Eugene no longer has to suffer from a hundred deaths and must no longer search for the world as his world is now to be found within himself -- as Ben said, "You are your world." Accordingly, there is only one thing left for Eugene to do -- to embark on the final search, the last voyage into life which is "the good one, the best" where "in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter"³³

We may interpret Eugene's decision to live within himself as a "death-in-life" that plays a large part in Eugene's interpretation of the world and becomes a part of his life, as soon as he is able to articulate his feelings. We are told that Eugene has spurned "childhood thoughts of aerial flight and escape into some magic and unvisited domain" and will

escape not out of life but into it, looking through walls he had never seen before, exploring the palpable and golden substance of this earth as it had never been explored, finding, somehow, the word, the key, the door, to the glory of a life more fortunate and happy than any man has ever known³⁴

This exploration will be an artistic endeavor that will consume every waking and sleeping moment of Eugene's life. (This was true for Wolfe himself as, we must remember, Wolfe always wrote about himself. The exploration lasted to the very end of Wolfe's life and, of course, was concurrent with his self-modeled protagonist. The journey was a death-in-life insofar as it was conducted with the same frenzied intensity that was characteristic of all Wolfe did and accordingly necessitated his severance from the human community. Wolfe's work prevented the establishment and maintenance of any relationship of significance and became the raison d'être for attempting to relate

with mankind in terms of his art — the medium by which he and his protagonist communicated their thoughts to the world without. We must note that Eugene's/Wolfe's art was not communication with the world but rather a one-way road along which it communicated to the world).

Eugene's decision to live within himself comes with a high price tag — one which will render him conscious of his loneliness (a necessary artistic requisite for Wolfe) and never satisfied with his restless, unappeased internal world. Eugene's cries of "Lost! Alone!" in Angel reflect his quintessential anguish that is so much a part of Eugene and of Wolfe's books. Wolfe was cognizant of his own loneliness and that of other men. In River he used a brilliant metaphor to represent mankind's anguish: Eugene scrutinizes the phenomenon of people in a train observing other people in another passing train. This event symbolizes the destiny of man in which the instant meeting of men in two different trains reminds Eugene of the longing of men for friendship — a respite from mankind's loneliness and disenchantment:

And they looked at one another for a moment; they passed and vanished and were gone forever, yet it seemed to him that he had known these people, that he knew them better than the people in his own train, and that, having met them for an instant under immense and timeless skies, as they were hurled across the continent to a thousand destinations, they had met, passed, vanished, yet would remember this forever. And he thought that the people in the two trains felt this, also: slowly they passed each other now, and their mouths smiled and their eyes grew friendly, but he thought that there was some sorrow and regret in what they felt. For, having lived together as strangers in the immense and swarming city, they now had met upon the everlasting earth, hurled past each other for a moment between two points in time upon the shining rails, never to meet, to speak, to know each other anymore, and the briefness of their days, the destiny of man, was in that instant greeting and farewell.³⁵

Thus, man's attempt to lessen his anguish is thwarted by the reality reflected in the passage above. The instant meeting, though met with friendly smiles, is underscored by the knowledge that all men are but atoms, in constant movement, capriciously tossed about throughout life's journey and always plagued by the briefness of their days.

This simple meeting of men in trains is a microcosm of the world-view of changeless change held by Eugene. Earlier in River, Eugene sees time as an everflowing river — the changeless change in which man's existence is fixed and subordinated to the eternity of time and the universe. This concept is represented by yet another microcosm: the train station. Here men constantly come and go in their great trains: the constant movement of mankind that is fixed in the timelessness of changeless change and man rendered impotent, alone, and confused in the very fixity of life.

Toward the end of River, Eugene has finally reconciled himself with man's place in the timelessness of changeless change and the duality of existence mentioned above. He talks of the realization, at the age of twenty-four, of the "bitter joy and anguish"³⁶ that comes with

the knowledge of man's brevity ... when we first understand what we have never known before: that for us, as for every other man alive, all passes, all melts before our grasp like smoke; when we know that the moment of beauty carries in it the seeds of its own instant death, that love is gone almost before we have it, that youth is gone before we know it, and that like every other man, we must grow old and die.³⁷

The knowledge of one's own brevity and the knowledge that life will be taken away from one before its meaning may be grasped or before one can employ what one has learned, coupled with the enigma of changeless

change, becomes a death-in-life that must remain with a man throughout his lifetime. This knowledge, or rather Eugene's inevitable march through Angel and River to this recognition of man's eternal Weltschmerz, is in itself a sentiment that may be referred to as the death-in-life motif. This motif underscores both Angel and River.

At the end of River, Eugene sums up what a man is; the following passage may be read as a statement of Eugene Gant's discovery at the conclusion of the Eugene Gant novels:

For what are we my brother? We are a phantom flare of grieved desire, the ghostling and phosphoric flicker of immortal time, a brevity of days haunted by the eternity of the earth. We are an unspeakable utterance, an insatiable hunger, an unquenchable thirst; a lust that bursts our sinews, explodes our brains, sickens and rots our guts, and rips our hearts asunder. We are a twist of passion, a moment's flare of love and ecstasy, a sinew of bright blood and agony, a lost cry, a music of pain and joy, a haunting of brief, sharp hours, an almost captured beauty, a demon's whisper of unbodied memory. We are the dupes of time.³⁸

III

THE DEATH OF BEN

i

The death-in-life motif in Angel and River (the Eugene Gant novels) is underscored by the absence of meaningful relationships on the part of Eugene with friends or family. Eugene is bewildered by life's complexity and his preoccupation with his responses to life. His primary response is to lock himself in his own world in order to cope with the vicissitudes of life. To accommodate his preoccupation, Eugene must necessarily, sooner or later, sever or remain distant from those with whom he may have had a lasting relationship. This is reflected in Eugene's intercourse with his mother, father, brothers, and sisters in Angel and River and is carried on in reference to Esther Jack and Foxhall Edwards in Wolfe's George Webber novels (The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again). Esther Jack and Foxhall Edwards are the fictional counterparts of Aline Bernstein and Maxwell Perkins -- the two people with whom Wolfe had the most significant relationships (in both his creative and personal life) in the last third of his life. Thomas Wolfe's relationships with others remained much the same from the beginning of his career to the end.

The one great exception to the above concerns Eugene's (and Wolfe's) relationship with his brother, Ben, who becomes Eugene's

alter ego and whose life and death are largely responsible for shaping Eugene's interpretation of the world. In 1929, Wolfe wrote the following to his sister Mabel (Helen in the Gant novels):

I think the Asheville¹ I know died for me when Ben died. I have never forgotten him and I never shall. I think that his death affected me more than any other event in my life ... he was one of those fine people who want the best and highest out of life, and who get nothing -- who die unknown and unsuccessful.²

In Angel, Wolfe describes Ben as one who gave a "cuff instead of a caress: he was full of pride and tenderness."³ Ben is the only member of the Gant family who makes a conscious effort to become a protector -- a guardian angel -- for his youngest brother Eugene and as such guides the youngster through the hostile world which (at this stage of Eugene's life) is represented by the reprehensible manner in which the Gants treat Eugene. (Eugene's parents, W. O. and Eliza Gant, are too preoccupied with their afflictions and careers respectively to properly care for Eugene). Ben tells Eugene to get on with his life and not to let his family bother him -- "Nothing gives a damn for you."⁴ Ben encourages Eugene to finish up college, even "if you have to steal the money" (a reference to their parsimonious parents) and adds, "Try to make something out of yourself. Hold your head up! You're as good as any of them"⁵

It is Eugene's misfortune that one of the ironies of his life and the Gant novels is that the one person with whom Eugene may have had a lasting relationship is removed early in the boy's life. Nonetheless, Ben's influence is such that his life fuses with Eugene's to transmogrify the developing adolescent into a man and helps forge his outlook on life as articulated at the end of River. Ben, perhaps the

most promising character in Wolfe's novels in terms of those human qualities of care, tenderness, and love that are otherwise absent in Wolfe's work, is the one who bears evidence of the Gant's "tragic fault": "he walked alone in the darkness, death and the dark angels hovered, and no one saw him."⁶ Ben is a stranger to the mundane affairs of mankind but is "always abrowl to find some entrance into life, some secret undiscovered door ... that might admit him into light and fellowship."⁷ The world does not seem to have a niche for a sensitivity and consciousness that is as acute and perceptive as that of Ben's. Rather than play the obsequious lackey to the high-placed of the world, Ben "was not to be intimidated by their cant, or deceived by their twaddle. He saw them with bitter clarity"⁸ As a result, Ben is rendered a stranger who cannot fit into the modality of the everydayness of men and he becomes a sort of brooding consciousness in the Gant novels and certainly a conscience for Eugene himself. Ben, endowed with goodness and humanity, is rendered impotent in the world of men and thus becomes symbolic of the goodness in people that is rendered impotent by the realization (conscious for Ben and later for Eugene, but unconscious for most) of the inherent futility of life in the universe of changeless change. (Ben is also symbolic of the bewilderment that is part of life for Americans who are confronted with the vastness and ambiguity that the environment of America poses).

Ben's reaction to the world, or perhaps his only way of coping with the reality of the world as interpreted by him, is to opt out. Accordingly, his feeling is one of contempt for the meaningless world

and contempt for his own existence in this sea of meaninglessness.

Ben questions his very existence -- one which makes little sense -- and asks his physician, Dr. Coker, "what are we here for?" Coker replies simply that a man must live, to which Ben snarls, "Why must he?"⁹

Just prior to his death, Ben states that he is a failure and has had nothing out of life and again questions the significance of life. He suggests to Eugene that life is so absurd that perhaps someone is playing a joke on mankind or that life is simply an unpleasant dream.¹⁰ Young Eugene notes that this may be so, "but I wish they'd wake us up," then adds, "maybe -- there's nothing, nobody to wake."¹¹ Although Eugene, the artist in adolescence, shows a willingness to ponder such gloomy metaphysics, Ben, the quintessential misfit, has no inclination to do so and dismisses the conversation with a terse "to hell with it all! ... I wish it were over."¹²

Ben's torment provides the impetus that sets Eugene on his search for meaning or at least for an interpretation of reality with which he can contend. While Ben is lying on his death-bed, Eugene has great difficulty trying to articulate his feelings. He prowls about the house looking for an "entrance he had never found," and as he does so "a bright and stricken thing" inside of him "twists about like a trapped bird."¹³ This is the very essence of Eugene: his own Gantian "stranger" that, in consummate identification with Ben, is that part of him which has yet to make peace with the world and is searching for the key, the door, that will admit him to the peace that he desires.

The "stranger" in Eugene is at a loss to grapple with the death of the other stranger, Ben. At first, it seeks to turn itself away

from the horror of Ben's death, until "at length, it gazed steadfastly, as if under a dreadful hypnosis, into the eyes of death and darkness."¹⁴ At this point Eugene realizes that "he could never again escape from this smothering flood of pain and ugliness." The acceptance of this reality renders Eugene all the more cognizant of his lack of response to a life that is tenuous at best; it is "as if he had received a blow in the kidneys." Eugene's only possible means of escape from this quandry of death and darkness is in the hope "that he might be clean and free if he could only escape into a single burning passion ... of love, hatred, terror, or disgust. But he was caught, he was strangling, in the web of futility."¹⁵

Ben's death brands a poignant illumination into the flesh of Eugene's brain. He admits that people can believe in the "nothingness of life ... in the nothingness of death and of life after death," but "who can believe in the nothingness of Ben?"¹⁶ Ben's life, for Eugene, remains a blazing and inextinguishable reminder of one who had lived as a stranger on the earth "trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language, the lost faces, the stone, the leaf, the door."¹⁷ Ben's life is the angel of Eugene's spirit that, for the rest of his life, will always be looking homeward trying to find the language, the door that will admit his spirit into that state of existence in which men will not be strangers and will be at peace with themselves and the world.

In River particularly, the thought of Ben always brings Eugene back to home. In one beautiful passage we find Eugene, in a dreamlike state of mind, wondering if a man can be "dead within your heart before

his rotten flesh be wholly dead within the ground....?¹⁸ This is in reference to Ben, who Eugene cannot really believe ever died, that he had lost a brother and a friend. Ben's life returns to Eugene in a "blazing image of lost time and the forgotten moment"¹⁹ and Eugene remembers his home "with an intolerable sense of pain and loss, the lost world of childhood;" the memory causes Eugene to feel "the strange and bitter miracle of life"²⁰ The remembrance of Ben and home for Eugene is one that provokes anxiety as it represents "lost time" — that which forever must be lost and yet is a "bitter miracle of life" insofar as the remembrance of lost time remains with Eugene and is part of his everyday existence. This is a life-in-death in that it remains for Eugene not simply a part of his past that lives in the present, but rather a death-in-life as the remembrance of lost time is regarded by Eugene as just that — a part of his life that is lost -- that which will never be again and as such becomes a constant reminder of the passing of life and all things. Thus, Eugene longs for something from the past that is "real and palpable, some gift out of the lost land" to remind him that he had "really been there"²¹ — that he did exist in the past. Otherwise the past must remain a dream and remain lost forever.

