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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE TRANSI-
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TO AN INCREASINGLY CHRISTIAN AWARENESS
OF EVIL IN THE FICTION OF THOMAS WOLFE.

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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE TRANSITION FROM A
PSYCHOLOGICAL VISION OF LIFE TO AN INCREASINGLY
CHRISTIAN AWARENESS OF EVIL IN THE FICTION OF
THOMAS WOLFE

A DISSERTATION
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FRANK F. ^{Finney}FINNEY, JR.

Norman, Oklahoma

1961

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THOMAS WOLFE

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TO MY WIFE

In addition, I should like to acknowledge especially my debt to Victor A. Elconin, Chairman of the Department of English, University of Oklahoma, who for eight years has served as the director of this dissertation. I should also like to thank the following professors for serving as members of my dissertation committee: Stanley Knight Coffman, Jr., Roy Raymond Male, and Alphonse Joseph Fritz, Department of English, University of Oklahoma; Donnell MacClure Owings, Department of History, University of Oklahoma.

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CHAPTER I

THE CRITICAL ATTACK

Max, Max, perhaps you think I hate all forms of criticism, but the sad truth is, how much more critical am I, who am generally supposed to be utterly lacking in the critical faculty, than most of these critics are. God knows, I could profit by a wise and penetrating criticism as much as any man alive, but as I grow older I am beginning to see how rare--how much rarer even than Lear, Hamlet, the greatest productions of art--such criticism is--and how wrong-headed, false, and useless almost everything that passes as criticism is. (Letter from Thomas Wolfe to Maxwell Perkins, March 31, 1935)¹

The critical climate in America during the past twenty-five years has been hostile to the idea that Thomas Wolfe was a successful artist. During this period a large number of discriminating critics have even been somewhat contemptuous of Wolfe's pretensions to being a serious novelist, the author's romantic sensibility, together with his callow

¹Elizabeth Nowell (ed.), The Letters of Thomas Wolfe New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 444.

exploitation of autobiographical material in the guise of fiction, alone seeming enough to rule out the possibility that his work might have any real significance as literature.¹ In addition, Wolfe's excessive dependence upon his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins, as a kind of behind-the-scenes collaborator to help him arrive at the form of his published fiction, seems indefensible.

The critics feel that this is true and that Wolfe's first two books, despite the extensive aid which the author received from his editor, as published novels still seem conspicuously lacking in the kind of conscious form which they believe every well-made novel demands. In other words, these critics have concluded that even the editorial acumen of Perkins was insufficient to remedy Wolfe's defects as a novelist, and that the most serious of these defects was his inability to control and dominate the form of his fiction the way a conscious artist should. Robert Penn Warren, one of the most discerning of these critics, has written that Wolfe's failure in Of Time and the River to impose a significant form over the particular nature of his material might serve as an object lesson to all writers of "the limitations, perhaps the necessary limitations, of an attempt to exploit directly and naively the personal experience and

¹Betty Thompson, "Thomas Wolfe: Two Decades of Criticism," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 306.

the self-defined personality in art."¹ Mr. Warren also advised the reader, as well as Wolfe, "to recollect that Shakespeare merely wrote Hamlet: he was not Hamlet."²

Although there is no specific reply to Mr. Warren's statements, either in the fiction or in the letters, Wolfe certainly was never convinced that Shakespeare's subjective experience was as removed from his artistic creation as his critic apparently assumed. Instead, Wolfe seems to have believed, judging from the numerous comments on the nature of autobiographical fiction to be found in his correspondence, that Shakespeare's unusual success in imparting a complex psychological verisimilitude to the characters in his plays was the result of his almost preternatural insight into the hidden meanings of their personalities, and that this uncanny insight, in part at least, was oriented subjectively. For this reason, the insight was never wholly subject to conscious control, since if it had been too consciously manipulated by the playwright, it would not have elicited from his subconscious memory the necessary supporting illumination. In other words, Shakespeare's insight seems to have operated best after he had established an almost complete empathy with his characters. By this means he was able to approach them initially, not in the light of their dramatic roles in a given play, but as real people, and with a kind of

¹Robert Penn Warren, "The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 132. ²Ibid.

uncontrolled intuition on his part in which his most private experience, on a primary if not archetypal level, provided the basis for the psychological interpretation of their experience. Only then, after the informing subjective imagination of the playwright had been indulged completely, did he begin to work with these characters as a professional writer.

The kind of empathic identification which has just been suggested on Shakespeare's part is not to be confused with a fatuously naive identification of the artist with his material, which critics frequently have ascribed to the creative method of a writer such as Wolfe. Certainly Wolfe, despite his obvious shortcomings as a romantic creator, knew that Shakespeare remained the conscious artist in managing his characters in each play according to his objective evaluation of their inner necessities, and according to the dramatic structure of the particular play in which they appeared. At the same time Wolfe believed that it was the playwright's subjective understanding of these people which provided the convincing psychological validation for their dramatic roles. On the basis of this approach to Shakespeare as a partially autobiographical artist, it might be argued that his celebrated objectivity as a dramatist owed less to controlled detachment than it did to his genius for making such a total identification with his characters that any purely personal elements disappeared in the process.

As a creative writer Wolfe did not feel obligated to defend this view critically,¹ but he did attempt to subscribe to it in practice with, one must hasten to add, widely varying degrees of failure and success in his fiction. In connection with Wolfe's declining reputation as a novelist, however, the point of these particular comments on Shakespeare is not that Wolfe succeeded or failed as an autobiographical writer himself, but that he was in fundamental critical disagreement with Warren's interpretation of Shakespeare's psychological detachment from the characters in his plays. Wolfe believed that any view such as Warren's, despite its general acceptance by the critics of a particular age, still remains an assumption rather than a critical truth, and there always exists the possibility that in some succeeding age with different literary tastes and standards, Wolfe's own romantic conception of the artist as an autobiographical creator might once again appear to make some kind of sense.

Mr. Warren's criticism of Of Time and the River first appeared in the American Review, May, 1935, and almost a year later it was reinforced by Bernard DeVoto's exacerbated attack, "Genius Is Not Enough," in the Saturday Review of Literature, April 25, 1936. In this review, ostensibly of The Story of a Novel, Mr. DeVoto charged that in addition to lacking significant form, Wolfe's first novel, Look Homeward, Angel, was overloaded with what the critic characterized as

¹Nowell, p. 510.

"placental material":

The material which nature and most novelists discard when its use has been served. It looked like one of two things, there was no telling which. It looked like the self-consciously literary posturing of a novelist too young and too naive to have learned his trade. Or, from another point of view, it looked like a document in psychic disintegration.¹

Unfortunately the appearance of this "placental material" was greater percentage-wise in the second novel than it had been in the first, and this fact, together with the unconvincing "giantism" of all of Wolfe's characters--among which had to be numbered the manic-depressive autobiographical protagonist himself--had convinced Mr. DeVoto that the author of such a literary melange had "mastered neither the psychic material out of which a novel is made nor the technique of writing fiction."²

To Mr. DeVoto the most damning evidence of Wolfe's incompleteness as a novelist was his frank admission in The Story of a Novel of the precise nature of the editorial assistance which he had received from the people at Scribner's in helping him prepare his first two novels for publication, especially Of Time and the River. After reading Wolfe's account of his collaboration with Maxwell Perkins on the manuscript of this novel, Mr. DeVoto was forced to conclude that "such organizing faculty and such critical intelligence as have been applied to the book have come not from inside the

¹Bernard DeVoto, "Genius Is Not Enough," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser, p. 141. ²Ibid., p. 143.

artist, but from the office of Charles Scribner's Sons."¹ According to Wolfe's own admission, his dependence upon Perkins was carried to such a length that the author was even unaware that he had finished his novel until his editor told him so. The critic found this situation intolerable:

Worse still, the artist goes on writing till Mr. Perkins tells him that the novel is finished. But the end of a novel is, properly, dictated by the internal pressure, osmosis, metabolism--what you will--of the novel itself, of which only the novelist can have a first-hand knowledge. There comes a point where the necessities of the book are satisfied, where its organic processes have reached completion. It is hard to see how awareness of that point can manifest itself at an editor's desk--and harder still to trust the integrity of a work of art in which not the artist but the publisher has determined where the true ends and the false begins.²

Mr. DeVoto commented that such an involved relationship between an author and editor was made still more ominous by Wolfe's youthful attitude toward revision, so that even after Perkins had used his critical intelligence to point out superfluous parts in the manuscript, Wolfe still recoiled from excising them. In other words, Wolfe was not consciously detached enough from his creation to be willing "to subdue his ego in favor of his book."³ For this reason, Mr. DeVoto was convinced that whatever genius Wolfe possessed was not enough in itself to make him a successful artist: "it never has been enough, in any art, and it never will be."⁴ If Wolfe were actually serious in his desire to be a distinguished novelist,

¹Ibid., p. 144. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 145.

⁴Ibid., p. 148.

what he needed most, in addition to a large measure of emotional maturing, was simply greater craftsmanship as a writer, "an ability to impart shape to matter, simple competence in the use of tools."¹ Mr. DeVoto also was certain that for Wolfe, as for every other writer, these developments had to take place within himself: "they cannot occur in the office of any editor whom he will ever know."²

To the author of this dissertation, it seems unfortunate that the criticism of Wolfe by Mr. Warren and Mr. DeVoto superficially seem to dovetail so neatly, for actually there is a marked difference in the kind of criticism, as well as in the emotional tone, which prevails in each of the two pieces. The tone of Mr. Warren's essay is unimpassioned, and his criticism is so shrewd that even today it has not been convincingly refuted. Moreover, Mr. Warren's appraisal of Wolfe's defects as a novelist has the added value of being representative of the critical position of those people who even by 1935 were becoming known as the New Critics.

The performance of Mr. DeVoto is an entirely different matter, for despite the pertinence of some of his criticism, an almost irresponsibly malicious spirit pervades his review from beginning to end. The reader finishes the final paragraph with the uncomfortable feeling that Mr. DeVoto's governing aim in writing his review was not merely to assess

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

and comment on Wolfe's failure as a novelist, but instead to use the embarrassing implications of the editorial relationship with Perkins to discredit Wolfe as much as possible in the imagination of the public. If this were Mr. DeVoto's intention, he succeeded beyond his own ambitious dreams, for it was not long after the appearance of this review that it became a commonplace with literary people to accuse Wolfe of being an author only through the permissive grace of his editor at Scribner's. The attack upon Wolfe, in other words, has shifted from the apparent absence of meaningful form in his fiction to his peculiar methods of creation, and as Betty Thompson has remarked: "the part of the Wolfe legend which deals with his methods of creation is the most enormously magnified of all."¹

The most recent of these vindictive attacks upon Wolfe's methods of creation was written by Malcolm Cowley and appeared in the November, 1957, issue of The Atlantic. This article, a lineal descendant of the DeVoto piece, is also weakened by the patronizing viewpoint of its author. At the same time, since it provides a compendium of most of the popular notions advanced to explain Wolfe's failure as a novelist, the article will now be examined in some detail.

Mr. Cowley admits that Wolfe had certain unmistakable gifts as a writer, but despite these gifts, such as his

¹Betty Thompson, p. 307.

demonstrated ability to create an effective episode, he failed as a novelist simply because "he was incapable of solving the larger problem of form"¹ in his fiction. By the time of Mr. Cowley's review, this particular criticism had become commonplace, as well as the critic's conclusion that Wolfe's inability to solve "the problem of changing flow into form"² was the natural consequence of his failure to master a professional method of composition. Mr. Cowley then asserts that Wolfe, even until his death, remained less a professional novelist than an amateur writing man--creating anywhere, anytime, and with no specific artistic goal in mind other than to fill as many thousands of sheets of paper as rapidly as he could with his immense scrawl until the flow of words was ended by complete exhaustion on the part of the writer:

He was not so much an author of books as a member of that much less familiar species, the writing man, homo scribens. His life was spent in conjugating a single verb in various tenses--scribam, scripsi, scriptum est--with the result that his working habits and problems are even more interesting to study than the works themselves.³

The low state to which Wolfe's reputation as a novelist has fallen at the present time is borne out by Mr. Cowley's almost casual assertion that Wolfe's "working habits and problems are even more interesting to study than the works

¹Malcolm Cowley, "Thomas Wolfe," The Atlantic Monthly, CC (November, 1957), 206.

²Ibid., p. 204. ³Ibid., p. 202.

themselves."¹ Perhaps for this reason, despite his expressed interest in Wolfe's working habits, Mr. Cowley felt under no obligation to study these habits as the word study is ordinarily employed. In other words, in Mr. Cowley's article the description of Wolfe's methods of creation suggests no really serious effort on the part of the critic to separate the apocryphal from the true. Instead, it is largely a rehash of the all-too-familiar legend that early grew up around Wolfe as a talented but wildly undisciplined romantic writer. Equally questionable is Mr. Cowley's inclination to generalize from those parts of the legend which either were exaggerated to begin with or which lost their relevance as Wolfe matured. All of this suggests that the documentation in Mr. Cowley's article is frequently of too dubious a nature to prove the connection he wishes to establish between Wolfe's creative methods and his failure as a novelist:

Most of Wolfe's faults as a writer were closely and fraternally connected with his virtues; both resulted from his method of composition.²

Mr. Cowley begins his study of Wolfe's working habits by reviewing that part of the legend connected with his early days in New York when he was writing Look Homeward, Angel. Mr. Cowley tells how Wolfe did most of his composing at that time in enormous ledgers, one of which would be opened on top of the icebox in his apartment, "so that he

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 206.

stood at his work like a factory hand."¹ After the publication of his first novel, Wolfe abandoned the icebox in favor of a straight-backed chair and table, but when he was working in a sitting position, he still "wrote at top speed, never hesitating for a word, as though he were taking dictation."² When he had finished a sheet of manuscript, about ninety of his pencilled words filling a page, he would shove it to the floor without taking the time even to number it, much less to check back over what he had written. Later he would pick up these sheets from the floor, assemble them into a bundle, and stow the bundle in a large wooden packing case in one corner of his room.

This method of spontaneous creation, according to Mr. Cowley, was never appreciably altered by Wolfe, and since obviously it had so little connection with the author's critical intelligence, Wolfe's most urgent problem as a writer was literally how to maintain an unbroken flow of words: once he had worked himself into the proper state of creative euphoria to get the flow started originally:

Before the flow could be established he would go through weeks or months of self-torture, walking the streets of Brooklyn at night, fleeing to Europe, staying drunk for days on end. Once the flow started, it might continue for months, during which his pencil sprayed out words like water from a hose.³

Mr. Cowley does admit that revision had a place in Wolfe's method of creation, but it was "not the usual sort

¹Ibid., p. 202. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

of revision that consists in making interlinear changes, then having the draft retyped."¹ Quite the contrary, for when Wolfe was dissatisfied with something he had written, he put aside the original draft, waited for his creative flow to begin anew, and then wrote a completely different version. In the second version, moreover, he often included a variety of additional details, characters, and even incidents, "so that his rewritten manuscripts were longer--often several times longer--than the first drafts."² Mr. Cowley's conclusion is that such an undisciplined method of composition could scarcely be expected to produce a finished novel with a carefully worked-out structure, much less one with an esthetically significant form. Little wonder then that in the fourth year after the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, the romantic Wolfe, despite having written by his own estimate over a million words for his new book, had to be rescued by his publishing editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins:

It was Perkins who saved him, by suggesting how he might make a novel out of one segment of the material, saving the rest for other books. Even then almost half the segment had to be pared away before Of Time and the River was published in 912 pages.³

Mr. Cowley has attacked Wolfe's writing habits because it is his conviction that all good writers approach creation in pretty much the same way, and the method they use is a dialectical one which involves the constant exercise of their critical faculties:

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 206.

The usual author is two persons or personalities working in partnership. One of them says the words to himself, then writes them down; the other listens to the words, or reads them, and then silently exclaims, 'This is good, this is what you wanted to say, but this! Can't you say it again and say it better?' A result of the dialogue between the writer and the reader within is that the usual manuscript moves ahead spasmodically--a sentence or two, a pause while another sentence is phrased and rejected and rephrased, then a rapidly written paragraph, then another pause while reader and writer argue silently (or even aloud) about what has been said, then the sound of a page crumpled and dropped into the wastebasket, then a day's interval, perhaps, then another page that goes better . . .¹

Since obviously this was not Wolfe's method of creation, Mr. Cowley reasons that "he chose to be only half of an author";² and Mr. Cowley uses the word chose deliberately, for he believes that Wolfe remained incomplete as an author largely as a matter of perverse principle. The critic mentions that if one talked about books with Wolfe for ten minutes, one realized that he was quite discriminating and perceptive about what he had read. He failed to apply his critical intelligence to his own work, "not through inability to do so, as he sometimes said, but chiefly as a matter of policy."³ The disturbing question to Mr. Cowley is why any writer, especially one as undeniably talented as Wolfe, should have persisted in suppressing the critical side of his nature in his own creation.

Mr. Cowley answers this question by shifting his attack from Wolfe the unsuccessful novelist to Wolfe the emotionally disturbed man. The critic mentions Wolfe's immaturity with

¹Ibid., p. 208. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 206.

which he was unable to cope intelligently since it provided the informing theme for his fiction. Coupled with this immaturity was his refusal to profit from the experience or wisdom of others, as if once he abandoned the compulsion to experience personally everything on earth, he also would have to sacrifice necessarily his romantic conception of his own uniqueness. Mr. Cowley observes that Wolfe's strenuous attempt to know everything first-hand, and then to discover the words to fit his knowledge, resulted, ironically, in his being cheated of some of the richest experiences in life. In fact, the critic asserts that Wolfe's personal history, instead of affirming those parts of the myth connected with his tremendous gusto for living, reveals a singularly deprived, unhappy individual.

Mr. Cowley mentions that Wolfe, from the time he was eight years old, never had a real home, and that he died without having "owned so much as a square foot of the earth he loved (even his grave is in a family plot)."¹ In addition, throughout most of his adult life, Wolfe was emotionally rootless and insecure, the kind of person, according to our critic, who was ignorant even of such simple pastoral pleasures as planting a tree or cultivating a garden in the spring. Wolfe never married, never had any children, and after leaving Asheville to teach at New York University, except for the period of his love affair with Aline Bernstein,

¹Ibid., p. 210.

lived by himself in some rented room or apartment in a large city. Mr. Cowley admits that despite Wolfe's habitual isolation in a city, he did seem to enjoy good company, but only at the most infrequent intervals since he also cultivated the belief that social contacts interfered with his creation. Most of his time he preferred to spend "alone in dingy lodgings or roaming the streets at night."¹

The critic feels that Wolfe's need to live by himself was the result of strong neurotic forces at work inside his personality. These forces were further distorted by the narrowness of his interests, for Wolfe "played no games, took part in no sports, displayed no social accomplishments."² He was indifferent apparently to good music, didn't much enjoy art, stopped going to the theatre after he had broken with Mrs. Bernstein, and probably did very little reading after leaving Harvard. Actually his few amusements consisted of eating, drinking, traveling, making love, and conversation, listed in their order of importance. Wolfe had such a paucity of interests, again according to Mr. Cowley, simply because his "real avocation was the physical act of writing,"³ together with his compulsive need to prepare himself temperamentally for the act.

Mr. Cowley believes that Wolfe paid a heavy price by choosing to remain the victim of such a highly unstable method of creation, in which the method itself, divorced as it

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

was from any carefully conceived artistic goal, served chiefly as a neurotic substitute to compensate the author for his deeply rooted feelings of insecurity. Part of the price was physical, for the hours of steady writing and sleepless nights, relieved periodically by the most violent drinking sprees, inexorably meant that Wolfe "was drawing sight drafts against his constitution without stopping to ask whether there was still a credit balance."¹ Still, the heaviest part of the price was mental rather than physical, and it is Mr. Cowley's opinion that the time is at hand for the critics to bring into the open the ugly truth that Wolfe was a sick man mentally for several years before he died:

But there was also a price in mental health that most of his critics have been too considerate to mention, even long after his death. His alternating moods of exuberance and despair became more extreme; especially the periods of despair were longer and deeper. Many physicians would say that in his last² years he was a victim of manic-depressive psychosis.

Mr. Cowley states that a manic-depressive psychosis is usually accompanied by paranoid symptoms in the mentally disturbed person, such as "ideas of reference and delusions of persecution and grandeur."³ Then he proceeds to list a few instances of Wolfe's paranoia, supported by quotations from the writer's correspondence. He uses a short quotation from a letter written by Wolfe to Perkins in January, 1937, to prove that Wolfe's delusions of persecution by this time were such that "he thought the whole literary world was

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

leagued in conspiracy to keep him from working."¹ Next Mr. Cowley mentions Wolfe's celebrated farewell letter to Perkins, which was published as the final section of You Can't Go Home Again. Although the critic admits that there is a "sustained eloquence" in the prose of this piece, at the same time he believes that "in places it was a crazy man's letter."² In one place Wolfe referred to himself as "a righteous man, and few people know it because there are few righteous people in the world."³ Mr. Cowley focuses his attention on this quotation as proof of the "delusions of righteousness" which Wolfe used to excuse his anti-social behavior near the close of his life:

There are many with delusions of righteousness, which they use as an excuse for being unjust to others. Wolfe was becoming one of them, as he must have realized in part of his mind--the Dr. Jekyll part, as he sometimes called it. At this point, as at some others, he was losing touch with reality.⁴

Wolfe wrote a letter to his sister Mabel in May, 1929, only a few months before the publication of Look Homeward, Angel. At this time Wolfe had every reason to be in excellent spirits, and we feel that there is nothing revealed in this particular letter to indicate otherwise. Actually the tone of the final paragraphs in the letter is somewhat bantering, and this includes Wolfe's observation that because of his queer ideas, such as not wanting to own or drive an automobile, he sometimes felt, as he contrasted himself with the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 212. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

majority of his fellow Americans, "like the only sane person on a stroll through a madhouse: all the maniacs are nudging one another and saying: 'See that guy? He's crazy!'"¹ In the concluding paragraph of the letter, after sending his love to the various members of his family and requesting that they write when they had time, Wolfe, still apparently in a joshing mood, gave this bit of advice to his sister about losing her mind:

Don't be afraid of going crazy--I've been there several times and it's not at all bad. If people get too much for you take a long ride on the train.²

Mr. Cowley takes this quotation at its face value and uses it, stripped of the final sentence about the train ride, as evidence that the "craziness" to which Wolfe referred "was indeed an almost normal state for a romantic artist forcing himself, provoking himself, beyond the natural limits of his emotions."³ The critic then mentions that it had all started so innocently with Wolfe: "so boyishly and admirably with his gift for feeling joys and sorrows more deeply than others."⁴ Wolfe early had adjusted his writing habits to exploit his romantic sensibility, but since years later he still retained these same habits which were to prevent his ever succeeding as a novelist, some kind of collapse on his part was inevitable. For this reason, Mr. Cowley is convinced that not only Wolfe's failure as an artist, but

¹Nowell, p. 180. ²Ibid. ³Cowley, p. 212. ⁴Ibid.

his eventual psychosis as well (assuming that he degenerated into a psychotic personality near the close of his life), was the direct result of his refusal to abandon his highly subjective methods of creation:

His psychosis, if we call it that, was not organic or toxic, nor was it functional in the usual sense of being an illness due to unsolved emotional conflicts. Like the oversized wart on the middle finger of his right hand, it was a scar,¹ he had earned in combat, a professional deformation.

We are not a psychiatrist, and this dissertation was not designed as an attempt either to refute or substantiate Mr. Cowley's charges that Wolfe was mentally deranged before he died and that his psychosis stemmed from his failure to master a professional method of creation. It is our non-professional opinion, nevertheless, that Mr. Cowley's charges are exaggerated, and to some extent, irresponsible. This opinion is based on our own close study of Wolfe's correspondence and fiction. As a result of this study, we do not believe that Wolfe's creative method as he grew older was identical with the romantic legend of his early years which Mr. Cowley has perpetuated.

This dissertation was designed to interpret the gradual change from Wolfe the artist with a psychological vision of life in Look Homeward, Angel, to Wolfe the artist with an increasingly Christian awareness of evil in You Can't Go Home Again. Since the first and last novels are central to an

¹Ibid.

understanding of this change, these are the two books which have been most carefully examined in the dissertation. Because of limitations of space, the pertinent material with regard to this change in Wolfe's second and third novels, Of Time and the River and The Web and the Rock, has been somewhat inadequately summarized. In addition, in the dissertation there are two chapters in which Wolfe, speaking through his published correspondence, is given the opportunity to defend both the form of his fiction and his autobiographical method, as well as two general chapters dealing with Wolfe's role as a psychological and archetypal novelist.

Most of the documentation for the dissertation has been taken from the two published collections of the author's correspondence, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother and The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, together with his published fiction, chiefly because so little reliable information is available any place else. Wherever this information does exist, it has been utilized insofar as practicable.

CHAPTER II

WOLFE ON THE FORM OF HIS FICTION

You say that 'Madame Bovary' becomes eternal while Zola already rocks with age. Well this may be true--but if it is true isn't it true because 'Madame Bovary' may be a great book and those that Zola wrote may not be great ones? Wouldn't it also be true to say that 'Don Quixote,' or 'Pickwick' or 'Tristram Shandy' 'becomes eternal' while already Mr. Galsworthy 'rocks with age'? I think it is true to say this and it doesn't leave much to your argument, does it? For your argument is based simply upon one way, upon one method instead of another. And have you ever noticed how often it turns out that what a man is really doing is simply rationalizing his own way of doing something, the way he has to do it, the way given him by his talent and his nature, into the only inevitable and right way of doing everything--a sort of classic and eternal art form handed down by Apollo from Olympus without which and beyond which there is nothing? Now you have your way of doing something and I have mine; there are a lot of ways, but you are honestly mistaken in thinking there is a 'way.'
(Letter from Thomas Wolfe to F. Scott Fitzgerald, July 26, 1937)¹

It has not been the practice of many great novelists to write critical commentaries on the significance of their fiction. Apparently most writers feel that if they have been unsuccessful in communicating what they had to say in their novels, it would be pointless to turn to the essay in the attempt to present that meaning discursively. Thomas Wolfe seems to have had this attitude with regard to his

¹Nowell, p. 643.

own creation, although he did comment on its meaning in some of his letters. The purpose of the present chapter is to examine these comments, not as definitive statements by their author about the form of his fiction, but rather as suggestive leads pointing to the more completely realized form in the novels themselves.¹

A pertinent introduction to the important theme of isolation in Wolfe's fiction can be made from the letter he wrote to his sister Mabel Wolfe Wheaton (June 5, 1933). In this letter he informed his sister that he believed he had discovered the true meaning of loneliness when he was a child and had "known about it ever since."² This knowledge of loneliness had been the result of thoughtless cruelty on the part of the adults in his family, who, he supposed, like most grown-up people "mean well by children but are often cruel because of something insensitive or cruel in their own natures which they cannot help."³ Because the "child is small and helpless and has no defense,"⁴ they impress upon him "that he is selfish, unnatural and inferior to the other members

¹The majority of contemporary critics who believe that Wolfe failed as a novelist admit that they are unable to distinguish any meaningful form within the autobiographical limits of the world of re-created memory which they feel comprises the imaginative extent of his creation. At the same time, many of these critics admit that Look Homeward, Angel is the least formless of Wolfe's novels, not because its author was consciously a superior artist at the beginning of his writing career, but principally because the subjective experience which supplied the content for this novel had a "natural unity."

²Nowell, p. 370. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 371.

of the family."¹ The child interprets this unthinking cruelty as rejection, and it provides the psychological foundation for his strong desire "to live alone . . . and if possible to get far, far away from the people who have told him how much better they are than he is."² Wolfe added that once this desire for loneliness has been created in a boy, it grows on him "from year to year and he wanders across the face of the earth and has no home and is an exile, and he is never able to break out of the prison of his own loneliness again, no matter how much he wants to."³

According to statements in his letters, Wolfe wrote Look Homeward, Angel to represent and interpret the loneliness which makes most people strangers to one another, and especially to trace the growth of the desire for isolation in a romantic, sensitive young boy. In a letter to his mother (November 6, 1929) Wolfe commented that the theme of his first book was stated on the opening page:

it says that we are born alone, and die alone, and that we are strangers to one another, and never come to know one another. That it is not written about people in Asheville--it is written about people everywhere, North, South, East, and West.⁴

Two months later Wolfe made a similar statement in a letter to his sister Mabel (January 5, 1930), remarking that what Look Homeward, Angel "says in the first paragraph and what

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

⁴John Skally Terry (ed.), Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 189.

it continues to say on every page to the end is that men are strangers, that they are lonely and forsaken, that they are in exile on this earth, that they are born, live, and die alone."¹

The first explicit reference in Wolfe's correspondence to the theme of his first novel was made in a letter from the author to Mrs. Margaret Roberts (July 19, 1926), composed shortly after he had begun work on the manuscript which finally became Look Homeward, Angel. At the time of this letter Wolfe planned to call his book "The Building of a Wall," with the title suggesting the important theme of the protagonist's isolation, together with his efforts as a boy and young man to erect a narcissistic wall to safeguard the creative side of his personality:

I am telling the story of a powerful creative element trying to work its way toward an essential isolation: a creative solitude; a secret life--its fierce struggles to wall this part of its life away from birth, first the public and savage glare of an unbalanced, nervous, brawling family group; later against school, society, all the barbarous invasion of the world. In a way the book marks a progression toward freedom; in a way toward bondage.²

The freedom Wolfe referred to in the last sentence of the quotation obviously represented the protagonist's eventual physical escape from his family and home town. The bondage, on the other hand, apparently was connected with the ravaging effects of his undisciplined romantic narcissism after

¹Nowell, p. 371. ²Ibid., p. 111.

he had left home.¹

The subordinate theme in the novel, providing a psychological illumination of the major theme of narcissistic isolation, was to be the unresolved conflict between the protagonist's parents, symbolically interpreted on the basis of each parent's attitude toward the possession of property. The father would have "an inbred, and also an instinctive, terror and hatred of property,"² whereas the mother would feel "a mounting lust for ownership that finally is tinged with mania."³ The protagonist, along with his brothers and sisters, would be a victim of the conjugal warfare of his parents: "as desperate and bitter . . . a contest between two people as you ever knew."⁴

In another letter to Mrs. Roberts composed about a year later (early June, 1927), Wolfe suggested that his interest in the theme of isolation definitely was to include all of the characters in his book, and not just his protagonist as the young artist in an unsympathetic environment. Moreover, by this time Wolfe was beginning to realize consciously that man's deepest sense of spiritual isolation was somehow connected with his feelings of "lost innocence." For this reason, he had decided to call his novel "Alone, Alone,"⁵ since the "idea that broods over it, and in it, and behind it is: that we are all strangers upon this earth we walk on--that

¹In Of Time and the River this narcissism equals "fury."

²Nowell, p. 112. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid., p. 122.

naked and alone do we come into life and alone, a stranger each to each, we live upon it."¹ By the time Wolfe had finished writing his manuscript (late March, 1928), he had changed the title to "O, Lost," which seemed more in keeping with the treatment in the individual sections of the controlling theme of isolation as affected by the protagonist's emotional and spiritual nostalgia for his lost innocence. The change to "Look Homeward, Angel," with the final selection of a title placing even greater emphasis on lost innocence as an important supporting theme, did not take place until after Wolfe had signed his contract with Scribner's in January, 1929.

Wolfe sent the manuscript "O, Lost" to various publishers in the spring of 1928 along with an accompanying letter. In this "Note for the Publisher's Reader" (written in late March, 1928), he explained that his manuscript might seem to "be lacking in plot but it is not lacking in plan."² This plan, "rigid and densely woven,"³ consisted of two central movements, an outward one and a downward movement. The outward movement dealt with the struggles of his protagonist as "a child, a boy, and a youth for release, freedom, and loneliness in new lands."⁴ This outward movement in the protagonist's experience was "duplicated by a series of widening concentric circles, three of which are represented by

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 129. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

the three parts of the book."¹ In the published novel the first of these circles ended when the protagonist reached puberty; the second when he left home to attend college; and the third when he was preparing to make a final leave-taking from home at the end of the book.

The downward movement was connected with Wolfe's interest in revealing the truth beneath the "visible outer" surface of the lives of the other members in the protagonist's family. The downward movement, in other words, through the author's "constant excavation into the buried life"² of these people, provided the psychological illumination necessary for the reader to understand the significance of the incidents that took place in the outward movement. Also since the book covered the life of the protagonist's family "intensively for a period of twenty years, and in rapid summary for fifty years,"³ the downward movement had the symbolic function of illustrating "the cyclic curve of a family's life--genesis, union, decay, and dissolution."⁴

Wolfe admitted that the family in the book was obviously patterned after his own, but he denied that his artistic representation of the hidden lives of these people had been chiefly the result of his retentive memory. It was true that much of this personal material had been stored in his memory, but before it emerged in his writing, it had first

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

been "completely digested"¹ in his imagination, then re-interpreted creatively. After the personal material had been through this process, Wolfe believed that it was the original autobiographical fact in name only; actually it was the fact given a new dimension of meaning according to its role in "a fiction which telescopes, condenses, and objectifies all the random or incompleated gestures of life."² Moreover, throughout this process it had been his artistic intention to give his creation a "universal meaning"³ based upon what appeared to unite his characters "to the whole family of the earth."⁴ Wolfe ended the letter to the "Publisher's Reader" by commenting that he did not know whether or not he had realized his intention successfully in the manuscript he was submitting, although he did believe that what he had written "presents a strange and deep picture of American life--one that I have never seen elsewhere; and that I may have some hope of publication."⁵

After Wolfe's manuscript had been accepted by Scribner's and published as Look Homeward, Angel, the author wrote Mrs. Roberts (January 12, 1929) that he realized that in his book he had dredged "up from the inwards of people, pain, terror, cruelty, lust, ugliness, as well, I think, as beauty, tenderness, mercy."⁶ He wanted his former teacher to know,

¹Ibid., p. 130. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 233.

⁴Ibid., p. 346. ⁵Ibid., p. 131. ⁶Ibid., p. 171.

however, that the creation of this material had not been maliciously inspired, for he had written most of the book literally "in a white heat, simply and passionately, with no idea of being either ugly, obscene, tender, cruel, beautiful, or anything else--only of saying what I had to say because I had to."¹ At this time, when he was engaged in the actual writing, his conscience and his artistic daemon had been the same: "The only morality I had was in me; the only master I had was in me and stronger than me."²

In a previous letter to Mrs. Roberts (August 11, 1929), Wolfe had explained that "the creative spirit hates pain more, perhaps, than it does anything else on earth, and it is not likely it should try to inflict on other people what it loathes itself."³ When the novelist who is also a serious artist begins to write, however, his most important concern "is to give his creation life, form, beauty. This dominates him, and it is doubtful if he thinks very much of the effect his work will have on given persons."⁴ For this reason, Wolfe still believed that whatever bitterness his first novel contained was directed generally at life rather than specifically at individuals in his home town whom he had wished to injure:

But I do believe sincerely, Mrs. Roberts, that any bitterness in my book--and I would not deny that there is bitterness in it--is directed not against people or against living, but against the fundamental structure of

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 198. ⁴Ibid.

life, which seems to me, or at least seemed to me when I wrote the book, cruel and wastefully tragic. I may be wrong in that¹ feeling, but at any rate, it was deep-seated and real.