A few pages later in River, Eugene remarks that:

when the crowd is gone, Ben stands there silent, lost, a look of bitter weariness, disgust, and agony upon his grey gaunt face, his lonely brow, his fierce and scornful eyes. And as he stands there that red light of waning day has touched the flashing head, the gaunt, starved face, has touched the whole image of his fiercely wounded, lost and scornful spirit with the prophecy of its strange fatality. And in that instant as the boy looks at his brother, a knife is driven through his entrails suddenly, for with an instant final certitude, past

reason, proof, or any visual evidence, he sees the end and answer of his brother's life. Already death rests there on his proud head like a coronal. The boy knows in that one instant Ben will die.²²

In the passage quoted above we may note how the identity or the remembrance of Ben's life has fused with Eugene's view of life. Once the crowd is gone, that is, once Eugene has dispensed with those affairs and people with which he is concerned in day-to-day matters, one thing alone burns in his mind: the memory of Ben. Ben's life reminds Eugene that there was no answer — just proud death. The notion of "no answer" and of lost time is integral to Eugene's outlook. Just before the passage quoted above Eugene talks of the crowd of America that is lost forever, the unity of which may only exist for a moment as in a ball park which is doomed to belong to the "indestructible fabric of the past" and moves "at last out of that inscrutable maw of chance we call the future into the strange finality of dark time."²³ (It is interesting to note that Wolfe says little about the future; it is, after all, "that inscrutable maw of chance." Wolfe's realm is in the present and the past: both modalities of time are structural abodes for Wolfe's death-in-life theme. Death in the present is found in a reference just before the above passage in which Eugene states that for him life is to "pace again the barren avenues of the night ... to feel again the ancient hopelessness of hope, the knowledge of despair, the faith of desolation."²⁴ The futility of life in the world of changeless change is that which makes those sensitive souls cognizant of the "ancient hopelessness of hope." As for the past, as noted above, it is the death-in-life that reminds one of the fact that all is passing or has passed into the "strange finality of dark time").

There is a poignant contrast between Ben and Eugene, the strangers of Angel and River. Both must succumb to death: for Ben the death is physical and for Eugene it is death-in-life. Ben's sensitive spirit cannot find the door or key to life and therefore it must perish in the hostile world. Eugene, acutely aware of Ben's tragedy, comes to recognize

a deeper and darker wisdom than he had ever known before. He began to see that what was subtle and beautiful in human life was touched with a divine pearl-sickness. Health was to be found in the steady stare of the cats and dogs, or, in the smooth vacant chops of the peasant.²⁵

Thus health (or life-in-life), in contrast to death-in-life, may be for those who perceive little of the world around them. It is for those creatures, human or otherwise, who for one reason or another, are unable or too busy to comprehend the undeniable reality of the futility of life in a hostile and indifferent universe. However, those who are "the lords of the earth" are condemned to be wasted by the beautiful disease "of thought and passion."²⁶ The disease is beautiful because those who have it recognize the beauty in the world yet in their comprehension of the world and in their creative efforts to express what they see, must necessarily be wasted and consumed by the disease of thought and passion. Eugene, as one of the lords of the earth, will, as an artist, attempt to set down on paper his thoughts and feelings, but in the process of doing so must again be condemned to the death-in-life resultant from the beautiful disease.

Eugene's task, therefore, is to delve into the substance of American life which requires exile "forever from the good and pretty, into a dark land that is forbidden to the sterilized."²⁷ The

sterilized represents that aspect of modern commercial America that Eugene finds "unclean": "the vicious doll-faces of the movie women, the brutal idiot regularity of the faces in the advertisements, and the faces of most of the young college-men and women"²⁸ Eugene remarks that the American commercial preoccupation for outer cleanliness (as reflected in the national demand for "shiny plumbing, toothpaste, tiled lunchrooms, haircuts, manicured dentistry," etc.) had become "the token of an inner corruption."²⁹ Eugene feels that he has in him a health greater than those obsessed with a clean America would ever know, and, even though this health was "something fierce and cruelly wounded" (a reference to the beautiful disease and his "stranger"), he would remain proudly alive and would not "shrink from the terrible sunken river of life"³⁰ Thus Eugene will use his "health" to look steadily "on the hidden and unspeakable passions that unify the tragic family of this earth."³¹

Later on in River, Eugene cogently articulates those passions that unify "the tragic family of this earth." In reference to American families (in particular the Simpson family that Eugene ridicules) and certainly with his own family in mind, Eugene observes that the memory of the "folly, falseness, and hypocrisy" of such families dims in his memory and is replaced by one "that grew more vivid and dominant" -- that of

a little family, one of millions huddled below the immense and timeless skies that bend above us, lost in the darkness of nameless and unnumbered lives upon the lonely wilderness of life that is America, and banked together against these giant antagonists, for comfort, warmth, and love, with a courage and integrity that would not die, and could not be forgotten.³²

Eugene considers such courage and integrity as redeeming qualities that give men strength and perhaps purpose in life though they are pitted against the lonely "wilderness of life" which is itself swept along by the current of changeless change.

11

Ben and Eugene are not the only strangers in the Gant novels: all the Gants are strangers as, in the final analysis, are all men. Early in Angel (right after the death of Grover) Wolfe has Eliza express the sorrow felt for

all who had lived, were living, or would live, fanning with their prayers the useless altar flames, suppliant with their hopes to an unwitting spirit, casting the tiny rockets of their belief against remote eternity, and hoping for grace, guidance, and delivery upon the spinning and forgotten cinder of this earth.³³

Such sentiments are all that can be expressed given the Wolfian environment in which men must live. It must be noted that Wolfe's world does not have any room for God. At best He is an "unwitting spirit" who seems to have forgotten the earth, leaving men to fend for themselves against the void of remote eternity. The Gants are perhaps strangers in a different way than are Ben and Eugene. Because they are pre-occupied with what is petty in life (W. O.'s bombast, sex, drinking; Eliza's money and property), they are aliens to that realm of thought and sensitivity that demands, at the very least, a challenge to, or a questioning of, the nature of existence. This realm of existence demands an intermittent abstention from the pursuits and demands of pedestrian life and requires the asking of questions and the

development and sustainment of relationships that point to what we may term a spiritual existence or, in terms more appropriate to Wolfe's novels, a beyond-the-self existence. Of this the Gants know little and for this very reason they become totally alienated from Ben.

Ben's relationship with his father is one of non-communication: "Their eyes never met -- a great shame, the shame of father and son"³⁴

And, while Ben is dying, Helen informs Eugene that Ben wants his mother out of the room: "He can't stand to have her come near him."³⁵ Nonetheless, Ben's death serves to remind the Gants of the predominance of self interest in their lives and of the fact that it is now too late to heal this family scar.

At first the Gants seem to feed on Ben's death, "as if drawn by some terrible magnet ... with an insatiate thirst for horror"³⁶

The Gant family, mostly absorbed with their individual selves, seems to find cohesion and sustenance in Ben's death in that it provokes the family to feel "the strange wonder, the dark rich miracle of his life" that overwhelms them with "its enormous loveliness. They grew quiet and calm, they plunged below all the splintered wreckage of their lives, they drew together in a superb communion of love and valiance, beyond horror and confusion, beyond death."³⁷ Ben is a stranger to them who "walked through their lives like a shadow" and as they look upon his wasted body they experience a "thrill of awful recognition, as one who remembers a forgotten and enchanted word, or as men who look upon a corpse and see for the first time a departed god."³⁸ Thus, Ben's death is the "forgotten and enchanted word" that points beyond the self and is passed on to the Gants as if from

a god. The death of the son and brother is the "sad and prophetic story, a brief and terrible summary of the waste, the tardiness, and the ruin of their lives" which "silenced them for a moment with its inexorable sense of tragedy."³⁹

Just before Ben expires, Eugene admits to himself that he does not believe in God nor Heaven or Hell,

but he was afraid they might be true. He did not believe in angels with soft faces and bright wings, but he believed in the dark spirits that hovered above the heads of lonely men. He did not believe in devils or angels, but he believed in Ben's bright demon to whom he had seen him speak so many times.⁴⁰

(Ben's demon is the over the shoulder entity to whom Ben hurls his remarks of disbelief and disenchantment with the world). Eugene feels "that no one but he could pray for Ben now: that the dark union of their spirits made only his prayers valid."⁴¹ It is right after this passage that Eugene says that one can believe in the nothingness of many things, of life and death, "but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben?"

Andrew Turnbull wrote the following in reference to Thomas Wolfe and the death of his brother Ben:

The agony that followed, while the hysterical family sought to stave off the inevitable, raked Tom's spirit but quickened the artist in him. It reinforced his dark, unearthly side and filled him with the exultancy in life which follows the full realization of death.⁴²

Wolfe expressed these sentiments in the last pages of Angel when the narrator, in reference to Eugene, notes that "since Ben's death, the conviction had grown on him that men do not escape from life because life is dull, but that life escapes from men because men are little."⁴³

Wolfe/Eugene has come to recognize the grandeur of life in that the

significance of Ben's death points to an existence beyond the self and points to the necessity of finding the lost world of "light and fellowship" that seems to have been extinguished (particularly in modern America). It is this that Eugene will endeavor to find and articulate in his capacity as an artist. However, this endeavor will be shrouded by the omnipresence of the terrible reality of life and the inevitability of death. In 1927, nine years after Ben's death, Wolfe wrote the following to his mother with the memory of Ben burning in his life:

Life at home practically ceased to be possible for me when Ben died. And I have sweated too much blood since I know that none of us is to be blamed very much for anything. Strangers we are born alone into a strange world — we live in it, as Ben did alone and strange, and we die without ever knowing anyone. It is therefore beyond the power of any of us to condemn, judge, or understand. I'm simply sorry for everyone.⁴⁴

IV

BLIND ACCRETIONS AND A FALLEN TITAN

i

There is a great contrast between Eugene's parents, W. O. and Eliza Gant, as both represent opposites in the spectrum of life. W. O. is a man of vigour and unbridled vitality who is certainly Wolfe's embodiment of the life spirit. Everything he does or touches responds with a flourish of abundance and artistic creativity. He may be seen as one who possesses those qualities that may be termed as ideally American. Eliza, on the other hand, is driven by an impulse to acquire money and property. All else, including her family, is rendered subordinate to this compulsion of what Eugene calls "blind accretions." Eliza, therefore, may be said to represent those impulses that are inimical to the American ideal as expressed by Wolfe. Her pursuit of material acquisition is that which contributes to "the great forgotten language, the lost faces" that are now America. Eliza's unrelenting desire for accumulation represents the death of that which has made (or had promised to make) America great: the American family, united and determined in its pursuit of new frontiers and ideas.

While Eugene is still in his seventh year, his mother, unable to resist a good buy that promises revenue, purchases a boarding

house with the appropriate name of Dixieland. The Gants decide to maintain the family home in which W. O. and all the children, except for Eugene, will live. Eliza decides to have Eugene live with her at Dixieland (he being "the last tie that bound her to all the weary life of breast and cradle").¹ Thus is initiated the rending asunder of a family that has known little cohesion from the beginning.

Prior to moving to Dixieland, Eugene was relatively happy living in a home in which the environment was dominated by the energy of his father: the home had exuded its "powerful charm" of "its male smell, its girdling rich vines, its great gummed trees, its roaring internal seclusiveness, the blistered varnish, the hot calfskin, the comfort and abundance"² upon the senses of the small boy. Life at Dixieland, which Eugene likens to a "great chill tomb"³ is, in contrast, that which renders Eugene's spirit "stretched out on the rack of despair." Eugene notes that the lives of the Gants "could not be more hopelessly distorted, wrenched, mutilated, and perverted away from simple comfort, repose, happiness."⁴ The boy feels that all has now become a waste as he and his mother now work for strangers, and that no endeavor would be made that could enhance the lives of the Gant family. The consequent damage that the move to Dixieland entails is such that it significantly contributes to the boy's subsequent dark vision of life. In 1927, Wolfe wrote to his boyhood teacher, Margaret Roberts, of the anguish he felt at the time:

I moved inward on that house of death and tumult from room to little room. My overloaded heart was bursting with its packed weight of loneliness and terror; I was strangling, without speech, without articulation, in my own secretions — groping like a blind sea-thing with no eyes and a thousand feelers toward light, toward life, toward beauty and order, out of that hell of chaos, greed, and cheap ugliness⁵

Dixieland remains a symbol of the family's disintegration throughout the course of the Gant novels. (Wolfe's mother, Julia Westall Wolfe, was in possession of the house at the time of Wolfe's death). Throughout the time Eliza is the mistress of the boarding house, she is witness to the deaths of her son and husband and observes the breakup of her family as her children leave to live elsewhere -- yet the woman manages to survive and flourish despite all of this. She is observed standing in front of her property, the possession of which Eugene describes as being "like the desperate clutch of life itself."⁶ In River, Eugene and his sister Helen ask themselves what

was this great claw in her life -- this thing that was stronger than life or death or motherhood -- which made her hold on to anything which had ever come into her possession, which made her cling desperately to everything which she had ever owned⁷

There is an irony and message in Eliza's obsession in that she is the only character in Wolfe's work to rise triumphant over grief, death, and tragic loss -- that which might destroy others. For her there is only the fulfillment of her own destiny and Eugene notes that she would remain "triumphant to her death She had lived ten lives, and now she was embarked upon another one, and so it had been ordered in the beginning: this was all that mattered in the end."⁸ Eliza is thus symbolic of human fortitude and endurance -- that which may (for survival, must) prevail despite all that life will hurl against one. To what end or purpose Eliza survives is not clear for she is little else but a symbol of survival. In her, human endurance reigns, but her accomplishments in terms of meaningful human

intercourse are negligible — her greatest success is in the realm of real estate. It would seem that her fortitude and endurance is simply Wolfe's recognition and awe of the human capacity to survive and is a comment on this capacity as being necessary for the survival of the species. Nonetheless, Eliza's survival is accomplished at the expense of others as is demonstrated in the Gant novels vis à vis Eliza and her family. We are left with the impression that Wolfe views such survival as ignoble since it does not include an attempt or some progression in terms of human relationships and insight into life. Survival, in this case, is an empty victory over the adversity of life. It is death-in-life.

11

The deprivation that Eugene is subject to at Dixieland is compounded by the knowledge that his father is dying of cancer. The impending death of one who is the very embodiment of life itself is such that it confounds and perplexes all the Gants. W. O.'s dying is an "unsearchable enigma" that robs the Gants of dignity and courage. His ill health renders the Gants subservient to the domination of the "weary and degrading egotism of life, which is blandly philosophical over the death of the alien, but sees in its own the corruption of natural law."⁹ The phrase "corruption of natural law" certainly befits the death of W. O., who is regarded by the Gants as "more real, than God ... more immortal than God; he was God."¹⁰

Eugene's reaction to the phenomenon of his dying father is mixed. He is shown to be deeply angered by his father's complaints in regard

to his failing health. To Eugene such complaints are "ugly and abominable" in view of the fact that W. O. was one of the few men who, having devoured everything in life, "now howled because he had stomach-ache and begged for more." On the same page we learn of Eugene's "choking fury" over his parents' "constant meditation ... on the death of others ... their weird absorption with the death of some toothless hag" and of their seeing "the intervention of God in the death of a peasant, and the suspension of divine law and natural order in their own"¹¹

The psychological effect of W. O.'s dying merits comment insofar as its importance to the development of the protagonist is concerned. Eugene, before the move to Dixieland, had been brought up in a home dominated by his father. It has been noted that, in Eugene's view, W. O.'s home was one of "comfort and abundance." W. O. transmits his vitality to all that live in his home: he bellows to the children to come downstairs to encounter "a roaring fire," he urges his children to eat more, and everything in the backyard grows as if touched by the hand of Nature. Professionally, he is a stone-cutter of considerable merit, using his great, powerful hands to carve monuments which catch the eyes of all. For Eugene, in his early years, life seems to be imbued with W. O.'s aura: his youthful world tintured with abundance, power, and immortality. W. O.'s long and painful death, covering some 800 pages of the Gant novels, can only serve to shroud Eugene's world with the inevitability of decay and death. As Eugene attains manhood, and thereafter, his life is dominated by this irrefutable fact. Early in River, Eugene talks of the "poisonous and morbid infection of our

own lives, which a man dying of a loathsome disease awakes in us" and notes that it results in a "self-hate" that we feel "because of our terrible desire to escape him, to blot out the horrible memory we have for him"¹² Thus, the death of the body is that which makes one hate himself for being unable to transcend the finality that nature has built into his frail existence.

At this stage in his life Eugene is on his way to Harvard — on the voyage that will open the door of his life to him and will, hopefully, ultimately lead to fulfillment in artistic expression. W. O.'s dying seems to touch an artistic chord in Eugene insofar as his interpretation of it has a link with what he most desires to do. We are told of the self-hate and disgust that are awakened in Eugene by the thought of his dying father. Despite this, and despite the reprehensible truth that W. O.'s death represents, Eugene finds life in his father symbolized by his great hands, which "looked as powerful and living as ever" and "had lost none of their character of power or massive shapeliness."¹³ W. O.'s hands seem to symbolize for Eugene the life-in-death that man the creator may leave behind long after he is dead. (It is fitting that W. O. creates that which is all most men leave behind — tombstones). Thus, Eugene believes that the artistry of "his father's work would never, as men reckon years, be extinguished, but that when that great skeleton lay powdered in the earth, in many a tangled undergrowth, in the rank wilderness of forgotten churchyards, these letters would endure."¹⁴ Eugene feels sorry for all men who perish and leave nothing behind: men who had never "scored their name upon a rock, blasted their mark upon a cliff, sought out the most

imperishable objects of the world and graven there some token, some emblem that utterly they might not be forgotten."¹⁵ Conversely, the creator, the artist, by virtue of his life's work, never really dies as he leaves his mark on the rock of the earth. As such, therefore, Eugene hopes he may unfetter the chains of mortality that have become so pervasive in his life and intellectual endeavors.

iii

W. O. Gant, on the threshold of death, expresses thoughts that parallel those of Ben in Angel. Eugene notes how his father desperately tries "to grope with the strange and bitter miracle of life, to get some meaning out of that black, senseless fusion of pain and joy and agony" -- to understand all those elements of life that have ultimately led to "this fatal and abominable end."¹⁶ Both key characters, Ben and W. O., pose questions about the meaning of life. It appears, then, that one's impending death is a time in life when we ask ourselves what our lives have meant; we exit, of course, with the question unanswered. Eugene the artist integrates his brother's and father's experience and rephrases the question (or at least his interpretation of the question) with the aid of his artistically acute eye: life is a dream from which we are always attempting to construct a workable matrix with which we may cope -- this occurs against the background of changeless change (the condition of which must remain incomprehensible to man) which plods along endlessly in the vast panorama of time. This is a dilemma of such magnitude as to render mankind helpless. The leading characters' reactions to this dilemma

are well recorded: Ben and W. O. ask what life is all about; Eugene's friend Starwick drowns himself in dissipation and degeneracy; Eliza preoccupies herself with the acquisition of property; Helen sacrifices her life in a futile attempt to keep her dying father alive; and, finally, Eugene the artist reacts with his finely tuned senses which enable and require him to record all of the above and underscore such with his own observations.

It would seem that the culmination of W. O.'s life brings forth a coalescence of Eugene's views regarding the above. The end of life (especially for one of such vigour and largeness of life as W. O.) is symbolized by a "feeble, foul, complaining and disease consumed" old man who sits on a hospital porch overlooking the city of his youth. It is the "sickening and abominable end of flesh" that is so base and ignoble that it robs us of life not only in the future, but of life in the past as well. We are left to "doubt that we had ever lived or had a father, known joy: this was the end, and the end was horrible in ugliness. At the end it was not well."¹⁷

A sociological note is added to the above: the idea that modern life exacerbates death's ignobility as we die "a shameful death that went out softly, dully in anesthetized oblivion, with the fading smell of chemicals on man's final breath." Thus, death itself, life's final event, becomes nothing but a mechanical biological termination — a "shameful death."¹⁸ Eugene's conception of death is thus linked to modern times in that as man has alienated himself from his environment he has become alienated from life and death itself. This ties in with Eugene's notion of "the forgotten language of America" or, indeed,

the death of America which subjects its denizens to an environment which renders a man cognizant of his "terrible loneliness." Like all Americans, W. O. is another "lost American who has been brought forth naked under immense and lonely skies to 'shift for himself'".¹⁹

The Gant novels are marked by a vision of the restlessness of the American soul: that which has so much (in terms of land, resources, and opportunity) that it is left bewildered and necessarily divorced from life itself and is forced to wander through life asking, "Where shall I go now? What shall I do?"²⁰ Instead of getting on with the business of living life (as those early pioneering Americans were forced to do), the modern American, in his discomfiture, does not live life, but questions it, asks if it is a dream, or loses himself in meaningless endeavors. Such is evident in the lives of Ben, W. O., Eliza, and Helen Gant.

If life is interpreted as a struggle fought in a meaningless vacuum, while speeding on towards its undeniable destination, then death itself must accordingly be seen as a welcome release from the travails of life. This is the case with Ben, of whose death Eugene and his brother Luke speak "with triumph and tenderness, as of one who had defeated pain, and had joyously escaped."²¹ This sentiment is again confirmed moments before W. O. dies. Just before he expires, his life of vigour, violence, and loneliness is transmuted through the offices of death to a final vision of resignation and tranquillity. W. O. is determined to "die well,"²² having lived badly. He recognizes that Eliza had wanted affection from him and had only received "taunts, abuse, and curses" and, despite the fact that Eliza

had endured all this with her characteristic "anguished but unshaken fortitude," Eliza accepts the apology W. O. issues for having been "the author of her grief and misery"²³

W. O. Gant's death is accompanied by a curious and revealing vision. The morning prior to his death, Gant dreams that he is back in Pennsylvania, the home of his boyhood. He walks by the church where his family is buried and, seeing no stones for three of his brothers nor for his parents, realizes that he is still a young man. W. O. continues walking on, passing by the sights and people of his boyhood until he comes to a wood-path where he sees a child standing. At this moment W. O. is aware of "a nameless sorrow in him that he could not understand, and some of the brightness had gone out of the day."²⁴

W. O. walks along the wood-path into the forest as the child, with sunlight streaming through the forest illuminating his angelic golden hair, precedes him. The forest turns dense and dark as W. O. walks on. Finally, he comes to a fork in the path. W. O. asks the child which path he should take and his question is unanswered. He hears someone else close by in the woods ahead of him and attempts to catch up, but in a moment the one whom he is following seems immensely far away. He stops, listens, and shouts, but no one answers:

And suddenly he knew that he had taken the wrong path, that he was lost. And in his heart there was an immense and quiet sadness, and the dark light of the enormous wood was all around him; no birds sang.²⁵

The dream symbolizes life itself during the course of which a man is alone and unguided and must inevitably find himself lost. The child, or angel, is shown to be unable or unwilling to guide W. O. along the correct path. A few hours later, just as death is imminent,

the child reappears as "something immensely bright and beautiful ... converging in a flare of light." This time W. O. is "filled with a sense of inexpressible joy, a feeling of triumph and security he had never known."²⁶ W. O. cries to the child "with faith and joy to give him rescue, strength, and life" This time W. O.'s entreaty is answered: the child tells him that

all the error, old age, pain and grief of life was nothing but an evil dream; that he who had been lost was found again, that his youth would be restored to him and that he would never die, and that he would find again the path he had not taken long ago in a dark wood.²⁷

Then, just as W. O. dies, he cries out through his streaming blood, "Here, Father, here!" to which a strong voice replies, "My son!"²⁸ Death evidently becomes an obvious triumph over life: a redemption from the turmoil of life in which the lost American and eternal stranger (the first of whom in the Gant novels is W. O.), the one without a father or guardian, is finally reunited with his father. We must note that the father is a child, which would mean that death brings one full circle: back to the pre-natal existence of innocence. Innocence is the realm of total peace and security: that state of existence in which man is necessarily at peace with himself and the world. In the final analysis, in the Wolfian universe, innocence is manifested at only two points in the course of a lifetime: in the mother's womb at the beginning of the cycle and in death at the end.