Wolfe concluded this particular letter by stressing that as an artist he aspired to be faithful to only one obligation: "I must create my vision of life as I see it."²

In Look Homeward, Angel Wolfe used the setting of a Victorian puritan family in small town America, dominated emotionally by the unrelenting conflict between the father and mother, to demonstrate how the narcissistic desire for isolation was formed in their children, especially in their youngest boy. In his second novel, according to the letter of application which Wolfe wrote for a Guggenheim Fellowship (December 16, 1929), he planned to investigate the theme of romantic exile as a continuation of the earlier theme of narcissistic isolation:

My new novel will be ready in the Spring or Autumn of 1931. Its title is 'The October Fair.' I cannot outline its plan and purpose so exactly as a scientist could his course of study: the book has a great many things in it but its dominant theme is again related to the theme of the first: it tries to find out why Americans are a nomad race (as this writer believes); why they are touched with a powerful homesickness wherever they go, both at home and abroad; why thousands of young men, like this writer, have prowled over Europe, looking for a door, a happy land, a home, seeking for something they have lost, perhaps racial and forgotten; and why they return here; or if they do not, carry on them the mark of exile and obscure longing.³

If in Look Homeward, Angel Wolfe had succeeded in revealing the distorting influence which Gant and Eliza, as

¹Ibid., p. 220. ²Ibid., p. 221. ³Ibid., p. 212.

ego-centric parents involved in a bitter, internecine struggle for supremacy, had exerted over the lives of all their children, producing in Eugene Gant especially deep-seated feelings of rejection coupled with an increasing desire to isolate himself from his family, in the second novel the author necessarily had to make use of time or memory to represent the damaging effects of that parental influence in the emotional life of his protagonist after he had left home. In addition, since the strong personalities of Gant and Eliza could not be separated from the fact that Gant was a man and Eliza was a woman, in his new book Wolfe would have to deal with the more general implications of a masculine and feminine dualism grounded in each individual's attitudes as a child toward his parents.

When Wolfe was in Europe in 1930, he was attempting to discover an adequate form to communicate his psychological interpretation of the restlessness and haunting sense of exile of the typical American. In a letter to John Hall Wheelock (June 24, 1930) Wolfe wrote that during the last few months he believed that finally he had begun to understand something about "our great woe and sickness as a people . . . because that woe is in me--is rooted in myself."¹ If the creative theory were valid that the artist "ought to see in what has happened to himself the elements of the universal

¹Ibid., p. 234.

experience,"¹ Wolfe was now convinced that in his next book, on the level of psychological myth, he could serve as a kind of "voice for the experience of the race."² This was the reason he had decided to employ mythical names and figures to support the general meanings in his new work.

The section which Wolfe was writing at that particular time was to be called Antaeus, and it would include an artistic interpretation of "wandering and the earth again" as the embracing dualism within which the emotional and spiritual experience of man takes place:

It begins 'Of wandering forever and the earth again'--and by God, Jack, I believe I've 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. In Antaeus, in a dozen short scenes, told in their own language, we see people of all sorts constantly in movement, going somewhere, haunted by it--and by God, Jack, it's the truth about them--I saw it as a child, I've seen it ever since, I see it here in their poor damned haunted eyes.³

Moreover, in Wolfe's view of this dualism, the compulsion to wander, as a psychological expression of the eternal flux behind all living, was connected with the masculine principle, while "amid all this you get the thing that does not change, the fixed principle, the female principle--the earth again."⁴

In his next letter to Maxwell Perkins (July 1, 1930) Wolfe connected this psychological dualism with the theme of "lost innocence," which had been given such an important symbolic treatment in the final chapter of Look Homeward, Angel.

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 235.

Wolfe explained to Perkins that his new book dealt with "two of the profoundest impulses in man--Wordsworth, in one of his poems, 'To a Skylark,' I think, calls it 'heaven and home,' and I called it in the first line of my book, 'Of wandering forever and the earth again.'¹ Wolfe then attempted to define his conception of this controlling dualism:

By 'the earth again' I mean simply the everlasting earth, a home, a place for the heart to come to, an earthly mortal love, the love of a woman, who, it seems to me belongs to the earth and is a force opposed to that other great force that makes men wander, that makes them search, that makes them lonely, and that makes them both hate and love their loneliness. You may ask what all this has to do with America--it is true it has to do with the whole universe--but it is as true of the enormous and lonely land that we inhabit as any land I know of, and more so, it seems to me.²

In his new fiction the river was supposed to be a symbol for this ceaseless movement in life, coupled with man's desire to leave home and wander.³ The section which Wolfe was writing at that time contained a husband and wife living close to a river which had flooded. In this scene the man's love for the river was to be contrasted with the wife's hatred of it:

You understand that the river is in her brain, in her thought, in her speech; and at the very end, lying in her tent at night while a new house is being built where the old one was (for he refuses to go up on high ground back beyond the river where nothing moves) she hears him waken beside her--he thinks she is asleep--she now realizes he is listening to the river, to the whistles of the boats upon the river, that he wants to be out

¹Ibid., p. 239. ²Ibid.

³In Of Time and the River the river is also a pastoral symbol of the power in nature as well as an archetypal symbol of the masculine vitality of the father.

there upon the river, that he could go floating on forever down the river. And she hates the river, but all of its sounds are in her brain, she cannot escape it.¹

Wolfe planned to fit the symbolic meaning of this particular scene² into a lyrical context to show its connection with the specific emotional experience of his protagonist: "All of my life is flowing like the river, all of my life is passing like the river, I think and dream and talk just like the river as it goes by me, by me, by me, to the sea."³

In another letter to Perkins, composed about two weeks later (July 17, 1930), Wolfe gave a more detailed explanation of the way he regarded the masculine and feminine dualism. He commenced by referring to the previous letter in which he had stated "that the book begins with 'of wandering forever and the earth again,'"⁴ and that these opposing elements seemed to him "to be fundamental in people."⁵ Wolfe admitted that he had arrived at this view by generalizing from his own experience, since his own desires had always seemed to be divided "between a hunger for isolation, for getting away, for seeking new lands--and a desire for home, for permanence, for a piece of this earth fenced in and lived on and private

¹Ibid., p. 239.

²Elizabeth Nowell has noted that this scene became quite long and was finally eliminated from Of Time and the River. The words "goes by me, by me, by me, to the sea," however, became "flows by us, by us, by us, to the sea," and this refrain was used throughout the book, as on pages 333, 510, 860.

³Nowell, p. 239. ⁴Ibid., p. 241. ⁵Ibid.

to oneself, and for a person or persons to love and possess."¹ Since his arrival in Europe, he had become convinced that feelings similar to his own were "rooted in most people,"² and that "the desire for wandering is more common to men, and for fixity and a piece of the earth to women."³ Wolfe commented that he knew that Perkins had been puzzled whenever this subject had come up between them previously, but in this letter he hoped to provide his editor with "a key":

I think you have sometimes been puzzled when I have talked to you about parts of this book--about the train as it thunders through the dark, and about the love for another person--to see how they could be reconciled or fit into the general scheme of a story; but I think you can get some idea of it now: the great train pounding at the rails is rushing across the everlasting and silent earth--and here the two ideas of wandering and eternal repose--and the characters on the train, and on the land, again illustrate this.⁴ Also, the love theme, the male and female love, represent this again:⁵ please do not think I am hammering this in the book, I let it speak for itself--I am giving you a kind of key.⁶

Wolfe mentioned that the first section of his book, Antaeus, would contain around twenty chapters, most of them connected with the masculine principle, "the idea of eternal movement, of wandering."⁷ Interspersed among these chapters, however, would be a half dozen "concerned with the female

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

⁴See the opening section of Of Time and the River, 25-27.

⁵See the love affair between Esther Jack and George Webber in the second half of The Web and the Rock.

⁶Nowell, pp. 241-42. ⁷Ibid., p. 243.

thing: the idea of the earth, fructification, and repose."¹ The chapters dealing with the "female thing" were planned to be "almost entirely about women and told in the language of women: the mother, the mistress, and the child--sometimes all included in one person, sometimes found separately in different women."² In addition, these stories were connected with the earth in that they contained, besides their feminine point of view, the pastoral "idea of redoubling and renewing our strength by contact with the earth."³ This represented one side of the psychological dualism in Wolfe's new fiction--the pastoral return to the earth as a kind of symbolic return to a forgiving mother. The other side of the dualism was the search for the father:

Now I hope you don't get dizzy in all this, or think I am carrying the thing to absurdity: all intense conviction has elements of the fanatic and absurd in it, but they are saved by our beliefs and our passion. Contained in the book like a kernel from the beginning, but unrevealed until much later, is the idea of a man's quest for his father. The idea becomes very early apparent that when a man returns he returns always to the female--he returns (I hope this is not disgusting) to the womb of earthly creation, to the earth itself, to a woman, to fixity. But I dare go so far as to believe that the other pole--the pole of wandering--is not only a masculine thing, but that in some way it represents the quest of a man for his father. I dare mention to you the wandering of Christ upon this earth, the wanderings of Paul, the quests of the Crusaders, the wanderings of the Ancient Mariner who makes his confession to the Wedding Guest--please don't laugh:⁴

¹Ibid. ²In Wolfe's fiction the finest example of this kind of story is "The Web of Earth."

³Nowell, p. 242. ⁴Ibid., p. 244.

Wolfe explained that he was writing this particular letter because he wanted Perkins to realize that his recent creation was not formless but had "a coherent plan and purpose."¹ Moreover, according to his plan, he would attempt to support the governing psychological dualism of his artistic vision by "an extensive use of old myths,"² although he did not come right out and explain this to the reader: "you (Perkins) know already that I am using the Heracles (in my book the City is Heracles) and Antaeus myth; and you know that the lords of fructification and the earth are almost always women: Maya in the Eastern legends, Demeter in the Greek, Ceres in Latin, etc."³

The reader would first be introduced to the psychological dualism as a conflict between the feminine earth and the masculine sea in a chapter called "The Ship":⁴

I tell why they are different: of the sea's eternal movement, and the earth's eternal repose. I tell why men go to sea, and why they have made harbours at the end.⁵

In this chapter the sea, like the great metropolitan city, would also symbolize the threat to modern man of experience viewed as a kind of naturalistic chaos--except that in Wolfe's fiction man triumphed over this chaos, imposed an order of his own creation upon it, through his myth-making abilities:

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 243. ³Ibid., p. 244.

⁴See The Web and the Rock, pp. 297-315.

⁵Nowell, p. 244.

I am proud of that ship and of man who built her, . . . who can face the horror of the ocean and see there in that unending waste the answer to his existence. I insist, by the way, in my book that men are wise, and that we all know we are lost, that we are damned together--and that man's greatness comes in knowing this and then making myths; like soldiers going into battle who will whore and carouse to the last minute, nor have any talk of death and slaughter.¹

Wolfe concluded this letter to Perkins by mentioning that he had also created a different protagonist, to be called David or Monkey Hawke, for his new book.² This protagonist was supposed to be the embodiment of Wolfe's conception of his subjective self: "I have made him out of the inside of me, of what I have always believed the inside was like."³ In addition, the physical appearance of Monkey Hawke would suggest the division in his nature between the beast and the angel, providing, in turn, the basis for a symbolic connection between the masculine and feminine principles of the psychological dualism with the spiritual dualism between good and evil existing in all people:

He is about five feet nine, with the long arms and the prowl of an ape, and a little angel in his face. He is part beast, part spirit--a mixture of the ape and angel. There is a touch of monster in him.⁴

Wolfe returned to the subject of Monkey Hawke and man's spiritual dualism in another letter to Perkins (December 9,

¹Ibid., p. 245.

²Monkey Hawke eventually became Monk Webber of The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again.

³Nowell, p. 245. ⁴Ibid.

1930) in which he explained that the supporting quotation for the title of his new book would be taken from the Bible to suggest the important theme of spiritual dualism: "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?"¹ In the book itself the spiritual dualism would include the psychological dualism as well as the protagonist's search for the father and his pastoral returns, whenever discouraged or defeated, to the feminine principle.

With this overall pattern in his imagination, Wolfe symbolically had envisioned the protagonist's father as "Poseidon, who is the Sea, eternal wandering, eternal change, eternal movement--but who also is a real person (never called Poseidon, of course)."² In the same symbolic fashion, his mother is the earth, variously referred to as "Gaea, Helen, or Demeter--but these things are never told you and the story itself is direct and simple, given shape by the legend."³ The legend, as previously indicated, would be based on the protagonist's emotional and spiritual search for his father, and would include his many deviational returns for strength to the earth (the symbol of the feminine principle) as a pastoral mother:

He contendeth with all who seek to pass him by, he searcheth alway for his father, he crieth out: 'Art thou my father? Is it thou?' and he wrestleth with that man,

¹This was used on the title page of Of Time and the River.

²Nowell, p. 279. ³Ibid.

and he riseth from each fall with strength redoubled, for his strength cometh out of the earth, which is his mother. Then cometh against him Heracles (the City) who contendeth with him, who discovereth the secret of his strength, who lifteth him from the earth whence he might ariseth, and subdueth him. But from afar now, in his agony, he heareth the sound of his father's foot: he will be saved for his father cometh!¹

In the next paragraph of the letter Wolfe advised Perkins not to get alarmed into thinking that the material in the book would resemble a Greek myth, for the legend which had just been summarized represented the book's symbolic structure, not its literal content. This content would remain chiefly contemporary, much like that in Look Homeward, Angel: "All of this is never mentioned once the story gets under way, but it is a magnificent fable, and I have soaked myself in it for over a year now: it says what I want to say, and it gives the most magnificent plot and unity to my book."²

Earlier in this chapter the statement was made that if Wolfe expected to make a further examination of the theme of isolation in his new fiction, it was almost inevitable that he develop an interest in memory or time. In other words, if his protagonist's romantic sense of exile as a young man were still affected by residual feelings stemming from an involvement at home with the contrasting personalities of his bitterly warring parents, the author had to turn to memory to interpret, and certainly to represent in a contemporary setting, the continuing influence of that emotional legacy

¹Ibid., p. 278. ²Ibid., p. 279.

after his protagonist had finally effected a physical separation from his father and mother. In addition, the protagonist's divided attitude toward his parents was obviously connected with the embracing psychological dualism whose thematic significance Wolfe recently had been attempting to explain to his editor.

Judging from his letters, Wolfe's interest in time gradually increased during the autumn and winter of the year he spent in Europe. He wrote to Perkins (October, 1930) that after anyone had been alone for an extended period, "time begins to make an unreal sound, and all the events of your life, past and present, are telescoped: you wake in the morning in a foreign land thinking of home, and at night in your sleep you hear voices of people you knew years ago, or sounds of the streets in America."¹ In this statement Wolfe appears to have meant that past time belongs to a world in which both logical and chronological continuity have little real meaning. For this reason, a seemingly unimportant incident which took place in the distant past may remain more vivid in one's memory, and even seem considerably more significant, than a happening from the immediate past which unquestionably was regarded as much more serious when it occurred.

This type of confusion gave the past an ambiguous

¹Ibid., p. 268.

coloring, and mechanical changes between the different time zones contributed to "this feeling of unreality"¹ so that it was difficult for Wolfe to be absolutely sure of what was past, present, or future. He mentioned that as he was writing to Perkins, it was ten o'clock at night in London, yet "for a moment I think of what you may be doing at the same time at ten o'clock, and then I realize it is only five o'clock in New York, and that you are probably at Scribners just before going home."² Equally unsettling was his realization that despite the physical separation of several thousand miles from his editor and the other people at Scribners, he did not feel that there was any psychological separation: "I think all of you are in my mind like a sack of living radium deposit, whether I am consciously thinking of you or not."³

Wolfe wrote three letters to Perkins in December, 1930. In the first letter (December 9, 1930) he commented that in his new fiction he hoped to communicate "the idea of time, the lost and forgotten moments of people's lives, the strange brown light of old time."⁴ Curiously enough, the time which seemed most "lost" emotionally, and which connected this interest with the search of Wolfe's protagonist for his father, was the time of Gant's manhood: "America, say, in 1893: photographs of people coming across Brooklyn Bridge, the ships of the Hamburg American Packet Co., baseball players

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 279.

with moustaches, men coming home to lunch at noon in small towns, red barns, old circus posters and many other phases of time."¹

Wolfe explained to his editor that since his interest in time seemed to add a new dimension to his previous concern with the constant flux of experience, he was thinking of calling one section of his next book "'Chronos and Rhea' or perhaps simply 'Time and the River'--that means 'Memory and Change.'"² In the next two letters to Perkins (undated December, and December 29, 1930)³ Wolfe emphasized that the material he was creating for his new book was "haunted throughout by the idea of the river--of Time and Change."⁴ Of course, basic to the symbolic structure of the book was still the search for the father--that is, "for an image outside ourselves, for a superior and external wisdom we can appeal (to) and trust"⁵--supplemented concretely by a love affair incorporating the masculine and feminine principles of the psychological dualism:

As well as I can tell you quickly, and in this small space, this is what my book is about: First, it is a story of a man who is looking for his father--this gives it plan and direction, and it also expresses a fundamental human desire. The story of a man's love for a woman is told with the utmost passion and sincerity and sensuousness in one part of it, together with all the phenomena of lust, hunger, jealousy, madness, cruelty, and tenderness--but the idea that the two

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³These two letters were not mailed.

⁴Nowell, p. 282. ⁵Ibid., p. 287.

sexes are from different worlds, different universes, and can never know each other, is implicit; and the father idea--the need for wisdom, strength and confession, with the kinship and companionship of one's own kind and father, hangs over the story all the time. Under this story structure are the ideas of the fixity and eternity of the earth and the brevity of man's life.¹

To the reader familiar with both Wolfe's correspondence and the content of his last three novels, it is plain that none of them agrees in specific detail with what their author imagined the content of his new fiction would be like in these letters written to Perkins in the winter of 1930. For example, instead of experimenting in Of Time and the River with a new protagonist, David Hawke, Wolfe returned to his original protagonist, Eugene Gant, and the consequent form of the published novel was based upon incidents, in one way or another, connected with the experiences of Eugene. Even so, a close inspection of this book reveals that much of the dualistic form mentioned in these early letters to Perkins was retained in individual sections of the novel, even in those parts devoted almost exclusively to the representation of the romantic sensibility of the protagonist.

This is the reason that Wolfe's statements to his English publisher, Frere-Reeves (April 15, 1932) about the importance of the months he spent in Europe after the publication of Look Homeward, Angel seem, in retrospect, to contain a large amount of truth: "I did a terrific amount of

¹Ibid., p. 288.

preparation and preliminary work on that book, and I am sure my time and labor was not wasted but what I was really doing apparently was getting the cement mixed for the building."¹ Wolfe's artistic interest in time and memory steadily increased during his work on the final sections of Of Time and the River, and as he complained to Perkins after the novel had been published, his principal dissatisfaction with what he had written was that it did not contain a clear enough demonstration of the effects of memory and the past upon the present moment in the life of the individual: "the whole inwrought, inweaving sense of time and man's past conjoined forever to each living present moment of his life."²

The human suffering which Wolfe witnessed in Brooklyn during the years of the economic depression, together with the terrifying rumors of man's inhumanity which he heard when he visited Nazi Germany, had turned his attention, after the publication of his second novel, from time and memory to the problem of evil. Wolfe was in Berlin when he wrote to Perkins (May 23, 1935) that on his trip through Germany he had "been told and felt things here which you and I can never live or stand for and which, if they are true, as by every reason of intuition and faith and belief in the people with whom I have talked I must believe, are damnable."³ Ironically, this evil, like Wolfe's conception of the masculine and feminine principles underlying the restless sense of exile

¹Ibid., p. 333. ²Ibid., p. 445. ³Ibid., p. 460.

of modern man, was also dualistic, for despite its genuinely diabolical nature, frequently in the German people it was mixed with an ambiguous kind of childlike innocence.

To Wolfe this perverse combination of evil and innocence apparently existing at the same time in a race of people made everything "so hard to explain because one feels they (the Germans) are so evil and yet cannot say so justly in so many words as a hostile press and propaganda would, because this evil is so curiously and inextricably woven into a kind of wonderful hope which flourishes and inspires millions of people who are themselves, as I have told you, certainly not evil, but one of the most child-like, kindly and susceptible people in the world."¹ Nevertheless, no sane person could deny the terrible reality of this evil in the Germans, which, Wolfe observed to his editor, existed in other people as well, including Perkins and himself:

But more and more I feel that we are all of us bound up and tainted by whatever guilt and evil there may be in this whole world, and that we cannot accuse and condemn others without in the end coming back to an accusation of ourselves. We are all² damned together, we are all tarred by the same stick.²

Wolfe's interest in evil had made him decide not to work on "the remaining books of the 'Of Time and the River' cycle,"³ but to turn to a different fable based on the gradual discovery of evil in the world by "the naturally innocent man."⁴ Since the first psychological recognition of evil

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., pp. 460-61. ³Ibid., p. 527. ⁴Ibid.

within oneself--as a nostalgia for lost sexual innocence--was a consequence of puberty, the book would begin, as the first long section of The Web and the Rock actually does begin, with the protagonist's vision of the world when he was twelve years old. In the book the search theme again would be used to show changes in the protagonist as his increasing knowledge of life was confirmed by his personal discoveries, although in this new material the search theme would clearly expose the narcissism of the protagonist, rooted in his feelings of pre-puberty lost innocence, instead of providing a pastoral justification for this narcissism as Wolfe had done with too much of the protagonist's romantic search in Of Time and the River.

This meant that the new book actually belonged to a different literary tradition from the first two, or so it seemed to Wolfe when he described its theme in a letter to his German editor, Heinz Ledig (June 10, 1936):

The general idea, so far as I can tell you here in the limits of a letter, is the idea that so many of the great men of the past, each in his own way, has used as the fundamental idea of his book. That idea as I conceive it is the story of a good man abroad in the world--shall we say the naturally innocent man, the man who sets out in life with his own vision of what life is going to be like, what men and women are going to be like, what he is going to find, and the story of what he really finds. It seems to me that this is the idea behind 'Don Quixote,' behind 'The Pickwick Papers,' behind 'Candide,' behind 'Gulliver,' and even it seems to me behind such works as 'Faust' and 'Wilhelm Meister.'¹

¹Ibid.

At this time Wolfe planned to call his new book The Vision of Spangler's Paul,¹ and the supporting quotation for the title was to be taken from Tolstoy's War and Peace: "Prince Andrei . . . turned away . . . His heart was heavy and full of melancholy. It was all so strange, so unlike what he had anticipated."²

In terms of his own experience, Wolfe made a final confirmation during the summer of 1937, when he returned to North Carolina to spend July and August in a mountain cabin a few miles outside of Asheville. Before taking this vacation Wolfe had unthinkingly assumed that merely by making a physical return home, he might be able to recapture a small part of his childhood vision of the world. Instead of this taking place, Wolfe's extended trip home made him realize that his emotional and spiritual innocence, including the many treasured images of himself centered in his early narcissism, was irrecoverable, and that it was impossible, in light of the many changes in his personality which were a projection of the reality of evil within himself, ever to "go home again." Wolfe wrote to Margaret Roberts (March 7, 1938) that this was the final discovery he had to make in terms of his private experience to secure the theme which would unify and illuminate the various other themes in his

¹Wolfe's use of the Biblical name Paul in this title symbolically connects its meaning with the gradual discovery of evil by the protagonist in the book itself.

²Nowell, p. 527.

fiction:

But my discovery that 'you can't go home again' went a lot deeper than this: it went down to the very roots of my life and spirit--it has been a hard and at times a terrifying discovery because it amounts to an entire revision almost of belief and of 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. But the point is, I have come through it now, and I am not desolate or lost. On the contrary, I am more full of faith and hope and courage than I have been in years. I suppose what I am trying to tell you here is a spiritual conviction that will inform the whole book--you could almost call that book, 'You Can't Go Home Again.'¹

In a long letter to Edward Aswell, his new editor at Harpers (February 14, 1938), Wolfe gave a detailed explanation of the meaning of his new book. He said that it dealt with "the adventures of what I call 'the innocent man' through life,"² and that in this respect, it was "a book of apprenticeship" and discovery:

It is a book, as I have said, about discovery--about discovery not in a sudden and explosive sense as when 'some new planet breaks upon his ken,' but of discovery as through a process of finding out, and of finding out as a man has to find out, through error and through trial, and through fantasy and illusion, through falsehood and his own damn foolishness, through being mistaken and wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused, and pretty much, I think, what every damned one of us is and goes through and finds out about and becomes.³

Wolfe had returned to the idea of Monkey Hawke for his protagonist, although in this book, in addition to his simian appearance, he would have "an American Wilhelm Meister

¹Ibid., p. 730. ²Ibid., p. 711. ³Ibid.

kind of name"¹ to suggest the romantic elements in his personality. His monkey features, of course, would emphasize his a-moral role at the beginning of the book as "the naturally innocent man"--innocent, that is, in terms of a pre-puberty, naturalistic vision of life as yet uncomplicated by the reality of spiritual evil. Moreover, by superficially distinguishing the protagonist from the common run of people, his monkey features, as handled by Wolfe, would connect the themes of emotional rejection and self-pitying narcissism:

Any marked variation from the type of average humanity is unfortunate--the midget, or the man of dwarfed figure, the excessively fat man, or the extremely tall man must encounter every moment of the day all kinds of sizes, patterns, shapes and measures of Things as They are, which cause him discomfort and inconvenience. The value of his own variation, if any, is psychological--in the kind of increased awareness it gives him of the structure of life, and the pattern of the world. Again, in his discovery of life, he is so strongly and passionately drawn to life because, in a sense, life rebuffs him: in his youth he is so often in passionate and angry conflict with the world and people because of these rebuffs, usually unintentional, or the result of type customs and type prejudice--(maybe a girl, for example, hesitates to dance with a man of great height because she is afraid the comparison will excite laughter and ridicule)--but later on, a man learns tolerance and wisdom and understanding out of the very discomfort and pain his own variation has caused him. He comes to realize that he is in no fundamental sense different from other people.²

Wolfe observed that the purpose behind the creation of his new protagonist was the opposite from what he had in

¹Ibid., p. 712. ²Ibid., p. 715.

mind with Eugene Gant. What gave significance to the character of Eugene was largely "his personal and romantic uniqueness, causing conflict with the world around,"¹ and in this respect, his development was a "kind of romantic self-justification."² Since the new book was "about discovery, and not about self-justification,"³ the romantic elements in the personality of Monk were meant to be viewed ironically, for Wolfe stressed that it definitely was not his intention to present the new protagonist "as the tragic victim of circumstances, the romantic hero in conflict and revolt against his environment, but as a kind of polar instrument round which the events of life are grouped, by means of which they are touched, explained, and apprehended, by means of which they are seen and ordered."⁴ In other words, Monk's somewhat grotesque appearance was not supposed to be the representation of "his personal uniqueness and difference,"⁵ but merely the outward symbol of that separation from other people which every person feels subjectively and which helps provide the psychological foundation for his self-love.

Most important with regard to the criticism that had been directed at his fiction, Wolfe believed that his new protagonist could not be regarded, in a derogatory sense, as an autobiographical figure, since his experiences

¹Ibid., p. 714. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

consciously were selected by the author to illustrate "the pattern that the life of Everyman must, in general, take in its process of discovery."¹ On this level, whatever autobiographical characteristics had been retained in Monk were there primarily because Wolfe believed that they had universal significance:

The protagonist . . . is important now because, I hope, he will be or illustrate, in his own experience, every one of us--not merely the sensitive young fellow in conflict with his home town, his family, the little world around him--not merely the sensitive young fellow in love, and so concerned with his little universe of love that he thinks it is the whole universe--but all of these things and much more insofar as they illustrate essential elements of any man's progress and discovery of life, and as they illustrate the world itself, not in terms of personal and self-centered conflict with the world, but in terms of ever-increasing discovery of life and the world, with a consequent diminution of the more personal and self-centered vision of the world which a young man has.²

Moreover, the individual incidents in the book would reveal concretely the protagonist's loss of self-pitying narcissism as his feelings of rejection and exile, according to which he was the innocent victim of a callously indifferent and unjust world, were gradually replaced by a spiritual vision of life which included both love and personal responsibility for evil.

Perhaps Wolfe's most suggestive words on the overall meaning of his fiction are to be found in the symbolic titles of his four major novels, interpreted in terms of the

¹Ibid., p. 213. ²Ibid.

specific context of each book. Look Homeward, Angel: (A Story of the Buried Life) provides a pastoral setting in which the reader is first introduced to the connections between the psychological realities of a divided, neurotic family and the development of the protagonist's narcissistic feelings of isolation and lost innocence. Of Time and the River, with time representing memory, and the river symbolizing the constant yet vital flux of immediate experience, shows the determining influence which memory exerts upon the life of the protagonist after he has left home and has begun his pastoral search.

The Web and the Rock relates the romantic narcissism of the protagonist to both the psychological dualism and the personal discovery of evil at the end of the novel, with the web symbolizing the possessive feminine principle--that is, the protagonist's continuing emotional dependence upon his mother--and the rock symbolizing the potent masculine principle--that is, the protagonist's emotional identification with the mature vitality of his father. You Can't Go Home Again is connected, in a general way, with all of these themes: the neurotic family, lost innocence, narcissistic isolation, romantic exile, the pastoral setting, determining memory, flux, the psychological dualism, and especially the reality of spiritual evil. The title of the book, however, most specifically represents Wolfe's conviction that the promise of emotional and spiritual maturity in the future

exists for the protagonist if he refuses to betray himself by attempting to return to his narcissistic past:

And, in order that there may be no doubt as to what this process of discovery involves, the whole book might almost be called 'You Can't Go Home Again'--which means back home to one's family, back home to one's childhood, back home to the father one has lost, back home to romantic love, to a young man's dreams of glory and fame, back home to exile, lyricism, singing just for singing's sake, back home to aestheticism, to one's youthful ideas 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, the cottage in Bermuda away from all the strife and conflict in the world . . . back home to the escapes of Time and Memory. Each of these discoveries, sad and hard as they are to make and accept, are described in the book almost in the order in which they are named here. But the conclusion is that although you can't go home again, the home of every one of us is in the future: there is no other way.¹

¹Ibid., p. 712.

CHAPTER III

WOLFE'S DEFENSE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

I suppose you understand by now that one reason I have always tried to write about the things I know myself is that no man could possibly have anything better than that to write about, and because if you explore your own backyard carefully enough and compare it with all the other things you find out, you may some day find out what the whole earth is like.¹

The critics and defenders of Thomas Wolfe as an artist are agreed upon one point: that his fiction is autobiographical to an uncommon degree. Moreover, many of the critics are of the opinion that Wolfe's indiscriminating reliance upon personal material to furnish the content of his books practically eliminates the possibility that they might contain a successfully realized aesthetic form. On the basis of this criticism, the romantic writer's statements in his letters about the form of his creation may seem somewhat fatuous. Since Wolfe obviously was serious when he made these statements, this chapter has been designed to let the author himself defend the significance of his creative method. At the beginning of the chapter a summary of the prevailing

¹Terry, p. 294.

criticism of Wolfe's fiction has been included to emphasize further the necessity for such a defense.

Robert Penn Warren wrote in "The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe" that Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River are patent-ly autobiographical, with the "pretense of fiction . . . so thin and slovenly that Mr. Wolfe in referring to the hero writes indifferently 'Eugene Gant' or 'I' and 'me.'"¹ Mr. Warren realized that Wolfe's intention was to erect his "autobiographical material into an epical and symbolic importance, to make of it a fable, a 'Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth,'"² but maintains that he was defeated in this intention by the limitations of his form. To this critic the artistic failure of Wolfe represents the inevitable shortcomings of the autobiographical method in its attempt "to exploit directly and naively the personal experience and the self-defined personality in art."³

Bernard DeVoto in "Genius Is Not Enough" attempted to isolate Wolfe's defects as an autobiographical novelist by relating them to the two kinds of conscious fantasy, identification and projection, which every writer employs. Mr. DeVoto believed that the writer who concentrates on identification as a method surrenders himself to his material, whereas the more conscious artist, who relies upon projection as a technique, dominates and controls his material:

¹Warren, p. 121. ²Ibid., p. 132. ³Ibid.

In the first kind he says, 'I am Napoleon,' and examines himself to see how he feels. In the second kind, he wonders how Napoleon feels, and instead of identifying himself with him, he tries to discover Napoleon's necessities. If he is excessively endowed with the first kind of fantasy, he is likely to be a genius. But if he learns to utilize the second kind in the manifold interrelationships of a novel he is certain to be an artist.¹

Mr. DeVoto concluded that people would stop calling Wolfe autobiographical if he gave his readers more projection and less empathic identification: "And we could do with a lot less genius, if we got a little more artist."²

John Peale Bishop wrote in "The Sorrows of Thomas Wolfe" that the autobiographical form which Wolfe employed was not "capable of giving shape and meaning to his emotional experience."³ The author could record but he could not evaluate since there was not enough artistic distance between himself and his protagonist. Mr. Bishop contrasted Eugene Gant with Stephen Dedalus, commenting that the reader almost never thinks of the latter character "simply as the young Joyce,"⁴ for instead of being merely Joyce's subjective image of himself, Stephen is a conscious artistic creation with a life completely independent of the author's:

But in Wolfe's novels it is impossible to feel that the central figure has any existence apart from the author. He is called Eugene Gant, but that does not deceive any one for a moment; he is, beyond all doubt, Thomas Wolfe.⁵

¹DeVoto, pp. 146-47. ²Ibid., p. 147.

³Edmund Wilson (ed.), The Collected Essays of John Peale Bishop (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 131.

⁴Ibid., p. 135. ⁵Ibid.

Mr. Bishop, like Mr. Warren, believed that Wolfe's failure demonstrates convincingly "that an art founded solely on the individual, however strong his will, however vivid his sensations, cannot be sound, or whole, or even passionate, in a world such as ours, in which 'the integrity of the individual consciousness has been broken down.'"¹

Henry Seidel Canby was slightly more tolerant of Wolfe's autobiographical form in Of Time and the River than the three critics who have already been mentioned. Mr. Canby commented in "The River of Youth" that Wolfe's book was "neither fiction nor autobiography, but both,"² since the incidents in the book obviously represented more than a journalistic rendition of Wolfe's own experience:

But fiction in the strict sense they are not, nor story, nor drama, but rather spiritual autobiography in which the thousand incidents, many of them trivial, and the dozens of characters, many of them extraordinary, have as their excuse for being that a youth met them on his way.³

Mr. Canby believed that this kind of spiritual autobiography, with the ego of the author-protagonist as its theme, was significant, but he did not feel that Wolfe as an artist had been entirely successful in illuminating its significance. This resulted from Wolfe's inability to distinguish clearly enough between fiction and fact, a confusion which frequently

¹Ibid., p. 136.

²Henry Seidel Canby, "The River of Youth," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 150.

³Ibid., p. 151.

left the reader with the impression "of being in two worlds at once."¹ In Of Time and the River, accordingly, instead of the reader's entering "that created world of the real novelist which has its own laws, its own atmosphere, its own people,"² Mr. Canby felt that the reader was too involved with Wolfe's actual experience, "seeing real people as he saw them, and often recognizing them "as with George Pierce Baker in *Professor Hatcher*, and many others) not as created characters but as literal transcripts from life."³

After the posthumous publication of The Web and the Rock, Clifton Fadiman in his review of the book commented that George Webber was no different from Eugene Gant of the first two books, so at last one could "freely and sadly say that both George Webber and Eugene Gant are Thomas Wolfe."⁴ In addition, the critic believed that the central failure in the Wolfe novels was that this same autobiographical protagonist, "despite the hundreds of pages devoted to him, despite his endless monologues, despite all the introspection, never quite becomes believable."⁵ The personal pages were always the most boring to Mr. Fadiman, and the most fascinating ones were those devoted to scenes and people Wolfe remembered from his experience, but which he did not try to "incorporate

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

⁴Clifton Fadiman, "The Web and the Rock," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 150.

⁵Ibid., p. 151.

within his gigantic sense of self."¹ With this observation in mind, Mr. Fadiman felt that even though it was impossible to predict what Wolfe might have done had he lived, his retention of the autobiographical method in his third novel certainly indicated no expansion in his artistic powers "save an increase in confusion."²

Mark Shorer in "Technique as Discovery" wrote that Thomas Wolfe apparently believed that he could create a novel merely by the "disgorging of the raw materials of his experience."³ To this critic Wolfe's books were not novels but "journals, and the primary role of his publisher in transforming these journals into the semblance of novels is notorious."⁴ Mr. Shorer remarked that it still remained to be demonstrated whether "Wolfe's conversations were any less interesting as novels than his books, which is to say that his books are without interest as novels."⁵⁻⁶ Mr. Shorer concluded that Wolfe's fatal defect was that his autobiographical method gave him no "point of view beyond his own which would separate his material and its effect."⁷ The result was a chaotic subjectivism in which the talent of

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 153.