At W. O.'s funeral Eugene is repelled by all the obscene pomp that is so remote from what he can remember of W. O.'s life and personality. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of W. O.'s hands once again captures Eugene's attention as they seem to have escaped death

with a kind of terrible reality as if there really is, in death, some energy of life that will not die, some element of man's life that must persist and that resumes into a single feature of his life the core and essence of his character.²⁹

Thus, in death, man, as helpless and lost as he was in life, continues to live. This, of course, would apply to those characters of consequence whose lives leave an immortal imprint on the flesh of Eugene's mind. This life-in-death, as described above, is for the living; for the dead there is a return to innocence.

iv

Eugene's sister, Helen, is another Gantian stranger who finds it necessary "to seize life in her big red-knuckled hands, to cuff and caress, to fondle, love, and endure it."³⁰ Of all the Gants she is the closest to her father — especially so after Eliza purchases Dixieland. After caring for W. O. for seven long years, Helen comes to the stark realization that there will be little for her to do after her father is dead. In despair, Helen vents her bitterness to the family physician, Dr. McGuire, at having sacrificed seven years of her life with nothing to show for it — "no fame, no glory, no success, no children Papa is all that I have left."³¹ She says that she must somehow keep her father alive as his death will mean the termination of utility and meaning in life for her. Dr. McGuire insists that Helen must grab hold of herself and find her own identity. He assures her that there is nothing terrible about the death of an old man — particularly one ravaged by disease. The doctor implores Helen not to succumb to the death "that's really horrible" —

the "rotten, lousy, dirty death-in-life"32

Shortly after the above episode, Helen finds that she must address herself to the "dark and bitter mystery of life" as both her brothers, Ben and Eugene, have already done. She thinks of all the people she knows in town — "almost everyone" — and of all she knows about them, yet realizes that she knows "nothing about any of them. I know nothing about anyone, not even about myself"33 This fact seems "terrible and grotesque" to her and she thinks desperately:

"What is wrong with people? ... Why do we never get to know one another? ... Why is it that we get born and live and die here in this world without ever finding out what anyone else is like? ... No, what is the strangest thing of all — why is it that all our efforts to know people in this world lead only to greater ignorance and confusion than before? We get together and talk, and say we think and feel and believe in such a way, and yet what we really think and feel and believe we never say at all. Why is this? We talk and talk in an effort to understand another person, and yet almost all we say is false: we hardly ever say what we mean or tell the truth — it all leads to greater misunderstanding and fear than before — it would be better if we said nothing."34

Why, she asks, do people destroy themselves when what they really want is happiness? She asks what is the

horrible thing in life that makes us throw ourselves away — to hunt out death when what we want is life? Why is it that we are always strangers in this world, and never come to know one another, and are full of fear and shame and hate and falseness, when what we want is love?35

Then, "with that dumb horror of disbelief and silence" the truth finally admits itself into her mind as she suddenly recognizes

that there was some monstrous and malevolent force in life that held all mankind in its spell and that compelled men to destroy themselves against their will. It seemed to her that everything in life — the things men did and said, the way they acted — was grotesque, perverse, and accidental, that there was no reason for anything.36

The mystery and strangeness of man's life becomes apparent and is followed with the sudden revelation of her identification with "ten thousand people each lying on his bed, naked and alone, united at the heart of night and darkness." She feels that she now knows "men ... in all their dark and naked loneliness, without falseness and pretense as she had never known them."³⁷

Helen, then, comes to a similar conclusion about life as does Eugene even though she does not articulate it in terms of the changeless change philosophy. Nonetheless, she realizes that the "monstrous and malevolent force in life" is such that it renders mankind "naked and alone," but is somewhat comforted by the thought that men in their common predicament, are united and may, in some way, "no longer be strangers and each would find the life he sought and never yet had found."³⁸ Thus, Helen expresses the Wolfian dilemma in a more personal manner than is previously found in the Gant novels and injects a heretofore absent sentiment: that of hope.

DEATH-IN-LIFE IN AMERICA

1

Early in Of Time and the River, Eugene exults in his youth and proclaims that he is young and twenty, that he could never die, and the world is his to take. He is enraptured with his "shining gifts and powers" and is joyfully thankful for his good fortune in having access to a "good and happy life."¹ Yet such is only the chimera of youth insofar as youth plays a nasty trick on all men. This is so because a man accumulates experience at the expense of growing old and youth is necessarily forfeited along the way. When a man is ready to deploy the resources gathered in his youth he finds that he is no longer in possession of that sensory appreciation of life that is known only to the young. This irony is well understood by young Eugene, hence "the strange and bitter miracle of life is no where else so evident as in our youth," and as time consumes the years, a man realizes with rancour that "the moment that we chose to take a step, or stretch a hand, or say a word -- we yet know that we can really keep, hold, take, and possess forever -- nothing."² It appears that life has a built-in death-in-life that becomes revealed to the thoughtful during the course of a lifetime (especially when one becomes cognizant of one's fading youth). The end result of

this knowledge is "when youth is gone, every man will look back upon that period of his life with infinite sorrow and regret." This regret becomes increasingly acute "as we discover with a bitter irony of mirth, that youth is something which only young men have, and which only old men know how to use."³

The phenomenon described above contributes greatly to Eugene's interpretation of the world and is, in part, responsible for the aimless, frenzied crowd of America that he observes and is a part of. It is a source of horror for the young man in that he feels it presents an obstacle to what he feels is his artistic requisite to "devour the earth and all the things and people in it." He feels he is doomed to be "sickened and made sterile, hopeless" smothered "by the stupefying weight of men and objects in the world, the everlasting flock and flooding of the crowd"⁴ that he observes swarming in the streets of New York. The "shining city" of his youth is thus turned into the nightmare of reality which is reflected in the death-in-life crowd of the city.

The city crowd is integral to the death motif in Wolfe's work and is referred to several times in River. Early in River, Eugene relates a strange and perplexing vision which concerns a company of old men and women at dinner. The vision is paradigmatic of the life of Everyman and incorporates the death-in-life phenomenon described above. Eugene notes that this vision was to return to him many times during the course of his life:

... there was a company of old men and women at dinner, seated together around a table. All of them were very old ... the faces of the old men and women were fragile and delicate like

old yellowed china, their faces were frail and sexless, they had begun to look alike. In their youth all these people had known one another. The men had drunk, fought, whored, hated one another, and loved the women. Some had been devoured by the sterile and corrupt fear and envy that young men know. In secret their lips were twisted, their faces livid, and their hearts bitter; their eyes glittered with a reptilian hatred of another man — they dreaded his success, and they exulted in his failure, laughing with a delirious joy when they heard or read of his hurt, defeat, or humiliation. They had been afraid to speak or confess what was in their hearts, they feared the mockery of their fellows; with one another their words were careful, picked, and disparaging. They gave the lie to passion and belief and said what they knew was false. And yet along dark roads at night they had shouted out into the howling winds their great goat cries of joy, exultancy and power; they had smelled snow in thick brooding air at night, and they had watched it come, softly spitting at the window glass, numbing the footfalls of the earth with its soft silent fall, filling their hearts with a dark proud ecstasy, touching their entrails with impending prophecy. Each had a thousand dark desires and fantasies; each wanted wealth, power, fame, and love; each saw himself as great, good and talented; each feared and hated rivals in business or in love — and in crowds they glared at one another with hard hostile eyes, they bristled up like crested cocks, they watched their women jealously, felt looks and glances through their shoulderblades, and hated men with white spermatic necks, amorous hair, and faces proud and insolent with female conquest.

They had been young and full of pain and combat, and now all this was dead in them: they smiled mildly, feebly, gently, they spoke in thin voices, and they looked at one another with eyes dead to desire, hostility, and passion.⁵

The pattern of life described in the above passage is such that it leaves Eugene bewildered. He has yet to articulate this observation in terms of the bitter realization of irretrievable youth and therefore considers that the old men and women may be concealing "some cunning and malevolent wisdom in their brains" or that they are perhaps simply "devoured with satiety, with weariness and indifference." Their lives can hold but little meaning for Eugene as all they had been is now lost and all that is left of them are words that

echo in their throats and pour out of their mouths in "a handful of dry dust and ashes."⁶ The vision presages the reality and acceptance of death-in-life — particularly in America.

The million, numberless faces that pass by Eugene in the city streets are a source of anxiety: they "haunt him with a blazing, unforgettable intensity of vision, with an overwhelming sense of strangeness, loss and sorrow, a poignancy of familiarity, affection and regret"⁷ The crowd reminds him of all that he has known and loved in life but is now lost forever. This sentiment is coupled with the certain knowledge that this process is endless -- that life, at any point in the future, will call forth the desirable past which is lost forever. In later years, these swarming millions come back to Eugene with "a sense of loss, affection" and Eugene is cognizant of "something strange and mad and lonely in the lives of all of them"⁸

Man is reduced to a living death because he is a victim of the changeless change phenomenon and is doomed to be but a pawn tossed about in the indifferent currents of life. Central to Wolfe's thesis is the fact that the American, while caught in the changeless change dilemma, is also a victim of modern America. The "million-footed crowd" is "so lost, so naked and lonely" as they are "driven on forever" under the "immense and cruel" American skies. Little is remembered from the "huge monotone of the lost years ... the lost life and the well known faces;" only that which is co-existent with the mad life-style of Americans is remembered: "a face once seen and lost forever in a crowd, an eye that looked, a face that smiled

and vanished on a passing train"⁹ and other images that for no apparent reason capriciously affix themselves to the mind and are recalled now and then.

Much later on in River, Eugene comes to the conclusion that men had been

hurled too far, too often, in the smashing projectiles of great trains, who, in their shining beetles of machinery, had hurtled down the harsh and brutal ribbons of their concrete roads at such a savage speed that now the earth was lost forever, and they never saw the earth again: whose weary, desperate ever-seeking eyes had sought so often, seeking man, amid the blind horror and proliferation, the everlasting shock and flock and flooding of the million-footed crowd, that all the life and lustre and fire of youth had gone from them; and seeking so forever in the man-swarm for man's face; now saw the blind blank wall of faces, and so would never see man's living, loving, radiant, and merciful face again.¹⁰

Thus, the American walks the streets forever, and walks the streets of life alone: his life "is written in the twisting of a leaf upon a bough, a door that opened, and a stone."¹¹ Life for man, and for the American in particular, is death.

11

For the living dead in America, life can offer but little in substance and meaning. Eugene notes that most people belong "to that great lost tribe of people who are more numerous in America than in any other country in the world." This crowd is composed of those who think "by some magic and miraculous scheme or rule, or formula, 'something can be done for them'" and, accordingly, spend their days reading, buying, and employing those formulas of American materialism that promise to deliver "a brilliant personality" and will show how

to "achieve success"¹² — ill-contrived mechanisms designed to exorcise the demons of dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

While Eugene is attending Harvard, he comes across such a group of the living-dead at Miss Potter's Friday afternoon art party.

Assembled at Miss Potter's are those who live, nourish, and propagate the death-in-life. They are referred to as the "whole tribe of the feeble, the sterile, the venomous and inept — the meagre little spirits of no talent and of great pretensions" who sneer at popular success but "for which each would have sold his shabby little

soul...."¹³ These would-be artists invoke terror in Eugene's soul for they are "the true enemies of the artist's living spirit, the true defilers and betrayers of creation ... who deal the stealthy traitor's blow in darkness at the work and talent of far better men than they."¹⁴ In them Eugene can find nothing but "the deadly and corrupt joy that took delight in its own death, and breathed, without any of the agony and despair he felt, the poisonous ethers of

its own dead world."¹⁵ Their lives suggest to Eugene that there was "no hope for his own life or the life of living men," but only a "cold malicious triumph" that knew the cause of his despair and feels triumphant in this knowledge. Their "pale faces" and "rootless and unwholesome lives" tell him that

there was no hope, no work, no joy, no triumph, and no love for such as he, that there could be nothing but defeat, despair and failure for the living of this world, that life had been devoured and killed by such as these, and had become a rat's alley, death-in-life forever.¹⁶

Eugene despairs that perhaps he may become yet another habitué of Miss Potter's art parties and notes that if this should come to pass

he would be better off dead. This incident reveals how uncertain Eugene is (and Wolfe was) of his own talents and demonstrates how just the thought of it can easily provoke him to despair. Indeed, this uncertainty plagues Eugene (George Webber/Wolfe) for the rest of his life and, never being sure of and secure in his own artistic powers, he becomes a source of his internal death-in-life. After the incident at Miss Potter's, Eugene, "filled with the death of life,"¹⁷ resumes a characteristic activity: prowling the streets of Boston as befits the stranger — the lost and lonely American.