³Mark Shorer, "Technique As Discovery," Forms of Modern Fiction, ed. William V. O'Connor (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1948), p. 23. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Shortly after the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, Mark Shorer wrote a letter to Wolfe praising the novel "in the highest terms." (Nowell, p. 206) ⁷Shorer, p. 23.

the novelist was uncontrolled, the material disorganized, and the form unachieved. What remained was "simply the man and his life."¹

Wolfe's defenders also admit the autobiographical nature of his fiction. Maxwell Geismar in the "Diary of a Provincial" remarked that Wolfe's creation was his life, and that his novels represent a kind of diary or journal, "tremendous, often inchoate, and very possibly unique in our time, of the artist in America."² Nathan Rothman, another critic sympathetic with Wolfe's intention, wrote in "Thomas Wolfe and James Joyce: A Study in Literary Influence" that the form of Wolfe's fiction is obviously autobiographical:

It should be remembered that Wolfe's work is not to be regarded as a piecemeal product, as a series of separate and successful volumes, like other men's. This is the way his books were published, of course, but that is not the way they were conceived. It is well known by now that Wolfe planned, from the very beginning, a gigantic, autobiographic work of art of at least six volumes.³

Mr. E. K. Brown, still another of Wolfe's supporters, observed in "Thomas Wolfe: Realist and Symbolist" that despite the author's objection to the term "autobiographical" being applied to his fiction "in that most general (and meaningless sense) in which, as he thought, it might be

¹Ibid.

²Maxwell Geismar, "Diary of a Provincial," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 110.

³Nathan L. Rothman, "Thomas Wolfe and James Joyce: A Study in Literary Influence," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 205.

applied to any creator,"¹ it is indisputable that Wolfe's novels are autobiographical: "We know that his father was a stonecutter: that Wolfe's life developed in the same fashion as that of the hero of the two later novels, George Webber."² Even more conclusive to Mr. Brown for accounting these four novels autobiographical was the patent connection between the "temper of Wolfe's mind"³ and that of the minds of his protagonists. Thomas Lyle Collins, one of Wolfe's most enthusiastic admirers, commented in "Wolfe's Genius Versus His Critics" that although Wolfe's fiction is unquestionably autobiographical, the same "is true in varying degrees for all novelists."⁴ In this critic's opinion, what distinguishes Eugene Gant--Monk Webber as a protagonist is that he is "one of the immortal autobiographical characters of fiction."⁵

Betty Thompson in "Two Decades of Criticism" observed that the Wolfe edition of the Southern Packet should be "demonstration enough that Thomas and Eugene were one."⁶ Miss Thompson did not mean by this remark that she regarded Wolfe as "merely a diary keeper";⁷ instead she believed that he had been successful in giving artistic form to his material even

¹E. K. Brown, "Thomas Wolfe: Realist and Symbolist," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 209.

²Ibid., p. 210. ³Ibid.

⁴Thomas Lyle Collins, "Wolfe's Genius Versus His Critics," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 168.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Thompson, p. 301. ⁷Ibid., p. 300.

though it so clearly had been lifted immediately from his personal experience:

Eugene Gant was the son of a lusty, rhetorical stone-cutter and a driving acquisitive mother, who kept a boarding house, Dixieland. Like William Oliver Gant, W. O. Wolfe, Tom's father, was a monument shop proprietor, who was born in Pennsylvania and liked to quote Shakespeare and Gray's Elegy. Julia Elizabeth Westall Wolfe is hardly distinguishable from Eliza Pentland Gant by those who know both . . . Eugene Gant and Thomas Wolfe were born on October 3, 1900. Their parents have been described; Eugene's hill-rimmed city was Altamont, Tom's Asheville. Eugene had twin brothers named Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland. So did Tom.

Because his fiction was based on his own life, Miss Thompson believed that Wolfe's sensitivity to the charge of being an autobiographical novelist had less to do with the resentment he felt toward the critics than with the very real concern he experienced "over the pain his frank portraits caused his friends and family."²

Herbert Muller in his book Thomas Wolfe presented a sympathetic interpretation of Wolfe's fiction. In the opening chapter of the book, however, Mr. Muller stated that despite Wolfe's objections to the term, he was an autobiographical novelist whose books are transcripts of his own experience:

Naturally he omitted, altered, or fused many details; inevitably he colored or transfigured; but the liberties he took are obvious or so unimportant that it is hardly profitable to study the differences between the story of Eugene Gant and the life of Thomas Wolfe.³

¹Ibid., p. 301. ²Ibid., p. 300.

³Herbert J. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1947), p. 25.

Mr. Muller concluded that even if the critic agreed with Wolfe's defense that all serious fiction is autobiographical, it was still important to remember that "hardly any other novelist has used his own experience so directly and so exclusively."¹ For this reason, it was Mr. Muller's opinion that whatever unity the critic discovered in Wolfe's fiction could not be regarded as "strictly a literary achievement"² since it was inseparable from the life and personality of the author. On this point Mr. Muller stated somewhat dismally that the personal nature of Wolfe's writing "might almost be reduced to the statement that all of Wolfe's work was written by Wolfe, and chiefly about Wolfe; it might be found as well in the volume of his letters to his mother."³

Louis Rubin, another critic who wrote a book, Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of His Youth, defending Wolfe's significance as a novelist, did not agree with Mr. Muller that Wolfe's novels are transcripts of the author's life, since the fictional record was quite obviously altered in many of "the more important particulars."⁴ At the same time, Mr. Rubin admitted that Wolfe always remained faithful to his experience in the crucial areas of his fiction:

Thus Thomas Wolfe may have begun Look Homeward, Angel in London, whereas Eugene Gant began his novel in France, but the author's and the protagonist's views

¹Ibid., p. 26. ²Ibid., p. 27. ³Ibid.

⁴Louis Rubin, Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of His Youth (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 15.

on writing about home while living in a foreign country, and their memories of the way they felt at the time, are identical. What is always autobiographical is that the protagonist and the narrator, who are one and the same, think and feel the same about various situations.¹

Mr. Rubin did not believe that this was the same thing as affirming that everything which Wolfe experienced eventually appeared in what he wrote. Even so, the critic admitted that it was difficult to find an important incident in the novels "which cannot be somewhere along the line substantiated as having actually happened"² to the author. For this reason, "it is as an autobiographical writer that Wolfe must be considered."³

The remainder of this chapter was not designed to refute the criticism that the content of Wolfe's fiction is autobiographical and that as a romantic writer he failed in his attempt to give each of his novels a significant form. Instead it was planned, together with the preceding chapter which includes the author's personal views on the form of his fiction, to introduce the reader to Wolfe's multiple role as a creator: in other words, Wolfe as a psychological novelist and archetypal artist as well as purely a romantic writer. Moreover, it is our assumption that theoretically it is possible in the same book for its author to fail as a romantic writer and yet succeed, at least in part, as an archetypal artist.

This is true because the archetypal artist first confronts his material on that most primary level of creativity

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 18. ³Ibid.

in which the conscious and subconscious workings of the imagination are fused. For this reason, the archetypal artist is capable of grasping intuitively the significance of his material and giving it a meaningful form in his creation without being critically aware of what he has done, except that it has satisfied his artistic vision and seems to have universality of meaning. Perhaps this is what Wolfe, as an archetypal artist, had in mind in many of his comments, examined in the remainder of this chapter, on the formal significance of autobiographical fiction.

In the preface to Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe first attempted to justify the intimately personal nature of the material he had used by asserting "that all serious work in fiction is autobiographical."¹ In writing from his own experience, therefore, Wolfe insisted that he had employed a method common in varying degrees to all writers, since the writer, like every other man, is unable psychologically to escape his own past:

But we are the sum of all the moments of our lives--all that is ours is in them: we cannot escape or conceal it. If the writer has used the clay of life to make his book, he has only used what all men must, what none can keep from using.

According to this view, the world of objective fact is never completely divorced from the subjective world of the

¹Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1929), p. 2^{vii}. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as LHA. ²Ibid.

individual imagination in which that fact, emotionally and spiritually, is given its personal meaning. What is usually referred to as the world of fact in this context is merely the most widely accepted illusion of reality which, for the sake of security and selfish convenience, the majority of people in any given age uncritically accept as the truth. The great writer, however, refuses to represent the commonplace view of the majority in his creation. Instead as an artist he tries to arrange and interpret the world of objective fact to express his own singular vision of life:

to wreak the vision of his life, the rude and painful substance of his own experience, into the congruence of blazing and enchanted images that are themselves the core of life, the essential pattern whence all other things proceed, the kernel of eternity.¹

Great fiction, therefore, is invariably "fact selected and understood . . . arranged and charged with purpose."² Moreover, it is autobiographical in that the creative vision of the artist, which instinctively employs symbols and images to impose its unique pattern upon the world of fact, is always emotionally and psychologically conditioned by the artist's most private experience.

In Wolfe's letters the numerous comments which have to do with the way he regarded himself as an artist depend heavily upon two words--vision and universality. Wolfe's

¹Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1935), p. 2550. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as OTR. ²LHA., p. vii.

use of the word vision has just been examined: namely, that every artist has a unique way of envisioning life which he attempts to embody in his creation: "It is a simple fact of seeing."¹ Since the "simple fact of seeing" is so important, it is the fullness, coherence, and imaginative truth of the serious writer's informing vision which finally gives his work its universal significance, not merely its aesthetic conformity with a set of doctrinaire principles within a specific literary genre which the individual creation is consciously supposed to satisfy.

Wolfe's use of the term universality also emphasized his conviction that artistic vision, given substance by the author's development of controlling themes, might legitimately serve as a substitute for aesthetic form. In other words, Wolfe believed that the autobiographical writer, in spite of the subjectivism of his method with regard to the significant form of a particular piece of fiction, can be successful as an artist if the vision which selects, shapes, and interprets the autobiographical material impresses the reader as being universally true. In the same manner, the more objective writer, deliberately controlling the distance between himself and his creation, fails when the form of his work, unsupported by an adequate vision, does not elicit the same response. For

¹Thomas Wolfe, The Hills Beyond (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), p. 218. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as THB.

this reason, whether a writer succeeds or fails can never be decided according to the abstract assumptions of critical theory which attach too great an emphasis to significant form. Always the final court of appeal is the discriminating reader who judges the success of what he reads by its aesthetic relevance to his deepest and most moving emotional and spiritual experience.

Wolfe expressed this view informally in a letter (June 28, 1933) to Alfred Dashiell, editor of Scribner's Magazine, with reference to a letter written to the magazine by Donald W. Chacey, praising Wolfe's stories:

While I have never felt that a man could do his best work for the huge public and that all good writing is in a way limited to a special and almost indefinable public, my feeling nevertheless is very strong that the best writing is not a precious thing and not limited to a little group of adepts and professional critics. In other words, I think there is scattered throughout the world the kind of public which this man represents, which is that limited and yet hearteningly numerous group of people of fine feeling and intelligence and unprofessional appreciation. Somehow I really feel that the real mark of a writer's merit and the real measure of his success comes in the end far more from these people than from the professional literary critic, and that it is really for the respect and belief of this unseen and unknown audience that a man instinctively does his work.¹

Wolfe's initial statements in the correspondence about the autobiographical nature of his fiction appear in the letter (March, 1928) which accompanied Look Homeward, Angel when the manuscript was first submitted to various publishers for

¹Nowell, p. 374.

a reading. In this letter Wolfe admitted that his book was autobiographical in that it was "made out of my life, and it represents my vision of life to my twentieth year."¹ At the same time, he did not believe that it was autobiographical in any "literal sense" since "there is scarcely a scene that has its base in literal fact."² By this statement Wolfe meant that he had used his artistic vision, operating especially in the psychological area of the "buried lives" of his characters, to turn the raw material of experience into a fiction with universally convincing significance:

The book is a fiction--it is loaded with invention: story, fantasy, vision. But it is a fiction that is, I believe, more true than fact--a fiction that grew out of a life completely digested in my spirit, a fiction which telescopes, condenses, and objectifies all the random or incomplete gestures of life--which tries to comprehend people, in short, not by telling what people did, but what they should have done. The most literal and autobiographical part of the book, therefore, is its picture of the buried life. The most exact thing in it is the fantasy--its picture of a child's soul.³

Later in the letter Wolfe added that the particular vision of American life which he had incorporated into his book was not eccentric or local in character, but representative: "a strange and deep picture of American life."⁴ At the same time, it was also original in that Wolfe had never encountered a similar vision in any other book he had read.

The two words picture and vision in connection with

¹Ibid., p. 131. ²Ibid., p. 130. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 132.

Wolfe's artistic purpose appear most frequently in the letters, although in the same context the author usually expressed his conviction that despite the personal nature of his fiction, it was not autobiographical in any narrow sense but had universality of meaning. Look Homeward, Angel was published October 18, 1929, and a few weeks later Wolfe wrote a letter to his mother (November 6, 1929) in which he attempted to justify its autobiographical content. He said that what he had written was plainly based on material taken "from human experience--as all serious fiction is,"¹ but that the book still "was fiction and represented the writer's own picture of life--that he had taken experience and shaped it into a world of his own making."² Accordingly, his mother was not to be deceived by any versimilitude between the facts in the book with the history of her own family, since whatever imaginative life these facts had in the characters and scenes of the fiction was Wolfe's artistic creation:

In short, the characters and scenes in my book are of my own imagining and my own making--they have their roots in human experience, but what life and being they have, I gave to them. There is no scene in my book that is supposed to be literal, and I will not talk to damned fools who ask me if so-and-so in the book is meant to be such and such a person living in Asheville.³

Wolfe then explained that his novel, instead of being written about a specific group of individuals living in a small town in North Carolina, was concerned with the universal experience of mankind: "people everywhere, North,

¹Terry, p. 189. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

South, East, and West."¹ After Wolfe had finished "The Web of Earth," he wrote a letter to his mother (May 29, 1932) in which he again defended his autobiographical method. In this letter he reminded his mother that her son had become a writer because he wanted to put "down a part of his picture of life as he sees it, and to do it as sincerely and honestly as he can."² In order to succeed in this purpose, Wolfe, like every writer, had been forced to "use the material he has seen and known,"³ even though the nature of the life he was depicting--"its web of fortune, misfortune, joy and grief is the same everywhere."⁴

Despite Wolfe's defense of his autobiographical method, he could never dismiss the truth that his fiction was unusually personal. For this reason, his urge to explain to his friends how his novels should be read was almost compulsive. Wolfe's former English teacher, Mrs. Roberts, had been upset by the autobiographical realism of his little selection "An Angel on the Porch," which appeared in the August, 1929, issue of Scribner's Magazine. In Wolfe's reply to Mrs. Robert's letter which took issue with his realistic method, he assured his teacher that the book from which the piece had been taken was "a work of fiction, and that no person, act, or event has been deliberately and consciously described."⁵

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 221. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Nowell, p. 198.

Wolfe added that although he was unable to explain the creative act in such a short letter, he knew that "the world a writer creates is his own world,"¹ even though it is necessarily "molded out of the fabric of life, what he has known and felt--in short, out of himself."² Several months later, after Look Homeward, Angel had already been published, Wolfe wrote another letter to Mrs. Roberts (February 2, 1930) in which he tried to explain more clearly why he felt his first novel was autobiographical only in a superficial sense. He said that the world which existed in his fiction was "fabulous" rather than "factual," and that its reality did not depend upon the truth of the experiences he had used, but rather upon his own psychological and artistic intuition which had taken that disorganized experience and shaped it into a meaningful creation:

The other thing I want to say is longer and more difficult, and I must write you about it later at length, but here it is indicated in outline: that all creation is to me fabulous, that the world of my creation is a fabulous world, that experience comes into me from all points, is digested and absorbed into me until it becomes a part of me, and that the world I create is always inside me, and never outside me, and that what reality I can give to what I create comes only from within. Its relation to actual experience I have never denied, but every thinking person knows that such a relation is inevitable, and could not be avoided unless men lived in a vacuum.³

In this same letter Wolfe emphasized that everything in his fiction was completely his own: "my own world, my own figures, my own events . . . my own fable."⁴ He had begun

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 220. ⁴Ibid.

writing Look Homeward, Angel in London--that admittedly was true--and he had finished the book in New York, but when he was actually working on the manuscript, he was living in neither London nor New York but in the world of his imagination, and he was thinking of the people in his book as created characters and not as any "actual Smiths, Jones, or Browns; nor do I see yet how such a thing is possible. If anyone thinks it is, let him take notes at street corners, and see if the result is a book."¹ Wolfe concluded the letter by hoping that Mrs. Roberts would find more pleasure in his future work than she had in the first novel, although he predicted that in whatever he wrote, his artistic purpose would remain the same: "If I am to be honest, I must create my vision of life as I see it."²

Shortly after the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe advised his friend Albert Coates (November 19, 1929) to read the book "for God's sake, Albert . . . as it was meant to be read--as a book, the writer's vision of life."³ Several weeks later Wolfe wrote to his sister Mabel (January 5, 1930) that despite the hostile reception which Look Homeward, Angel had been given in his home town, as if his sole purpose had been "to say something mean about Smith and Jones and Brown,"⁴ the book had actually been written because he felt its significance was general rather than particular: "it is

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 221. ³Ibid., p. 209.

⁴Ibid., p. 216.

as true of people in London and Idaho as of people in Asheville."¹ Wolfe added that the discouraging thing about the criticism directed at the book by his townspeople was not that it revealed they had misunderstood the book's superficial meanings, "but that they do not know at all what I am like or what my vision of life is."²

Wolfe was in Paris when he wrote to his English publisher, Frere-Reeves (June 23, 1930) that he had just finished reading Tolstoy's War and Peace, and that the great Russian's novel had impressed him as "a tremendous, magnificent book"³ with "also a grain of biography"⁴ in it. Wolfe commented that he still was convinced that the best writers, such as Tolstoy, made use of their own experience in their fiction, although in this statement he was not attempting to dismiss the importance of the imagination in helping the writer transform his subjective material into a creation with universal meaning:

It seems to me that all good writers draw heavily on their own experience, but I suppose most bad ones do also: not so much, though--the bad ones grind out 'fiction.' All good writing, I am sure, is in some measure autobiographical, but it is the right use of this with the imagination which makes a good book.⁵

About a month later Wolfe wrote to his editor, Maxwell Perkins (July 17, 1930), that with regard to his new fiction he believed he was "at last beginning to have a proper use

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., 233. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

of a writer's material: for it seems to me he ought to see in what has happened to him the elements of the universal experience."¹ Wolfe later commented that in his next book he planned to make use of his personal experience, "things I have known and felt, as the first one did,"² but, in addition, he hoped to employ "fables and legends" to transcend imaginatively the autobiographical nature of his material. In another letter to Frere-Reeves (August, 1930) Wolfe remarked that like every writer he was wittingly faced with the problem of weaving "out bloodily his own vision of life."³ Nevertheless, as an artist he did not believe that he had any "new ideas" or "any new feelings about life"⁴ to communicate in his fiction--merely a different illumination of experiences and feelings which are universally true for all people.

Wolfe wrote to his brother Fred (July 19, 1931) that he supposed the townspeople in Asheville would never be able to understand that as a writer he was primarily "interested neither in gossip or making money."⁵ Instead he regarded himself as an artist whose chief desire was to "create something that will satisfy him and hold in it his vision of life."⁶ In a letter to his Uncle Henry Westall (January, 1932) Wolfe commented that the reason he wrote was "because I want to do the best that's in me, to create my vision of

¹Ibid., p. 241. ²Ibid., p. 245. ³Ibid., p. 256.

⁴Ibid., p. 255. ⁵Ibid., p. 303. ⁶Ibid.

life as I have seen and known it, and to leave something, someday, that may have, I hope, some enduring value."¹

Next he tried to explain to his uncle why he did not think Look Homeward, Angel had been written about specific individuals in his home town, but about people in general, "living on this earth as I had known them, and what I said was as true of Pittsburgh or Boston or Brooklyn, as of Asheville."² Wolfe admitted that in the book obviously he had made use of incidents from his own life, "of experience as I had known it,"³ but he believed that "this is what all men must do."⁴ As a serious artist, however, he denied that he had worked with this personal material "either to praise, wound, insult, or glorify particular people";⁵ he had worked with it "in order to create some kind of living truth which will be true for all men everywhere."⁶

Wolfe wrote to his Asheville friend George McCoy (March 22, 1932) that his artistic intention in Look Homeward, Angel had been "simply to rig out a part of my vision of life as I had seen and in part known it."⁷ It was Wolfe's opinion that even most of the critics who had written about the book had misunderstood this intention, and when their reviews first began to appear, his impulse frequently had been "to take pen and paper at once and make some kind of a hot answer or impassioned defense."⁸ As a writer, however, he realized that

¹Ibid., p. 317. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid., p. 331. ⁸Ibid.

the proof of whether he had succeeded or failed was always his work, and for this reason he had "decided never to write a word if I could help it in answer to any criticism, whether in the form of a personal letter or in the press, which seemed to me unfair and unjust."¹ If it were really true that "his intention and meaning"² had not been revealed clearly in his first novel, he stated that his defense would be that which every serious writer employs: "To possess his soul with patience, and stick to his job resolutely until he has revealed himself."³

Wolfe had expected that his second novel would refute the criticism that his fiction was little more than the artistic journal of his life. When he realized that the new book would be no different in kind from Look Homeward, Angel, he became acutely sensitive to the charge of being an autobiographical novelist. He had just finished "The Web of Earth" when he wrote to Julian Meade ("April 21, 1932) that as an artist he would "not be driven into some obscene jargon of literary competition against any man or woman living. The only man I will compete with is myself."⁴ In another letter to Julian Meade (July 7, 1932) Wolfe commented, with regard to the autobiographical form of his fiction, that he believed "every man has his own special problem and his own conflict with his material and . . . that each man has got

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 338.

to learn it in his own way for himself."¹ In Wolfe's mind there was no other choice if the writer accepted his conviction that "a man's work and the way he does it is more than any thing on earth a unique possession, and his entire relation to it is a process of constant and entirely personal discovery."² For this reason Wolfe stated that he should like his "work to be of one piece with all my life, and that to me the labor of writing does seem to be united to a man's whole vision of life."³

Wolfe's references to vision and universality to justify his artistic method continue to appear throughout the remainder of his correspondence. Wolfe's story "A Portrait of Bascom Hawke" appeared in the April, 1932, issue of Scribner's Magazine, and several weeks after its publication, his cousin Elaine Westall Gould wrote him a bitterly critical letter in which she mentioned that she had "deliberately refrained" from reading the story because she had been warned that it contained "an unfair and ruthless portrayal of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Henry A. Westall."⁴ In Wolfe's reply (July 15, 1932) he asserted that his cousin had been mistaken in believing, solely on the basis of hearsay opinion, that the story had been written to expose the ruthlessness of her parents:

¹Ibid., p. 343. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 344.

The story was not about ruthlessness nor about a ruthless man. Someday I will try to tell you what I wanted the story to be about. I should not be deeply disturbed if I thought your objection to the story was based on the fact that you thought I had made a heroic figure out of the man . . . That, after all, is a matter of personal vision, and in that respect the writer must be true to his own--he can do nothing else but be true to his own whether it coincides with that of his friends or not.¹

Wolfe remarked that he had been especially upset by the allegation in his cousin's letter that purely from vindictiveness he had tried to portray her mother as "a weak and ridiculous figure,"² for it was this kind of irresponsible attack, crediting his artistic purpose with malice and the desire for personal revenge, which had been typical of the criticism directed at him by the people in his home town after the publication of his first novel:

Now in reference to all this I want to say that the business of answers and vindications or of getting revenge or of 'showing them up' has never yet been the motive behind anything I wrote, although I was savagely accused of doing this and threatened with anonymous letters and denounced from press and pulpit in Asheville, North Carolina, two years ago because of my first book.³

Wolfe observed that although he "was the most surprised and bitterly wounded person about the fate of that book in my native town,"⁴ he still could not improve upon the defense which he had expressed to his friends shortly after the book appeared: "that the writer is creating a world of his own visioning and that in so doing he creates a new kind of reality and a new set of values, and that his work,

¹Ibid., p. 345. ²Ibid., p. 346. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

in so far as it has living value, is not concerned in exalting or degrading a particular Jones, or Brown, or Smith, but rather in finding in any particular Jones, or Brown, or Smith the things that unite him to the whole family of the earth."¹

Wolfe explained to his cousin that when she mentioned the names of her own father and mother, that aroused one set of memories in his mind, "but when you speak of a man and a woman in one of my stories, that awakens an entirely different set of memories and a different kind of reality."² Instead of consciously intending an injustice to the mother in "A Story of Bascom Hawke," Wolfe commented that his fault, if any, had resulted from his being too "little concerned with that particular character at all."³ That, in his opinion, was typical of the way the writer's imagination invariably functioned:

What I am here saying to you is that I concentrated in that story upon the portrait of a man: that I tried to show him as he looked, as he spoke, as he dressed, and as he walked along the street, and that whatever scenes or persons were introduced into the story were introduced for this purpose. The sole example of the ruthlessness of which you speak consisted of ruthlessly cutting away everything I did not find immediately useful to the purpose of this single portrait: if I had completed the story of the man's life in its connections with all the other lives about him, I should no longer have had a story, I should have had a novel of very considerable length. Now let me repeat again:--if I was unfair to your mother, as you say I was, it came not because I was meditating her portrait. And neither, let me say, was I meditating the portrait of your father, because that is not the way the writer works--at least that is not the way I work.⁴

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 347. ⁴Ibid.

Wolfe concluded that he knew his cousin would find it difficult to believe that he did not regard the central character in his story "to be even a close approximation of your father, although I would not deny that we both know where much of the clay that shaped that figure came from."¹ He could inform his cousin, however, where a great deal of the shaping vision behind the creation of that particular character did not come from: "of sources, experiences, and actual moments of my own life and seeing of which you know nothing, but which went into the making of the story."²

Wolfe's comments in this particular letter to his cousin help explain why he believed the reader was mistaken who identified the members of Eugene Gant's family in Look Homeward, Angel with the author's own parents and brothers and sisters. In other words, the people in the book must be viewed as created characters rather than autobiographical figures since their vitality as representative types did not spring from Wolfe's retentive memory, but was a creative achievement, involving his deepest insights and given meaning and form by his artistic vision.

Aline Bernstein had written a book, Three Blue Suits, in which Wolfe suspected that both her husband and he had appeared as fictional characters.³ After Wolfe had read the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

³Mrs. Bernstein has denied that any character in the book was patterned after her husband. (Nowell, p. 394)

book, he wrote a long letter to Mrs. Bernstein (December 11, 1933) expressing his disapproval of the way she had portrayed these two men:

I don't believe that you really think of your husband and me as you have portrayed us in these stories. I am sorry that you said some of the things you did, and that you have been willing to give out to the world these portraits as representing your own estimates of us.¹

Wolfe commented that he hoped he had learned a valuable lesson from Mrs. Bernstein's book in his own attempts "to be as fair and comprehensive"² as possible in his fiction. He admitted that in the past he had with regret written too nakedly from his own experience, and without paying enough attention to the consequences of what he had created upon the lives of the people who had helped provide him with his material. At the same time, he emphasized that he did not think he had "ever wilfully and maliciously distorted what I believed and knew to be true about people, in order to satisfy a personal grudge."³

Wolfe explained to Mrs. Bernstein that it was this kind of irresponsible writing which actually was fiction from an artist's point of view. Moreover, it was this kind of false creation which was damaging, and not that so-called autobiographical writing which, no matter how personal in its use of detail, was at least true in a final sense. Most people, of course, failed to understand this difference, and Wolfe observed that much of the criticism which had plagued him

¹Nowell, p. 393. ²Ibid., p. 394. ³Ibid.

since the publication of Look Homeward, Angel had been the result of the reader's inability to distinguish "between the artist's point of view, which is concerned with the general truth drawn from his personal experience, and the point of view of people which is, particularly if they are in your book, concerned with making identification from something which is intended as a general truth."¹

Wolfe concluded his remarks by stating that naturally every good writer had to reveal some kind of "passionate bias" in his creation, in that he could not keep from expressing "the indignation, the conviction, the certitude, the sense of conflict, with which it seems to me everyone who creates something must have."² Such an artistic bias, however, was an entirely different thing from the writer's "stacking the cards against someone"³ in order to justify himself. Mrs. Bernstein's mistake had been that she created autobiographical characters who were identifiable, and then, on the basis of a malicious interpretation of their personalities, had involved these characters in false situations and conflicts: "You gave some of the facts, but the other facts which were vital to an understanding of the situation you suppressed, and in doing this, I think you have been the loser."⁴

In a letter to J. G. Stikeleather (July 8, 1935), Wolfe asserted once again that Look Homeward, Angel had not been

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 395.

written "as a savage and vitriolic attack upon the citizens of Asheville, North Carolina, but as a young man's vision of his childhood and his youth and the world from which he came--a world which in its general humanity could have been as true of Peoria or Spokane or Berlin or any place as it was of Asheville."¹ The June 24, 1936, issue of The New Republic contained an article by Hamilton Basso praising Wolfe's fiction. Wolfe wrote a reply (June 24, 1936) in which he said that he certainly hoped Basso was right in his statement that he had been "able to take materials of localized regional experience and give them communication of universal interest."² Wolfe added that he supposed "that is what every writer, with his own special material, would like to do."³

In another letter to Hamilton Basso (July 31, 1937) composed after Wolfe had made his return pilgrimage to Asheville, he wrote that he now believed he had come to the end of one creative road, and that his future work would be written "from a different point, another vision and, I hope, with a deeper purpose."⁴ He expressed the same view in a letter to Edward Aswell (December, 1937), when he observed that although he had begun life as a lyrical writer, he no longer regarded himself as a young man and his artistic vision had changed accordingly: "I am thirty-seven years old--and I must

¹Ibid., p. 475. ²Ibid., p. 531. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 628.

tell you that my vision of life has changed since I began to write ten years ago, and that I shall never write the kind of book that I wrote then."¹ In the correspondence the last statement about the importance which Wolfe attached to his creative vision was made in a letter to Margaret Roberts (April 6, 1938), only a few days before the author left New York City on his final trip West:

It is hard enough for me to get anything done anyway, because everything comes out with such a tremendous superflux, and calls for such infinite boiling down and rearrangement--but it seems to me the best course for me is to stick at it somehow, somehow by the grace of God to get it done, somehow to get it all wrought into a single and coherent vision of life, not just as a series of explosive and isolated protests.²

Throughout most of 1937 Wolfe had been struggling to build up enough courage to make a formal severance from Scribner's and Maxwell Perkins. During these months the justification he made to his friends for his desire to change publishers was that the people at Scribner's were unwilling to print his material in the form he had written it. Wolfe felt that this represented a censorship over his artistic vision which as a serious writer he could no longer tolerate. In a letter to Sherwood Anderson (September 22, 1937), after Wolfe had definitely made up his mind to secure a new publisher, he wrote the following:

My troubles with Scribners are deep, grievous, and, I fear, irreparable: I'll have to try to find someone else, if anyone will have me. I can't tell you the anguish

¹Ibid., p. 699. ²Ibid., p. 738.

this thing has cost me: these things get a deep hold of me, and this has been almost like death. But I will be published, if I can: I've got to be--and I will have my own picture of life, my own vision of society, of the world as, thus far, I have¹ been able to live, sweat, feel and think it through!

Wolfe previously had expressed his grievances to Maxwell Perkins, notably in the long "personal letter" which was written December 15, 1936, and mailed January 10, 1937. In this letter Wolfe also reviewed his attitudes toward autobiographical fiction:

But to go back to this simple, fundamental, inescapable necessity of all art, which I have patiently, laboriously, coherently, explained a thousand times, in such language that no one can misunderstand it, to all the people who for some strange and extraordinary reason, in America and nowhere else that I have ever been on earth, keep harping forever, with a kind of idiot pertinacity, upon the word 'autobiography'--you can't make something out of nothing.²

Wolfe declared that when faced with the question of autobiographical fiction, you actually had but two choices: either you could "say there is no such thing as autobiographical writing, or you can say that all writing is autobiographical,"³ but he emphasized categorically that "you cannot and must not say that one novel is an autobiographical novel and another novel is not autobiographical. Because if you say these things, you are uttering falsehood and palpable nonsense."⁴

Wolfe explained to Perkins that he considered his own novels "neither more nor less autobiographical than"⁵ Tolstoy's

¹Ibid., p. 655. ²Ibid., p. 592. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

War and Peace. He believed that they were less autobiographical, if a critical judgment had to be made, because Tolstoy had succeeded more than himself in making "a perfect utilization of all the means, all the materials at his disposal."¹ Wolfe maintained, nevertheless, that both he and Tolstoy, "and every man who ever wrote a book, are autobiographical,"² although, of course, the end of this autobiographical impulse, under the creative direction of the artist, was invariably fiction. For this reason, Wolfe was still convinced that what he had written in his own books, despite the extent to which it seemed to be merely a journalistic reproduction of his personal experience, was actually an independent creation given its reality by the shaping and unifying power of his artistic vision:

And as you know very well, I don't 'write about' people: I create living characters of my own--a whole universe of my own creation. And any character that I create is so unmistakably my own that anyone familiar with my work would know instantly it was my own, even if it had no title and no name.³

Critics have seized upon statements, such as the ones that Wolfe made in his "personal letter" to Perkins, to prove that his conception of "autobiographical fiction" strips the term of any significant critical meaning. On this particular issue, however, the real conflict, or perhaps confusion, between Wolfe and his critics seems to be one which, surprisingly enough, has never been seriously examined: namely,

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

that when the critics refer to the autobiographical nature of Wolfe's fiction they have in mind its versimilitude with the facts of the author's life, but that Wolfe in his defense was thinking of the psychological and archetypal basis of his artistic vision which transformed the raw experience into significant fiction. In other words, Wolfe and the critics have vastly different psychological interpretations of the important word experience, especially when qualified by the somewhat ambiguous adjective autobiographical. In addition, Wolfe's views on this matter were connected with his theory of the determining influence which memory exerts upon the imagination of every person, whether he is a writer or not.

Wolfe made use of this argument in a letter to Julian Meade (February 1, 1932) in which he attempted to defend his conviction "that nowhere can you escape autobiography whenever you come to anything that has real or lasting value in letters."¹ Wolfe remarked that in his own work he actually lived two lives: "one which is intensely conscious of the world around me, and one which lives with equal intensity in the past."² With regard to the persistent influence of the past in the creation of other writers, Wolfe mentioned how Coleridge, when he composed "The Ancient Mariner," had been unaware of the extent to which he drew upon memories stored in his subconscious, "a thousand elements of

¹Ibid., p. 321. ²Ibid., p. 323.

apparently unrelated experience, to create something that was his own and that was beautiful and real and in the highest sense of the word original."¹ Wolfe emphasized that Coleridge's example was not exceptional, but that this use of material "which is sunken in the well of unconsciousness, or which is only half-remembered, is a typical use of the creative faculty"² with all writers. Wolfe concluded that such an artistic method had to be regarded as autobiographical, despite the variety of sources from which different writers obtained the subconscious experience which finally appeared in their books:

Now what is this, Meade, except the most direct and natural use of autobiography, and how could Coleridge have written differently from the way he did write, and how could Joyce have written differently from the way he wrote, and how could Proust have written differently from the way he wrote: Coleridge's experiences came mainly from the pages of books and Joseph Conrad's experiences came mainly from the decks of ships, but can anyone tell you that one form of experience is less real and less personal than another, or that Coleridge's books had less reality for him than Conrad's ships; and finally, could anyone tell you that Joyce and Proust are either more or less autobiographical than Coleridge or Swift, and if they do tell you so, would you think their words any longer had meaning or were worthy of serious consideration.³

Previously Julian Meade had inquired if Wolfe looked "upon writing as an escape from reality."⁴ Wolfe's answer was that "in no sense of the word does it seem to me to be an escape from reality: I should say rather that it is an

¹Ibid., p. 321. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

attempt to approach and penetrate reality."¹ Wolfe added that with a truly great writer such as James Joyce, "the effort to apprehend and to make live again a moment in lost time is so tremendous that some of us feel Joyce really did succeed, at least in places, in penetrating reality and in so doing, creating what is almost another dimension of reality."² Moreover, Wolfe believed that this extra dimension of reality owed its imaginative existence, not primarily to Joyce's artistic method, but to the illuminating vision which had enabled him to "penetrate reality" successfully in the first place, and which later his formal method had been developed to support.

Wolfe in his fiction had obviously used a method quite different from Joyce's, but their artistic goals had been the same: to create "a new dimension of reality" in which "a moment in lost time" might live forever. Wolfe was certain, therefore, that whether he had succeeded or failed as an artist could never be decided on the basis of a criticism directed chiefly at the inadequacies of his creative method. Instead, the final decision had to be made according to the aesthetic relevance and truth of the imaginative world which had its unique existence only in his so-called autobiographical novels.

¹Ibid., p. 322. ²Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

WOLFE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVELIST

In a system where things are forever changing, where is the fixed, immutable, unchanging principle to be found? That is--where is the Absolute? Moreover, by the very exigencies of this vast, mechanical civilization we have built, life becomes bewildering and overpowering in its complexity. In the last chapter of that remarkable book, 'The Education of Henry Adams,' Adams voices this sentiment when he returns to New York after a long absence and looks at that terrific and chaotic skyline. Civilization has exploded. In this chaos of force and disorder, where is to be found that principle of unity, order, which his spirit seeking education (which is but knowledge of unity) is on the hunt for. He goes to Washington, and finds his friend, John Hay, a man of splendid ability, already drained and sapped of his vitalities by the demands of this monstrous new world. Now, as I interpret it, Hay represents the finest we have to offer the demands of our present life. But he is not adequate. (Letter from Thomas Wolfe to George Pierce Baker, September or October, 1922.)¹

The critics of the fiction of Thomas Wolfe have had little to say about the author's role as a psychological novelist.² This is a curious oversight merely on the basis

¹Ibid., p. 36.

²The critic Monroe Stearns is an exception to this statement. Mr. Stearns, in his short article "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," included a psychological interpretation of the more romantic themes in Wolfe's fiction.

of Wolfe's psychological treatment of the Gant family in Look Homeward, Angel. The oversight is even more surprising, however, in light of the title, Of Time and the River, which he selected for his second novel. Wolfe has written that in this title Memory might easily be substituted for Time, and Change for River.¹ The substitute title, of Memory and Change, is practically a bald statement that some kind of connection exists in the novel between the author's frequently expressed philosophical interest in flux and his almost as frequently stated psychological theory of memory.

The remainder of this chapter will deal with the implications suggested by such a connection, with an attempt being made to show that Wolfe in his fiction was originally attempting to provide a psychological answer, not only to the disturbing philosophical question of how to find meaning in a contemporary world of endless naturalistic change, but to the more personal question as well, of why so many people in this spiritually confused world, including the author, also feel emotionally driven to waste their lives. Moreover, Wolfe's attempt to use the psychological experience of his protagonist to answer this latter question would lead him in his fiction to a central discovery, supported by both his psychological and spiritual intuition, of the significance for modern man of the age-old dualism between good and evil.

¹Nowell, p. 279.

During his lifetime Wolfe was often accused of being a non-intellectual writer "who got at life through his senses rather than his brains."¹ Wolfe was aware of this criticism, and in You Can't Go Home Again attempted to refute it. After the publication of his novel, Home to the Mountains, the same charges were directed at Wolfe's protagonist, George Webber, but he felt that if they were true at all, they represented only a "kind of lifeless half-truth."² The weakness of most intellectuals with regard to matters involving emotional and spiritual truth, he believed, was that their formal knowledge was too consciously detached from their subjective experience. For this reason, the objective viewpoint in which they took critical pride, lacking an integrating focus in their personal lives, usually degenerated until it became "disparate, arbitrary, sporadic, and confused"³ in other areas as well. The protagonist did not believe that his more immediate psychological approach was vulnerable to quite this kind of confusion. If in his fiction, therefore, he had created the impression of being a mindless romantic, it was chiefly that on the basis of principle he differed with his critics, since he was unwilling to dismiss the confirming truth of personal experience whenever he reflected:

The most striking difference between Webber's mind and the mind of the average 'intellectual' was that Webber

¹Muller, p. 64.

²Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. 409. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as YCGHA. ³Ibid.

absorbed experience like a sponge, and made use of everything he absorbed. He really learned constantly from experience. But the 'intellectuals' of his acquaintance seemed to learn nothing. They had no capacity for rumination and digestion. They could not reflect.¹

The critic Herbert Muller finds a passage such as this unconvincing, and he has emphasized that no matter how Wolfe regarded himself, "he was certainly not an intellectual, and stood outside the intellectual movements of his time."² Even so, Mr. Muller qualifies his criticism by adding that Wolfe's "career was a continuous self-education, an uncommonly stubborn, honest, arduous effort, religious in intensity, to distill the truth and value of his experience."³ According to the critic, the advantage of Wolfe's approach "was that it enabled him, within the limits of his intellectual reach, to live and write as a whole man."⁴

We would agree with Mr. Muller's criticism if the word intellectual were supplemented by the word emotional so that his statement would read: "The advantage of Wolfe's approach was that it enabled him, within the limits of his intellectual and emotional reach, to live and write as a whole man." Such a change seems necessary in light of Wolfe's success, as well as his partial failure, as a novelist, which we believe had less to do with his intellectual limitations than with his emotional shortcomings which had an almost determining influence on his selection of a subjectively oriented

¹Ibid. ²Muller, p. 162. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 166.

form for his fiction.

When Wolfe attended the University of North Carolina, he was a brilliant student in the philosophy courses of Professor Horace H. Williams. This professor, who, according to Floyd Watkins, suggested Plato Grant in Wolfe's fiction,¹ was an Hegelian in his teaching. After Hegel his own philosophy was "at best, a tortuous and patched up scheme of other men's ideas."² What he did supply for his students was "the inspiration of a questioning intelligence."³ He tried to teach them "not to be afraid to think, to question. . . . And the seed he planted grew--long after Hegel, 'concepts,' 'moments of negation,' and all the rest of it had vanished into the limbo of forgotten things."⁴

Wolfe was obviously a favorite student of the philosophy teacher, for he not only won the philosophy prize during his junior year, but later, in a letter of recommendation supporting Wolfe's application for a teaching position at New York University, Professor Williams wrote: "'I consider Thomas C. Wolfe one of six remarkable students in my thirty years experience here.'"⁵ After Wolfe had left the University of North Carolina to do graduate work at Harvard, he

¹Floyd C. Watkins, Thomas Wolfe's Characters (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 132.

²YCGHA, p. 710. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Thomas C. Pollock and Oscar Cargill, Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1954), p. 16.

continued to correspond intermittently with Professor Williams, and in a letter from Cambridge, Massachusetts (September 9, 1921), he tried to explain to his former teacher the direction in which his intellectual curiosity then seemed to be pointed:

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 ever-lasting change?' In a system where things forever pass and decay, what is there fixed, real, eternal? I search for an answer but it must be demonstrated to me. Merely saying a thing is not enough.¹

From this quotation it would appear that Wolfe's interest in philosophical questions, even at this early date, was already distinguished by a need for a revelation of the truth in terms of his personal experience.

Several months later Wolfe wrote another letter to Professor Williams (February, 1922) in which he commented that "philosophy is gnawing me again."² Many of the passages in this letter are interesting, but the following quotation seems especially significant in that it anticipates Wolfe's re-definition of the philosophical problem of how to discover unity in a world of constant change as the psychological problem of how to find an explanation for the inexcusable waste in people's lives:

Most everyone seems to waste his life in false attempts: a show of fine energy foully misplaced. Time after time

¹Nowell, p. 18. ²Ibid., p. 27.

it has seemed as if mankind was about to come upon the Absolute: to plunge into and discover the ultimate, impenetrable mystery; and then they quit, or turn to ¹ something else, to baffle and foul themselves anew.

Wolfe was vitally concerned with this problem: first, because he did not wish to waste his creative life; and second, because he was an inquirer after the truth.

In the same letter to Professor Williams, Wolfe observed that what makes philosophical matters so difficult to deal with is invariably their application in one's own life, since "it is comparatively easy to imagine a kinship with the perfect and divine essence if we are forever handling and seeing and reading beautiful things, but we're put to it to find this relation in that which outwardly, at least, is ugly."² To illustrate this view Wolfe mentioned the disillusionment he had experienced recently when reading the poetry of Walt Whitman. After finishing one of Whitman's poems, he would initially be filled with enthusiasm "about the nobility and dignity of labor and the universal brotherhood, where Walt affectionately clasps each artisan on the back and calls him 'camerado.'"³ Later when Wolfe went into the Boston streets, "filled with a great desire to clasp mankind in my arms, the subway guard, or the man behind the counter, can, by a few ill-timed remarks, change my desire to call him 'camerado' to a desire to punch him on the jaw.

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 29. ³Ibid.

So much for the universal brotherhood!"¹

Wolfe's disillusionment with the idealism of philosophy divorced from personal experience did not mean that he had suddenly lost his intellectual curiosity. Quite the contrary, but it does help explain why his curiosity gradually became more psychological during his years at Harvard, and why, because of his increasing distrust of formal intellectual abstractions, he came to believe that the philosophical (or critical) approach to all intellectual questions should remain speculative rather than dogmatic. In the same letter to Professor Williams which contained his remarks about Whitman's poetry, Wolfe observed:

The very nature of a philosophy, to me, is speculative. It must ever be on the hunt. Show me a man who has evolved a philosophy which, he says, has solved the problem of his life, and I believe you'll find a man who has surrendered to it.²

The psychological bias in Wolfe's thinking, reflecting his distrust of the intellectual generalization taking priority over the concrete facts of experience, had been reinforced by the work he was doing for Professor George Pierce Baker in the 47 Workshop. Wolfe had been admitted as a student in Professor Baker's Workshop in the fall of 1920, and in October of the following year his one-act play "The Mountains" was included in the program of studio performances. This play was unsuccessful chiefly because he had stressed

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 28.

discursive dialogue as a substitute for dramatic action.¹ Although Wolfe was distressed by the failure of his play, it made him realize that he would have to modify his technique if he hoped to succeed eventually as a playwright.

When Wolfe attended the University of North Carolina, he had studied English under Professor Edwin Greenlaw, and, according to Richard Kennedy, it was from this teacher that Wolfe obtained his artistic theory of "literature as a transcript of life."² Wolfe felt that he had been unsuccessful in applying this theory because he had let his interest in abstract ideas divert his attention from the concrete representation so essential to giving these ideas convincing dramatic verisimilitude in the individual play. For this reason, he wrote to Professor Greenlaw (March, 1922) that he was attempting in his new writing to have a more immediate:

grasp on the facts of life. When I attended philosophy lectures (and I rate these lectures highly) I was told that there was no reality in a wheelbarrow, that reality rested in the concept or plan of the wheelbarrow.³ But the wheelbarrow is the thing you show on the stage.

Wolfe's respect for the fact was accompanied by his increasing concern with the symbol as an artistic carrier of the fact's psychological and spiritual meanings. In the same letter to Professor Greenlaw, Wolfe mentioned the legend of the medieval monks, who "by the very intensity of their

¹Richard S. Kennedy, "Wolfe's Harvard Years," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 24.

²Ibid., p. 32. ³Nowell, p. 30.

reflection, could bring out upon their foreheads and hands the sign of the cross, the nail-wounds of the Crucifixion."¹ Then he added that in his writing he was beginning to feel "deeply the necessity of symbols like these to tie to," and that this was "no mere windy talk."²

Wolfe's practical experience in the 47 Workshop was teaching him the necessity of adequate dramatic representation of the fact in his writing, while, at the same time, his imagination was being turned to the symbol as a means of giving the isolated fact some kind of universal significance. Despite these developments, he still retained his former intellectual curiosity in the philosophical problem of how to find the absolute in a world of unceasing flux. This problem, as he explained in a letter to Professor Baker (September, 1922), was central to the meaning of the play which he was writing at that time:³

This is my first attempt at what is called the 'problem play.' But the play, as I conceive it, deals with a spiritual and human problem, rather than with a social or economic problem for which I have small use. I will state it, as I see it, and it is unfortunate if the language seems involved and complicated. In a system where things are forever changing, where is the fixed, immutable, unchanging principle to be found? That is--where is the Absolute?⁴

The teacher at Harvard who suggested to Wolfe that this

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

³Elizabeth Nowell has noted that this particular play remains unidentified.

⁴Ibid., pp. 35-36.

problem might legitimately be examined from a psychological viewpoint, as a substitute for the traditional philosophical approach, was Professor John Livingston Lowes.

During Wolfe's first year at Harvard he had taken Professor Lowes' course, "Studies in the Poets of the Romantic Period."¹ At that time Professor Lowes was working on The Road to Xanadu, his exhaustive study of the creative process in which he was to demonstrate how Coleridge's vast reading, stored in his subconscious memory, was later utilized in the creation of "The Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan":

The contents of myriad books lay for years in Coleridge's 'deep well of unconscious cerebration' (Lowes takes this phrase from Henry James); and later, isolated words, phrases, images and ideas rose from the chaos of twilight memory to be shaped into brilliant poetry.²

Although The Road to Xanadu was not published until 1927, even by 1920-21, when Wolfe was a student in the Romantic Poetry course, Professor Lowes had already finished enough of the book to read sections of it to his class. Wolfe was excited by the implications of Lowes' approach, and in the previously mentioned letter to Professor Greenlaw (March, 1922), he described the stimulating effect which the Coleridge book had already had upon his reading:

Professor Lowes' book on Coleridge (not published yet, I believe) which he read to the class last year, had a great effect upon me. In that book he shows conclusively how retentive of all it reads is the mind

¹Ibid., p. 30. ²Kennedy, p. 20.

and how, at almost any moment, that mass of material may be fused and resurrected in new and magic forms. That is wonderful, I think.¹ So I'm reading, not so analytically as voraciously.¹

Various critics have commented on the patent connection between Wolfe's work under Professor Lowes and his indiscriminate reading in the Widener Library at Harvard. Richard Kennedy wrote that Wolfe, "fascinated by Lowes' findings . . . strove to stock his memory with a prodigious store of bookish turmoil from which great poetry might emerge when the imaginative faculty summoned";² while Oscar Cargill made the sarcastic observation that Professor Lowes "may have been partially responsible for starting Wolfe off on his exaggerated orgies of reading in the Widener Library and for his later boasts of omnivorousness, but there is no indication that he stimulated in Wolfe a desire for that organized and consistent study which is genuinely fruitful of knowledge."³

Surprisingly enough, both of these critics failed to mention the lasting influence of Professor Lowes' work upon Wolfe's creative imagination: that it left him with an increased awareness of the important role of the subconscious memory in all areas of life. This meant that before Wolfe could solve the philosophical problem of how to find a unifying principle in the flux of the present moment, he first

¹Nowell, p. 30. ²Kennedy, p. 20.

³Pollock and Cargill, p. 23.

had to understand the psychological connections between that constant flux and the determining subconscious memory: that is, he had to understand, in all its disturbing implications, the theme of time.

Wolfe's interest in time appears throughout his fiction, but from its title obviously the novel in which he deals most directly with this theme is Of Time and the River. The author's statement that "'Time and the River' . . . means 'Memory and Change'"¹ has already been commented upon. In the same letter to Maxwell Perkins (December 9, 1930) in which this statement was made, Wolfe explained that in his new book he wanted to communicate "the idea of time, the lost and forgotten moments of people's lives,"² because the book was supposed to be about America, and his psychological approach to memory had convinced him "that a native has the whole consciousness of his people and nation in him; that he knows everything about it, every sight, sound and memory of the people."³ According to Wolfe's theory, what made you peculiarly an American was what you kept permanently stored in both your conscious and subconscious memory from your actual experience: "the ten million seconds and moments of your life, the shapes you see, the sounds you hear, the food you eat, the colour and texture of the earth you live on."⁴

If passages such as these were to be used as the final

¹Nowell, p. 279. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 280.

definition of Wolfe's attitude toward time and memory, his views would seem hopelessly romantic. When Wolfe wrote this letter to his editor, however, he was just beginning his second book, and the various ramifications of his psychological theory were still beyond his grasp. Later in the completed novel Wolfe has his protagonist, Eugene Gant, comment on the puzzling nature of this problem. When Eugene was in Paris, he visited the American Library and read what William James had to say about time and memory. According to the notes which Eugene made in his journal, William James believed the following:

James 'The Object of Memory is only an object imagined in the past to which the emotion of belief adheres.'

Temporal experience divided into three qualitatively distinct intervals: the remembered past, the perceived specious present, and the anticipated future--By means of the tripartite division we are able to inject our present selves into the temporal stream of our own experience.

By arrangement of temporal orders of past with temporal orders of future--we can construct a temporal order of our specious presents and their contents.

Thus time has its roots in experience and yet appears to be a dimension in which experiences and their contents are to be arranged.

Thus the stuff from which¹ time is made is of the nature of experienced data.

The most important of these notes, with regard to Wolfe's artistic development, are the following: first, that a memory object "is only an object imagined in the past to which the emotion of belief adheres"; second, that "the stuff from which time is made is the nature of experienced

¹OTR, p. 671.

data" operating within a "perceived specious present." These ideas actually provided support for Wolfe's psychological treatment of time in his fiction.

In the little autobiographical treatise, The Story of a Novel, Wolfe explained that three time elements were "inherent in the material"¹ he used to create Of Time and the River. The first time element was the actual present, in which the narrative moved ahead and "which represented characters and events as living in the present and moving forward into an immediate future."² Wolfe realized, of course, that this approach to time was common to most literature. The second time element was psychological and revealed "these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they had experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment."³ In American fiction this psychological theory of time, related to the controlling dualism between the masculine and feminine principles centered in the individual's childhood attitudes toward his parents, was original with Wolfe. The third time element was "the time of rivers, mountains, oceans and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against

¹Thomas Wolfe, The Story of a Novel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 51. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as SN.

²Ibid. ³Ibid.

which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day."¹ The critic Louis Rubin has observed that this third time, "which did not change and seemed to mock all of mortal existence, limited as that existence was by change and death,"² provided Wolfe with a basis for his tragic vision of human destiny. Perhaps this is true, although we believe that too frequently the third time element was used by Wolfe as a kind of unconvincing pastoral justification for his romantic pessimism. It was the conception of psychological time, supporting his informing artistic vision, which we feel enabled Wolfe to unify the various themes in his fiction.

At the beginning of his article "Time as Unity in Thomas Wolfe," W. P. Albrecht commented: "It is largely through his effort to find permanence in flux that the novels of Thomas Wolfe may be considered 'modern' in their treatment of time."³ A few paragraphs later the critic added that in Wolfe's fiction "the feeling of time--of flux and permanence--unifies each of the completed novels and the four novels considered as one."⁴ Margaret Church expressed the same opinion more romantically in her article "Dark Time," when she wrote that "the four novels of Wolfe's tetralogy echo the voice of time. Like the great railroad

¹Ibid., p. 52. ²Rubin, p. 29.

³W. P. Albrecht, "Time as Unity in Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 239. ⁴Ibid., p. 240.

sheds, they harbor its sound."¹ The article by Miss Church is chiefly interesting, however, because of the cross-references to Bergson and Proust. In the viewpoint of the critic, Wolfe necessarily relied heavily upon his artistic insight in dealing with the problem of time, for the American author, "unlike Proust, was no philosopher, and would without question have been confused by an array of Bergsonian metaphysics."² Since this criticism is pertinent, a brief summary will now be given of Wolfe's use of psychological intuition, as a substitute for the more traditional philosophical approach, in his first novel.

When Wolfe was a graduate student at Harvard, his creative writing teacher, Professor Baker, advised his students that the ability to profit from intelligent criticism usually made the difference between "a second-rate artist and a great artist."³ Wolfe did not agree with his teacher on this matter, and during the period of his final disenchantment with the 47 Workshop, wrote a letter to Professor Baker (summer or early fall of 1923) which contained a defense, consistent with his own romantic temperament, of the connection between genius and intuition:

You, or no man else, can make me a great artist, or a second-rate artist, or any kind of artist . . . That part of our destiny, believe me, is fixed, and nothing

¹Margaret Church, "Dark Time," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 260. ²Ibid., pp. 249-50.

³Nowell, p. 47.

save death or madness can check or change it. And worldly wisdom on life, from the experienced traveler, is of no avail. If there is genius, the thing is a marvellous intuition, little dependent on observation. If there is no genius, I'd as soon draw wages from one form of hackery as another.¹

It was this faculty of intuition to which Wolfe turned, his choice practically determined by the singular demands of his artistic vision, to give form and meaning to his beginning novel, Look Homeward, Angel.

Before Wolfe began writing this novel he had already re-defined the philosophical problem of finding permanence in flux as the more intimate psychological problem of discovering the forces in American life that resulted in narcissistic isolation, usually accompanied by such a needless waste of potentially creative human resources. This problem would inevitably lead Wolfe in his fiction to an examination of spiritual evil. At this time, however, his curiosity was psychological, and his approach to the problem was not too different in its human aspects from Helen Gant's disturbed reverie in Of Time and the River about the loneliness and frustration so painfully visible in the lives of the people she knew in Altamont:

'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 any one 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

¹Ibid., pp. 47-48.

a way, and yet what we really think and feel and believe we never say at all. . . .

'Why are we all so false, cowardly, cruel, and disloyal toward one another and toward ourselves? Why do we spend our days in doing useless things, in false pretense and triviality? Why do we waste our lives--exhaust our energy--throw everything good away on falseness and lies and emptiness? Why do we deliberately destroy ourselves this way, when we want joy and love and beauty and it is all around us in the world if we would only take it? Why are we so afraid and ashamed when there is really nothing to be afraid and ashamed of? Why have we wasted everything, thrown our lives away, what is this 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? Why is it? Why? Why? Why?

A few pages earlier Helen had complained to Hugh McGuire, W. O. Gant's doctor, about how miserable she felt, especially since she realized her father was so near to death. Wolfe's psychological bias in this novel is unmistakable from the answer which he had the doctor give the unhappy woman. Dr. McGuire explained to Helen that "it's not the death of the dying that is terrible, it is the death of the living,"² and that psychologically "we always die that death for the same reason--because our father dies."³ This is true because "when the father goes, the whole structure of the family life goes with him--and unless his children have the will, the stuff, the courage to make something of their own, they die, too."⁴ In Wolfe's artistic vision, what complicates the death of the father for the children

¹OTR, pp. 228-30. ²Ibid., p. 215. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

is that the disappearance of the "structure of life" associated with his personality does not necessarily have to coincide with his physical death. His psychological death is adequate.

II

Purely as literary creations, the father and mother of Eugene Gant are very much alive throughout Look Homeward, Angel, and in this regard they illustrate Wolfe's unusual success in creating three-dimensional characters whenever he dealt with material contemporaneous emotionally with his life at home. Gant and Eliza, however, represent much more than two remarkably vivid characters in a book whose general meaning is supposed to be limited by its autobiographical form. They are also representative Victorian puritan types, and on this level, their lives have universal significance. This was clearly part of Wolfe's artistic intention in making a psychological interpretation of the "buried lives" of all the members of the Gant family so that he could reveal the connections between the neurotic personalities of the parents and the loneliness and emotional waste in the lives of the children.

Gant and Eliza have at least five different psychological roles in the novel, all of them colored by the bitter domestic struggle in which they have been engaged as husband and wife throughout most of their married life. First,

they appear as real people. In this role Gant is the egotistical stonecutter from Pennsylvania, almost a comic-opera mixture of the drunken lecher and Victorian puritan father; yet tremendously vital, with his passion for the ritual of life within the privacy of a home in which he is sole lord and master, his love of roaring fires, abundant food, and melodramatic, comical invective. Eliza is the possessive boarding house owner from the mountains of North Carolina, an infuriating combination of the martyr and morally immaculate mother of a large family; yet indomitably willed, with her miserly contempt for almost everything in life that failed to make money, her obsessive lust for real estate, her Scotch-Irish clairvoyance and incredibly ego-centric memory, and her smug, self-righteous respectability.

The second role in which Gant and Eliza appear is that of emotionally rejecting parents, and it is in this role that they exert an almost determining influence in helping establish a sense of narcissistic exile in each of their children, although most noticeably in Ben and Eugene. It must be remembered that Gant and Eliza, early in their married life, revealed neither the capacity nor the inclination to understand each other as husband and wife. Instead they soon regarded each other as strangers whose marriage provided a legitimate arena for savage domestic strife. All of the Gant children, therefore, when quite young were exposed to the emotional antagonism which existed between their parents,

and the most damaging result of this clash of parental egotisms was the feeling of rejection which it produced in the children. On this score, the children felt like unwanted strangers, exiles in a family that reflected the "confusion, antagonism, and disorder"¹ in the personalities of their parents. In addition, the emotions of the children were divided in this deadly contest between father and mother, and because of their ambiguous allegiance to each parent, the children had strong feelings of resentment, guilt, and betrayal. For them the fight was hopeless, especially when they were used selfishly by Gant and Eliza as weapons to prove which parent was right.

Gant and Eliza were also rejecting parents in that their neurotic egotism forced them to remain blindly insensitive to the real emotional needs of their children. Instead of responding with sympathetic insight and unsolicited love, the parents impressed upon their children that understanding and affection never came unbidden; they had to be deserved--that is, the children had to prove through what they accomplished that somehow they had earned the right to be loved. This was true because the world was a hostile place in which every individual had to fight for attention and success.

The children, suffering from a lack of unselfish affection from their parents, easily found this neurotic view

¹LHA, p. 246.

of life convincing, and after having made a necessary retreat into their narcissistic shells, soon were able to look upon themselves as isolated little centers in an antagonistic universe, and with a self-pity which eventually would rival the inflexible egotism of Gant and Eliza. In this unresponsive, calloused world, love was indeed treacherous, and the shrewd person--that is, the emotionally rejected child who was neurotically convinced of the justness of his exile from warm human relationships--tried to avoid entanglements with other people as he grew older which might involve an invasion of his secret personality. He was not interested in sharing his life with another person but in discovering complete self-sufficiency, since if he did not really need the affection of other people, he could never be seriously hurt. In an insecure present exaggerated by an unpredictable future--which for him, at least, would always remain emotionally threatening--he was an exile simply because narcissistic isolation, so long as he was not disillusioned with his self-love, seemed preferably to inevitable betrayal.

The third role in which Gant and Eliza appear in Look Homeward, Angel is that of representative Victorian puritan parents. Eliza is practically the archetype of the Victorian puritan mother, invincibly secure behind the pale of her own moral superiority. Moreover, she takes a self-satisfied delight in her superiority, buttressed by the fatalistic conviction that her life is "utterly beyond any personal

defeat or ruin,"¹ in malicious combination with her complacent prophecies of sickness, failure, and death for other people.

The name of Eliza's family, the Pentlands (the name itself suggesting the "pent-up" feelings of the typical puritan), is consistent with the emotional repression in her own personality: her sexual frigidity, her masochistic devotion to work, her constant nagging, her miserliness, and her self-centered indifference to the human needs of other people. Eliza believes that if only sex, licker, and profanity might be eliminated from life, this would be the best of all possible worlds, provided, of course, that children forever remained dutiful to the obligations they owe their parents. Eliza also is a pragmatic puritan who believes that money and success almost always go together. Finally, she is a sentimental optimist who attaches an exaggerated importance to family life, despite the obvious lack of affection and understanding among its members in her own home.

Gant seems to be much less convincing a model of the Victorian puritan type than his wife. It is true that Gant is a "good family man" when sober, and that he maintains usually the appearance of Victorian respectability whenever he is downtown working in his marble shop. In the small town of Altamont, however, his reputation as a decent-living

¹OTR, p. 352.

middle class citizen has been hopelessly compromised by his notorious drinking bouts and shameless whore-mongering. This side of Gant's nature represents his rebellion against the narrow moral standards of the community, but undisciplined as his revolt may seem, it is still largely superficial. Actually the stone-cutter's drinking and lechery are but the inverted side of his wife's puritanical distrust of desire. Gant, like both Eliza and his more decorous neighbors, also is convinced that physical desire is wicked, and he is the drunken animal in his love-making chiefly because he has never been able to connect affection with desire, love with sex. The reprobate Gant, despite his scandalous behavior, at heart remains a conventional Victorian puritan father.

Gant is certainly a typical puritan in preaching the virtues of thrift, hard work, and self-denying ambition to his children. As a stone-cutter he preserves the heartiest contempt for any man who has never done what he calls a "hard day's work in his life," and he takes special pride in eulogizing, for the moral edification of his children, his own role as the self-made man who has worked long and hard to support an ungrateful family. In these moods he contrasts the privations of his youth with the pampered existence of his children, charging that they are little more than economic parasites, whose very lives depend upon the bounty provided by his own selfless, uncomplaining toil.

Eliza agrees with the views of her husband in theory, for both Gants assume that children, for the privilege of having been born and reared by their parents, no matter how indifferently, have mortgaged permanently their emotional independence. In addition, Gant and Eliza agree that children, so long as they are financially dependent in the home, rightfully should feel guilty about any kind of self-indulgence (going to school represents a form of indulgence to the Victorian puritan), and that especially they have no right to criticize the views of the parents who are unselfishly providing their economic support. If this latter right ever exists, the children are entitled to it only after they have left home and have proven their worth by becoming financially successful on their own.

From the summary which has just been given, an argument can be made that Gant and Eliza used the mythology of Victorian puritanism to provide a moral justification for their role as emotionally rejecting parents. In other words, by attaching a moral significance to what their children might legitimately expect from life, supported by an attack upon emotional spontaneity and desire as symptoms of an unstable weakness in character, Gant and Eliza attempted to camouflage their own selfishness. The result, of course, merely intensified the feelings of loneliness and exile which already existed in their children.

The fourth role in which Gant and Eliza appear in

Look Homeward, Angel reveals their determining influence over the lives of their children solely in terms of the Oedipal situation. Gant as the Freudian father is a hateful image of parental authority and vindictive wrath to each of his sons. The oldest son, Steve, despises him, yet at the same time is compulsively driven to waste his own life in imitation of his father's libertine excesses. Eventually this particular son, who despite his weakness remains his mother's favorite, leaves home for good. Luke, the second son, attempts to disguise his fear and jealousy of Gant by bringing him gifts and playing up to his vanity. This son's compulsive stuttering, however, in combination with the disordered extroversion and self-pity in his personality, is a more revealing indication of the way he really regards his father. The embittered son Ben feels hostile toward both parents, but his attitude toward Gant is one of contemptuous resentment mixed with fear, while his bitterness toward Eliza stems from the infuriating conviction that his mother has somehow betrayed him. Ben feels that his parents, selfishly exploiting their children's instinctive loyalties and guilts, have also destroyed any chances they might have of finding happiness in the future. The daughter Helen differs from her brothers in that she is enviously resentful of her mother, not of Gant, and the strength of this emotional bond between daughter and father, from the time Helen was a small girl brushing her lips against the rough bristles of Gant's

mustache, might serve as a textbook example of the Electra complex. At the same time, Helen is an unhappy, frustrated woman who realizes that the martyr-like attention she has lavished on her father has never really been appreciated, and she feels that her life is a failure.

In Look Homeward, Angel the Oedipal situation is given its most extensive treatment in Eugene's relationship with his father and mother. Eliza, it must be remembered, was a frigid wife who never seemed to question that her body had been created for any other sexual function than to bear and nurse children. For this reason, she was willing to submit with disgust to her husband as a bed-partner until she reached the end of childbearing. When that time arrived, she retreated to her own bedroom and never again did she and Gant share the same room at night. Because she was so self-righteously oblivious of her complete sexual nature, Eliza saw nothing out of the ordinary in refusing to wean her youngest son until he was almost four years old or in permitting him to sleep in her bed, nestling warmly against her back and flanks, until he had reached puberty.

The emotional consequences for Eugene of such an intimate relationship with his mother were inevitably deep-seated and lasting. By continuing to sleep in the same bed with his mother until adolescence, the son, in a very real sense, had usurped the sexual role of his father, especially in the light of Eliza and Gant's continence after Eugene's

birth. In this respect, Eugene was actually a sexual participant in the neurotic warfare between his parents. The horror of incest, therefore, with the revengeful, tremendous figure of Gant in the background, was not foreign to the protagonist's childhood imagination, and it made him even more dependent upon the emotional security afforded by his mother.

Eliza as the Freudian mother wanted her son to love her and to hate his father, their mutual enemy. In addition, Eliza was an extremely possessive woman who wished to keep her youngest son a "baby boy" eternally so that he would never outgrow his emotional dependence upon his mother. To succeed in this goal she capitalized upon her son's fears and employed her own strength, not to help Eugene develop his latent self-confidence, but constantly to undermine his faith in himself. This kind of castrating possessiveness on the part of the mother, re-inforcing the son's Oedipal fears, guilts, and resentments, could only have destructive effects upon his personality after he had grown up and left home. In Wolfe's fiction the word used to characterize these uncontrollable and damaging emotions is fury.

The conclusion to be drawn from the author's psychological investigation of the "buried lives" of the Gants is that although the sense of isolation in the children was produced originally by emotional rejection on the part of the parents, the self-destructive waste in their lives

after they had become men and women was connected with the determining pattern of residual emotions, still hopelessly confused, surviving from their Oedipal relationships with a neurotic father and mother.

The fifth role in which Gant and Eliza appear in Look Homeward, Angel is that of archetypal parents in the imagination of their children: that is, the structure of the father's life, metaphorically represented by the house on Woodson Street, symbolizes the masculine principle in the children's imagination; and the structure or image of the mother's life, metaphorically represented by Dixieland, symbolizes the feminine principle. Although we do not believe that Wolfe had an adequate grasp of the significance of this symbolic dualism when he was writing his first novel, it still unmistakably belonged to his artistic vision during those years, and for this reason, its potential significance is both expressed and implicit in the fiction.¹ The problem,

¹Richard Chase, Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949). In this book Richard Chase has emphasized that myth is literature before it is cultural phenomenon, and that as literature "must be considered as an aesthetic creation of the human imagination." (p. 73) Chase also has suggested that with the mythopoeic imagination, the metaphorical experience invariably precedes the conscious symbolic abstraction. (p. 26) Certainly this seems to have been true of the way Wolfe's imagination functioned, and perhaps it helps explain why the archetypal dualism in Look Homeward, Angel, which cannot be divorced from the book's form, is not represented consciously enough by the controlling symbolism which Wolfe used in his later fiction. Instead the dualism is revealed chiefly through the actual experiences of Gant and Eliza, interpreted metaphorically, together with the houses associated with their personalities.

therefore, which Wolfe faced as an artist after finishing Look Homeward, Angel was to gain a more conscious understanding of the significance of the archetypal role of the parents as related to the other themes in the book which he had represented and interpreted primarily as a psychological novelist.

It was not easy for Wolfe to discover a solution to this problem since it actually meant that he had to find a controlling form for his new fiction which would unify and illuminate his psychological interests in flux, emotional rejection, Victorian puritanism, and the Oedipal situation, as well as the themes of lost innocence and pastoralism.² To solve this problem Wolfe shifted his psychological approach to a more primary archetypal vision which embraced the reality of a dualism between good and evil at the spiritual center of man's experience.

Before attempting any summary of the archetypal dualism in Wolfe's fiction, especially as affected by his growing awareness of spiritual evil, it is first necessary to examine Look Homeward, Angel specifically in terms of the author's psychological and pastoral vision at the beginning of his creative career as a novelist. In the next eight chapters of this dissertation, therefore, an attempt will be made to show how Wolfe used the setting of a Victorian puritan family in

¹The important themes of lost innocence and pastoralism in Look Homeward, Angel will be examined in detail later in the dissertation.

small town America, dominated by parents typical enough to symbolize the masculine and feminine principles of a controlling psychological dualism, to reveal and interpret how the pastoral vision of life, a reflection of the rejected child's desire for isolation coupled with his emotional nostalgia for lost innocence, was formed in the personality of the narcissistic protagonist, Eugene Gant.