The dilemma of artistic uncertainty is discussed thoroughly in a conversation between Eugene and his friend, Francis Starwick. In the conversation Wolfe reveals the problem faced by those who have the desire to create and the ramifications it had for him. Starwick eloquently explains how people such as those at Miss Potter's art parties come into being. The enemy for them is not death but life itself: these are people who "have had the seeds of life within themselves" and had been destroyed by them; they are the people who had "been given just enough to get a vision of the promised land" and realize that the promised land — the art they would create — can remain nothing but a vision. They are destroyed by their insight into life and by the realization that they have "the lust, without the power, for creation" and are thus doomed to become "the eunuchs of the arts." As such, their lives become "dead and rotten with [their] hatred of the living artist and the living man."¹⁸ This is what is responsible for Starwick's indolence and debauchery as he is such a man: "to have the spirit of the artist and lack his

hide"19

Eugene despairs that this fate is what may be in store for him. Some four hundred pages later in River, Starwick confronts Eugene in reference to this dilemma. He implies that Eugene's restlessness and insatiable desire parallel the death-in-life people found at Miss Potter's. He asks if Eugene really thinks he can profit by "reading all the books that were ever printed -- of knowing all the people -- seeing all the places"²⁰ as in the process he is no longer able to enjoy the books, people, and places. He suggests that "this thing in you is growing worse all the time; if you do not master it, it is a disease that will some day drive you mad and destroy you."²¹

Starwick goes on to say that such endeavors are useless in that they only lead to the addition of yet another book to the already existing mountain "of dull, fair, or trivial work that has already been done" and as such, "What is great -- what is priceless -- what we would give our lives to do -- is so impossible" that "if we can never do the best -- then why do anything?"²² Eugene seriously considers his friend's words as in them "were implicit every element of the resignation, despair, and growing inertia and apathy of his will."²³

The above sentiment is very much a part of Wolfe's work as it was a part of Wolfe himself. In 1928, Wolfe wrote his mistress, Aline Bernstein, the following:

This terrible vomit of print that covers the earth has paralyzed me with its stench of hopelessness. I cannot lift my head above the waves of futility and dullness. I have no hope, no confidence, no belief in my ability to rise above the level of even the worst of it. Impulse is killed in me, hope is dead -- for I am so sure so much of this -- most of it! -- was begun hopefully, was

thought good by its perpetrators, fond praisers. And to think that this world is full of people who say this and that confidently, who write criticisms, and talk confidently of literature and art, who peck around in the huge mess of literature and art, who peck around in the huge mess with a feeling of complacency and pleasure — I cannot follow them, understand them.²⁴

In Wolfe's posthumous third novel, The Web and the Rock, the protagonist, George Webber, despairs that Shakespeare had not "yet said the thousandth part of all he knew about the terror, mystery, and strangeness of time"²⁵ With this in mind, Wolfe articulates George's artistic problem:

... grey time washed over him and drowned him in the sea-depths of its unutterable horror, until he became nothing but a wretched and impotent cipher, a microscopic atom, a bloodless, eyeless grope-thing crawling on the sea-floors of the immense, without strength or power ever to know a hand's breadth of the domain in which he dwelt, and with no life except a life-in-death, a life of drowning horror, as he scuttled headless, eyeless, blind and ignorant and groping, his way to the grey but merciful extinction of death. For, if the greatest poet who had ever lived had found the task too great for him, what could one do who had not a fraction of his power, and who could not conceal the task, as he had done, behind the enchantments of an overwhelming genius?²⁶

Thus the Wolfian protagonist, Eugene/George, must drive himself onwards in his artistic quest partly to achieve what he knows is unachievable and partly to forget his despair. In Rock, George thinks of the fact that a genius (this in reference to Coleridge) must find a way to use his genius or it will turn on him and "rend him like a tiger: it can bring death to men as surely as it brings them life."²⁷ This despair is again reflected in Wolfe's last novel, You Can't Go Home Again, when George, after having written his first book, Home to Our Mountains (Look Homeward, Angel), responds to those who ask if he can write another book:

Webber's heart would drop out of him like a leaden plummet, hope, confidence, and conviction would seem lost forever to him, and all the high and shining truth that he had ever found and lived and known would now turn false to mock him. Then he would feel like one who walked among the dead, and it would be as if the only things that were not false on earth were the creatures of the death-in-life who moved forever in the changeless lights and weathers of red, waning, weary March and Sunday afternoon.²⁸

Indeed, Wolfe wrote in The Story of a Novel, in reference to writing River, that he had realized "that in a man's work there are contained not only the seeds of life, but the seeds of death, and that the power of creation which sustains us will also destroy us like a leprosy if we let it rot stillborn in our vitals." Hence, Wolfe's remedy was to write furiously as he "had to get it out ... somehow" and that he saw "for the first time a terrible doubt" that he "might not live long enough to get it out"²⁹ Wolfe likened this creative drive to a worm that would feed on him and could not escape from "until death put its total and conclusive darkness on my life"³⁰ Wolfe was quite right in that his relentless quest was only terminated by his death. Wolfe prophesied his own death when he wrote, in Starwick's words, that his "disease" would destroy him. Also, Wolfe had himself in mind when George, in Rock, notes that a genius must find a way to use his talent, or must necessarily succumb to death. Wolfe died as a result of this relentless quest to do all and see all. He contracted a cold when he took a swig from a bottle belonging to a sick man while on a boat trip to Victoria, British Columbia. Wolfe became quite sick, but instead of resting to regain strength, spent the next day touring Vancouver in a taxi. He then went on to Seattle where he became increasingly ill. Several weeks

later he died in Baltimore. There it was learned that his initially unattended cold had been responsible for opening up a tubercular lesion that culminated in the tuberculosis of the brain that was responsible for his death.

iii

The Wolfian protagonist is locked in a desperate struggle: he must avert the death-in-life existence that has befallen people like Starwick and those at Miss Potter's; he must somehow overcome the stifling sadness he feels as he observes the loneliness and anguish exhibited in the "million-footed crowd" of lost Americans; he is bewildered and rendered impotent by the unfathomable dilemma of changeless change. And yet he is an artist who, if he is to do the work he deeply feels he is committed to, must somehow survive and come to terms with those things that are tearing him apart. The only way in which Eugene can deal with all of this, as noted above, is to reside within himself and therein find the forgotten language of America and a door through which he may enter into life and knowledge. Ironically, in this decision to escape from death-in-life, Eugene chooses death-in-life. In order to live as he wishes, he must have his freedom and cast away all that he feels is contributing to his despair. Accordingly, isolation is the life he chooses to lessen the inimical impact that people and the environment have on him. But therein lies a fundamental problem insofar as freedom can only be realized in terms of a mutually beneficial relationship with society. Only in the give-and-take interchange of ideas and

relationships can a man be led to a deeper and truer understanding of himself and ultimately reflect this knowledge in his work -- this is particularly so for the artist. Eugene's isolation (which he pursues in the total, all-encompassing way characteristic of him) can only lead to increased despair and thus become the source of his own death-in-life.

Henry Steele, writing of Wolfe, posits a similar conclusion:

A man alone is unable to function as a member of society. It is only within society that the individual is able to fully express freedom. Personal freedom may be achieved through self-exploration, but full realization of the self's potentialities is dependent upon their expression within a social relationship.³¹

Thus, freedom and isolation (or self-exploration) must be recognized and co-exist in the individual as two separate entities which the individual must summon and employ when the need arises. Both are necessary for the individual to develop into a fully rounded and satisfied human being. Yet isolation and isolation only is freedom for Eugene and he consequently cuts himself off from the rest of the world. While he is an acute observer of the world, he is a non-participant in its affairs and his failure to participate necessarily diminishes his potentiality as a human being and artist. This is partly responsible for his frustration with himself and his environment. This problem is recognized by Eugene when he notes that America has lost the language, has left something in the past, that would render relationships with others meaningful and satisfying. As such, this is America's problem as well as Eugene's.

Eugene's isolation prevents him from ever having a meaningful relationship with anyone and throughout the course of his life he is

constantly retreating to his inner self. His sexual behaviour, for example, is unsatisfying as he knows only the selfness of lust and is unable to express the otherness of love. Throughout Eugene's young manhood, as described in River, (and the posthumous novels as well), Eugene is never able to consummate a meaningful relationship. All his friends seem to be items of interest that briefly swim before Eugene's restless eyes. His best friend, Starwick, is regarded as little more than an amusing companion with whom Eugene can prowls about Cambridge and Paris. Never does Eugene articulate his relationship with Starwick in terms of a commitment of any kind. When Eugene discovers that the object of his lust is in love with Starwick, this, along with Eugene's revulsion for Starwick's homosexuality, is sufficient to permanently terminate the relationship. (Wolfe's most enduring relationship — with his publisher Maxwell Perkins who appears as Foxhall Edwards in You Can't Go Home Again — was severed by Wolfe when the critics accused Perkins of having "written" Wolfe's books for him. The fact that Perkins sent River to the printer when Wolfe felt that the book was not yet completed deeply angered the author. Also, Wolfe felt that his political differences with Perkins were such that the relationship, which both defined in terms of father and son was, if not completely terminated, irreparably damaged).

Eugene's sexual behaviour gives additional confirmation of his failure with other people. Throughout the nine hundred pages of River, Eugene's relationships with women are discussed only in terms of sex. The woman that most impresses him is Starwick's friend, Ann,

a woman who overpowers Eugene with her beauty and fills his heart with "longing and impossible desire"³² Ann, being a "fertile, dumb, unplowed plantation of a woman,"³³ represents a particularly desirable conquest for Eugene's insatiable lust. This attempt, however, is frustrated as Ann is in love with Starwick. (Mention should be made of Wolfe's most enduring relationship with a woman, Aline Bernstein, who appears as Esther Jack in the posthumous novels. Mrs. Bernstein, who apparently genuinely loved Wolfe, was cast out of his life when the author felt that her hold on his life was too tenacious for his liking. Also, Wolfe felt he had to get away from Mrs. Bernstein's life and friends in New York's cultural environment as he found this life-style repulsive).

In the final analysis, therefore, the existence that Eugene/George/Wolfe has chosen for himself dictates that he (and America as discussed below) "would never see man's living, loving, radiant, and merciful face again." For Eugene and America, it is death-in-life.

iv

In the preceding pages the concept of death-in-life as applied to the American experience has been alluded to. This is a central motif in the Gant novels in that Eugene's final view of his country is a vision of a land with unlimited potential that has degenerated to a meaningless frenzy negating all that America might have been. The root cause of this is, of course, the inherent futility engendered in man's outlook due to the phenomenon of changeless change. In the absence of hope little can be accomplished — even

in America. But there is a peculiarly American shading to this problem due to the vast potential of the country which, in Wolfe's view, seems to work against Americans rather than for them. This, coupled with the changeless change conundrum, is responsible for the modern America depicted in Wolfe's novels.