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSE ON WOODSON STREET

'Come to us, Father, in the watches of the night, come to us as you always came, bringing to us the invincible sustenance of your strength, the limitless treasure of your bounty, the tremendous structure of your life that will shape all lost and broken things on earth again into a golden pattern of exultancy and joy.'¹

William Oliver Gant was born in 1850 in Dutch Pennsylvania, and during his childhood he acquired a love for the tremendous barns and well-kept farmlands of that country, "the ripe bending of golden grain, the plenty, the order, the clean thrift of the people."² At the same time, from his wandering father, who had journeyed to Pennsylvania from England, Gant inherited "a passionate and obscure hunger for voyages,"³ which sent him footloose to Baltimore at the age of fifteen. While in Baltimore the drifting boy stopped in front of a stone mason's shop, and suddenly was possessed by nameless excitement as he observed the carved tombstones in the showcase window. He felt that more than anything in the world he wanted to create, to carve delicately with a chisel,

¹OTR, p. 233. ²LHA, p. 6. ³Ibid., p. 4.

"to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone. He wanted to carve an angel's head."¹ Gant never succeeded in carving an angel's head, but after five years apprenticeship, he did master the stone mason's trade, and spent the next few years in Baltimore, working, drinking, and often at night, frequenting the theater of Booth and Salvini, where his powerful memory absorbed the rhetoric of the plays, especially those of Shakespeare.

By this time Gant had attained his full manhood. He was six feet four, possessed of tremendous physical and sensual powers, and was seething on the inside with desire, fury and unrest. Soon he left Baltimore to continue his aimless drift down the continent, alone and lost, hoping to find in alien lands the order and establishment of his childhood world. He settled first in Sydney, a small town in the eastern part of the state of Old Catawba, where he did stone mason's work on the new State Penitentiary. Here Gant lived a sober, industrious life until he had to marry a young woman from the town, Maggie Efird, whom he had gotten into trouble. Gant divorced Maggie as soon as it was convenient, but within a few months he had gotten another woman pregnant whom he was again obliged to marry. This woman, Cynthia Masom,² was a gaunt, tubercular spinster, ten years older than her husband,

¹Ibid.

²Wolfe was not always consistent in details connected with his minor characters. Maggie Efird does not appear in Look Homeward, Angel by name, and Gant's second wife, Cynthia, is called Lydia Mason in "The Web of Earth."

who had a nest egg and a small millinery shop in the town.

Gant now gave full vent to his fury, and eighteen months of wedded hell with a howling, drunken maniac of a husband proved too much for Cynthia's precarious health; she died suddenly one night after a hemorrhage, but not before Gant had started an affair with her sister-in-law, Eller Beals, who had come to Sydney to visit in their home. This affair continued after Cynthia's death untill Eller's husband, getting wind of the situation, wrote a threatening letter to his wife, ordering her to return home by the next train or he was prepared to come to Sydney and leave behind "a damned dead Yankee."¹ In this fashion Eller Beals drifted in and out of Gant's life, and the reprobate Yankee stone-cutter, sick with fear and penitence, his health wasted by his tremendous drinking, decided it was time for him also to leave the little Southern town where his evil fame was so well known. He packed his tools and belongings, and took the train for Altamont, a small town in the western part of the state nestled in the fortress of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Gant was thirty-two years old when he arrived in Altamont one grey-golden day in late October. He had managed to save twelve hundred dollars from the wreckage of Cynthia's estate, and with this money he rented a store at one edge of the town's public square, acquired a small stock of

¹Thomas Wolfe, From Death to Morning (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 244. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as DM.

marbles, and set up business. To the townspeople of Altamont, Gant was a stranger from the North, lodging in a boarding house, but even so, his tall scarecrow figure soon became the object of familiar gossip. Gant's health returned with the spring, together with his old eagerness for life, and he made the acquaintance of Eliza Pentland, a native woman several years younger than himself and a member of one of the town's oldest and most prolific families. Somehow the penitent stonecutter managed model behavior for a year, and he and Eliza were married the following May.

The house that the newlyweds moved into on Woodson Street had been built by Gant with his own hands, and it reflected the "rich modelling of his fantasy."¹ It was located on a quiet, hilly street, had plenty of warm rooms, and a high embracing veranda in front. Soon "whatever he touched in that rich fortress of his soul sprang into golden life."² Behind the house was a long yard that stretched four hundred feet, and here Gant had planted an orchard, grape vines, and a garden:

as the years passed, the fruit trees--the peach, the plum, the cherry, the apple--grew great and bent beneath their clusters. His grape vines thickened into brawny ropes of brown and coiled down the high wire fences of his lot, and hung in a dense fabric, upon the trellises, roping his domain twice around. They climbed the porch end of the porch, and house and framed the upper windows in thick bowers.³

Gant and Eliza lived together in this house from 1884 to

¹LHA, p. 16. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

1908, and during these years Eliza bore him fifteen children, of whom seven lived past the first year: Steve (the oldest), Daisy, Helen, Grover and Ben (the twins), Luke, and Eugene (the baby). During these years the house on Woodson Street, girdled by its great clustering vines, remained for Gant "the picture of his soul, the garment of his will."¹

Gant's union with Eliza, however, was not a happy one: they were opposite types, with little capacity or willingness to understand the views of the other; both were aggressive egotists, and both soon regarded their marriage as a legalized arena for savage domestic warfare:

For from the first, deeper than love, deeper than hate, as deep as the unfleshed bones of life, an obscure and final warfare was being waged between them.

When Eliza married Gant, she was just a young country woman of twenty-five, ignorant of life, hungry for affection, and completely innocent of the real personality of her husband. Gant, although only nine years older than his wife, seemed much older than his years: "he looked old--his ways were old--he had lived so much among old people."³ In addition, Gant was a stranger from the remote and alien North, and he preserved this distance in his relationship with his wife. For the next forty years Eliza only addressed her husband by his first name twice. "He was--and remained thereafter-- 'Mister' Gant."⁴

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 18. ³OTR, p. 252. ⁴LHA, p. 18.

For his new marriage Gant also preserved the embittered egotism which lay behind the cruelty and drunken abuse of his life in Sydney, and he was not long in revealing that ugly side of his nature to his young wife. Eller Beals had continued to correspond with Gant, even after his marriage, and the letters kept arriving until Eliza considered it her duty to write John Beals and inform him of the misconduct of his wife. When Gant discovered what Eliza had done, he was furious. He came home in a maniacal rage, cursed his wife, and warned her never to forget that she was sitting at his table only because Eller Beals was married to another man and had left him. In "The Web of Earth" Eliza tells of her reaction to Gant's abusive attack:

'I got up and went out onto the porch and I wanted to go out and leave him then and there, but I was carrying my first baby around inside me, and it had rained and I could smell the flowers, the roses, and the lilies, and the honeysuckle vines, and all of the grapes a-gettin' ripe, and it was growing dark, and I could hear the people talking on their porches, and I had nowhere to go, I could not leave him, and 'Lord God!' I said, 'What shall I do? What shall I do?'¹

Gant also had begun to drink heavily again, and his savage sprees, which occurred almost punctually every two or three months, usually lasted several days. As the years passed, several of these sprees lengthened into an unbroken drunkenness that continued for weeks, and each time Eliza had to send her husband to take the cure for alcoholism at

¹DM, p. 246.

Richmond. Gant was completely inconsiderate of others in his drinking. On one of his extended drunks, Eliza and four of her children were sick at the same time with typhoid fever. Gant's most devastating drunk, however, occurred during the months preceding the birth of Eugene, for Eliza's final pregnancy had particularly infuriated him. All of this brutal intoxication was accompanied not only by the abuse and cruelty Gant inflicted on his wife and family, but by his recurrent visits to a house of prostitution in Eagle Crescent, a neighboring village. Quite obviously, such behavior became notorious in Altamont, and Gant's drunkenness soon was a classic myth for the children of the town. On this score, the intemperate stonecutter either could not or did not wish to reform. Until his death, Gant's animal egotism, as reflected in his drinking, remained vulgar, uncontrolled, and completely selfish.

Gant was excessive not only in his drinking; he was excessive in everything connected with the Rabelaisian sweep of his enormous appetites. To begin with, Gant was a man of unusual physical strength and vitality. His friend Fagg Sluder said that the stonecutter had more real strength and vitality than any two men he had ever known, and even Eliza had to admit the extraordinary vigor of her husband:

'Lord! I've seen him do enough to kill a hundred trees-- the things he's done and managed to get over would kill the strongest tree that ever lived!'¹

¹Ibid., p. 247.

It was not that Gant was an exceptionally large man, for despite his height, he was never fleshy; his frame, however, was big-boned, and his lean muscles seemed charged with a dynamic kind of energy. His tremendous strength became almost as legendary around the town as his wild drinking sprees, and Gant's friends liked to tell how they would go into his shop and find the stonecutter lifting one end of an eight-hundred pound block of marble while his two big negro helpers strained at the other end, hardly able to budge it. Gant's ready indulgence of his overpowering appetites was based on his extraordinary physical vitality.

With Gant, unfortunately, everything was on the same level of animal appetite: hunger, desire, love. He especially demanded abundance in his food, and he delighted in describing the great stored barns and the groaning plenty of the farms in Dutch Pennsylvania he had known as a boy. Gant's own eating habits were Gargantuan, and Eliza tells of a typical meal for Gant, even after his great frame was wasted by cancer:

'Right up to the end he could eat a meal that would put most people in the grave, two dozen raw oysters, a whole fried chicken, an apple pie, and two or three pots of coffee, sir. Why I've seen him do it time and again! With all sorts of vegetables, corn on the cob and sweet pertaters, string beans and spinach and all such as that.'¹

Gant was as much the animal in his love making as he was in his eating. The sordid history of his life in Sydney

¹Ibid., p. 257.

has already been mentioned, and also his drunken visits to Elizabeth's house of prostitution in Eagle Crescent. Eliza certainly had no illusions about the goatish fashion in which her husband made love. She implied this in "The Web of Earth" when she mentioned first learning about Gant's divorce from Maggie Efird. Gant had kept this affair secret, but when faced with the proof of the final divorce papers in Eliza's hands, he maintained sheepishly that he and Maggie had never slept together as husband and wife. Eliza was unconvinced:

'I know you, and I know you couldn't have kept away from her. You'd 'a'got at her somehow,' I said, 'if you had to bore a hole through the wall!'¹

Gant, of course, almost never displayed any open affection for his wife, especially in front of his children. On the few occasions when he did attempt to fondle Eliza by putting his arm stiffly around her waist, she would become painfully embarrassed, tears would come to her eyes, and she would bridle away clumsily, saying: "'Get away! Get away from me! It's too late for that now.'² The children also were embarrassed by these rare, unnatural exhibitions of affection. Gant's love-making remained an extension of his lust, and after Eugene's birth, the stonecutter and Eliza started sleeping in separate rooms.

In addition to his lechery, his vulgarity, his periods

¹Ibid., p. 237. ²LHA, p. 65.

of violent drunkenness, and his tremendous physical vitality, what else was Gant like during those years when he breathed the heated lion-breath of his desire and fury over the growing family on Woodson Street? To begin with, Gant was a wanderer who had been fascinated by the romance of unvisited lands from the time he was a boy in Dutch Pennsylvania. This accounted for his initial trip to Old Catawba, and although his marriage with Eliza tied him down, it did not eliminate his love for ships, trains, hotels, cities, voyages, anything that promised relief from the drabness of small town life in America at the turn of the century. Eliza always regarded her husband as a rolling stone who would never have amounted to anything if she had let him carry out his romantic day-dreams:

'Lord God! I never saw a man like that for wanderin'. I'll vow! a rollin' stone, a wanderer--that's all he'd a-been, oh! California, China, anywheres--forever wantin' to be up and gone.'¹

Gant's eagerness to travel reflected more than just his romantic desire and hunger. At first it involved a kind of search based on his own feelings of loneliness and exile. Gant was the lost American, seeking to get some meaning out of the confusion and brutal chaos of experience. Surely, Gant felt, if he wandered blindly long enough he might stumble onto "a light, a door, a dwelling place of warmth and certitude."² Gant, of course, never succeeded, and he made

¹DM, p. 250. ²OTR, p. 254.

his last voyage to California in the fall of 1906. On his return home he realized that he was finally caught in the trap of life and fixity, and he resigned himself petulantly to fate and to the cancer which was already beginning to stir in his tremendous frame. The last voyage for Gant, the Far-Wanderer, was to be his death.

Gant had come to Altamont a stranger from the North, and despite his drinking, he preserved that strangeness, together with a sense of Victorian dignity and reserve, in his relationships with the people of the town. It has been mentioned that Eliza never addressed her husband as anything but "Mr. Gant," for if she ever had called him by one of his first names, "their anguish of shame and impropriety would have been so great that they could hardly have endured it."¹ The wife's addressing her husband as "Mister" was not an uncommon practice of the time, but the stonecutter also remained "Mister Gant" even to his closest friends. There was something singular about Gant, a kind of sombre mournfulness and detachment most clearly seen in his face, which held off any intimate advances. On Eugene's first trip to Harvard, one of the men in the smoking car, Mr. Candler, told the son of his first impression of Gant:

'I was going back to work after dinner and had just turned the corner at the Square there from Academy Street when I saw your father. I remember stopping

¹Ibid., p. 251.

to watch him for a moment because there was something about his appearance--I don't know what it was, but if you saw him once you'd never forget him--there was something about the way he looked and talked and worked that was different from any one I'd ever seen.¹

Gant re-inforced his reserve just by the way he dressed. He not only was meticulous about his clothes--his suits were always made of expensive black broadcloth, spotless, faultlessly pressed, and he carried himself in them as straight as an arrow--but Gant even wore his good clothes when he did manual labor. On a typical weekday Eugene might climb the veranda leading to Gant's store, walk through the dusty interior of the display room with its slabs of marble and masses of Vermont granite, and find his father in the workroom, bending over a trestle and using the heavy wooden mallet with delicate care as he guided the chisel through the letters of an inscription. Gant would be dressed in his well-brushed garments of black broadcloth, boiled shirt, wing collar, silk tie, starched cuffs, and his coat removed so that a long striped apron could cover all his front.

Gant was no common workman, and to his young son he seemed a master craftsman. He was "better at this than any one in all the world."² Gant's opinion of himself was slightly as elevated as that of his son's, for he always regretted that he had never been able to study the law. Even so, Gant was not afraid of physical labor, and he had righteous contempt for those people who he felt had never done a hard day's

¹Ibid., p. 56. ²LHA, p. 101.

work in their lives. Gant's own integrity was uncompromising with regard to any work that he did with his hands, and for that reason, Gant's hands seemed to symbolize the very best in his personality. To Eugene they were "the largest, most powerful, and somehow the most shapely hands he had ever seen."¹ After his father's death when Gant's body, emaciated by his struggle with cancer, lay in the casket, his hands still retained their granite power and symmetry, and evoked, as nothing else could have done, "the strength, the skill, all the hope, hunger, fury, and unrest that had lashed and driven on through life the gaunt figure of the stonecutter."²

Eugene once observed that Gant was a great man, and not a singular one, "because singularity does not hold life in unyielding devotion to it."³ By this Eugene meant that Gant's vitality, his passion for order, his sense of decency and dispatch, his love of cleanness, roaring fires, abundant food, gardens, good clothes of black broadcloth, hotels, ships, trains, and new cities, even his foul drunkenness and howling fury, were not isolated from experience, since in his house on Woodson Street he had actually created for his children the "enchanted structure" of a "golden life."⁴

The creation of a "golden life" by the reprobate Gant is not paradoxical if one remembers that in addition to his

¹OTR, p. 271. ²Ibid., p. 272. ³LHA, p. 62.

⁴OTR, p. 271.

wandering and drunken lechery, "he was intensely a family man; their clustered warmth and strength about him was life."¹ Even Eliza admitted that you had to give the devil his due, and despite her husband's "wander' and goin' away, he was as good a family man as ever lived":²

'Now, boy, I want to tell you: he could do anything about a house, he could repair and fix anything, he could make anything with his hands, and let me tell you, sir; when you went downstairs in the morning you always found a good fire burning in the range; now, you didn't have to wait, you didn't have to go pokin' around to get a fire. Now he liked to eat, and he always had a good hot stove waitin' for you.'³

Gant desperately needed the order and dependence of his home, and he lavished upon his family his own love of abundant food, the magnificent gusto of his rhetoric, and finally his passion for ritual. After the birth of Eugene, Gant's drinking had tapered off, and until Eliza purchased Dixieland, "the family was at the very core and ripeness of its life together."⁴ In the memory of Wolfe's protagonist, a typical autumn or winter day in the house on Woodson Street began with Gant's rising at six or six-thirty and dressing. Then he went downstairs to build the fires, and as he kindled a blaze in the range and a roaring fire in the sitting room, he would compose his morning's flood of rhetoric. At this point he would appear before Eliza in the kitchen to deliver his tirade, which usually included grotesque references to her "worthless old father," Major Pentland, her skinflint

¹LHA, p. 49. ²DM, p. 234. ³Ibid. ⁴LHA, p. 63.

brothers, and to all the "Mountain Grills"--an inclusive term Gant applied to the native population of the region. After this tirade Gant appeared at the foot of the stairs and delivered the following cry by formula:

'Steve! Ben! Grover! Luke! You damned scoundrels: get up! In God's name, what will become of you! You'll never amount to anything as long as you live . . . When I was your age, I had milked four cows, done all the chores, and walked eight miles through the snow by this time.'

Gant was then in a good humor for breakfast, and the family sat down to a groaning table. After breakfast Gant departed for his marble shop about the same time the boys left for school, and he came home for lunch--dinner as it was called then--briefly garrulous with the day's happenings downtown. The central occasion in the home for the children, however, was their father's return in the evening, loaded with provisions, and his nightly tirade against Eliza--a ceremony which required a half-hour in composition, and another three-quarters, with repetitions and additions, in delivery. The rhetoric of Gant's invective was so undisciplined, his similes so preposterous and comical, created in a Rabelaisian spirit of vulgar mirth, that the children were shaken by it to their toes, and "grew to await his return in the evening with a kind of exhilaration."² After this explosive tirade had ended, the family sat down to another huge meal, and after supper Gant held forth in the sitting

¹Ibid., p. 50. ²Ibid., p. 63.

room, swinging back and forth in his stout rocker, and punctuating his comments with powerful spurts of tobacco juice into the blazing fire.

These magic years of the family's densely woven, turbulent life in the house on Woodson Street, with the vital presence of Gant, the archetypal father, giving dramatic color to all their lives, provided a safe, cozy world as well for Wolfe's protagonist. During the long evenings, "secure and conscious in the guarded and sufficient strength of home,"¹ little Eugene lay before the sitting room fire, poring over the engravings and woodcuts in the volumes from his father's bookcase. He was still unable to read, but his sensuous imagination reacted to the pictures, and the past unrolled before him in enormous vistas. Behind him would be his father, talking, rocking vigorously, and at regular intervals, spitting tobacco juice over his son's head into the hissing fire. Or Gant might be in a rhetorical mood, and in his sonorous voice would recite the passages from Shakespeare he had carried in his memory from his nights as a young man attending the theater in Baltimore. In the imagination of his son at this time, the re-assuring vitality of Gant suggested the creative energy and power of the Mississippi River:

His life was like that river, rich with its own deposited and onward-borne agglutinations, fecund with

¹Ibid, p. 11.

its sedimental accretions, filled exhaustlessly by life in order to be more richly itself, and this life, with the great purpose of a river, he emptied now into the harbor of his house, the sufficient haven of himself, for whom the gnarled vines wove round him thrice, the earth burgeoned with abundant fruit, the fire burnt madly.¹

Gant always took special pride in being a good provider, and during Eugene's childhood the family fed stupendously. Thanksgiving and Christmas were the most important feasts for the Gants, and to prepare for these occasions Eliza baked for weeks in advance. At this time Eliza was still a good cook and her meals were something to remember. Little Eugene, of course, was a devout believer in the fantasy of Christmas, and Gant was his unwearied comrade as he scrawled petitions to Santa Claus night after night in the early winter, tossing them into the fire with perfect trust:

As the flame took the paper from his hand and blew its charred ghost away with a howl, Gant would rush with him to the window, point to the stormy northern sky, and say: 'There it goes! Do you see it?'²

Gant shared his son's hatred of useful gifts for Christmas, and he bought the boy wagons, sleds, fire engines, drums, and horns. It was during these pre-puberty years that Eugene "thought his father was the grandest, finest person in the world."³

Eugene was happy with the "enchanted world of his childhood,"⁴ protected by the towering figure of Gant. What

¹Ibid., p. 79. ²Ibid., p. 90. ³HB, p. 48.

⁴OTR, p. 29.

did the children have to fear from "the senseless nihilism of life,"¹ the threat of perpetual, meaningless change, or of being lost on the "spinning and forgotten cinder of this earth,"² so long as they could identify with their father's structure of life. In this regard, the gigantic image of the archetypal father seemed more than human: it was God-like:

It was as hard for them to think of Gant's death as of God's death: it was a great deal harder, because he was more real to them than God, he was more immortal than God, he was God.³

In this chapter it has been shown that in the childhood imagination of Wolfe's protagonist, the masculine image of his father was early associated with the house on Woodson Street, which Gant had built "with his great hands"⁴ even before he married Eliza, and which thereafter remained "the picture of his soul, the garment of his will."⁵ After Eugene had experienced puberty and left his childhood behind, he continued to identify the metaphor of the vine-encircled house, "the roaring fires, the groaning, succulent table, the lavish and explosive ritual of the daily life,"⁶ with his father's legendary vitality.

Since the house was so intimately connected with the masculine image of Gant, it remained in the family until the cancerous stonecutter was too ill to struggle against his

¹LHA, p. 246. ²Ibid., p. 59. ³Ibid., p. 484.

⁴Ibid., p. 16. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid., p. 61.

wife's greed. Then, "stark, bare, and raw, stripped of its girdling vines,"¹ it was sold, and "the rich labor of their life was gone. In this, more than in anything else, Eugene saw the final disintegration of his family."² Seven years later the stonecutter was dead, yet the house on Woodson Street remained a symbol of the golden life which Gant, in the role of the archetypal father, had created for his family:

He had come home again, and yet he could not believe his father was dead, and he thought he heard his great voice ringing in the street again, and that he would see him striding toward him across the Square with his gaunt, earth-devouring stride, or find him waiting every time he turned the corner, or lunging toward the house bearing the tremendous provender of his food and meat, bringing to them all the deathless security of his strength and power and passion, bringing to them all again the roaring message of his fires that shook the fire-full chimney throat with their terrific blast, giving to them all again the exultant knowledge that the good days, the magic days, the golden weather of their lives would come again, and that this dreamlike and phantasmal world in which they found themselves would waken instantly, as it had once, to all the palpable warmth and glory of the earth, if only his father would come back to make it live, to give them life again.³

¹Ibid., p. 605. ²Ibid. ³OTR, p. 328.

CHAPTER VI

DIXIELAND

. . . and finally her terrific ownership of the house was as apparent as if the house were living and could speak to her. For the rest of them that old bleak house had now so many memories of grief and death and intolerable, incurable regret that in their hearts they hated it; but although she had seen a son strangle to death in one of its bleak rooms, she loved the house as if it were a part of her own life--as it was--and her love for it was greater¹ than her love for any one or anything else on earth.

In Look Homeward, Angel the archetypal mother whose femininity has been irreparably damaged by the values of Victorian puritanism is Eliza Gant. Eliza, in other words, represents the eternal feminine principle once it has been de-sexualized and made morally immaculate. In this respect, after Wolfe's protagonist has entered puberty, the mother's personality is associated with his feelings of guilt and lost innocence. Equally important, Eliza's possessiveness is identified with emotional sterility in Eugene's childhood imagination, and with regard to the controlling archetypal dualism in the novel, it symbolizes the castrating threat of the feminine principle over her son's emotional

¹Ibid., p. 352.

development as opposed to the liberating structure of life identified with the father's vitality. By the end of the first section of Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene has already made symbolic connections between the wintry, death-like barrenness of Dixieland and Eliza's personality, just as earlier he had associated Gant's vitality metaphorically with the house on Woodson Street:

It was the winter, and the sullen dying autumn that he hated most at Dixieland--and the dim fly-specked lights, the wretched progress about the house in search of warmth, Eliza untidily wrapped in an old sweater, a dirty muffler, a cast-off man's coat. She glycerined her cold-cracked hands. The chill walls festered with damp; they drank in death from the atmosphere.¹

Eliza Pentland Gant was as supreme an egotist as her husband, and although egotism may have been the only personality trait they shared, she was in her own possessive way as remarkable a person as the furious stonecutter. Eliza was born into a respected and numerous Old Catawban family shortly before the Civil War, and as a young girl, suffered, together with her three oldest brothers, Henry, Will, and Jim, the terrible hardships and deprivations of the post-war years in the South. The effect of these experiences was to develop in Eliza and her brothers an insane niggardliness and an inordinate love of property.

Eliza had already accumulated two small pieces of property before she married Gant, and from the first she regarded the house they moved into on Woodson Street as "a

¹LHA, p. 141.

piece of property, whose value she shrewdly appraised, a beginning for her hoard."¹ Eliza's acquisitiveness enraged Gant, for despite the pride he took in living under his own roof, he had nothing but contempt for the ownership of property as an investment:

'I hope I never own another piece of property as long as I live--save a house to live in. It is nothing but a curse and a care, and the tax-collector gets it all in the end.'²

Such a viewpoint was heresy to Eliza, and it helped inaugurate the bitter strife between them "and the great submerged struggle beneath, founded upon the hatred and love of property."³ At this time Eliza even wanted Gant to abandon his trade of tombstone cutter, for she felt that death was unprofitable: "People, she thought, died too slowly."⁴

What Eliza endured in pain and cruelty after she married "Mister" Gant, no outsider ever knew. She had wanted affection from a kind, understanding husband, and instead, she received from Gant drunken violence and abuse. By the time she was forty-two years old, she had been pregnant fifteen times, and of these pregnancies, only eight children survived childbirth. Eliza did the cooking and laundry for her family, brought the children through epidemics of typhoid fever, diphtheria, and pneumonia, and, in addition, survived serious illnesses herself, not to mention the

¹Ibid., p. 16. ²Ibid., p. 12. ³Ibid., p. 21.

⁴Ibid., p. 17.

prolonged drunks of her husband. In the "Web of Earth"

Eliza describes what these years were like:

'Lord! Lord! I often think of all that I've been through, and wonder that I'm here to tell it. I reckon for a fact I had the power of Nature in me; why! no more trouble than the earth takes bearing corn, all of the children, the eight who lived, and all the others that you never heard about--all of the children and less married life than any woman that I knew--and oh! to think of it, to think that he should say the things he did--cursin' and tauntin' me and runnin' wild with other women, when he had done it all, and like a devil when he saw what he had done. Lord! Lord! . . . the things he did and said were more than I could stand, they¹ made me bitter and I prayed that God would punish him.'

In spite of the ugliness of Gant's conduct, Eliza, in the accepted Victorian fashion, remained faithfully married to her husband, and, at the same time, somehow managed to preserve her own dignity and integrity. She had been wounded by the cruelties Gant inflicted upon her, but she never betrayed her wounded spirit to the author of her woe by any shameful familiarity. She held her distance, wept or was silent when he cursed her, nagged briefly in reply to his outlandish rhetoric, and in the blind, antagonistic warfare in which they were engaged, slowly, implacably had her way:

Eliza came through stolidly to victory. As she marched down these enormous years of love and loss, stained with the rich dyes of pain and pride and death, and with the great wild flare of his alien and passionate life, her limbs faltered in the grip of ruin, but she came on, through² sickness and emaciation, to victorious strength.

Eliza was not an easy woman to understand, and Gant

¹DM, pp. 297-98. ²LHA, pp. 18-19.

certainly was not the man to bridge successfully the gulf that divided them. On this score Gant was appalled by the fixation of his life upon accident: "Strangest of all, he thought, was this union, by which he had begotten children, created a life dependent on him, with a woman so remote from all he understood."¹ What infuriated Gant most about Eliza was not just her powerful, germinal instinct for property. It was the slow, octopal movements of her temper; her Buddhistic complacency; her drawling, mouth-pursing speech; her incredible, ant-like memory; her habit in conversation of exploring all the lost lane-ends of the dead past, "feasting upon the golden pageant of all she had ever said, done, felt, thought, seen, or replied with ego-centric delight";² her fatalistic sense of her own moral perfection combined with her blind indifference to the human needs of other people; her brooding, superstitious interest in sickness, death, and burial; and only then, her mania for acquisition and her "terrible will that wanted to own the earth more than to explore it."³

Just before the birth of Eugene, Eliza was lying in her upstairs bedroom, and as she clasped her hands over her swollen belly, she was already planning her future. Eliza realized that she was forty-two years old and that this pregnancy would be her last. With her tremendous patience she had waited half a lifetime for this event and with

¹Ibid., p. 21. ²Ibid., p. 10. ³Ibid., p. 70.

certain foresight of what she would do when she had finally freed herself from childbearing. She thought enviously of the wealth of her two older brothers, and said determinedly to herself: "'I'll get it. Will has it! Jim has it, and I'm smarter than they are.'"¹ Then her mouth strained with pain and bitterness as she reflected upon Gant's lack of interest in owning property which had foiled her for so long:

'Pshaw! If I hadn't kept after him he wouldn't have a stick to call his own today. What little we have got I've had to fight for; we wouldn't have a roof over our heads; we'd spend the rest of our lives in a rented house.'²

Years before Eliza had given up trying to express herself through Gant, but now as a potential business woman who could bargain like a man, she was going to assert herself. She was especially dissatisfied with the house on Woodson Street, for it was part of her religion not merely to possess property but to draw income from it, and the Woodson Street house was financially so much dead weight. Eliza placed little value on privacy, and was perfectly willing to rent out part of her home to strangers. What she required was a house that could be run like a business and which would yield her a good return on her investment; she was in the market for a boarding house.

Eliza was unable to put her plan into operation for several years. At first Gant was still too formidable an antagonist, and in 1904 the tragic death of their son Grover,

¹Ibid., p. 21. ²Ibid.

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¹Ibid., p. 21. ²Ibid.

while the family were attending the St. Louis Exposition, came as a crushing blow to Eliza. Gant accused her of being responsible for the child's death, and Eliza felt so betrayed and utterly miserable that for the next two years she tried to bury her grief in the oblivion of work.

Then in the fall of 1906, Gant made his trip to California, and returned to Altamont a partially chastened man. He had begun to lose some of his fabulous vitality, and had already felt, with a sense of naked terror, the first stirrings of the cancer which would eventually destroy him. Eliza, however, was growing triumphantly stronger with each passing year and was ready to make her desperate bid for independence. In the summer of 1907, she made a down payment of fifteen hundred dollars on Dixieland, a rambling, gabular frame house of eighteen or twenty rooms, situated five minutes from the public square:

In winter, the wind blew howling blasts under the skirts of Dixieland: its back end was built high off the ground on wet columns of rotting brick. Its big rooms were heated by a small furnace which sent up, when charged with fire, a hot dry enervation to the rooms of the first floor, and a gaseous but chill radiation to those upstairs.¹

The move to Dixieland symbolized the final cleavage between Gant's and Eliza's worlds. Gant could not endure the residence of outsiders under his roof, and for that reason, had a particular revulsion against living in a boarding house:

¹Ibid., p. 128. ²Ibid., p. 51.

to earn one's living by accepting the contempt, the scorn, and the money of what he called 'cheap boarders' was an almost unendurable ignominy.¹

So Gant refused to follow Eliza to Dixieland, and he kept Helen with him in the house on Woodson Street. Eugene went with his mother, and Steve, Ben, and Luke were left floating "in limbo."

Gant stopped by the boarding house on his way to work in the morning to deliver his howling tirade against Eliza, and in the evening he would frequently sit in a stout rocker in the parlor or on the front porch of the "Barn," as he called it, expressing his political views to the boarders, and with mounting rhetoric, predicting soup kitchens and that "your guts will grease your backbone" so soon as a Democratic administration is elected to office. Helen also helped her mother serve the boarders, for whether Eliza was servantless or not, the restless girl needed the animation, the clatter of plates, the table talk, and the stimulation of the boarding house meals. After supper in the evening she would sing for the boarders assembled in the parlor. Even so, for all the Gants the purchase of the boarding house by Eliza represented the end of their family life together as the archetypal father had envisioned it.

The child Eugene especially felt betrayed at having to exchange "the tumultuous, happy, warm centre"² of his father's

¹Ibid., p. 51. ²Ibid., p. 130.

home for the unattractive environment of the boarding house, which he quickly learned to associate with everything he found depressing and sterile in life. For this reason, long after the move had taken place, he returned to Woodson Street whenever he had the opportunity, still seduced by "the powerful charm of Gant's house, of its tacked and added whimsy, its male smell, its girdling rich vines, its great gummed trees, its roaring internal seclusiveness, the blistered varnish, the hot calf-skin, the comfort and abundance."¹

During the first winter after the move to Dixieland, the drafty, many-gabled house was like a tomb for both the mother and son, and Eliza began to suffer from constant rheumatic attacks aggravated by a serious kidney condition. Because of her failing health, during the next several years Eliza managed Dixieland only for the profitable summer months, leasing the boarding house to strangers from autumn until spring. This enabled her to make extensive, although frugal, trips through the South in a search for better health, and on these trips she always took little Eugene with her, telling him to "scrooch up" on the train when the conductor passed through so that he could ride for half-fare. When the mother and the son were vacationing together, they shared the same sleeping berth, and even though Eugene enjoyed the adventure of traveling through the romantic South,

¹Ibid., p. 130.

he resented the emotional dependency which was exaggerated by such a close relationship with the possessive Eliza. Back at Dixieland Eugene also shared his mother's bed until he was twelve years old, when he was given a private room and bed of his own.

This physical separation from his mother at night, however, did not produce the anticipated emotional separation from Eliza. To obtain this freedom, Eugene, after he had entered puberty, faced a long, desperate struggle as he attempted to assert his manhood against the castrating authority of his mother's possessiveness. In this respect, as previously suggested, the personality of Eliza, symbolically equated with the bleakness of Dixieland in Eugene's imagination, was also identified with the emotional sterility of the archetypal mother trying to keep her son eternally her "baby boy."

Throughout the adult life of Wolfe's protagonist, his most formidable antagonist remained the strangulating authority of his mother's personality fixed in his memory. This was his most damaging inheritance from a dead past, and one which he carried with him constantly, no matter where he went or what he did. What made this mother image so difficult for Eugene to struggle against psychologically was its ambiguous mixture of innocence and evil, the uncorrupted child combined with the sorceress mother, yet both somehow removed from man's fallible humanity affected by the flux of experience in the present moment. For Eugene, in other words, Eliza Gant as a

personification of the archetypal child-sorceress mother existed outside of time.

In the role of the archetypal child mother, Eliza was removed from time in that her innocence was part of a timeless pastoral setting, a-moral as the earth, in which she was guiltless as any other uncorrupted "force of nature":

The final impression of the woman might have been this:--that her life was somehow above and beyond a moral judgment, that no matter what the course or chronicle of her life might have been, no matter what crimes of error, avarice, ignorance, or thoughtlessness might be charged to her, no matter what suffering or evil consequences may have resulted to other people through any act of hers, her life was somehow beyond these accidents of time, training, and occasion, and the woman was as guiltless as a child, a river, an avalanche, or any force of nature whatsoever.¹

In the role of sorceress mother Eliza was outside of time in that her psychological world belonged to a dead past. In this respect, it was symbolically a submerged world of suffocating memory, and Eliza, asleep in her small closed room at the rear of Dixieland, was envisioned by her son as a human Sargasso Sea:

Roofing the deep tides, swinging in their embrace, rocked Eliza's life Sargassic, as when, at morning, a breath of kitchen air squirmed through her guarded crack of door, and fanned the pendant clusters of old string in floating rhythm.²

When Eugene saw his mother in this role, "he felt the weariness and horror of time,"³ and was fatally convinced that "all but her must die in a smothering Sargasso."⁴

With similar feelings of horror, the son frequently

¹OTR, p. 4.