After his father's death, Eugene, knowing that he would never live in his mother's home again, embarks on the journey to New York, the "shining city," where he will do the work he feels he must. On the train Eugene thinks of what he is bringing to the city: "the whole packed glory of the earth -- the splendor, power, and beauty of the nation."³⁴ This idea is conceptualized as his American cultural inheritance in that the young man feels he represents the collective consciousness of his forbears:

... the million memories of his fathers who were great men and knew the wilderness, but who had never lived in cities: three hundred of his blood and bone, who sowed their blood and sperm across the continent, walked beneath its broad and lonely lights, were frozen by its bitter cold, burned by the heat of its fierce suns, withered, gnarled, and broken by its savage weathers, and who fought like lions with its gigantic strength, its wildness, its limitless savagery and beauty, until with one stroke of its paw it broke their backs and killed them.³⁵

The echoes of his forbears reverberate in the young man's mind reminding him that they had given "a tongue to solitude, a pulse to the desert;" that "the barren earth received us and gave back our agony: we made the earth cry out." These men had "got land, fenced it, owned it, tilled it; they traded in wood, stone, cotton, corn, tobacco; they built houses, roads, grew trees and orchards." Though they lacked the "thousand years and ruined walls" of more established societies, they were nonetheless proud in that they had a "glory of

our own, laid out across three thousand miles of earth."³⁶ Eugene brings all these memories to the city: that which "seemed to be the city's complement — to feed it, to sustain it, to belong to it."³⁷ Yet the glory pales in the city as the proud inheritance, which had succumbed to the country's savagery in the past, has continued to die in the savagery of the urban environment. The city dwellers seem

to form one general City-Voice, one strident snarl, one twisted mouth of outrage and of slander bared forever to the imperturbable and immortal skies of time, one jeering tongue and rumor of man's baseness, fixed on the visage of the earth, and turned incredibly, and with evil fortitude, toward depthless and indifferent space against the calm and silence of eternity.³⁸

Eugene, in his naiveté, finds this wonderful in that the city was loathe to submit to resignation, but instead would hurl imprecations at the indifferent universe: "he saw the whole thing blazing in his face again to the tone and movement of its own control, unique, and incomparable energy." As he looks upon the face of the city his spirit cries, "Incredible! Oh, incredible! It moves, it pulses like a single living thing!"³⁹ The feeling is short-lived however as the terrible reality must inevitably admit itself into Eugene's mind. He recognizes that the city's "strident snarl" is but the voice of America's restlessness in which a city of millions has succumbed to the living death resultant from the immensity and confusion inherent in America's vastness — all of which is overshadowed by the implacable visage of changeless change. As such, men swarm about "on the rootless pavements in drowning tides of grey abomination, of numberless death and horror" and Eugene is again reminded of his forbears who, in a different way, had done much the same years ago. In New

York, everyone is reduced to the lowest common denominator: the "million-footed crowd" seething through the chasms of the city who, "with a corrupt and venomous joy," seize upon "every story of man's dishonor, defeat, or sorrow" and with "vicious jibe and jeer ... greeted any evidence of mercy, honesty, or love."⁴⁰

Death is to be found everywhere: youths who "had been brought still-born" from their mother's wombs into the city vainly try to root their meagre lives into "the rootless rock" of the city and "feebly imitate the feeble objects of its base idolatry — of, which the most heroic was a gangster, the most sagacious was a pimp, the most witty was a Broadway clown;"⁴¹ the fashionable patrons at a Broadway revue whose laughter is "a new and disagreeable mirth that was coming into man's life, which seemed to have its sources not in the warm human earth and blood of humor, but to proceed from something sterile, sour and acrid in his soul," something that in its putrescent merriment has "the desire to wound and mock and injure" (Eugene feels that this "came more from fear, a need to divert attention from one's own nakedness and insecurity by an attack upon a common target");⁴² the old woman at the Hotel Leopold, Dr. Thornton, who extolls the virtue of man and sees his place in "the glorious proportion of the sidereal universe" and notes the "unceasing progress he has made in his march upward from the brute, the noble aspiration of his spirit, the eternal labor of his intellect towards a higher purpose" yet is herself "one of the most prosperous abortionists in the country"⁴³ (Wolfe's tone in this passage is clearly one of disapproval). Death is even reflected in the architecture of the Hotel Leopold annex in

which Eugene lives:

... it belonged, somehow, to a new and accursed substance which had come into the structure of life -- a substance barren, sterile, and inhuman -- designed not for the use of man, but for the blind proliferations of the manswarm, to accommodate the greatest number in the smallest place -- to shelter, house, turn out, take in, all the nameless, faceless, mindless manswarm atoms of the earth.⁴⁴

The hotel is a microcosm of man's fate:

... if the Hotel Leopold had housed all of the hope, joy, fury, passion, anguish, and devouring hunger the earth can know, and that the wild and bitter tenement of youth can hold, it also housed within its walls all of the barren and hopeless bitterness of old age. For here -- unloved, friendless, and unwanted, shunted off into the dreary asylum of hotel life -- there lived many old people who hated life and yet, who were afraid to die.⁴⁵

In The Web and the Rock, George Webber notes how Americans are always anxious to go somewhere and that when the automobile came in "the roads, particularly on Sunday, were choked with cars going into the country, going to another town, going anywhere, no matter how ugly or barren the excursion might be, so long as the terrible restlessness in some measure might be appeased."⁴⁶ It would seem that Americans are doomed to submit to "a strange and haunting paradox" in that they "are fixed and certain" only when they are in movement. George feels the same way as he "was never so assured of his purpose as when he was going somewhere on a train." George "never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there," however, "It was only when he got there that his homelessness began."⁴⁷ Thus, only when they are in movement with the tempo of the changing universe do Americans find a temporary respite from their restless fury, but when they stop and confront the reality of American life, they, like Eugene in River, realize that they can only be as "helpless

as a leaf" and "driven on forever," unable to "fence, wall, conquer, make his own" anything.

In a draft letter to Aline Bernstein written in a 1933 entry in his notebooks, Wolfe noted that the people in the streets found "nothing but fury in the end," and asked if there was nothing but this.⁴⁸ This concern belied a feeling that compelled Wolfe to write the following in the last years of his life (1937-1938) which summarizes the above:

Is it not true that there is in our hearts the knowledge of betrayal — vicious, cowardly betrayal -- self-betrayal of ourselves, America's betrayal of herself? Is it not true that all of us are conscious in our hearts that there was hope of glorious and high fulfillment in America — and that that high and glorious fulfillment has not only never been achieved but that even the promise of that high and glorious fulfillment has been so aborted, corrupted, made dropsical with disease, that its ancient and primeval lineaments are no more to be seen? Is it not true that we were given here for the enrichment and improvement of man's life a golden wilderness, and that we have made of it a wilderness of horror, ugliness and confusion? Is it not true that we begin here with an ideal of a free man's life, enlarging and fulfilling its whole purpose in an atmosphere of free and spacious enlightenment — and is it not true that what we have here is for the most part just a mongrel and disordered mob — a jargon of a thousand tongues, the mouth-piece of a million vicious and sensational rumors — but with no faith, no freedom, no belief — a slave-like swarm without the dignities of slavery — a duped, doped horde who seek or want no remedy for the disease that preys upon them -- and themselves so vicious, infamous, and base, that one does not know which is the more hateful or more odious — the fools who take it, or the knaves who dupe?⁴⁹

In conclusion we can only say that, in essence, Wolfe's statement points to a failure of overwhelming magnitude; failure in terms of what the author attempted in his life's work: to wreak a vision of America, to bring his inheritance to the city and distill "the beauty of an everlasting form, enslave and conquer man by his enchantment, cast his

spell across the mountains, beat death down upon his knees, kill death utterly, and fix eternity with the grappling hooks of his own art."⁵⁰ This was the task as stated in River, and in the magnitude and nobility of the attempt Wolfe was ultimately led to what he perceived to be a conclusive truth. In the final analysis, Wolfe sought "beauty, passion, and unutterable eloquence" and found that such could only be "slipping forever through our fingers with time's sanded drop, flowing forever from our desperate grasp even as a river flows and never can be held."⁵¹ As Herbert J. Muller has said, "Wolfe sought [his] subject in the greatness of America, but [he] found that the America [he] longed to celebrate did not exist."⁵² We can therefore only admire Wolfe for the courage and tenacity that his task required and empathize with him for the reality that he found. And so, Wolfe, the lost and lonely American, in a far away French town, concludes his longest work with the following:

The memory of the lost America -- the America of twenty years ago, of quiet streets, the time-enchanted spell and magic of full June, the solid, lonely, liquid shuffle of men in shirt-sleeves coming home, the leafy fragrance of the cooling turnip-greens, and screens that slammed, and sudden silence -- had long since died, had been drowned beneath the brutal flood-tide, the edict stupefaction of that roaring surge and mechanic life which had succeeded it.

And now, all that lost magic had come to life here in the little whitened square, here in this old French town, and he was closer to his childhood and his father's life of power and magnificence than he could ever be again in savage new America; and as the knowledge of these strange, these lost yet familiar things returned to him, his heart was filled with all the mystery of time, dark time, the mystery of strange, million-visaged time that haunts us with the briefness of our days.

He thought of home.⁵³

VI

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

1

Towards the end of his life, Wolfe's views as expressed in the Gant novels culminated in what was to be a rationalization of what Herbert J. Muller termed his "tragic sense of life." Muller has said that Wolfe ultimately "came to terms with life by taking on its worst meanings, going through its worst possibilities."¹ This final rationalization is found in Wolfe's last posthumous novel, You Can't Go Home Again; his book of short stories, From Death to Morning; as well as in his notebooks and letters.

In River, Eugene is temporarily distracted from the harsh reality of life when he is invited to the Hudson River estate of his wealthy friend, Joel Pierce. Eugene is awed by the life of luxury and genteel ease at the Pierce estate and for a moment deludes himself by thinking that perhaps this is the kind of life for which all men hope: that this life was good due to the conviction that "filled him at that moment of its essential uncorruptible righteousness." The estate momentarily becomes a "symbol of what all life on earth should be, a promise of what every man on earth should have."² The symbol soon disintegrates as Eugene considers what is responsible for and what maintains this life of luxury: "many nameless lives had labored,

grieved, and come to naught in order that this fragile image of compacted night, this priceless distillation of its rare and chosen loveliness, should blossom to a flower of moonlight beauty on a hill."³

Thus is exhibited a kernel of social consciousness that finds fuller expression in Wolfe's last novel and is responsible in part for the author's final interpretation of life. Some thirty pages later in River, Eugene comes to a fundamental conclusion while still a guest at the Pierce estate:

It seemed to him that here began that slow, and somehow desperately painful recognition that the enchanted world of wealth and love and beauty, of living fulfillment and of fruitful power, which he had visioned as a child in all his dreams about the fabled rich along the Hudson River -- did not exist; and that he must look for that grand life in ways stranger, darker, and more painful in their labyrinthine complications than any he had ever dreamed of as a child⁴

Eugene realizes that he is a part of common humanity in that he could only find the joy of life, such as it may be, in the

brutal stupefaction of the streets; goodness and truth in the mean hearts of common men; and beauty in the only place where it can ever be found -- inextricably meshed, inwrought, and interwoven in that great web of horror, pain and sweat and bitter anguish, that great woven fabric of blind cruelty, hatred, filth and lust and tyranny and injustice, of joy, of faith, of love, of courage and devotion -- that makes up life, and that resumes the world.⁵

Thus Eugene, through the eyes of his creator, comes to understand and accept that he has much in common with all men, that he is indeed one of them. It is in this understanding that Wolfe's "personal legend becomes increasingly typical and symbolical. Specifically, it becomes an American legend."⁶ As such, therefore, Americans (Muller writes) "seem lost and they hunger for a better life, as men naturally do, but they seem unnaturally haunted and hurt

because they feel that they have lost their proper inheritance as Americans, a rich inheritance of exultancy, abundance and splendor."⁷

Muller notes that this is so because of what Wolfe said was "some foul, corrosive poison in our lives — bitter enigma that it is!"

This certainly refers to the phenomenon of changeless change and the inherent death-in-life that is America. Nonetheless, Muller adds that the "depression, however, gave Wolfe some idea of the nature of this poison. It made the enigma more terrible but less of an enigma, and therefore not simply bitter."⁸

That this is so is confirmed in You Can't Go Home Again wherein Wolfe makes several references to the dismal plight of men, but the observations are tempered by a personal identification with and a social understanding of the dilemma mankind faces. (Also, the author's outlook is further tempered by his admittance that he had learned "that he could not devour the earth, that he must know and accept his limitations").⁹ We therefore see George Webber in Again restate the American dilemma in terms that are tinctured with pathos and resignation but with the bitterness notably absent. He can talk of the simple joy of life for what it is — that there is something beautiful in mankind's tragedy; that men possess courage and dignity in that they simply live and face the harshness of life and yet can still find some enduring beauty in the world. Thus George notices a man staring out of a window, day after day, motionless, in the apartment across the street from his own. George marvels how the mad rush of the city swirls about this implacable man and thinks of him as "the symbol of a kind of permanence in the rush and sweep and chaos

of the city, where all things come and go and pass and are so soon forgotten."¹⁰ George tries to penetrate the mystery of the man until finally, he finds the answer. The man represents "the face of Darkness and of Time" in which a voice speaks to George with "the blended tongues of all those men who have passed through the heat and fury of the day."¹¹ The voice tells George that men who have seen all of life and have experienced all the pain and anguish that life entails "now sit quietly by our windows watching all that henceforth never shall touch us ... we can swear to you that these things pass."¹² The voice continues, telling George that these men "are content to make our own a few things" while letting millions of others pass. They reassure him that some things never change:

All things belonging to the earth will never change — the leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth — all things proceeding from the earth to seasons, all things that lapse and change and come again upon the earth — these things will always be the same, for they come up from the earth that never changes, they go back into the earth that lasts forever. Only the earth endures, but it endures forever.