²LHA, p. 290.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

compared his mother's memory to a great, blind, sucking octopus:

Her memory moved over the ocean-bed of event like a great octopus, blindly but completely feeling its way into every sea-cave, rill, and estuary, focussed on all she had done, felt, and thought, with sucking Pentlandian intentness, for whom the sun shone or grew dark, rain fell, and mankind came, spoke, and died, shifted for a moment in time out of its void into the Pentlandian core, pattern and heart of purpose.¹

Throughout Look Homeward, Angel, Eliza's memory is referred to as octopal. In one passage, however, Wolfe specifically describes his protagonist as "a sailor drowned within the hold . . . a diver twined desperately in octopal feelers, who cuts from death and mounts slowly from the sea-floor into light."² In this passage the octopus, which represents the ego-centric memory of Eliza, also symbolizes the archetypal mother's desire to strangle her son emotionally: that is, her parasitical need to keep his emotional life always dependent upon her own.

In his "buried life" Eugene had been afraid of the smothering feminine principle from the time he was a baby, and this helped explain his hatred of the dark, and his love of incandescence and bright lights:

He hated dull lights, smoky lights, soft, or sombre lights. At night he wanted to be in rooms brilliantly illuminated with beautiful, blazing, sharp, poignant lights.³

It also accounted, certainly in part, for his recurrent

¹Ibid., p. 79. ²Ibid., p. 300.

³Ibid., p. 203.

nightmare visions of life.¹

One of these terrifying nightmare visions went back to the trip the Gant family had made to the St. Louis Exposition when the protagonist was four years old. His older sister Daisy, yielding to the furtive cat-cruelty in her nature, had taken him for a ride on the scenic railway which ended in a carnival house of horror. Eugene was seized with insane fear as the car he was sharing with his sister rolled slowly down the monstrous gloom peopled by fiendish heads and grotesquely illuminated bodies:

He was paralyzed by the conviction which often returned to him in later years, that his life was a fabulous nightmare and that, by cunning and conspire artifice, he had surrendered all his hope, belief, and confidence to the lewd torture of demons masked in human flesh.¹

The nightmare vision which returned to Eugene most frequently, and which seems to relate clearly to the controlling imagery employed elsewhere in Wolfe's fiction to symbolize the protagonist's fear of the possessive feminine principle in his emotional life, involved a ghoulish dread of being buried alive:

In his old fantasies of death he had watched his living burial, had foreseen his waking life-in-death, his slow, frustrated efforts to push away the smothering flood of earth until, as a drowning swimmer claws the air, his mute and stiffened fingers thrust from the ground a call for hands.²

¹In Wolfe's fiction the nightmare vision of life is associated symbolically with the dominance of the castrating feminine principle over the protagonist's emotions and imagination in a world in which the "golden structure" of life symbolized by the archetypal father is missing. ²LHA, p.156.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to show that in his first novel Wolfe used Eliza Gant's ownership of Dixieland as a controlling metaphor to suggest the castrating nature of the archetypal mother's possessiveness upon the emotional development of her children. A more complete examination of the archetypal mother's symbolic role in Wolfe's fiction will be presented later in this dissertation.

CHAPTER VII

EMOTIONAL REJECTION: THE DEATH OF BEN

And Eliza, stripped suddenly of her pretenses, clung to him, burying her white face in his coat sleeves, weeping bitterly, helplessly, grievously, for the sad waste of the irrevocable years--the immortal hours of love that might never be relived, the great evil of forgetfulness and indifference that could never be righted now.¹

The childhood world of Eugene Gant was split by the contrasting personalities of Gant and Eliza as archetypal parents. In addition, it was divided by the antagonism which these two people displayed, on a more human level, as the embittered husband and wife fighting desperately for supremacy within the home. Somehow the child early sensed that he was psychologically involved in this internecine struggle. As a result, because his feelings of allegiance to his father and mother were mixed, he developed a desire for isolation, since, for him at least, any happy outcome to their battle was hopeless. Also the boy felt betrayed that his happiness should depend upon a contest which he had done nothing to provoke. He was an innocent participant in the neurotic feud

¹Ibid., p. 545.

between his parents merely because he happened to be their child. In addition, Eugene felt rejected because the hostility generated by the clash of these strong egotisms left almost no place for the understanding and warm affection he craved. In a typical Victorian puritan environment, Gand and Eliza were emotionally rejecting parents, and Eugene, like his sensitive, lonely brother, Ben, quickly regarded himself as the forgotten child, the lost stranger, an exile in his parents' home.

Wolfe's protagonist was born October 3, 1900, in an upstairs bedroom of the house on Woodson Street. At the time Gand was suffering the tortures of the justly damned as an aftermath of one of his most furious drunks, during which he had threatened to kick down the locked door leading into the pregnant Eliza's bedroom. This was the turbulent theater of human events into which the tiny Eugene was ushered by disinterested circumstance, yet within a few months the baby had already begun to sense the uncompromising antagonism between his parents.

Eugene had entered the world a stranger from the dark womb of his mother, but if his parents provided any example, most grown-ups were equally "strangers to one another,"¹ and "no one ever comes really to know any one else."² This meant that children and adults face the same problem: how to secure understanding in a world of inadequate communication.

¹Ibid., p. 38. ²Ibid.

In other words, Gant and Eliza were such ruthless adversaries chiefly because they did not understand each other, and their understanding was limited because, like the self-centered child, their egotism prevented them from discovering an effective means of communication. From the bottom of his crib the baby Eugene regarded all the grown-ups who leered down at him as having:

for one another not much greater understanding than they had for him: that even their speech, their entire fluidity and ease of movement were but meagre communicants of their thought or feeling, and served often not to promote understanding, but to deepen and widen strife, bitterness, and prejudice.¹

In a passage such as this, the insight which Wolfe attributed to his infant protagonist may seem absurd. The fact remains that the problem--one might say the mystery--of communication is central in Wolfe's fiction, and that for him it literally reflected the emotional predicament of the child who has to make his needs understood without being able to speak. The baby Eugene could howl for food, but when he cried for affection and understanding, he was baffled by his limited, infantile powers. Trapped in his tiny prison of a crib, he remained the stranger, the exile, the misunderstood and isolated child:

And left alone to sleep within a shuttered room, with the thick sunlight printed in bars upon the floor, unfathomable loneliness and sadness crept through him: he saw his life down the solemn vista of a forest aisle, and he knew that he would always be the sad one; caged in that little round of skull, imprisoned in that

¹Ibid.

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¹Ibid.

beating and most secret heart, his life must always walk down lonely passages. Lost.¹

Throughout Look Homeward, Angel Wolfe has expressed how his protagonist preserved his infant sense of exile, and somehow, buried even more deeply in his nature, the conviction of having been betrayed into the role of orphan and outcast. The critic Monroe Stearns relates this feeling of betrayal to Eliza's early rejection of Eugene, "through her lack of motherly sympathy and her inability to see the world from the child's point of view,"² which was aggravated by her refusal to wean her baby until he was three and a half years old. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Mr. Stearns' psychological interpretation, one cannot dispute that Wolfe's protagonist did have intense feelings of betrayal, supported by guilts, fears, and resentments, which persisted throughout his life, and which, as he grew older, were increasingly connected with the selfishness and neglect, not only of Eliza, but of Gant as well. In our opinion, both the mother and father of Eugene were emotionally rejecting parents in that their neurotic compulsions left them unresponsive to the real needs of their children.

Before the Gant family moved to Dixieland, Eugene had never willingly let anyone fondle him except his brother Ben, for actually Ben was the only person in the family who had

¹Ibid., p. 37.

²Monroe Stearns, "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Walser, p. 197.

extended to him that necessary mixture of affection and intuitive understanding to which he might respond sympathetically. His sister Helen had mothered and petted Eugene when he was a baby, touseling him on the bed and smothering him with slaps and kisses, but he had sensed even then that Helen's affection was not based "on any deep kinship of mind or body or spirit, but on her vast maternal feeling, something that poured from her in a cataract of tenderness and cruelty upon young, weak, plastic life."¹ Daisy and his other brothers had been too concerned with their own growing pains to really notice Eugene, and his parents, as usual, remained absorbed in their respective egotisms. Eugene, therefore, almost instinctively learned to retreat into his secret self, and to regard his position in the family as actually that of a "stranger in a noisy inn."²

We have previously shown that despite his isolation, Eugene as a child was not too dissatisfied with the "noisy inn" of his life in the house on Woodson Street. It was the warm, bustling, tightly-knit little universe of the family, in the most inclusive sense of the term, with the vital presence of Gant giving re-assurance to all their lives. Even after the protagonist had left this world permanently behind and had been living for some time at Dixieland, his nostalgic memories of the rich life in his father's house were

¹LHA, p. 246. ²Ibid., p. 83.

still too vivid to admit disenchantment. After he had entered puberty, however, the remainder of his life at home involved an increasing disillusionment with his family, and a mounting resentment at the selfishness so painfully apparent in the lives of his mother and father.

When Eugene moved to Dixieland, he took with him the psychological knowledge that his parents were wedded strangers who regarded their home first as the legitimate arena within which to wage an uncompromising, lifelong struggle to "get even" with each other. As the irreconcilable husband and wife, they had substituted vanity for love, and all relationships in the family reflected the "confusion, antagonism, and disorder" in their own natures. Gant and Eliza, of course, had little insight into themselves, and they were cruelly ignorant of the personalities of their children. Even if they had been better informed, however, there is no assurance that they would have been seriously concerned. In their role of Victorian puritan parents, certainly they did not believe that they were being unreasonable in demanding that their children become self-sufficient enough to find their own way to success and happiness through the treacherous maze of experience.

This was more easily admonished than done, and the children quickly learned to regard themselves as isolated little centers in an antagonistic universe. In other words, suffering from a lack of parental affection, the Gant

children had been convinced at an early age that attention, which in their home served as a kind of narcissistic substitute for love, was something which seldom came unbidden. Instead, it had to be worked for strenuously: that is, the child who desired the attention of his parents had to prove through what he had accomplished that he deserved to be noticed and praised. Even then, the smart child seldom revealed his private feelings in his struggle to impress his father and mother. If he did reveal his feelings, the exposure would almost certainly result in some kind of painful, if not humiliating, betrayal.

It has been mentioned that after the move to Dixieland, Eugene accompanied his mother on her various train trips into the deep South as she sought to find a cure for her rheumatism and kidney trouble. They journeyed to Florida one winter, the next winter to New Orleans, and the following winter to Hot Springs, Arkansas, where Eliza spent her afternoons in the hot baths, attempting to steam out her crippling disease. On these trips Eugene was embarrassed by his mother's stinginess. Eliza would carry shoe boxes of luncheon on the trains, open them in the diner, and after a lengthy inspection of the menu, order only a cup of coffee. Wherever they went, she provoked interminable quarrels over prices and charges. They stayed in the cheapest hotels, and frequently dined on a meal of sweet rolls and milk in their untidy room. In Hot Springs Eliza even sent Eugene on the streets to

distribute printed cards advertising the attractions of her boarding house in Altamont:

He writhed as he saw himself finally a toughened pachyderm in Eliza's world--sprucing up confidently, throwing his shoulders back proudly, making people 'think he was somebody' as he cordially acknowledged an introduction by producing a card setting forth the joys of life in Altamont and at Dixieland, and seized every opening in social relations for the purpose of 'drumming up trade.'¹

Eugene's lack of confidence was directly traceable to the criticism and egotistical preoccupation with their own affairs of Gant and Eliza as emotionally rejecting parents. Eliza was a nagging mother, who, whenever she and her son walked on the streets together, kept reminding the thin, gangling boy to "'Spruce up! Throw your shoulders back. Make folks think you're somebody.'² Back at Dixieland, during their first years together in the boarding house, Eliza was equally adept at undermining his self-confidence. At this time the mother was customarily indifferent to her youngest son's whereabouts whenever she was busy. For this reason, she would think of him only in the evening after most of the work with her boarders had been finished. Then if she discovered that Eugene had spent the day at his father's house and had been taken care of by his older sister, Helen, the querulous, nagging mother would greet the boy with self-pitying scorn as soon as he returned to Dixieland:

'What do you mean by running off to your papa's like that? If I were you, I'd have too much pride for that. I'd be

¹Ibid., p. 160. ²Ibid., p. 159.

a-sha-a-med!' Her face worked with a bitter hurt smile. 'Helen can't¹ be bothered with you. She doesn't want you around.'

Gant relished attacking the self-confidence of all of his children, especially the boys, and prophesying their failure in extravagant rhetoric "as he dwelt on his own merit and the worthlessness of his sons."² The stonecutter not only reproached his sons for being hopelessly weak, if deprived of their father's strength to fall back on, but he expanded with self-righteous indignation when he contrasted the hardships of his own youth with the undeserved comforts which his children enjoyed solely because their father had always been such a hard-working, selfless provider:

No one ever did anything for me,' he howled. 'But everything's been done for you. And what gratitude do I get from you? Do you ever think of the old man who slaves up there in his cold shop in order to give you food and shelter. Do you?'³

Gant enjoyed baiting Eugene until the boy was left with an abysmal sense of his own unworthiness. He was tortured by remorse and fear at the dinner table whenever the self-pitying Gant, even while he heaped Eugene's plate with succulent food, made unctuously malicious prophecies of his approaching death:

'I tell you what: there are not many boys who have what you have. What's going to become of you when your old father's dead and gone?' And he would paint a ghastly picture of himself lying cold in death, lowered forever into the damp rot of the earth. . . . noting with keen

¹Ibid., p. 131. ²Ibid., p. 114.

³Ibid., p. 115.

pleasure the inward convulsion of the childish throat, the winking eyes, the tense constricted face.¹

Eugene was so impressed by these attacks of his father that years later, when he was trying to explain to a friend why he felt compelled to work so obsessively, he could only refer to his childhood, and to the loud, accusatory voice of his father which still echoed in his memory:

hollering at him from the foot of the stairs, telling him to get up, and that he's not worth powder enough to blow him sky high, and that when he was his age, he'd been up four hours already and done a whole day's work--poor, miserable orphan that he was.²

Gant, of course, had long regarded himself as a self-made man, and he liked to preach to his sons the rude American legendry of the country boys who came to town and succeeded simply because they were "country boys, poor boys, and hard-working farm boys."³ To him, as well as to Eliza, all work which earned money was "honorable, commendable, and formative of character,"⁴ and they saw to it that their own sons went to work at an early age. Neither parent, unfortunately, took any pains to examine the kind of work the children did.

Ben, the son with a tubercular tendency, was working as a route boy on the newspaper before he had finished grade school. Every morning at three-thirty, young Ben could be found in the down town lunch room, his loaded paper bag by his side, and a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, serving as breakfast. Eugene likewise was still

¹Ibid., p. 118. ²OTR, p. 390. ³LHA, p. 82.

⁴Ibid., p. 112.

in kneepants when he was regarded by his parents as "big enough to do a little work," and was sent on the street after school hours to huckster The Saturday Evening Post. The boy was too shy and self-conscious to be a good salesman. He loathed the work, but still he tried to conceal his feelings at home to keep from being "accused of false pride, told that he was 'afraid of a little honest work,' and reminded of the benefits he had received from his big-hearted parents."¹

It is true that Eliza later spoiled Eugene by giving him advantages which the other children had not received, for she sent him to the Leonards' private school for his high school work, and afterwards financed his education at the State University and Harvard. The possessive mother, however, never let her son forget that his "special privileges" had cost a lot of money which he had done nothing especially to deserve. For this reason, he owed Eliza a permanent debt of gratitude for her sacrifices in his behalf. Eugene did remember this debt, but he never felt that the money had been spent because his mother had any genuine confidence in his ability. In Eliza's ego-centric imagination, she had merely been indulging her youngest child: her "baby." Years later, when Eugene outlined to Eliza his hopes of becoming a successful writer the autumn before he went to New York, she expressed her distrust in a half-critical, half-bantering reply:

¹Ibid., p. 123.

'Well, you may do it. I hope you do. Stranger things than that have happened.--Now, there's one thing sure,' she said strongly, 'you have certainly had a good education--there's been more money spent upon your schooling than on all the rest of us put together--and you certainly ought to know enough to write a story or a play!--Why, yes, boy! I tell you what,' his mother cried in the old playful and bantering tone, as if she were speaking to a child, 'if I had your education I believe I'd try to be a writer, too.'

II

Eugene not only was ashamed of the public indecency of boarding house life, but, as suggested earlier, he felt betrayed that his parents had surrendered the privacy of their home to outsiders. He was afraid, however, to express his criticism openly around his unsympathetic family. Since his feelings of shame and betrayal had to remain "bottled-up," Eugene felt increasingly "thwarted, netted, trapped"² as he approached puberty, much the same way he had sensed that he was trapped when he was first put on the streets to sell The Saturday Evening Post.

By this time Eugene was beginning to see clearly that his family's poverty, which Eliza talked so much about, was not real but belonged rather to the "insensate mythology of hoarding."³ What was genuine was the jangled disorder and ugliness of their lives which the bleak horror of Dixieland revealed so nakedly. To Eugene came more and more the conviction that the lives of his family "could not be more

¹OTR, p. 336. ²LHA, p. 136. ³Ibid.

hopelessly distorted, wrenched, mutilated, and perverted away from all simple comfort, repose, happiness, if they set themselves deliberately to tangle the skein, twist the pattern."¹ He choked with repressed rage as he thought of Eliza's sorry greed which had helped reduce the family to this condition. The shambles of Dixieland was the heart of her life. "It owned her. It appalled him."²

Soon Eliza had regained her health completely, and although her illnesses during the previous four years had injured her earning power at Dixieland, she still had been able to pay off the last installment on the house, and had made extensive alterations on the ramshackle frame building. Gant and Eliza were not poor in the fall of 1911, and their combined wealth amounted to around \$100,000, the bulk of which was solidly founded in well-chosen pieces of property of Eliza's selection. Eliza, nevertheless, continued to impress upon her children how "hard-up" she was, and the more property and wealth she and Gant accumulated, the more she brought into the open her obsessive stinginess.

Eliza no longer rented out her boarding house part of the year but ran it herself the full twelve months. She was much stronger physically than she had been even before her illnesses, and could perform daily tasks of drudgery in the maintenance of Dixieland "that would have floored a strong negro."³ After a full day's work of supervising the cooking,

¹Ibid., p. 137. ²Ibid., p. 294. ³Ibid., p. 279.

washing, ironing, and attending to the needs of the boarders, she seldom got to bed before two o'clock in the morning, and was up again before seven.

Eliza got along badly with what help she had, for she constantly nagged the negro girls, accused them of loafing and stupidity, and would not pay them regularly, but would dribble out their wages, a coin or two at a time. She especially watched the girls with a falcon's eye for thefts, and once, with a detective, searched a departed girl's room in Niggertown, and finding there sheets and spoons that had been stolen from Dixieland, had the girl sent to the penitentiary for two years. Also, Eliza was indiscriminate in accepting boarders for her place. She rented rooms to alcoholics, half-dead tuberculars, semi-prostitutes, and once found space for an insane man and his keeper. When Helen, in a frenzied rage, asked her mother why she accepted all of these strange people in her house, Eliza replied, with her characteristic, maddening inflexibility, that she guessed they were all good people; it had long been a basic trait in Eliza "to defend blindly whatever brought her money."¹

The years passed. Gant was losing his strength at an alarming rate, and his extroverted egotism had degenerated into whining senility. He stayed soaked in petulant self-pity, and constantly referred to himself as "the poor old cripple who has to provide for them all."² Also, the egotism

¹Ibid., p. 141. ²Ibid., p. 262.

of Gant and Eliza, their real indifference to the welfare of their children, was being proven in circumstance. Daisy had married and had gone to South Carolina to live with her husband, but the oldest son, Steve, had already turned into a confirmed drifter and alcoholic. Steve had inherited most of his father's vices, but unfortunately, none of Gant's redeeming qualities: "his cleanliness, his lean fibre, his remorse."¹ Moreover, since his childhood, Steve had been the witness of his father's wildest debauches, and was on intimate terms with the prostitutes of Eagle Crescent soon after he had entered his teens. Gant, when he first had to face the proof of his son's wayward conduct, heaped abuse on the boy and called him a "good-for-nothing bum, a worthless degenerate, a pool-room loafer,"² predicting that Steve was headed straight for the penitentiary. Eliza was more realistic when she observed sarcastically that "maybe if he hadn't been sent to every dive in town to pull his daddy out, he would turn out better."³ Now Steve was returning home at periodic intervals, dissipated, bitter, and cursing his family for their indifference and neglect of "little Stevie":

He had believed for years that he was persecuted--his failure at home he attributed to the malice, envy, and disloyalty of his family, his failure abroad to the malice and envy of an opposing force that he called 'the world.'⁴

¹Ibid., p. 241. ²Ibid., p. 46. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 242.

None of the other brothers could endure the maudlin self-pity of Steve, and on one of his visits home, a savage brawl erupted involving Steve, Luke, and Ben. As Eliza stood helplessly watching the fight, she wept that brother should strike brother. Then when the fight was over and she had dried her tears, she fretted that she might lose some of her boarders because of the ugly disturbance:

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' said Helen impatiently. 'Forget about the boarders once in a while.'¹

The distorted personalities, not only of Steve but of all the children, were given their neurotic bent by the indifference of Gant and Eliza. Having experienced so little real affection at home, the children were practically ignorant of its existence, much less of its importance, and in their own lives they tended to imitate the egotism of their parents. Luke, the stutterer, developed an extreme extroversion to impress the world with how unusual a person he was:

He wanted above all else to be esteemed and liked by the world, and the need for the affection and esteem of his family was desperately essential. The fulsome praise, the heartiness of hand and tongue, the liberal display of sentiment were as the breath of life to him.²

To secure this praise, the boy acted out the role of "Big-Hearted Unselfish Luke."³ He was the constant bringer-home of gifts to his parents, the insistent payer of drinks at the fountain, and the sentimental spokesman for the

¹Ibid., p. 246. ²Ibid., p. 115. ³Ibid., p. 116.

for the wonderful symbols of: "'Home,' 'Father,' 'Mother,' and 'Unselfishness.'"¹ He was also the ready accuser of any selfish, family-forgetting spirit on the part of his brothers, for "he was determined to occupy alone the throne of goodness."² Luke's later career did not fulfill the promise of his youth, and he resembled Steve when he placed the blame upon the hostile world, "out to get him,"³ together with his indifferent family, where there was always "too damn much thought of saving a nickel, and too damn little about flesh and blood."⁴

Luke and Helen regarded themselves as inheritors of the generous Gant strain rather than "cold, selfish Pentlands,"⁵ and their admiration for each other was boundless. Helen, again like her extroverted brother, needed extension in life: movement, bustling excitement, people; and despite her impulsive generosity, she was egotistical and as self-pitying as the other members of the family. Helen was willing to help Eliza with the meals at Dixieland, and to sing and play the piano for the boarders at night, not because she was unselfish, but because she wanted to "dominate, to entertain, to be the life of the party."⁶ Even her strong lust to nurse, which was so apparent in the slave-like attention she lavished on Gant during the final years of his

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 118. ³Ibid., p. 547.

⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid., p. 134. ⁶Ibid.

life, came from her "imperative need for dominance over almost all she touched."¹ Helen also enjoyed the praise that accompanied her willingness to slave, and just before Ben's death she commented on her role of martyr with ill-timed self-flattery:

'I've done everything I could. I haven't been to bed for two days. Whatever happens, I'll have no regret on that score.' Her voice was filled with a brooding, ugly satisfaction.²

The person for whom Helen had undeniably martyred her life was her father, whom she had adored from the time she was a little girl, when Gant had clasped her bony shoulders with his tremendous hands, hugged her to him, and brushed her lips with the rough bristles of his mustache. Both father and daughter were "strung on the same wires,"³ and because of their similar natures, the young girl was the only member of the family who had any control over the wild stonecutter when he was drunk. She would feed him scalding soup, slap his face peevishly when he misbehaved, and then see that he got safely into bed.

As the years passed, the bond between the girl and her father grew stronger, and Eliza watched it develop with rankling discontent. Finally the friction between Helen and Eliza, and the unspoken rivalry over Gant which it implied, became acute, and when Eliza moved to Dixieland, Helen was happy to remain in the house on Woodson Street to look after

¹Ibid., p. 237. ²Ibid., p. 547. ³Ibid., p. 133.

her father's needs. Even after Helen's marriage to Hugh Barton, she still served as martyr to the cancerous Gant, and "as his great strength dwindled, palsied, broke along that road, she went with him inch by inch, welding beyond life, beyond death, beyond memory, the bond that linked them."¹ Such slavish devotion so impressed Eugene that shortly after Ben's death, when Helen was reflecting upon the tragic net of frustration and loss in which they were all caught, and protesting vigorously: "'I'm married to Hugh Barton! I'm his wife!" Eugene could only comment to himself, "'Are you? Are you?'"²

Helen felt that her willingness to serve had been exploited not only by Gant but by the whole family. Forced to carry so much of the family responsibility upon her own shoulders, she had never had the opportunity to find any happiness for herself. Later she complained bitterly about this to her husband:

Do you know what it is to wait, wait, wait, year after year, and year after year, never knowing when he's going to die, to have him hang on by a thread until it seems you've lived forever--that there'll never be an end--that you'll never have a chance to live your own life, to have a moment's peace or rest or happiness yourself? My God, does it always have to be this way?--Can I never have a moment's happiness? . . . Must they always come to me? Does everything have to be put on my shoulders?³

Helen blamed Eliza for being partially responsible for the death of Ben. She cursed the selfishness of her brothers, and her father's self-pitying concern with his disease

¹Ibid., p. 577. ²Ibid. ³OTR, p. 13.

that had been so exhausting upon her own strength. As the years dragged by and Gant's death became a certainty, Helen's nerves were stretched to the breaking point. She soaked herself with patent drugs and medicines to try to find some relief for the hysteria of her tortured spirit. Instead, her morbid concern over her father's approaching death only increased, and one afternoon she sobbed her despair to Hugh McGuire, the family doctor:

'He's all I've got to live for, Doctor McGuire. I've got nothing out of life that I wanted or expected--it's all been so different from the way I thought it was--I've had nothing--no fame, no glory, no success, no children--everything has gone--Papa is all that I have left! If he dies what shall I do?'¹

Helen's opportunity for a normal married life had been thwarted by the parasitical egotism of her parents, and the pathetic history of Benjamin Gant's life serves as an ironic reminder of their monumental indifference. Ben was one of the twin brothers born in 1892. Ben suffered his first painful loss in the fall of 1904, when his twin brother, Grover, the gentlest and saddest of the boys, with the soft raspberry birthmark on his throat, died unexpectedly from typhoid fever in St. Louis. Ben had known rejection and loss before this tragedy, for as he stared at the cooling board which held the fever-wasted remains of his brother, his scowling eyes had already acquired their "curious old man's look."² After Grover's death, Ben remained a stranger in the turbulent

¹Ibid., p. 214. ²LHA, p. 560.

Gant household, going his quiet way practically unnoticed by his parents. Only after Ben's own death was his mother able to recall that:

Nobody ever knew him.¹ He never told us about himself. He was the quiet one.¹

Ben did form an attachment for little Eugene, as if some deep-rooted instinct drew him, the rejected stranger, to this child-brother with whom he had so much temperamentally in common. Ben had gotten a job as paper carrier for the morning newspaper, and he would spend a portion of his small earnings on gifts and amusements for Eugene. Also he would play with the small boy for hours on the leather sofa in the sitting room, cuffing him gently with his white hard hands, and establishing with him a secret communication entirely apart from the other members of the family. Eugene idolized his older brother, who gave a "cuff instead of a caress," and who was so "full of pride and tenderness."² Ben's pride, combined with the indifference of his parents, enabled him to slip quietly from school after the eighth grade. He took on extra duties at the paper office, slept at home, ate perhaps one meal a day there, prowled around the house only in the early morning hours, and "came and went, and was remembered, like a phantom."³

The years passed and Ben continued working in the newspaper office. He was respected by the businessmen of the

¹Ibid., p. 576. ²Ibid., p. 94. ³Ibid., p. 112.

town for his fierce honesty, but he did not respect them in turn. Ben saw through the pretensions of these businessmen, and he was disgusted by the petty chicanery which they used to conceal their selfish goals. When some remark or incident especially aroused his scorn, Ben would jerk his head skyward, as if he were addressing some secret angel, and mutter sarcastically: "'O my God! Listen to that, won't you?'"¹

Ben long ago had seen through the pose of his parents and had made a connection between his own, lonely frustrated existence and their neglect. Gant's selfishness especially stirred his indignation, and now as Ben stalked through the boarding house, he seldom spoke to the self-pitying old man. A few years before, Ben, Luke, and Eliza had accompanied Gant on a trip to Baltimore. They had expected to leave Gant at the hospital for a routine examination, and then "sight-see" around the town. Ben had bought himself a new suit, and had looked forward eagerly to the trip. Gant had managed to spoil their plans, however, by going on a drunken spree almost as soon as they boarded the train. After Gant had been drunk in Baltimore for several days, Luke pleaded with Ben to help sober up their father to keep the sick man from drinking himself to death. Ben replied caustically:

'Well, I don't give a damn if he does, if that's what he wants to do let him go right ahead. Maybe the rest of us would get some peace then if he did. He's always had his own way, he's never thought of any one but himself and I don't care what happens to him.'²

¹Ibid., p. 167. ²DM, p. 263.

Ben was equally bitter towards his mother for her miserly neglect of her family, and he warned Eugene never to trust either of their parents:

'Do you think they give a damn whether you die or not, as long as you save them expense? What are you bragging about: Don't brag until you've got something out of them.'¹

Eugene was away at college when he received a telegram that Ben was sick with pneumonia. He rushed home on the next train to learn from Luke that Ben had been sick in the bleak, drafty "Barn" for six days before Eliza had become concerned enough to call a doctor. Even after the doctor diagnosed pneumonia, she dismissed the seriousness of her son's condition. That had been five days ago, and now Ben was lying on a bed in the big corner upstairs bedroom slowly strangulating to death. He refused to let Eliza enter the sick room, and once when she timidly opened the door and he saw her face, he gasped thinly, as if in terror: "'Get out! Out! Don't want you.'² While this was taking place, Gant was dozing in the parlor downstairs, waking and sleeping by starts, and "resentful because of the sudden indifference to him."³

The afternoon of the wet, grey October day lengthened into darkness, and Ben's condition grew steadily worse. He had lapsed into unconsciousness, and Eliza could finally enter the sick room without Ben's objecting. She sat beside her son's deathbed, clasped his cold fingers in her worn

¹LHA, p. 530. ²Ibid., p. 547. ³Ibid.

grasp, and waited for death, as she relived in her mind "a past of tenderness and love that never had been."¹ Ben died around four o'clock in the morning, and Eliza straightened his limbs, folded his hands across his thin body, smoothed out the rumpled covers of the bed, and with a pair of scissors, snipped off a little lock of his hair where it wouldn't show. Then she went downstairs to phone John Hines, the undertaker. Gant and Eliza were going to spare no expense on Ben's funeral:

So, to Ben dead was given more care, more time, more money than had ever been given to Ben living. His burial was a final gesture of irony and futility: an effort to compensate carrion death for the unpaid wage of life--love and mercy.²

¹Ibid., p. 577. ²Ibid., p. 573.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VICTORIAN PURITAN PARENTS

This harsh code to which she adhered was indigenous to America. It has not only done much to shape our lives and histories, but it persists to this day, and is at the root of much of the sickness, the moral complex of America. For example, she believed it was wrong to take a life "in cold blood," but it was not nearly so wrong as to take a drink. She was always warning her children against evil ways and loose living, and speaking of people who committed 'all kinds of immorality and licentiousness'; but it would have come strangely to her ears to hear murder referred to as an immoral act. True, it was 'an awful crime'--but she could understand it in these terms because the Bible told about Cain and Abel, and taught that it was wicked to take life. But privately, she did not consider it half as bad for a man to take a life as to take a drink, or--what was the most immoral¹ act of all--to sleep with a woman who was not his wife.

A general statement of the theme of Look Homeward, Angel, supporting Wolfe's claim that as an artist he had "been able to take materials of localized regional experience and give them communication of universal interest,"² has previously been made in this dissertation. According to this statement, Wolfe in the novel used the setting of a Victorian puritan family in small town America, dominated by a father and mother typical enough to serve as archetypal parents, to

¹HB, p. 231. ²Nowell, p. 531.

demonstrate how the narcissistic desire for isolation was formed in their children, especially in their youngest boy. The symbolism used to illuminate this theme was the contrasting attitudes toward property on the part of Gant and Eliza, with the father's way of life metaphorically represented by the house on Woodson Street, while the mother's personality was identified with her boarding establishment, Dixieland. This dualistic theme was extended further to include the protagonist's feelings of rejection and lost innocence. Finally the setting for most of the action was an isolated pastoral world in which there was no personal awareness of evil on the part of the fictional characters despite the "cruel and ugly waste" so unpleasantly visible in all of their lives.

It has also been suggested that if this statement of the theme of Look Homeward, Angel has any validity, the critic can neither regard the book as merely the autobiographical account of the author's experiences until he was twenty years old, nor can he make an exact equation between Eugene's relatives in the novel and the members of Wolfe's own family. Gant and Eliza, in other words, have a significance imparted to them by Wolfe as a conscious artist and not one automatically inherited from their prototypes in real life, since obviously the parents in the novel represent something more to the reader than just a neurotic man and woman who actually lived at a specific time in Asheville, North Carolina, and

who had a literary son named Thomas Wolfe. In the values to which they subscribe overtly in their lives, as well as in their subconscious experience, their "buried lives," Gant and Eliza are the typical father and mother of every Victorian puritan family, and it is chiefly through their roles as symbolic figures that they have given Wolfe's creation the kind of universality of meaning for which he was striving.

The Victorian puritan parent, as interpreted by Wolfe, is a symbol for the compulsive egotist living in a sexually inhibited culture, and who, because of his emotional and spiritual attachment to a private world of lost innocence, is unable either to experience love in a normal human relationship or to recognize the destructive demon within himself. To phrase it theologically, the Victorian puritan has lost the capacity to recognize the spiritual dualism in man. In addition, his intense nostalgia for lost innocence, confirmed in adult life by an inheritance of determining memories, is originally supported by the emotional rejection which he experienced as a child at home together with his traumatic fall from sexual grace during puberty. Finally, the disturbed psyche of the Victorian puritan reflects his neurotic adjustment to the unmentionable desires first provoked by his involvement in an Oedipal situation which, as he grows older, is never successfully resolved.

Since in Wolfe's first novel, Gant and Eliza used the mythology of Victorian puritanism to provide a moral excuse

or justification for their role as emotionally rejecting parents, it is hoped that the connection between the two roles of the father and mother was partially demonstrated in the previous chapter of this dissertation. At any rate, these two roles of the parents are so closely joined that much of the documentation in the chapter on emotional rejection might seem just as pertinent to our present examination of the ethics of Victorian puritanism. Since this is so, it seems wise to include in the last half of this chapter additional documentation from Wolfe's fiction in which the family of his second protagonist, George Webber, is represented. This seems justifiable in that in the books dealing with George Webber, especially in the first half of The Web and the Rock, Wolfe was so obviously making connections between the predicament of modern man and his psychological heritage from the Victorian puritan culture of the preceding century.

In Wolfe's fiction the most impressive Victorian puritan is Eliza Gant, with "her invincible strength, hope, and fortitude, and her will that was more strong than death."¹ In the narrow realm of her Victorian puritan imagination, Eliza was certain that most of the ills which plagued mankind could be traced to two evils: sex and "licker," and in her mind, they usually accompanied each other. She had been warned against "licentious behavior"--a euphemism that covered almost any kind of sexual activity--from the time she was

¹OTR, p. 338.

a small girl, for in the backwoods community in which she grew up, even murder was regarded as a venial sin contrasted with the evils attending an immoral life. Eliza, therefore, was being true to her Victorian puritan inheritance when in "The Web of Earth," she privately defended Dock Hensley, the infamous county hangman, who used the polished skull of one of his victims for a sugar bowl in his home:

'You may rest assured on one score: Dock Hensley has certainly been a home-lovin' man and he has stuck to his wife and children: no matter what else he has done he has never been guilty of no immorality or licentiousness, no one has ever been able to say that about him,' and of course, that was true; 'they tried to prove something like that on him in that trial, in order to discredit his character, they tried to show that he'd gone running around after other women besides his wife, but they couldn't do it, sir--they had to give the devil his due--his morals were pure.'¹

Unfortunately Eliza was not married to her puritanical ideal of a Christian-living family man: "one who never drank or smoked or used bad language or ran around with women."² Gant not only was a notoriously hard drinker, but he was also a "divorced man." The reprobate stonecutter had kept this part of his past secret from Eliza until several months after they were married, and Eliza admitted to Eugene that she never would have married his father if she had known about his divorces:

It was considered a disgrace in those days to have anything to do with a divorced man and as for a divorced woman, why, of course, she wasn't considered much better than a chippy. If I'd known about it before I married him I don't reckon I'd 'a' had anything more to do with

¹DM, p. 277. ²HB, p. 232.

him: I'd 'a' been too mortified at the thought of low-erin' myself in that way.¹

Gant never attempted to divorce Eliza, but throughout their married life he remained the inconsiderate lecher in his love-making. Moreover, since Eliza failed to respond to his importunate advances, during these years he had made Elizabeth's house of prostitution in Eagle Crescent his sexual home. Even after cancer of the prostate gland had rendered him helpless, his imagination remained pruriently active. He no longer visited Elizabeth's house solely because he was physically incapacitated.

The shameless Judge Rumford Bland of You Can't Go Home Again had contracted a venereal infection in his eyes which eventually left him blind, and it was the unmentionable sexual nature of his affliction which inspired the special terror with which most of the townspeople regarded this evil old man. In addition, Bland was divorced, and although after his divorce he had returned to live with his mother, "a stately, white-haired lady to whom he rendered at all times a faithful, solicitous, exquisitely kind and gentle duty,"² the only other women he had continued to have intimate relationships with were prostitutes. Such wicked behavior further vilified his reputation in a community where sex seemed practically synonymous with depravity. Judge Bland was obsessed by the connection between the two, yet if allowances are made for the

¹DM, p. 232. ²YCGHA, p. 77.

cynical pleasure he derived from flaunting his shameful life in the faces of his respectable fellow-citizens, his attitude toward sex and women was in keeping with the puritanical mores of the community in which he lived:

As for women generally, Judge Bland divided them brutally into two groups--the mothers and the prostitutes--and, aside from the single exception in his own home, his sole interest was in the second division.¹

Gant, like the venereally blinded Judge, also had separated women into mothers and prostitutes,² and this helped provide the psychological foundation for his scandalous conduct in Altamont. It has been emphasized that the egotistical stonecutter, a man of tremendous physical and sensual powers, was as much the uncontrolled animal in his love-making as he was in his excessive eating and drinking. This inability of Gant's to distinguish between affection and appetite revealed his true contempt for the feelings of other people as much as it did his compulsion to indulge himself sensually. Gant's strongest feelings of guilt, however, were aroused by his sexual desires, and for this reason, despite his drunken rebellion against the more superficial standards of respectability in the town, he was a good Victorian puritan at heart. The animalism which Gant brought so savagely into the open on his

¹Ibid.

²In the sexually inhibited world of the Victorian puritan, the idealization of the non-sexual woman as the spiritually innocent mother, together with the downgrading of the sexual woman as the spiritually corrupted prostitute, represents the schizophrenic splitting into separate halves of the ancient fertility image of the "child-sorceress" mother.

drunken visits to Elizabeth's house of prostitution was merely repressed by his more decorous neighbors, but emotionally it was there: the darker side of a narcissistic world which had divorced love from sex.

Eliza had a less sophisticated explanation for her husband's whoremongering, as well as for his abusive treatment of her in the home. One cause alone was responsible, and it was alcohol:

'That awful, that awful curse,' said Eliza, shaking her head sadly, 'the curse of lickin.'¹

Eliza's father, Major Pentland, never touched a drop of whiskey in his life, and never knowingly permitted a man who imbibed to step inside his house. Since the Major was such an impassioned dry, he would never have approved Eliza's marriage to Gant if he had been acquainted with the true character of his future son-in-law.

Whenever Eliza mentioned this fact to her husband, the intemperate stonecutter flew into a furious rage until that "damned old hog, Major Pentland," became the favorite target of his invective. Even so, Gant felt guilty about his own drinking, especially after a devastating spree, and in these tee-totaling periods of remorse, he referred to liquor as the curse that "has caused more misery than all the other evils in the world put together."² This kind of sentiment enabled him to vote dry when Altamont had to decide on local option,

¹LHA, p. 241. ²Ibid., p. 317.

and to give Eugene fatherly advice after his son's first drunk:

'Son,' said he presently, 'I hope you'll take last night as a warning. It would be a terrible thing if you let whiskey get the best of you. I'm not going to speak harshly to you about it: I hope you'll learn a lesson by it. You had better be dead than become a drunkard.'¹

Gant was never able to follow his own advice and he continued to drink periodically until he died. His drinking had caused so much misery in the home that Eliza refused to believe that her husband was actually sick, even when the doctors at Johns Hopkins diagnosed his trouble as cancer:

'Oh forget about it!' said Helen wearily. 'Good heavens, mama. Papa's a sick man. Can't you realize that?'

'Pshaw!' said Eliza scornfully. 'I don't believe there's a thing in the world wrong with him but² that vile licker. All his trouble comes from that.'

As previously indicated, such a self-centered disregard of reality on the part of Eliza, re-inforced by the ethics of Victorian puritanism, was psychologically damaging to all of her children.

Despite their superficial differences, Gant and Eliza were in agreement about most of the values which they attempted to instill in their children. As Victorian puritan parents they believed implicitly in the virtues of thrift, self-denying ambition, and hard work, especially for the young person who aspired to be a financial success in life. For this reason, the Gants were suspicious that any activities

¹Ibid., p. 498. ²Ibid., p. 435.

of their own children which did not involve effort as a means and money-making as a goal were frivolous, if not sinful. The lazy and rebellious children, for their future security, had to be taught to adjust to the realities of life at an early age, which meant learning how to support themselves. Gant and Eliza, of course, were always envious of the prestige which accompanied success in the business world, and as pragmatic materialists, unwilling to distinguish between inner worth and respectability, believed that money was the only reliable indication of a man's character:

It was not enough that a man work, though work was fundamental; it was even more important that he make money--a great deal if he was to be a great success--but at least enough to 'support himself.' This was for both Gant and Eliza the base of worth.¹

The self-indulgent Gant had not noticeably sacrificed any of his own pleasures in attempting to live up to the puritanical ideals which he advocated for his children. Despite this inconsistency, Gant always preserved the heartiest contempt for any man who had never done a hard day's work in his life, and as already mentioned, took special pride in eulogizing his role as the self-made man who had worked uncomplainingly throughout a long, difficult life to support his ungrateful family. In these moods, Gant not only liked to make his children feel that they were economic parasites existing solely on the bounty provided by his own unselfish toil, but he particularly enjoyed contrasting the hardships

¹Ibid., p. 114.

of his youth with the pampered existence of his sons:

'And school was always at least six miles away, and they were always barefooted, and it was always snowing. God!' he laughed suddenly. 'No one's old man ever went to school except under polar conditions. They all did.'¹

Eliza had never been as melodramatic as Gant in attempting to inspire her children with her role as the family martyr, but she had been much more consistent in practicing what she preached, for most of her married life had actually consisted of long, tedious hours of work for the welfare of the family. It is to be remembered that by the time Eliza was forty-two, she had been pregnant fifteen times, and in addition, during these years had done the cooking and laundry for the family; and had seen her children, as well as herself, through innumerable illnesses; and had remained faithful to a drunken, philandering husband. For this reason, one day when Gant was goading his wife with malicious comparisons between the prettiness of his former sweetheart Eller Beals and the plainness of Eliza, the latter had replied with puritanical indignation:

'Why, yes,' I said to him later when he'd begin to brag about how pretty she was to look at. 'Why, yes, I reckon so, that's true, but then, 'I said, 'a whole lot of us could be pretty if we never lifted a finger to do a lick of work. Some of the rest of us could look real nice,' I said, 'if we didn't have to cook and wash and bring up childern.' Well, he admitted it then, of course, said 'Yes, you're right.'²

Eliza was fifty years old when she acquired Dixieland,

¹YCGHA, p. 390. ²DM, pp. 242-43.

and she worked even harder running the boarding house than she had drudged raising her children in the house on Woodson Street. She submitted willingly to these long hours of back-breaking toil, not just because of her puritanical faith in the virtue of hard work but because what she was doing was making money. She had a similar attitude toward the possession of property, for with Eliza it was never enough just to own a piece of property; that property had to produce an income before she became attached to it. Eliza's own pragmatic attitude that work became important only when it earned money, and that anything which earned money must be "honorable, commendable, and formative of character,"¹ was shared by the other Victorian puritan citizens of Altamont.

The Gants used money as a weapon to control the views of their children, for in their household no offspring was supposed to express opinions contrary to those of his parents until he had earned the right by becoming financially independent. In this regard, Ben's scornful criticism of the family was tolerated by Gant and Eliza only because their son "had secured for himself the kind of freedom they valued most--economic freedom."² Eugene himself first experienced a measure of his brother's independence after he had obtained a morning newssppper route:

He did not shrink so much beneath the menace of the family fist.³ He was more happily unmindful of his own unworthiness.

¹LHA, p. 112. ²Ibid., p. 124. ³Ibid., p. 302.

Until Eugene was completely self-supporting, however, his position in the family still remained that of the economic parasite, and his views were always discounted accordingly.

In a conversation with his mother and Helen, shortly before leaving home to teach in New York City, Eugene had made several sarcastic remarks about Scoop Pegram, a self-made man who had started from scratch to work his way up to a local bank presidency. Helen had responded to her brother's remarks by warning him not to criticize people in the town "until you've got it in you to support yourself."¹ Eliza seconded this advice by defending the worth of the business man whom Eugene had attacked:

'He had made his own way since his childhood,' Eliza continued sternly and deliberately--'no one ever did anything for him, there's one thing sure--there was no one in his family who was in a position to do it--what he's done he's done for himself, without assistance, and' his mother said in a stern and telling voice, 'without education.'²

Eugene had no real answer to criticism of this sort except to choke up with rage and guilt. After all, his mother had been convinced that he was lazy from the time he was a small boy, and years later, after he had become successful as a writer, she was to remind him that he was "mighty lucky" to be able to earn his living by doing such a light, easy kind of work:

'You're mighty lucky, because none of the rest of your people had any such luck as that. They had to work hard for a living.'³

¹OTR, p. 356. ²Ibid. ³HB, p. 20.

As Victorian puritan parents Gant and Eliza were convinced that their children owed them a permanent debt because of the money that had been spent to raise them to an age where they could work to support themselves. Their children's education represented a part of this debt, and Eliza never let Eugene forget the amount of money his special schooling had cost. In his opinion, his parents' attitude toward his undergraduate record at college belonged to the same money-conscious pattern:

'If I did badly at the university with money of my own, you'd dare say nothing, but if I do well on money you gave me, I must still be reminded of your goodness and my unworthiness.'¹

On the afternoon of Eugene's initial departure for Boston, his cousin George Pentland had given him the sarcastic advice that he had better study hard at Harvard, for "your mother'll take it out of your hide if she finds you loafin' on her money."² In this remark the cousin was voicing the ingrained puritanism of the community that even the gifted offspring lacked the right to indulge himself on his parents' hard-earned cash. Going to college to study for an advanced degree clearly represented to George Pentland a form of unjustifiable self-indulgence on Eugene's part, as well as an almost cowardly retreat from the fiercely competitive business world.

Gant and Eliza differed from their nephew in that they

¹LHA, p. 504. ²OTR, p. 115.

were not quite so contemptuous as he of the importance of education. At the same time, their respect for learning was matched by an equally hearty distrust of "those who could not use it for some practical end."¹ With these pragmatic materialists, it seemed perfectly reasonable to subordinate education to financial success, since they had done the same with almost everything else in their lives. In the narrow moral vision of this Victorian puritan couple, again it was the amount of money a man had accumulated in his lifetime which was the only reliable index of whether he really had succeeded or failed with his life.

In Wolfe's second novel, *Bascom Pentland*, Eliza's brother, is another highly individuated Victorian puritan personality. During Eugene's years at Harvard he frequently visited the house of his Uncle Bascom, where he had discovered a puritanical atmosphere which had many features in common with the one he had known back home. Bascom was as miserly as his sister Eliza and also shared her lust to accumulate property. In addition, he had the Victorian puritan's distrust of everybody's cleanliness except his own, and despite his lecherous appetites and prurient imagination, regarded anything that had to do with sex as obscene.

Bascom affected to be a sentimental idealist of the purity of Southern ladies, but throughout most of his married life

¹HB, p. 264.

he had treated his wife with calloused indifference. When Eugene became acquainted with this woman, she was a lonely eccentric who spent her days listening to the gramophone or talking to her pots and pans in the kitchen. Bascom, nevertheless, seemed unmoved by the pathos of his wife's condition. His life had revolved so long around "its ancient and embedded core of egotism"¹ that, like Eliza, he seemed to have lost whatever sensitivity he may have possessed as a young man to the human needs of other people. Even the knowledge that one of his sons was a derelict failed to disturb this self-centered man, absorbed in the "world of his own creating to whose every fact of feeling and motion he was the central actor."² Like the other members of his family, Bascom also had the egotistical conviction that his destiny was fated and that his actions were somehow above moral censorship:

Again, as much as any of his extraordinary family, he had carried with him throughout his life the sense that he was 'fated'--a sense that was strong in all of them--that his life was pivotal to all the actions of providence, that, in short, the time might be out of joint, but not himself. Nothing but death could shake his powerful egotism.³

Eliza as a representative Victorian puritan was even more certain than her brother that her life had been "shaped to a purpose,"⁴ and with all the fatalistic vanity of her superstitious Scotch soul, she saw "extinction only for others, never for herself."⁵ It was this same uncritical

¹OTR, p. 121. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

⁴LHA, p. 21. ⁵Ibid.

narcissism of his mother's, revealed not only in her maddening sense of destiny but in the self-satisfied delight she took in discussing everything that had ever happened to herself or her family, and in her smug prophecies of sickness, failure, and death for other people, which Eugene had resented as a boy as much as her puritanical strictures on drinking, smoking, impure language, sex, etc. Also he realized bitterly that despite the importance which his mother attached to family life, there had been all too little love in the Gant home. In this respect, Eliza never seemed to have matured enough herself to be able to feel an affection for her children that was not exploitative. Even as a middle-aged woman, her feelings had remained those of the girl-mother whose emotional and spiritual allegiance was to the uncorrupted world of her own childhood. It was this combination of the child and the morally impeccable puritan in her nature which produced in Eugene such mixed feelings of anger, shame, and pity:

such choking exasperation and wordless shame, and somehow with a nameless and intolerable pity, too, because behind it he felt always her high white forehead, and her faded, weak, and childlike eyes, the naked intelligence, whiteness, and immortal innocence of the child that was looking straight through the mask of years with all the deathless hope and faith and confidence of her life and character.¹

To the author of this dissertation, Eliza Gant's double role as the innocent child-mother and the complacent Victorian

¹OTR, p. 351.

puritan implies a connection in Wolfe's creative imagination between the two: namely, that Victorian puritanism had its psychological roots in the non-sexual world of lost innocence, and that necessarily the moral values of the Victorian puritan reflected the child's narcissistic oversimplification of human nature. For this reason, it was the Victorian puritan as the emotional and spiritual child who was obsessively concerned with physical vices, who tended to identify spiritual evil invariably with some aspect of sexual corruption, and who even went so far as to make a virtue out of his self-righteous egotism. In addition, a spiritually sanctified Victorian puritan such as Eliza Gant could feel throughout her life as personally uninvolved with evil as the idealistic Eugene later did on his pastoral search, each of them being removed from any harmful consequences resulting from their acts. The reality of the Fall of Man existed for others, but not for themselves, and on this level, Eliza's life especially seemed outside spiritual assessment or personal ruin as she worked her destiny to its inevitable and triumphant completion:

And yet, for her, even if that house, the whole world, fell in ruins around her, there could be no ruin--her spirit was everlasting as the earth on which she walked, and could not be touched--no matter what catastrophes of grief, death, tragic loss, and unfulfilment might break the lives of other men--she was triumphant over the ravages of time and accident, and would be triumphant to her death. For there was only the inevitable fulfilment of her own destiny--and ruin, loss, and death availed not--she would be fulfilled.¹

¹Ibid., p. 352.

II

Wolfe's second literary editor, Edward C. Aswell, has written that there were probably three reasons behind Wolfe's exchanging the Gants and the Pentlands of his first two novels for the Webbers and the Joyners of his last two. To begin with, Wolfe believed that by making this shift he could avoid causing any further embarrassment to his family. Also Wolfe felt that he still had many important things to say about his childhood which he could express only through a new character such as George Webber. Last, and most important, Wolfe was convinced that in his artistic vision he had developed a more detached attitude towards himself and his work, and that he needed a different character to proclaim this "emancipation from his former self."¹

Aswell's opinions were originally based on a letter (February 14, 1938) in which Wolfe attempted to explain to his editor the theme and purpose of the new fiction in which George Webber appeared. At the beginning of this letter Wolfe stressed the "genuine spiritual and artistic"² change in himself which he believed necessitated a switch in protagonists:

In other words, the value of the Eugene Gant type of character is his personal and romantic uniqueness, causing conflict with the world around him; in this sense, the Eugene Gant type of character becomes a kind of

¹HB, p. 371. ²Ibid., p. 352.

romantic self-justification, and the greatest weakness of the Eugene Gant type of character lies in this fact.

Therefore, it is first of all vitally important to the success of this book that there be no trace of Eugene Gant-i-ness in the character of the protagonist; and since there is no longer a trace of Eugene Gant-i-ness in the mind and spirit of the creator, the problem should be a technical one rather than a spiritual or emotional one.¹

Because the problem seemed largely technical to Wolfe, he made George Webber as different as possible in physical appearance from both Eugene and himself, for "to create in the character of the protagonist, a figure which is six feet and six inches tall--my own height--would be to incur the very danger of personal autobiography and personal identity I am so anxious to avoid."² At the same time, the controlling theme of his fiction demanded that Wolfe create a character who, like the author, had suffered from an isolation accentuated by his physical differences from ordinary people.

In the opinion of most of the critics, the result of these conflicting demands, as well as Wolfe's naive assumption that he had freed himself from his own "Eugene Gant-i-ness," was a protagonist different from his predecessor in appearance only. Clifton Fadiman emphasized their similarity in his review of The Web and the Rock: "The central character, though he is called George Webber, is still the Eugene Gant of the previous books."³ We do not agree with Mr. Fadiman that there is no real distinction in the fiction between Wolfe's treatment of George Webber and Eugene Gant. Since

¹Nowell, p. 714. ²Ibid., p. 716. ³Fadiman, p. 150.

both protagonists, nevertheless, in their emotional and spiritual lives represent the experience of "Everyman," they will be regarded, with the necessary factual reservations, as a single person in the remainder of this dissertation.

The family background of George Webber was similar to Eugene Gant's, for his mother, Amelia Joyner Webber, came from a family, the Joyners, that "was extremely clannish, provincial, and opinionated--in the most narrow and dogged sense of the word, puritanical."¹ Her father, Lafayette Joyner, had frequently stated "that he 'would rather see a daughter of mine dead and lying in her coffin than married to a man who drank,'"² and his views with regard to a divorced person were equally fanatical. This feeling that "divorce was a disgraceful thing"³ was the accepted attitude of the family, and during George's childhood, voices were still lowered whenever the name of a divorced man was mentioned, and "when one whispered furtively behind his hand that someone was a 'grass widow,' there was a general feeling that she was not only not all she should be, but that she was perhaps just a cut or two above a common prostitute."⁴

For some perverse reason, Amelia Joyner defied the wishes of her father to marry John Webber, who was a divorced man as well as a man who drank. Even more scandalous, Webber

¹Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), p. 6. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as WR.

²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., pp. 6-7.

deserted George's mother, after having been married to her for over twenty years, to have an affair with a young woman in the town, and he lived brazenly with the hussy as a common-law wife until his death in 1916. Amelia died not long after her husband had deserted her, but the scandal of John Webber so infuriated the "hard-bitten and puritanical members of the Joyner clan"¹ that they went to court, and with the "full consciousness of the approval of all good people,"² secured legal custody of young George.

The years that the young protagonist spent growing up under the puritanical supervision of his mother's relatives were not happy ones. From the very first, his status with the Joyners was that of the emotionally rejected child, a "charity boy," and instead of living in the fine brick house which his Uncle Mark owned, he lived with his Aunt Maw in an ancient one-story frame house at the rear of his uncle's lot. Aunt Maw, a seventy year old spinster, was the ageless incarnation of the grim, fatalistic spirit of the mountain people, and the dark vision of life which she communicated to the boy was one of "death and doom and terror and lost people in the hills, long, long ago."³ Also she made her nephew feel that the Victorian puritan Joyners, with their self-righteous prejudices and rigid, intolerant moralities, their repressed, corrupted sexuality, and their consuming lust for misery and defeat in other people, always triumphed and were

¹Ibid., p. 7. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., pp. 8-9.

"always right, invincibly right."¹ George knew that he was life's outcast who, no matter how hard he tried, would never be "worthy to be a death-triumphant, ever-perfect, doom-prophetic Joyner."²

The boy had never really wanted to be one of these disagreeable censors of man's imperfections, and opposed to their grimness, the forbidden image of his father's life always seemed "full of secret warmth and joy to him."³ George understood, of course, that his father had been a wicked man, since as a boy he was forced to listen so many times to the Joyner version of his father's infamous conduct that the "story of his father's crimes, his father's sinfulness, his father's lecherous, godless, and immoral life was written on his heart."⁴ Still, he was attracted by "the sinful warmth and radiance of his father's world,"⁵ even as he despised "with every instinctive sense of loathing and repulsion of his being"⁶ the Victorian puritan world of his mother's people:

And because he was told incessantly that the one he hated was good and admirable, and the one for which he secretly longed was evil and abominable, he came to have a feeling of personal guilt that was to torment him for many years.⁷

As a charity boy growing up with his Joyner kin, George felt little affection for his Uncle Mark's hypercritical wife, Aunt Mag. This woman was a tall, rather gaunt woman,

¹Ibid., p. 9. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., pp. 10-11. ⁷Ibid., p. 11.

still childless at forty-five, who had "cold eyes, a thin nose, and a bitter sneering mouth."¹ Perhaps Aunt Mag had been more agreeable when she was younger, but for twenty years she had been a hypochondriac under constant medical attention, and her chronic invalidism had envenomed her disposition. Sometimes George would accompany his Aunt Maw to Mag's house, and they would usually find the ailing woman sealed in her bedroom "in a sickening enervation of red-hot stove heat."² Invariably on these visits, as soon as Mag caught sight of her nephew, the sneering, nagging woman would summon him to her bedside, and then with "a bending down of her thin, pious mouth,"³ would explain how fortunate the rejected boy should feel to be living under a Joyner roof, thanks chiefly to her own selfless generosity:

'You don't know how lucky you are, boy!' she would scream at him. 'You ought to get down on your knees every night and thank the Lord for having a good Christian home like this! Where would you be if it wasn't for me? I made your Uncle Mark take you in! If it wasn't for me, you'd have been sent to an orphan asylum--that's where you'd be!'⁴

Aunt Mag was highly regarded in the Baptist church, for she contributed liberally to the collection plate and was equally generous in supporting the Baptist orphanage. To help with this charity, she usually kept in her service two or three orphans whom she made "drudges of all trades about the house."⁵ In addition to the orphans, Mag had taken into

¹Ibid., p. 97. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 98.

⁴Ibid., pp. 97-98. ⁵Ibid., p. 98.

her home the two sons of her dead brother, and because these nephews "were her own blood, she had brought them up with as much misguided indulgence as though they had been her sons."¹

Mag's long-suffering husband, extremely frugal with himself, never made an issue of his wife's extravagance, but for years he had been exposed to "all her weapons of harsh laughter, incessant nagging, and chronic invalidism."² This undoubtedly helped fuel the "hidden volcano of anger"³ in the man, and whenever the volcano erupted, Mark would rush savagely from the house to spend hours tramping through the hills until his spirit had calmed. After George had reached his teens, he accompanied his uncle on several of these impassioned walks, and the vision of the Victorian puritan Joyner world which he obtained from his uncle at these times did not conform with the unsullied picture which his Aunt Maw had painted for the boy.

Mark's father, Lafayette Joyner or "Fate" as he was more commonly known, had become a kind of Old Testament patriarch to his children before he died, and he had been able to assume this role because of the strong sense of tribal loyalty among the Joyners: "The truth is that no family ever lived that had a stronger sense of their identity."⁴ The original patriarch of the Joyner clan had been Fate's pioneering father, William or "Bear" Joyner, who had fathered

¹Ibid., p. 99. ²Ibid., p. 100. ³Ibid.

⁴HB, p. 227.

some two dozen children by his two wives: "It was a sowing of blind seed. They came. They just came."¹ One of the grimmest family stories among the Joyners was connected with the old Bear's indifference to his children. Once when he had been criticized for neglecting his offspring, the Bear had replied with brutal frankness:

'My God Almighty! A man can plant the seed, but he cain't make the weather! I sowed 'em--now, goddamn 'em, let 'em grow!'²

According to the embittered and resentful son Mark, Lafayette Joyner had inherited in his attitude toward his own numerous family much of his father's calloused indifference without the lusty old pioneer's redeeming vitality.

Lafayette Joyner, like so many pretentious Southerners after the Civil War, had appropriated the military title of Major without having done any soldiering. Of course, Aunt Maw, his oldest child, was familiar with the fraudulent history behind her father's title, but she had long ago refused to believe it. To this devoted daughter, the flawless Major Joyner represented the zenith of Christian gentility:

'You have heard your good Aunt Maw speak, no doubt, about the Major--of his erudition and intelligence, the sanctified infallibility of all his judgments, of his fine white hands and broadcloth clothes, the purity of his moral character, of how he never uttered a profane word, nor allowed a drop of liquor in his house--nor would have let your mother marry your father had he known that your father was a drinking man. That paragon of morals, virtues, purities, and manners--that final, faultless, and inspired judge and critic of all things.'

¹Ibid., p. 228. ²Ibid., p. 226. ³Ibid., p. 165.

Uncle Mark did not share his sister's worshipful admiration of their father. Instead, he had long regarded the Victorian puritan patriarch as an egotistical monster. One afternoon he explained to young George, with a revulsion that stemmed from his earliest childhood memories, how bitterly he had hated life in his father's house:

'As each one of my unhappy brothers and sisters was born,' he declared in a voice so husky and tremulous with his passionate resentment that it struck terror in the boy's heart, 'I cursed him--cursed the day that God had given him life! And still they came!' he whispered, eyes ablaze and furious, in a voice that almost faltered to a sob. 'Year after year they came with the blind proliferation of his criminal desire--into a house where there was scarcely roof enough to shelter us--in a vile, ramshackle shamble of a place,' he snarled, 'where the oldest of us slept three in a bed, and where the youngest, weakest, and most helpless of us all was lucky if he had a pallet of rotten straw that he could call his own! When we awoke at morning, our famished guts were aching!--aching!' he howled, 'with the damnable gnawing itch of hunger!--My dear child, my dear, dear child!' he exclaimed, in a transition of sudden and terrifying gentleness--'May that, of all life's miseries, be a pang you never have to suffer!--And we lay down at night always unsatisfied--oh always! always! always!'¹

Despite his pioneer ancestry, Lafayette Joyner identified with the planter class of the ante-bellum South, which was the reason for his having assumed the title of Major. To complete his role of the Southern gentleman, Major Joyner had cultivated an impressive growth of luxuriant whiskers, prided himself inordinately on his plump, genteel-looking hands, and customarily dressed in a black broadcloth suit. He also wore a white boiled shirt which his wife, Mark's

¹Ibid., p. 160.

neglected mother--"poor, patient, and devoted woman that she was--who never owned a store dress in her whole life--had laundered, starched, and done up for her lord and master with such loving care.'"¹ The pompous Major not only was vain of his appearance but affected to be something of a literary man as well. While the youngest of his numerous progeny were scrambling "in their dirty rags about his feet," he would be lost in the world of poetic inspiration, composing romantic verses to an imaginary lady-love.

After Mark's unflattering recital of the Major's failings, he asked his nephew if it was any wonder that the son had grown to hate the very sight of his father: "'venerable whiskers, thick lips, white hands, broadcloth, unctuous voice, pleased laughter, smug satisfaction, invincible conceit, and all the brutal tyranny of his narrow, vain, inflexible, small soul.'"² Even so, Mark was forced to admit to George that the Major had lived up faithfully to the moral code of the Victorian puritan: "'purity of character--piety--fine words--no profanity--yes! I suppose my father had them all.'"³

It was true that Lafayette Joyner had never permitted any liquor in his house, but neither was there any affection, human decency, or privacy. Until Mark was twenty years old, eight of the children slept in the same room with their mother and father, and one night Mark's four year old brother

¹Ibid., p. 164. ²Ibid., p. 166.

³Ibid., 168.

died in his trundle bed, pushed beneath the bed of his parents, while the rest of the family were sound asleep. The dying child had screamed only once, "such a scream as had the whole blind agony of death in it."¹ Unfortunately, by the time the flustered parents had obtained a light and pulled the little trundle bed into the center of the room, the neglected child was dead. The sudden death of this son had inspired the self-preoccupied Major to an ecstasy of unctuous grief, for as Mark commented desperately to his nephew:

'Oh! if you could have heard the sanctimonious, grief-loving unction of that voice, that feeding gluttony and triumphant vanity of sorrow that batten on its own child's life and said to me, as it had said a thousand times, more plain than any words could do: 'I! I! I! Others will die, but I remain! Death, sorrow, human agony, and loss, all the grief, error, misery, and mischance that men can suffer occurs here for the enlargement of this death-devouring, all-consuming, time-triumphant universe of I, I, I!'"²

It was this same extravagant egotism, not only part of his father's nature but unpleasantly visible in the personalities of all the Victorian puritan Joyners, which had enraged Uncle Mark throughout his life. He referred to it as "conceit," but realized that this word failed completely to suggest the monumental qualities of the Joyner egotism: "conceit is such a small word after all."³ The entrenched self-love, always infallibly smug and self-righteous, upon which the Joyners had grounded their lives could match its will "only against the universe, the rightness of its every act

¹Ibid., p. 168. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 167.

against the huge single voice and bitter judgment of the world, its moral judgments against God himself."¹ With such certain feelings of moral perfection to support their egotism, the Victorian puritan Joyners, like Eliza Gant, were spiritually removed from the effects of their deeds. In a world corrupted in all of its parts by sin and evil, they too remained forever blameless:

'Was it murder? Why, then, the murder was not in ourselves, but in the very flesh and blood of those we murdered. Their murder rushed out of their sinful lives to beg for blood execution at our hands. The transgressor assaulted the very blade of our knives with his offending throat. The wicked man did wilfully attack the sharp point of our bayonet with his crime-calloused heart, the offender in the sight of God rushed on us, thrust his neck into our guiltless hands, and fairly broke it, in spite of all that we could do!'²

III

George Webber, like Eugene Gant, was the victim of a "savagely divided childhood,"³ and because his early home life had been so frustrating, again like Eugene, soon "found himself longing constantly for another universe shaped in the colors of his own desire."⁴ At an early age George learned to identify the world of sexual desire with the masculine image of his father, just as he connected the frigid puritanism which he hated with his grim-lipped, censorious mother's people. In this respect, he had a clearer understanding of the psychological division in himself, as symbolized by the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 10. ⁴Ibid., p. 11.

marked contrast between the Joyner and Webber strains in his past, than did Eugene of his ambivalent nature. In addition, since George had been reared by his Aunt Maw instead of by his own mother, even as a child he had experienced greater freedom than Eugene in bringing to the surface the hostility which he felt for the castrating, possessive mother, whose idealized role was supported so sentimentally by the ethics of Victorian puritanism.

When John Webber died, his only son had just graduated from high school, and George used the small inheritance which was left him by his father's will to enroll the following autumn in Pine Rock College. This school was "an old, impoverished backwoods college"¹ in the protagonist's home state of Catawba, and the provincial existence which its students led reflected the prevailing puritanical mores of the region:

It was a better life than Cambridge or than Oxford had to offer. It was a spare life, a hard life, an impoverished kind of life, in many ways a narrow and provincial kind of life, but it was a wonderfully true and good life, too.²

At first George himself believed that this was true because he had been indoctrinated by his Victorian puritan Joyner relatives to think that any life was good which kept young people "true and constant to the living sources of reality, a life which did not shelter or cloister them, that did not make snobs of them, that did not veil the stern and homely visage of the world with some romantic softening of

¹ Ibid., p. 179. ² Ibid.

luxury and retreat."¹ George's initial impressions of the austere homeliness of life at Pine Rock College were not completely trustworthy, and before he graduated from the school, he was disillusioned by the sentimentality which unfortunately accompanied it.

Gerald Alsop was the student at Pine Rock who was the symbol of Victorian puritan sentimentality in its most cloying human form. At an early age Gerald, or Jerry as he was called by his intimates, "had learned to wear rose-colored blinders against life,"² and as he grew older it was not surprising that his "hostility should be turned against anything --any person, any conflict, any situation, any evidence, or any idea--that would tend to take those blinders off."³ When George first made the acquaintance of Jerry at college, the sentimental young man stood several inches under six feet, weighed close to three hundred pounds, and was noticeably effeminate.

At Pine Rock College Jerry was the spiritual mentor of a small group of students who gathered around him as a kind of mother-confessor. That was the role which Jerry especially cultivated and prized--listening to intimate soul confessions from inexperienced young men about their imaginary sexual lapses. The typical Pine Rock student who unbosomed his sins to Jerry might relate how he had stopped overnight at a hotel on his trip to college. Late that night he had strolled down

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 192. ³Ibid.

the hallway to discover a door unexpectedly ajar and standing behind it a naked woman "inviting him with sweet smiles and honeyed words into her nest of silken sin."¹ At first the young man would succumb to temptation, yet at the very moment he prepared to go to bed with this carnal, wicked woman, he would remember "the image of his mother's face, or the features of the pure, sweet girl for whom he was 'keeping himself.'"² This memory would give him the moral stamina necessary to preserve his sexual innocence. It also would elicit from Jerry a mushy encomium on "Mothah," the purest of all God's many and wonderful creations:

'I knew you would! Yes, suh! Here he would shake his head and chuckle tenderly. 'You're too fine a pusson evah to be taken in by anything like that! . . . and if you had, think how you'd feel now! You wouldn't be able to hold yoah haid up and look me in the eye! You know you wouldn't! And every time you thought of your Mothah . . . you'd have felt lowah than a snake's belly. Yes, suh! You know you would! And if you'd gone ahead and married that girl'--he pronounced it 'gul,' with a vocal unction only slightly inferior to the pronunciation of the sainted name of 'Mothah'--'you'd have felt like a louse every time you'd look at her! Yes, suh, you'd have been livin' a lie that would have wrecked yoah whole life!"³

In the spiritual vision of Jerry Alsop, the "saintly figure of Mother was supreme,"⁴ although the reasoning which the effeminate Jerry used to explain why Mother deserved her sanctified pedestal was not quite convincing. Presumably his argument rested on the demonstrable premise that Mother

¹Ibid., p. 190. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., pp. 190-91.