The tarantula, the adder, and the asp will also never change. Pain and death will always be the same. But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower, something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April.¹³

Throughout Again, there are several references to man's predicament tempered by the sentiment expressed above. George despairs that a man spends a third of his life sleeping, another third in "sterile labor," a sixth in coming and going, and wonders how much time is left

for "a vision of the tragic stars? How much of him is left to look upon the everlasting earth?" The answer is that he has just a "few snatched moments only from the barren glut and suck of living."¹⁴

Nonetheless, George marvels at the notion that "this moth of time, this dupe of brevity and numbered hours" would cause the gods to cry out, "He lived, and he was here!" if they could only view mankind's remains: "where only a few marks and carvings of his hand were legible upon his broken tablets, where only a wheel lay rusting in the desert sand"¹⁵ Once again, admiration and wistful joy is expressed for the simple recognition that man has made a small mark in the universe: even though he lives below the "senseless stars," man nonetheless "writes his meanings in them." Thus, George concludes two-thirds of the way through Again: "Man loves life, and loving life, hates death, and because of this he is great, he is glorious, he is beautiful, and his beauty is everlasting." And, in dying, man's eyes "burn beautifully, and the old hunger shines more fiercely in them — he has endured all the hard and purposeless suffering, and still he wants to live."¹⁶

ii

In Again, Wolfe writes about the death of an American cipher, C. Green, a man who commits suicide by jumping from the twelfth story of a Brooklyn hotel. The man is nondescript and even his name is presumed to be assumed. The man represents the common American who, in the ultimate defiant gesture, abnegates his life and America by his death. The suicide is described in

graphic detail, complete with a group of curious onlookers drawn to the macabre spectacle and giving forth their opinions as to whether or not "a thing like that takes guts" and so forth. Wolfe notes how difficult it is for anyone to understand this death in that Green was just another American "speaking our own tongue and stuffed with our own stuffing," yet had "concealed in him some secret, dark, and frightful thing more terrible than anything that we have ever known"¹⁷

Wolfe notes that the death would have been "all right if he had just been blown away like an old paper, or if he had been swept aside like remnants of familiar litter," but Green "would not have it so" as his death was more than just death, but a statement and denial of man's condition:

He exploded to drench our common substance of viscous grey with the bright indecency of blood, to resume himself from number, to become before our eyes a Man, and to identify a single spot of all our general Nothingness with the unique passion, the awful terror, and the dignity of Death.¹⁸

The sentiment above concerning the "dignity of Death" finds full expression in Wolfe's short story "Death the Proud Brother" (in the collection of short stores From Death to Morning). In the story the author talks about three deaths observed in the city in a rather casual tone then comments on a fourth which profoundly impresses him and the crowd of onlookers. The first death is caused by a truck which side-swipes another in an attempt to pass and subsequently sends the second truck careening into a man's confectionary stand. The man is killed instantly. The second death concerns a street bum who falls forward across a pile of iron beams -- one of which smashes in the side of his head. The third death observed concerns a steelworker some nine

stories aloft. The man, a riveter, is given a moment's rest as the feeder turns to exchange a joke with a man upon another girder. The riveter puts his bucket down to light a cigarette and while doing so, the feeder carelessly tosses a red-hot rivet to the unprepared man. The rivet strikes the man and causes him to fall to his death. The three deaths are viewed as grotesque aberrations in the swirl of the city's everyday life. They are relegated to a transitory curiosity that momentarily disturbs those present, but the pulse of the city is quickly resumed if indeed, it is stopped at all. The fourth death is much different in that "the city people were stunned, awed, bewildered, and frightened, as they had not been before; and yet the fourth death had come so quietly, easily, and naturally that it seemed as if even a child could have looked at it without terror or surprise."¹⁹ This death simply concerns a shabby, nondescript man who expires on a subway bench. This death provokes more than a curious look from the crowd and more comment from the author than just a few paragraphs. The crowd gathers around the man debating whether or not he is dead and postulating as to what the cause of his death may have been. Rather than diminish, the crowd gathers strength as more are drawn to the little dead man on the subway bench. The crowd stays, and curiously, does not "press in, or try to thrust their way up close, as people do when some violent, bloody, or fatal accident has occurred."²⁰

The author is struck by the different reaction in himself and the crowd vis à vis the first three deaths and the last. The first three deaths are caused by accident — circumstances that are

predictable in that one knows and accepts that accidents will happen and will, from time to time, cause deaths. Grotesque and macabre as the first three deaths are; they do not elicit more than a curious response. Once the surprise and shock has quickly passed, it is noted how the crowd "had responded instantly to death, accepting its violence, bloody mutilation, and horror calmly, as one of the natural consequences of daily life."²¹ The death of the man in the subway is not caused by any discernable occurrence. There is no violence, no explanation. In the absence of explanation the crowd is disturbed as they unconsciously realize that the man, in whose garments the "lives of a million people were written," has simply expired because men must die. The man, who is a symbol for the common city-man, is disturbing because he reminds the crowd of their own mortality and that a violent accident — an improbability — is not likely to be the cause of their deaths, but rather they shall all die for the simple reason that they must. As the author looks upon the dead man he feels that he and the crowd are looking "across an immense and lonely distance" at "a lonely little figure upon an enormous stage" who "by his very littleness and loneliness in that immense grey space ... seemed to gain an awful dignity and grandeur."²²

This, then, is the reason why the crowd is drawn to the dead man. In him they see themselves and the futility and meaninglessness of their own lives. Yet in death the little man has transcended futility and meaninglessness as if death were a built-in body mechanism that in its very essence is all the baseness and harshness that is life. Death is thus called "proud death" in that the poorest

cipher is, in death, given the dignity that life has robbed from him; dignity in the sense that no longer must a man endure the humiliations of a barren and fruitless life in the universe of changeless change. The crowd recognizes and understands the meaning of the cipher's death and in this profound realization they cannot turn away from the dead man:

Therefore they would not leave it from a kind of love they bore it now; and because proud death was sitting grandly there and had spoken to them, and had stripped them down into their nakedness; and because they had built great towers against proud death, and had hidden from him in grey tunnels, and had tried to still his voice with all the brutal stupefactions of the street, but proud death, dark death, proud brother death, was striding in their city now, and he was taller than their tallest towers, and triumphant even when he touched a shabby atom of base clay, and all their streets were silent when he spoke.

Therefore they looked at him with awe, with terror and humility, and with love, for death, proud death, had come into their common and familiar places, and his face had shone terribly in grey tainted air, and he had matched his tongue, his stride, his dignities against the weary and brutal custom of ten million men, and he had stripped them down at length, and stripped their strident and derisive tongues, and in the image of their poorest fellow had shown them all the way that they must go, the awe and terror that would clothe them — and because of this they stood before him lonely, silent, and afraid.²³

Once death is seen in the way described above, Wolfe is able to sing its praise with particular reference to himself. Death is that which retrieves "from exile the desperate lives of men who never found their home" and has "opened your dark door for us who never yet found doors to enter, and given us a room who, roomless, doorless, unassuaged, were driven on forever through the streets of life"²⁴ — all of which alludes to themes around which all of Wolfe's work was written. (It is interesting to note that in the beginning of this short story,

Wolfe traces the inception of this concept of death to the deaths of Ben and W. O.: "And I had watched my brother and my father die in the mid-watches of the night, and I had known and loved the figure of proud Death when he had come").²⁵

iii

To briefly restate Wolfe's views on death, we would note that in Wolfe's first two novels death is portrayed as the malevolent robber of man's hopes, ambition, and of his very life. By the time we get to "Death the Proud Brother" (and Again), death, through the offices of Wolfe's experience with life, has been transmogrified into a benevolent friend -- a brother -- which relieves man of the inexorable and ineffable pain and sorrow that he must endure in life. Thus, in Wolfe's view, a man's life is marked by a wild paroxysm of hope and ambition at the beginning -- the goal of the "shining city" being his motivating symbol -- and degenerates, during the author's maturation process, to an admission of defeat and despair when he realizes that he is pitted against the implacable universe of changeless change. This process leads to the acceptance of death as a noble and proud friend who absolves man of all his pain. This would just about complete the examination of Wolfe's views on death, but there is, however, one more thing to add which ends this study and ended Wolfe's career and life on a note of hope. This was occasioned by Wolfe's last visit to Germany during Hitler's regime and the experience is related in the closing pages of Again.

While George Webber is in Hitler's Germany he is forced to

realize that the land he had loved and considered his home away from home has succumbed to the evils of Nazism. This is impressed upon him by friends and acquaintances who reveal to George in guarded conversation that the Nazi regime has imposed a new order on the country that henceforth would be the ultimate negation of man's dignity and freedom. This fact is poignantly impressed upon George as he is on board the train that is taking him out of Germany. In his compartment George is seated with two Germans, a naturalized American, and a nervous little man who George later finds out is a Jew.

The little Jew is in such discomfiture that he is nicknamed "Fuss-and-Fidget" by George. As the train approaches the Belgian frontier, the passengers discuss the German currency regulations which allow both foreigners and citizens to leave the country with a maximum of ten marks. The little man becomes increasingly nervous as the frontier approaches and avails himself of an offer made by George and the other American who are able to hold some of the other passengers' excess money as they are both under the maximum amount. At the frontier the train stops for the customs inspection and to change engines. Very soon there is a note of crisis in the air that George and the other passengers feel has something to do with the little Jew. They quickly learn that the man is indeed a Jew who has been caught trying to flee the country with a large amount of money. The man is arrested and George instantly becomes aware of the man's ten marks burning in his hands. George's first reaction is to return the money but he accedes to his new-found friends' entreaties that this action would lead to his arrest. Just then the man appears on the station

platform with his captors. They walk by George and the other passengers and the man, whom they had learned to like in the course of the journey, does nothing to betray them. George and the others board the train and as they pass by the little man on the platform they exchange a glance which prompts the following reaction:

He looked once, directly and steadfastly, at his former companions, and they at him. And in that gaze there was all the unmeasured weight of man's mortal anguish. George and the others felt somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow guilty. They all felt that they were saying farewell, not to a man, but to humanity; not to some pathetic stranger, some chance acquaintance of the voyage, but to mankind; not to some nameless cipher out of life, but to the fading image of a brother's face.²⁶

After the incident George ruminates on what Germany had meant to him, that he "had been at home in it, and it in him" and that the country "was the other part of his heart's home, a haunted part of dark desire, a magic domain of fulfillment."²⁷ He considers that this is now lost to him but measures the gain of this loss:

... he began to see another way, the way that lay before him. He saw that you can't go home again -- not ever. There was no road back. Ended now for him, with the sharp and clean finality of the closing of a door, was the time when his dark roots, like those of a pot-bound plant, would be left to feed upon their own substance and nourish their own little self-absorbed designs. Henceforth they must spread outward -- away from the hidden, secret, and unfathomed past that holds man's spirit prisoner -- outward, outward toward the rich and life-giving soil of a new freedom in the wide world of all humanity. And there came to him a vision of man's true home, beyond the ominous and cloud-engulfed horizon of the here and now, in the green and hopeful and still-virgin meadows of the future.²⁸

Thus, in Again, we have the culmination of Wolfe's views on death and perhaps of his artistic credo. Life is an onward movement that constantly pulsates into the future. As such, one cannot go backwards in time nor to anything in the past in which lies sheltered the dreams,

vision, and security of days long past. To do so is futile and leads only to failure in that going home again (Wolfe's term for the security the past represents) is not only a physical impossibility, but also abrogates one's responsibilities in the present and necessarily circumvents the possible glories and hope that the future may hold. For the artist this realization is of critical import as his main task in his craft (as Wolfe said many times) is the pursuit of truth. "You can't go home again" therefore articulates Wolfe's rejection of his past while opening the door to the future. That Wolfe was elated and relieved to have come upon this understanding is revealed in the many letters he wrote to friends outlining the tenets of this new-found knowledge. In no less than three letters to close friends, in his notebooks, and of course in Again (as inserted by his editor, Edward C. Aswell) does this understanding find expression. To Margaret Roberts, his boyhood teacher who had a profound influence on the author, Wolfe wrote in 1938:

... my discovery that "you can't go home again" went a whole lot deeper ... it went down to the very roots of my life and spirit — it has been a hard and at times terrifying discovery because it amounts to an entire revision almost of belief and knowledge; it was like death almost, because it meant saying farewell to so many things, to so many ideas and images and hopes and illusions that we think we can't live without.²⁹

That Wolfe was thinking of calling his last book You Can't Go Home Again (in a letter to Aswell in 1938) gives obvious qualification to the great importance Wolfe attached to his discovery. In the letter to Aswell, Wolfe articulated what he couldn't go home to and the following is how it appears in the novel, as Aswell evidently thought that it merited inclusion (in Aswell's connective insertions) in Wolfe's last novel:

You can't go back to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile, to escape to Europe and some foreign land, back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake, back home to aestheticism, to one's youthful idea of "the artist" and the all-sufficiency of "art" and "beauty" and "love," back home to the ivory tower, back home to places in the country, to the cottage in Bermuda, away from all the strife and conflict in the world, back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for, back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time — back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.³⁰

(It is interesting to note that in his discovery Wolfe rejected one of the major themes in his writing — particularly in River — that of the search for the father that would be an "outer image of certitude, strength and wisdom" to whom Wolfe wished to "confide his life" and was certain he would "one day find in the streets of life").³¹

The last four chapters of Again contain a letter George has written to his publisher, Foxhall Edwards, outlining the reasons why he has felt compelled to leave him for another publisher. The letter is a fictional account of the reasons why Wolfe left Maxwell Perkins. (One of the reasons why Wolfe left Perkins was that Wolfe felt Perkins to be a father figure — he admitted as much in writing — and was disappointed that Perkins could not fulfill his expectations, a reason why Wolfe severed relations with many other people). Wolfe's discovery of "you can't go home again" was occasioned by his social awareness which was forced upon him by the revealing experience of the depression and of what he had found in Nazi Germany. Wolfe had decided that he must look forward into the future for hope — something that men would have to work and aim for — and was disappointed when Perkins did not share his view. Although Wolfe was deeply impressed with Perkins' humanity and

ingenuous temperament, he was deeply saddened by Perkins' acceptance of the world order. In Again, Wolfe put it as follows:

You felt that all the glaring evils in the world around us — the monstrous and perverse unbalance between power and servitude, between want and plenty, between privilege and burdensome discrimination — were inevitable because they had always been the curse of man and were the prime conditions of his being. The gap between us has widened. You stated and affirmed — I heard you, but could not agree.³²

In the novelistic letter, George notes that Edwards' way of life conforms to "the way of thought, of feeling, and of acting, of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes." George admits that this "is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound."³³ He admits that in this great book there is truth by which he abides — that all is vanity and man shall never behold the work of God and must remain ignorant and bewildered to the end of his days, but must nonetheless "do the work at hand with all his might."³⁴ This George accepts and recognizes in Edwards, but in this "lies the root of trouble and the seed of severance" and thus he writes to Edwards:

Your own philosophy has led you to accept the order of things as they are because you have no hope of changing them; and if you could change them, you feel that any other order would be just as bad. In everlasting terms — you and the Preacher may be right: for there is no greater wisdom than the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, no acceptance finally so true as the stern fatalism of the rock. Man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot. There is no denying this in the final end. But we must, dear Fox, deny it all along the way.³⁵

This is the foundation of Wolfe's final vision: that despite the reality of life's futility and the hopelessness of changeless change, man must continue to struggle and hope for a better life as in "the affirmation of that fact, the continuance of that unceasing war, is man's

religion and his living faith."³⁶ In this knowledge the Wolfian protagonist, at the end of his story, believes there is still hope for America, that "the true discovery of America is before us"³⁷

In the final analysis, Wolfe's life ended on a note of profound hope. He had lived with death and in the end accepted its inevitability with stoic resignation. Perhaps the most significant thing he had learned was that death was inevitable and, as it could only bring joyful release from the world, was not to be feared. Only death-in-life could be horrible and was to be feared. In death-in-life there could be no hope and no reason at all for living and Wolfe struggled with his life to find something more than just death-in-life. It is curious that Wolfe died shortly after having formulated his notion of "you can't go home again." He had always said that he would die at an early age and would never finish his work. Perhaps this knowledge could only be understood in the face of death. It is appropriate that Wolfe's last novel concludes with the following:

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

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

"— Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending — a wind is rising, and the rivers flow."³⁸

The very last words Thomas Wolfe wrote were contained in a letter to Maxwell Perkins. The letter is a poignant statement of how far Wolfe had come since Look Homeward, Angel:

I've made a long voyage and been to a strange country, and I've seen the dark man very close; and I don't think I was too much afraid of him, but so much of mortality still clings to me — I wanted most desperately to live and still do, and I thought about you all a thousand times, and wanted to see you all again, and there was the impossible anguish and regret of all the work I had not done, of all the work I had to do — and I know now that I'm just a grain of dust, and I feel as if a great window has been opened on life I did not know about before — and if I come through this, I hope to God I am a better man, and in some strange way I can't explain, I know I am a deeper and wiser one.³⁹

NOTES

Chapter I

¹The Letters of Thomas Wolfe to His Mother, ed. C. Hugh Holman and Sue Fields Ross (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 35.

²Ibid., p. 36.

³Ibid., p. 65.

⁴Ibid., pp. 71-72.

⁵Andrew Turnbull, Thomas Wolfe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 306.

⁶The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard S. Kennedy and Paschel Reeves (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970), II, 757.

⁷C. Hugh Holman, "'The Dark Ruined Helen of His Blood': Thomas Wolfe and The South," Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Leslie A. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 19.

⁸Ibid., p. 29.

⁹Hereafter referred to as Angel and River.

¹⁰The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Elizabeth Nowell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 18.

¹¹Turnbull, p. 61.

¹²Ibid., p. 61.

¹³Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁴Richard Steele, A Study in Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company, 1976), p. 45.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁶Steele, p. 107.

¹⁷Elizabeth Nowell, Thomas Wolfe: A Biography (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960), p. 194.

¹⁸Hereafter referred to as Rock and Again.

¹⁹Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Thomas Wolfe: Time and The South," Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 66.

²⁰Ibid., p. 74.

²¹Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (Norfolk: New Directions Books, 1947), p. 8.

²²Ibid., p. 18.

²³Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 3.

Chapter II

¹Angel, p. 158.

²Ibid., p. 158.

³Ibid., p. 159.

⁴Ibid., p. 159.

⁵Ibid., p. 244.

⁶Ibid., p. 249.

⁷Ibid., p. 422.

⁸Ibid., p. 426.

⁹Notebooks, Vol. I, p. 155.

¹⁰Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 34.

- ¹¹River, p. 42.
- ¹²Angel, p. 519.
- ¹³River, p. 2.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 333.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 510.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 860.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 370.
- ¹⁸Ibid., pp. 388-389.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 254.
- ²⁰Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock (New York: Harper Brothers, 1939), p. 299.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 299.
- ²²Ibid., p. 585.
- ²³Notebooks, Vol. II, pp. 457-458.
- ²⁴Letters, p. 227.
- ²⁵Ibid., p. 234.
- ²⁶River, pp. 366-367.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 245.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 245.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 136.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 91.
- ³¹Angel, p. 520 (italics Wolfe's)

³²Angel, p. 521.

³³Ibid., p. 521.

³⁴River, p. 389.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 410-411.

³⁶Ibid., p. 701.

³⁷Ibid., p. 701.

³⁸Ibid., p. 869.

Chapter III

¹Asheville, North Carolina: Thomas Wolfe's hometown.

²Letters, p. 178.

³Angel, p. 77.

⁴Ibid., p. 388.

⁵Ibid., p. 373.

⁶Ibid., p. 93.

⁷Ibid., p. 93.

⁸Ibid., p. 102.

⁹Ibid., p. 293.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 445.

¹¹Ibid., p. 445.

¹²Ibid., p. 445.

¹³Ibid., p. 457.

¹⁴Angel, pp. 457-458.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 458.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 465.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 465.

¹⁸River, p. 200.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 201.

²⁰Ibid., p. 200.

²¹Ibid., p. 53.

²²Ibid., p. 207.

²³Ibid., p. 207.

²⁴Ibid., p. 207.

²⁵Angel, p. 490.

²⁶Ibid., p. 490.

²⁷Ibid., p. 490.

²⁸Ibid., p. 491.

²⁹Ibid., p. 491.

³⁰Ibid., p. 491.

³¹Ibid., p. 491.

³²River, p. 209.

³³Angel, p. 49.

³⁴Ibid., p. 327.

³⁵Ibid., p. 453.

³⁶Angel, p. 457.

³⁷Ibid., p. 461.

³⁸Ibid., p. 462.

³⁹Ibid., p. 449.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 464.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 464 (*italics Wolfe's*).

⁴²Turnbull, p. 28.

⁴³Angel, p. 491.

⁴⁴Letters to Mother, p. 119.

Chapter IV

¹Angel, p. 106.

²Ibid., p. 108.

³Ibid., p. 108.

⁴Ibid., p. 112.

⁵Letters, p. 123.

⁶River, p. 347.

⁷Ibid., p. 348.

⁸Ibid., p. 352.

⁹Angel, p. 404.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 404.

¹¹Ibid., p. 231.

¹²River, p. 60.

¹³Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁴Angel, p. 83.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁶River, p. 78.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 254.

²⁰Ibid., p. 90.

²¹Angel, p. 470.

²²River, p. 256.

²³Ibid., p. 252.

²⁴Ibid., p. 260.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 260-261.

²⁶Ibid., p. 267.

²⁷Ibid., p. 268.

²⁸Ibid., p. 268.

²⁹Ibid., p. 273.

³⁰Angel, p. 197.

³¹River, p. 214.

³²Ibid., p. 215.

³³Ibid., p. 227.

³⁴River, pp. 227-228.

³⁵Ibid., p. 230.

³⁶Ibid., p. 230.

³⁷Ibid., p. 231.

³⁸Ibid., p. 231.

Chapter V

¹River, pp. 94-95.

²Ibid., p. 454.

³Ibid., p. 455.

⁴Ibid., p. 91.

⁵Ibid., p. 147.

⁶Ibid., p. 148.

⁷Ibid., p. 151.

⁸Ibid., p. 155.

⁹Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 593 (*italics Wolfe's*).

¹¹Ibid., p. 155.

¹²Ibid., p. 169.

¹³Ibid., pp. 288-289.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 289.

¹⁵River, p. 301.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 301-302. }

¹⁷Ibid., p. 304.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 322.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 323.

²⁰Ibid., p. 709.

²¹Ibid., p. 709.

²²Ibid., p. 710.

²³Ibid., p. 711.

²⁴Notebooks, Vol. I, p. 207.

²⁵Rock, p. 274.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 274-275.

²⁷Ibid., p. 463.

²⁸Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (Garden City, New York: Garden City Books, 1940), p. 500.

²⁹Thomas Wolfe, The Story of a Novel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 55.

³⁰Ibid., p. 73.

³¹Steele, p. 41 (*italics Steele's*).

³²River, p. 756.

³³Ibid., p. 757.

³⁴Ibid., p. 412.

³⁵Ibid., p. 413.

³⁶River, p. 415.

³⁷Ibid., p. 415.

³⁸Ibid., p. 417.

³⁹Ibid., p. 419.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 421-422.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 498-499.

⁴²Ibid., p. 503.

⁴³Ibid., p. 439.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 429.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 431.

⁴⁶Rock, p. 231.

⁴⁷Again, p. 56.

⁴⁸Notebooks, Vol. II, p. 619.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 918 (*italics Wolfe's*).

⁵⁰River, pp. 550-551.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 551.

⁵²Muller, p. 57.

⁵³River, pp. 898-899.

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¹Muller, p. 17.

²River, p. 539.

³Ibid., pp. 539-540.

⁴Ibid., pp. 570-571.

⁵Ibid., p. 571.

⁶Muller, p. 65.

⁷Ibid., p. 92.

⁸Ibid., p. 92.

⁹Again, p. 6.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 42.

¹¹Ibid., p. 43.

¹²Ibid., p. 43.

¹³Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 435.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 435.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 436.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 480.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 481-482.

¹⁹Thomas Wolfe, "Death the Proud Brother," in From Death to Morning (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 41.

²⁰Ibid., p. 47.

²¹Ibid., p. 41.

²²Ibid., p. 61.

²³Wolfe, "Death the Proud Brother," p. 62.

²⁴Ibid., p. 67.

²⁵Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶Again, p. 699.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 703-704.

²⁸Ibid., p. 704.

²⁹Letters, p. 730.

³⁰Again, p. 706.

³¹Notebooks, Vol. II, p. 623.

³²Again, p. 736.

³³Ibid., pp. 732-733.

³⁴Ibid., p. 737.

³⁵Ibid., p. 737 (*italics Wolfe's*).

³⁶Ibid., p. 738.

³⁷Ibid., p. 741.

³⁸Ibid., p. 743.

³⁹Letters, p. 777.

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