⁴Ibid., p. 191.

was a female who in lawful matrimony had given birth to a child (or children). What was not so demonstrable was the inferred conclusion that by virtue of her role as legitimate child-bearer, Mother had become "in some divinely mysterious way, not only the author of all wisdom, but the spotless custodian of all morality as well."¹ This is what the idealism of Victorian puritanism, as it responded to the sentimental pressures in smalltown America, had degenerated into at Pine Rock College about the time the United States was preparing to enter World War I:

a non-drinking, non-smoking, non-gambling, non-card-playing, non-fornicating state of single blessedness, leading up eventually to 'the life of service and of leadership for which Pine Rock prepares a man'--namely, the eventual sacrament of matrimony with a spotless female, variously referred to in the lexicon of idealism as 'a fine woman,' or 'a pure, sweet girl.'²

¹Ibid., p. 192. ²Ibid., p. 195.

CHAPTER IX

THE OEDIPAL INVOLVEMENT

She rubbed the sleep gently from her small weak eyes, smiling dimly as she thought, unwakened, of ancient losses. Her worn fingers still groped softly in the bed beside her, and when she found it vacant, she awoke. Remembered. My youngest, my oldest, final, bitter fruit, O dark of soul, O far and lonely, where? Remembered O his face! Death-son, partner of my peril, last coinage of my flesh, who warmed my flanks and nestled to my back. Gone? Cut off from me? Where? Where?¹

Earlier in the dissertation it was emphasized that the imaginative identification of Gant, in his role as a mythical father, with the house on Woodson Street, and of Eliza's feminine nature with Dixieland, was not to be confused with the way Wolfe's protagonist regarded these people as human beings. On this score, Eugene had intense feelings which especially came into the open after his conscious loss of sexual innocence during puberty, and which, at least in part, were the result of his involvement as a child in an almost classical Oedipal situation. The lasting consequences of this Oedipal situation were his deep-seated hostility and fear of Gant accompanied by an excessive need to turn to Eliza, or to a

¹Ibid., p. 290.

mother substitute for emotional support. In addition, the menace of Eugene's incestuous desires exaggerated his feelings of lost innocence and made the search for the archetypal father inevitable if he ever hoped to free himself psychologically from his childhood past. In this chapter a summary will be given of Eugene's sexual development, particularly as it reveals the determining influence of his unresolved Oedipal attitudes toward his parents.

It has already been mentioned that Eliza Gant was a good Victorian puritan mother in that she never seriously believed that her body had been created for any function other than to submit with disgust to the animal passions of her husband, bear and nurse children, and do the hard physical work around the house. Because she was so self-righteously oblivious of her sexuality, Eliza saw nothing wrong in refusing to wean Eugene until he was almost four years old or in permitting him to share her bed at night until the boy had reached puberty. Actually she had only felt guilty when her husband attempted to fondle her in front of the children, and on these rare occasions, she had bridled away from his touch with tears of real embarrassment in her eyes. She was willing to submit to Gant as a bed-partner until she reached the end of child-bearing, but she found his attempts at sentimental affection intolerable. When Eliza did arrive at the menopause, she retreated to her own room, and never again did she and her husband share the same bed at night.

Eliza was not the only person who had been embarrassed by Gant's love-making, for Eugene had suffered acute feelings of shame when he had first witnessed his father's awkward attempts to caress Eliza:

Eugene, when he first noticed an occurrence of this sort, was getting on to his fifth year; shame gathered in him in tangled clots, aching in his throat; he twisted his neck about convulsively, smiling desperately as he did later when he saw poor buffoons or mawkish scenes in the theatre. And he was never able to see them touch each other afterwards with affection, without the same inchoate and choking humiliation: they were so used to the curse, the clamor, and the roughness, that any variation into tenderness came as a cruel affectation.

Even as a small child, Eugene had already absorbed enough of the sexual neurosis which helped fuel his parents' open antagonism to feel uncomfortable whenever he saw his father touch his mother. In addition, from an early age Eugene could not endure being touched himself. The revulsion which he experienced, especially when another boy or man touched his naked flesh, was reinforced by a childhood terror of "physical humiliation."² Years later, after he had left home and was teaching in New York City, he still had not triumphed over these disturbing fears.

Before Eugene started to grammar school, he had been taught by his mother to regard his sexual organs as nasty, and for this reason, in the classroom he had been unable to raise his hand to signal to the teacher whenever he needed to go to the boys' toilet: "He could never say it, because it

¹Ibid., p. 65. ²Ibid., p. 97.

would reveal to her the shame of nature."¹ During these grammar school years the boy also learned the shameful punishment he faced if he were mistaken for a sissy. This had happened once, shortly after he had enrolled in school when he still wore the Lord Fauntleroy curls which so delighted his mother. After a week of miserable recess periods, during which he was singled out for persecution by the other boys because of his girlish hair, the family had persuaded Eliza to let her "baby" go to the barber shop to have his hair cut. This experience had impressed upon Eugene the importance of never exposing himself to attack because of effeminate characteristics either in his appearance or physical mannerisms.

A number of years after the Lord Fauntleroy experience when Eugene was attending the Leonards' private school, one of his classmates was a Jewish boy by the name of Edward Michalove. This boy scarcely twelve years old at the time, somehow had already managed to acquire the mincing effeminacy of an old maid. His squeaking, girlish voice and the suggestive bounce of his hips as he walked to and from the classrooms excited the other students to instant persecution. They ridiculed and badgered the homosexual boy until he lived in a state of constant hysteria. Although Eugene had joined in the sadistic torment of "Miss" Michalove, years afterwards he felt guilty when he recalled what he had done:

He never forgot the Jew; he always thought of him with shame. But it was many years before he could understand

¹Ibid., p. 88.

that that sensitive and feminine person, bound to him by the secret and terrible bonds of his own dishonor, had in him nothing perverse, nothing unnatural, nothing degenerate. He was as much like a woman as a man. That was all. There is no place among the Boy Scouts for the androgyne--it must go to Parnassus.¹

Eugene's fear of being mistaken for a sissy himself, as well as his instinctive terror of physical humiliation, were both connected in his subconscious with the wrathful image of Gant as the adult dispenser of retributive sexual justice. Moreover, Eugene's dread of the vengeful Oedipal father seemed to have an alarming basis in fact since by continuing to sleep in the same bed with his mother until adolescence, Eugene had in an almost literal sense usurped Gant's physical role. Perhaps the following incident in Look Homeward, Angel, with its obvious sexual implications, will suggest a few of the connections between Eugene's various fears. A more precise explanation of the Oedipal significance of these fears will be included later in this chapter.

When Eugene was a magazine peddler, he had discovered that his easiest sales were made in the tubercular sanitariums which fringed the outskirts of Altamont. Once when he was canvassing a hillside sanitarium, two young men had inveigled him into their room on the pretext of buying a magazine; then after closing and locking the door, they had attacked the boy: "tumbling him on the bed, while one drew forth a pocket knife and informed him that he was going to

¹Ibid., p. 236.

perform a caponizing operation on him."¹ Eugene's immediate reaction to the double threat of both a homosexual assault and castration was more savage than the sick men had anticipated:

he went mad with fear, screamed, and fought insanely. They were weak as cats, he squirmed out of their grasp and off the bed cuffing and clawing tigerishly,² striking and kicking them with blind and mounting rage.

After a nurse unlocked the door and the boy had regained the welcome sunlight on the outside of the building, he was "nauseated by fear and by the impact of his fists on their leprous bodies."³

By the time Eugene had secured a private sleeping room at night, he was already taller than his mother, but his body was absurdly narrow and thin. He was then one of the respected "big boys" in the upper grade of grammar school, and got along well enough with the other boys of his own age. Also he took an active interest in sports, although he played games badly himself for he was unable to accept the discipline and hard work that make a successful athlete. Also he was unable to bear the thought of losing:

He wanted always to win, he wanted always to be the general, the heroic spear-head of victory. And after that he wanted to be loved. Victory and love. In all of his swarming fantasies Eugene saw himself like this--unbeaten and beloved.⁴

The principal during Eugene's last year in grammar school

¹Ibid., p. 122. ²Ibid., p. 123. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 204.

was Mr. Leonard, who would start the private school which Eugene attended the following autumn. Mr. Leonard was a muscular, heavy-bodied pedant who had grown up on a farm in Tennessee and who had retained "a broad streak of coarse earthy brutality in him."¹ Ordinarily he tried to be sympathetic with his charges, but whenever challenged "he put down rebellion with good cornfield violence."² In the classroom, for the principal was a teacher as well as an administrator, his hands quite frequently were powdery with chalk dust. One day as Mr. Leonard strolled up and down the aisles, Eugene's Oedipal fears rose to the surface, and he instantly realized how much he feared this symbol of masculine authority with his powerful, chalk-smearing hands:

When he passed near by, Eugene got the odor of chalk and of the schoolhouse: his heart grew cold with excitement and fear. The sanctity of chalk and school hovered about the man's flesh. He was the one who could touch without being touched, beat without being beaten. Eugene had terrible fantasies of resistance, shuddering with horror as he thought of the awful consequences of fighting back: something like God's fist in lightning.³

Before the principal and Margaret, his literary-minded wife, opened their private school, Eugene had already been invited to become a charter student because of an unusual essay he had written interpreting Millet's painting "The Song of the Lark." Eliza went to see the Leonards, and after haggling over the price of tuition, at length agreed to send her son for a trial year, which later was extended to four.

¹Ibid., p. 207. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 206.

During these years when he attended the Leonards' school as a day student, Eugene continued to spend his nights at Dixie-land, and his emotional allegiance to his mother was not weakened by the fact that Gant, Helen, and Luke all resented Eliza's indulging her son by sending him to a private school. They would comment sarcastically to the mother:

'You've ruined him completely since you sent him to a private school.' Or, 'He's too good to soil his hands now that he's quit the public school.'¹

Despite the close tie between mother and son, Eugene's spiritual mother, from the time he attended the Leonards' school until he left home to enroll in college, was his idealized teacher, Margaret Leonard, not Eliza Gant.

When Eugene first met Margaret Leonard, she was thirty-four years old, the mother of two small children, and tubercular. Her wasted figure and the ashen color of her skin revealed her disease. Eugene, however, forgot about Margaret's physical condition as soon as he turned his eyes to her face. It was the most tranquil and yet the most passionate face he had ever seen, and it was filled with the high poetry of her spirit. At once the boy felt a sense of moral purification as if in the presence of this woman, almost miraculously he were in union, not with disease, but with the greatest health he had ever known:

All of his sin, all of his pain, all the vexed weariness of his soul were washed away in that deep radiance: the tumult and evil of life dropped from him its foul and

¹Ibid., p. 225.

ragged cloak. He seemed to be clothed anew in garments of seamless light.¹

Also he sensed that this remarkable woman, whose spirit had remained untarnished by the ugly realities of life, somehow recognized and seemed to understand his most secret personality.

Eugene had discovered at last a mother whom he could love without the ambiguous feelings of guilt and resentment which accompanied his potentially incestuous relationship with the demanding, egotistical Eliza. Equally important, in his idealized teacher he had found an immaculate emotional symbol with which he could identify his own nostalgia for his pre-sexual innocence.

Margaret remained Eugene's spiritual inspiration while he attended the Leonards' private school. As an English teacher she guided his reading, helped form his literary tastes, and encouraged him in his ambition to become a writer. In addition, as a woman she gave him sensitive affection. Pamela Johnson, the English critic, regards Margaret's influence as being so important that Eugene, "for the rest of his life, in all other women, sought for her likeness."² We are sceptical of this conclusion of Miss Johnson's, for Eugene's relationship with his teacher remained non-sexual and

¹Ibid., p. 477.

²Pamela Johnson, Hungry Gulliver (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 45.

idealistic. The adolescent boy refused to tell her about the drunkenness and disorder of life in his home, and any unpleasant fact which threatened to level Margaret down to the plainness of ordinary existence was to him "as unreal and horrible as a nightmare."¹ In terms of the child-sorceress dualism, Margaret remained the archetype of the spiritually uncorrupted "child-mother," and when the memory of her children first impelled Eugene to try to picture the sexual relationship which at one time obviously had existed between the principal and his wife, the disbelieving boy was horrified:

He had heard of the children. Now he remembered them, and Leonard's white muscular bulk, with a sense of horror. His swift vision leaped at once to the sexual relation, and something in him twisted aside, incredulous and afraid.²

The boy's sexual imagination had been precociously stimulated by his intimate physical closeness to Eliza, when, as a pre-adolescent boy, for warmth and security at night he had snuggled his thin child's body against the matronly back and thighs of his mother. It seems logical to infer, therefore, that the attraction which older women always possessed for Eugene was conditioned not by Margaret Leonard but by his relationship with the Victorian puritan Eliza. When the boy was in the fourth grade in grammar school, already he was responsive to the sexual attraction of older women. In his daydreams about his teacher at this time, he imagined

¹LHA, p. 225. ²Ibid., p. 212.

wishfully that she had asked him to remain after school one evening so she could tell him about her love:

'You don't want one of these silly little girls, Eugene,' she would say coaxingly. 'You're too good for them--you're a great deal older than your years. You need the understanding a mature woman can give you.'¹

A few years later Eugene had a desperate crush on Mrs. Selborne, one of the boarders at Dixieland. This heavy-bodied woman, a mindless, sensual creature in her mid-twenties, was in the boy's imagination "the living symbol of his desire--the dim vast figure of love and maternity."²

Eugene's brother Ben, for whom he had such admiration, also favored older women, and at the time of his death was having an affair with Mrs. Pert, an alcoholic married woman of forty-three. During a summer vacation after Eugene had been away to college and had already lost his virginity in the "red light" houses of Exeter, he imitated his brother's example by sleeping carnally with Miss Brown, a woman at least twenty years his senior who was another one of Eliza's questionable boarders. Miss Brown prided herself on being a high-class prostitute instead of a common "chippy," and because Eugene had so little money to pay for the attentions he received from this woman, he was persuaded to give her the medals he had won at the Leonards' school. Ironically, Miss Brown had a son, practically the same age as the protagonist, who was living in the Middle West. One night as

¹Ibid., p. 110. ²Ibid.

she and Eugene lay in bed together after having made love, the woman began to discuss her son:

He turned his head away sharply, whitening with a sense of nausea and horror, feeling in him an incestuous pollution.¹

It has been mentioned that the Victorian puritan Gant, like the infamous Judge Bland, divided women into two classes--prostitutes and mothers--and that at an early age Eugene had followed his father's example. Evil women were meant to be loved sexually, but good women were supposed to be placed on a pedestal and idealized spiritually, since in their role as the immaculate mother image, they had managed to transcend the degrading vulgarity of sex. When Eugene attended grammar school, in one of his classrooms he had been attracted by two girls who sat in adjoining seats. One of these girls, Bessie Barnes, was an erotic creature, at least in the boy's fantasy, who displayed "her long full silken leg"² as she sat scribbling at her desk. Sitting at the desk behind the sensual Bessie was Ruth, a demure, innocent girl with milk-white eyes and her black hair parted simply in the middle. As Eugene furtively studied the two girls, he thought pleasantly "of a wild life with Bessie and of a later resurrection, a pure and holy life with Ruth."³

The protagonist had been indoctrinated by his parents to believe that any brazen exposure of sex was shameful, particularly within the sanctity of the home. One day Eugene

¹Ibid., p. 471. ²Ibid., p. 205. ³Ibid.

had accidentally discovered a strange girl and his brother Steve making love on Gant's leather couch. Years later, even after the two had been married, he could never see this couple descend the stairs together at Dixieland without feeling both embarrassed and ashamed. Eugene also felt guilty about his own compulsive sexual desires during puberty. During the years when he attended the Leonards' school, he believed that he should have preferred death to revealing to Margaret, his innocent spiritual mother, any of his ugly sexual appetites and frustrations:

She would have been stricken with horror if she could have known the wild confusion of adolescence, the sexual nightmares of puberty, the grief, the fear, the shame in which a boy broods over the dark world of his desire. She did not know that every boy, caged in from confession by his fear, is to himself a monster.¹

In the autumn of 1915 Eugene took an excursion trip to Charleston, South Carolina. One of the girls in the party was a waitress, several years older than himself. When she and Eugene found themselves alone together in a hotel room in Charleston, the more experienced girl expected her partner to make the necessary advances. Eugene made a few preliminary caresses, but when he suddenly realized what else the girl wanted him to do, he felt terrified. He managed to save himself, however, by invoking the approved Victorian puritan myth that no self-respecting young man would take advantage of a sweet, unsuspecting virgin:

¹Ibid., p. 307.

'I won't be the first. I won't be the one to begin you.
 . . . I may be bad, but I won't do that.'¹

In this experience, Eugene was the virgin, not the girl on the bed to whom he was guiltily apologizing.

Since the protagonist regarded women as either spiritually innocent or sexually evil, he faced an emotional dilemma whenever he was in the company of a girl who attracted him romantically. For example, he had fallen in love with Laura James chiefly because he had been able to idealize her purity and innocence:

All the young beauty in the world dwelt for him in that face that had kept wonder, that had kept innocence, that had lived in such immortal blindness to the terror and foulness of the world.²

Eugene was so impressed by the immaculate condition of this girl, as contrasted with his own fallen state, that when finally he had summoned enough courage to hold her hand, he felt as if he had practically seduced her. Laura, five years older than the protagonist, was less innocent than he had assumed. Eventually Eugene was forced to recognize that the girl whom he idealized had been intimate with other lovers before himself, and this bitter knowledge made him frantic with mixed feelings of disgust and betrayal:

'You have fellows--you let them feel you. They feel your legs, they play with your breasts, they--' His voice became inaudible through strangulation.³

After his abortive romance with Laura James was ended, Eugene, like his father and brothers before him, was

¹Ibid., p. 365. ²Ibid., p. 436. ³Ibid., p. 455.

introduced to the carnal mysteries of sex by the small town whore. During his first year at the State University, he accompanied several college friends to a somewhat isolated latticed house, with its identifying "red light," in the nearby crossroads village of Exeter. After his first experience with a prostitute, Eugene vomited as soon as he was outside the latticed house. Then for the next few days:

was haunted by his own lost ghost: he knew it to be irrecoverable. For three days he avoided every one: the brand of his sin, he felt, was on him.¹

Conveniently reassured by his guilts that no more of his sexual innocence could be lost, Eugene returned at the end of the week to the same enticing latticed house in Exeter. During this experience the prostitute with whom he slept even called him "son."

Eugene's identification of sex with prostitution, together with his adolescent idealization of the innocent woman, were both the outgrowth of his involved relationship with Eliza, and in his subconscious, of his fear of the vengeful Gant. It has been suggested various times in this dissertation that in the Gant home, the protagonist literally had usurped his father's place by continuing to sleep in the same bed with his mother until he was twelve. What made this Oedipal replacement even more menacing was Eliza and Gant's continence after the birth of their youngest child. In the triangular affair involving Gant, Eliza, and Eugene, the father,

¹Ibid., p. 412.

in a very real sense had been shoved aside as husband and lover, and the son, in an equally real sense, was the guilty interloper.

Eugene, of course, obviously had to experience tremendous guilts and fears because of his participating role in a triangular family situation which was impossible to resolve sexually. As a son Eugene loved his mother, yet he felt guilty about his expressing that love openly, particularly when it seemed the least bit physical, for in his subconscious memory the fierce, cuckolded Gant, who needed only the slimmest excuse to exact righteous vengeance, was always present. To protect himself from the wrath of the avenging father, as well as to avoid the horrible consequences attending his incestuous desires, the son had to make a clear separation between affection and sex. His own psychological position would otherwise have been unbearable.

In the Gant home the Victorian puritan mother was the one who profited most from this Oedipal situation. She was able to enjoy the emotional and physical companionship of her son, yet without making sexual sacrifices and without surrendering her independence. Eugene was the one who remained in a dependent position and who felt emotionally thwarted. He was the spoiled child, selfishly identifying with his mother's plight in the struggle between his parents; needing her support desperately for his own emotional security; yet rebelling at his dependent role and feeling both guilty and fearful

of his father. Home life for the boy, therefore, was an emotional prison from which he had to escape if he ever hoped to secure independence and happiness for himself. The disturbing question was how to escape, especially since the most bitter resentments he felt for each parent were seldom divorced from moving feelings of pity and love:

He felt that he might be clean and free if he could only escape into a single burning passion--free, and hard, and hot, and glittering--of love, hatred, terror, or disgust. But he was caught, he was strangling in the web of futility--there was no moment of hate that was not touched by a dozen shafts of love.¹

The years passed and Eugene's sense of freedom gradually increased as he became less afraid of the aging Gant. The physical decline of his cancerous father was swift, and because his life previously had been connected with such in-temperate gratification of his appetites--excess in eating, drinking, and huge rioting debauchery--it was horrible for the children still at home to watch the noticeable disintegration of his physical powers. Also Eugene was exasperated by the senile petulance of his father, especially when the self-pitying old man whined for attention and forgiveness. The boy reflected grimly that "his father's life had devoured whatever had served it, and that few men had had more sensuous enjoyment, or had been more ruthless in their demands on others."²

At this time Eliza was in a splendid condition to

¹Ibid., p. 549. ²Ibid., p. 279.

ponder upon the slowly approaching death of her husband. Although she was in her middle fifties, her health was excellent, for she had grown triumphantly stronger after the diseases of her middle years. Dixieland was turning out to be a more profitable investment than even she had expected, and her other properties were also increasing in value. Unfortunately for her children, Eliza's miserliness seemed to keep pace inversely with her advancing prosperity. One night Eugene became almost hysterical as he attacked his mother's compulsive greed:

'Mama, mama, in God's name, what is it? What do you want? Are you going to strangle and drown us all? Don't you own enough? Do you want more string? Do you want more bottles? By God, I'll go around collecting them if you say so.' His voice had risen almost to a scream. 'But tell me what you want. Don't you own enough? Do you want the town? What is it?'¹

As soon as Eugene had finished his attack he felt guilty. His mother was crying, and taking her son's hand in her own, almost as if she were still a child, Eliza laid her white, girlish face, twisted with grief, against his shoulder:

It was the gesture of a child: a gesture that asked for love, pity, and tenderness. It tore up great roots in him, bloodily.

'Don't!' he said. 'Don't, mama! Please!'

'Nobody knows,' said Eliza. 'Nobody knows. I need some one too. I've had a hard life, son, full of pain and trouble!' Slowly, like a child again, she wiped her wet weak eyes with the back of her hand.

Ah, he thought, as his heart twisted in him full of wild pain and regret, she will be dead some day and I shall always remember this. Always this. This.²

During his second year at the State University, Eugene

¹Ibid., pp. 438-39. ²Ibid., pp. 439-40.

had returned home for the Christmas vacation and somewhat inadvertently had managed to get drunk on Christmas Eve. This was the first time in his life that he had ever been intoxicated, and the next day, after he had sobered up, he was filled with gratitude that his family seemed tolerant enough enough to overlook what he had done. When the mood of the family changed and they began to make a serious moral issue of his drinking, Eugene felt betrayed and lashed back at their attack:

'I know that I have been guilty of no great crime against you, and I am no longer afraid of you.'

'Why, boy!' said Eliza. 'We've done all we could for you. What crime have we accused you of?'

'Of breathing your air, of eating your food, of living under your roof, of having your life and your blood in my veins, of accepting your sacrifice and privation, and of being ungrateful for it all.'¹

On this occasion, Eugene again became hysterical as he expressed to his mother the bitter resentments he had bottled up inside himself from the time he was a child. Then he emphasized why he felt so desperately that he had to leave home to escape from his family:

'Unnatural!' Eliza whispered. 'Unnatural son! You will be punished if there's a just God in heaven.'

'Oh, there is! I'm sure there is!' cried Eugene. 'Because I have been punished. By God, I shall spend the rest of my life getting my heart back, healing and forgetting every scar you put upon me when I was a child. 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 last 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

¹Ibid., p. 504.

shall get me some order out of this jungle of my life: I shall find my way out of it yet, though it take me twenty years more--alone.'

'Alone?' said Eliza, with the old suspicion. 'Where are you going?'

'Ah,' he said, 'you were not looking, were you? I've gone.'¹

Eugene's final leavetaking from home was not so simple as he had predicted. He was given a dress rehearsal of what to expect a few days after Ben's death, when Eliza sat before the fire at Dixieland, "calling up from the past the beautiful lost things that never happened."² Suddenly she had looked over at her youngest child, her "baby," and when Eugene saw the fear in his mother's eyes, he rushed to where she sat, grasped her work-worn hand, and the two clasped each other tightly as Eliza laid her face gently against his arm:

'Don't go yet,' she said. 'You've all your life ahead of you. Stay with me just a day or two.'

'Yes, mama,' he said, falling to his knees. 'Yes, mama;' he hugged her to him frantically. 'Yes, mama. God bless you, mama. It's all right mama. It's all right.'

Eliza wept bitterly.

'I'm an old woman,' she said, 'and one by one I've lost you all. He's dead now, and I never go to know him. O son, don't leave me yet. You're the only one that's left: you were my baby. Don't go! Don't go!' She laid her white face against his sleeve.

It is not hard to go (he thought). But when can we forget?

In these frantic good-byes, Eliza felt and knew all her son wanted to say without his even expressing his love; at least, so it seemed to Eugene at the time. Also he believed he understood the final wisdom of the earth, when, on

¹Ibid., p. 505. ²Ibid., p. 578. ³Ibid.

the eve of his departure from home, he faced the poignant reality of this indivisible bond between mother and son, in which there was neither forgetting, nor denying, nor explaining, nor hating:

O mortal and perishing love, born with this flesh and dying with this brain, your memory will haunt the earth forever.

And now the voyage out. Where?¹

II

In terms of the artistic vision which governs all of Wolfe's fiction, the representation of the dualism between the masculine and feminine principles in Look Homeward, Angel, given its final definition by the protagonist's Oedipal involvement with his parents together with his homosexual fears and nostalgia for pre-sexual innocence, further illuminates the author's criticism of the ethics of Victorian puritanism. To make this point clear, it is necessary to re-examine briefly material which we have already included in the preceding chapters of this dissertation, but now using the psychological experiences of Wolfe's protagonist in the fiction itself as an informing guide.

When Gant as a Victorian puritan father separated lust from affection, he resembled his son Eugene in that he also was projecting his early Oedipal relationship with his mother into adult life. This, in turn, meant that sex and spiritual evil had to be united in his eyes, since puberty

¹Ibid., p. 616.

represented the traumatic fall from innocence which he had experienced personally. After puberty Gant had been forced to adjust to a corrupted world in which his own sexual desires were too powerfully unregenerate to control, and which, whenever he submitted to their urgent demands, left him feeling weak-willed and ashamed. To find personal salvation in this kind of hopelessly sinful world, he had to erect a rigid barrier between the idealistic side of his personality, emotionally fixed in a childhood setting of pre-sexual innocence, and his depraved, post-puberty animal nature.

When Gant married Eliza, therefore, it was psychologically impossible for him to love his wife passionately, for he was already conditioned to regard the potential mother of his children with the same pure feelings with which as a child he had loved his own mother. His sexual desires had to be transferred to the common sluts and prostitutes which they deserved. Largely for this reason, whenever Gant's lust became unmanageable, he had gotten drunk, visited the whores in Eagle Crescent, fornicated with furious relief, returned home to revile his frigid wife as the betrayer, and after sobering up, had repented in a neurotic abyss of shame. In his moods of self-abusive penitence, Gant agreed with his wife that if only sex and licker could be eliminated from life, this would be the best of all possible worlds. This was the unrealistic attitude toward human nature of typical Victorian puritan parents, given its emotional context by

their attachment to private world of childhood innocence, and upon which was based their narcissistic indifference to spiritual evil, particularly when it appeared within the sanctuary of the home.

Eugene Gant had grown up in a household in which his parents' uncritical approval of the virtues to be obtained from hard work, money, respectability, and exaggerated self-love, combined with their ingrained puritanical distrust of sex and alcohol, helped make neurotics of all their children. Previously it was pointed out that Eugene was still a baby when he sensed that his own happiness was somehow being betrayed by the hostility which existed between his parents. Actually no betrayal was involved, for Gant and Eliza failed to respond with normal affection to their small child simply because they were unable to respond with normal affection to each other; Eugene was in no way to blame.

The helpless child did not feel innocent, for in his subconscious, even at this early age, his sense of rejection was supported by feelings of guilt. Instinctively he believed that his parents had not given him the love he craved simply because he was undeserving. As the child grew older, his conviction of personal unworthiness, along with his latent sexual guilts, became more extreme, and when he reached adolescence, they were inextricably meshed. Puberty, therefore, had to represent for Eugene, as it had symbolized to his father before him, a shocking fall from innocence, for

it was during this disturbed period that his lust finally surfaced to be recognized as the shameful thing his feelings of emotional rejection and his subconscious guilts had predetermined it should be. The next step for Eugene was to equate his sexual shame with evil, and as soon as he had done this he was both psychologically and spiritually prepared to make his guilt-ridden pilgrimage to the Victorian puritan whorehouse, that sorceress's temple of wickedness and forbidden pleasure.

The house of prostitution occupied such an important place in the sexual imagination of the Victorian puritan because of the accepted propaganda that nice women were not supposed to enjoy sexual intercourse. By nice women the Victorian puritan male usually meant women whom he had placed on a pedestal because they resembled his mother. Wolfe's representation of the Oedipal situation in Look Homeward, Angel suggests that the Victorian puritan husband was compelled to place his wife on a pedestal, neither because he truly esteemed her as a woman, nor because the sentimentalized wife especially enjoyed her elevated position. He placed the "nice woman" on a pedestal rather because he had to protect himself psychologically from his repressed incestuous desires, as well as from the torturing guilts which accompanied them, both sets of emotions having originated in his Oedipal involvement as a child with his own parents.

The Victorian puritan husband, since he was constantly threatened by the spectre of vicarious incest if he consciously associated his sexual desire with that substitute mother figure, his wife, was emotionally driven to go outside the home for carnal pleasure. The obvious place to find this pleasure was the whorehouse, where he could purchase sexual attention from women vulgar enough to give him the psychological freedom he needed to make love on an abandoned animal level and enjoy it. His sexually rejected wife, since theoretically she was supposed to be non-sexual, was left free to compensate in the home for her husband's neglect; and in the home is precisely where, with neurotic vengeance, she exacted compensation. The double sexual standard observed in this culture helps explain why the family atmosphere in a typical Victorian puritan home was frequently so deadly to its various members.

It has now been suggested that the Victorian puritan male, in his attempts to separate sexual desire from affection, ended up with a schizophrenic attitude toward women. On the one hand, he had his wife or mother whom he could idealize but not love sexually, and on the other hand, there was the prostitute to whom he could turn for carnal gratification.¹ This double standard was harmful to the psyche of the Victorian puritan male because it re-inforced his lack

¹ Again the reader should be reminded that this attitude represents a splitting into separate halves of the ancient fertility archetype of the child-sorceress mother.

of confidence in his own masculinity, a condition which had been exaggerated by his prolonged emotional dependence upon the kind of possessive mother which his culture produced. Also, this double standard was destructive in that it helped turn his adult interests completely to the world of men where he could establish relationships which were psychologically more satisfying than he could with women. This was true because in the world of men the sexual feelings and affections of the Victorian puritan were superficially re-united so that he was able to experience the illusion of emotional wholeness. Such a compromise worked, however, only so long as his sexual desires remained repressed, for the male world in which he felt increasingly at ease had for its foundation sublimated homosexual responses.

In his subconscious the Victorian puritan male was aware of his sexual ambivalence, and again to provide some kind of psychological defense against his own compulsive weaknesses--as he had done when he placed the woman who represented his mother on a pedestal--he brought to the surface his most devious guilts and fears and directed them against the overt homosexual. If the Victorian puritan male regarded any open sexual pleasure with women as nasty--an attitude stemming from his repressed desire for incest with his mother coupled with his fear of the avenging father--than logically he was forced to regard any open display of homosexuality as unspeakably vile.

The most deplorable result of this attitude was that in the adult world of the Victorian puritan, the obviously maladjusted homosexual--in the boy's world, the sissy--became the socially approved target for the most neurotic expression of sadistic malice. Another unfortunate result of the same attitude was the compelling need of the Victorian puritan male to prove his manhood venturesomely, not to women but to other men. Today the athletically-minded twentieth century male seems to have inherited both of these attitudes,¹ even as he is usually blissfully unaware that they have any connection with his own repressed homosexuality. For such a "red-blooded" male, the connotations of the word "pervert" suggest human nature in an especially depraved form, since like the Victorian puritan of the preceding century, he continues to identify evil with sex and to worship at the spiritual shrine of his own narcissism.

¹For documentation note the popularity of Ernest Hemingway's fiction.

CHAPTER X

LOST INNOCENCE

All of our life goes up in smoke. There is no structure, no creation in it, not even the smoky structure of dreams. Come lower, angel; whisper in our ears. 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?¹

Thomas Wolfe believed that the protagonist in his fiction was a microcosm for "the enormous wistfulness and loneliness of America where all men wander and are sick for home, and where all things change but change itself."² Before Eugene Gant entered adolescence, however, he had not been particularly upset by change, for then, in his childhood imagination at least, he had belonged to a world of innocence in which it seemed that change, together with the evil which frequently attended it, did not have to be taken seriously. The boy had grown up in Altamont, that "isolated fortress in the hills"³ of Old Catawba, when the town had contained between fifteen to twenty thousand inhabitants. It was just a small mountain town, but to Eugene it had possessed enormous authority: "with a child's egotism it was for him the centre

¹LHA, p. 295. ²WR, p. 369. ³LHA, p. 108.

of the earth, the small but dynamic core of all life."¹ Altamont, in a very real sense, represented the world to the boy, and it was a re-assuring, familiar world, forever guarded by the soaring blue-green hills in the distance: "beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change."²

The feelings of security which Eugene associated with his familiar home town, protected by the surrounding mountains, were similar to those which he had experienced in his father's house on Woodson Street, with its tremendous, encircling vines. This suggests that in the imagination of Wolfe's child protagonist, his chief protection against the threat of unceasing change, in reality, was not the mountains rimming his home town, but rather the archetypal image of the father guarding his childhood home. In the selection "The Lost Boy," Wolfe made this connection a little clearer, for in this selection young Grover Gant's sense of security was associated only generally with his home town; specifically it was identified with his father's marble shop at the corner of the town square as a symbol of Gant's re-assuring masculine vitality. Before examining "The Lost Boy," it is first necessary to define, in terms of Wolfe's informing artistic vision, both the child's pre-adolescent world of innocence, as well as his post-adolescent world of "lost innocence."

The childhood world of innocence in Wolfe's artistic

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 191.

is always controlled imaginatively by the masculine principle: that is, by the archetypal image of the father. In the child's psychological imagination, the father provides the image of masculine vitality. In the child's religious imagination, the father represents God. The pre-sexual child is a narcissist, but because of his imaginative allegiance to the structure of his father's life, both his self-love and his feelings of innocence are kept relatively free from his emotional dependence upon his mother. For this reason, the image of the child-sorceress mother, the archetype of the feminine principle, only becomes menacing after the child has become an adolescent.

In the safe, uncorrupted world of childhood, change, death, evil, and even time, are all meaningless abstractions, for these abstractions need the confirmation of puberty to become emotionally real. In other words, the child does not actually enter the world of change and time, is not even able to have a convincing premonition of his own inevitable death, much less a recognition of spiritual evil, until he has lost his sexual innocence. In addition, his most disturbing fears and guilts remain latent in his unconscious memory until this psychologically determining loss of innocence occurs.¹

¹This aspect of the child's pre-adolescent experience is supported by the psychological theory of Sigmund Freud and Theodore Reik: "We know that early experiences of childhood, especially those to which we attribute the character of the traumatic, seem to be entirely forgotten. In some form or other, mostly distorted, they are remembered at the time

Finally, the child's world is one in which his sensuous impressions are almost always connected with the present moment, the "immediate now"; moreover, whatever his senses respond to in the present seems fresh, original, and alive.

The emotionally and spiritually fresh world of childhood innocence becomes the romantically stale world of "lost innocence" after the child has experienced adolescence. The attractive image of the archetypal father is then supplanted by the hateful image of the Oedipal father, and the re-assuring structure of the father's life is removed from the present and located in the past and in the future. In the past it still exists as the archetype of masculine vitality, but the archetype is nostalgic rather than vital. In the future the masculine structure of the father's life is confused with the young man's romantic vision of the outside world:

The great vision of the city is burning in your heart in all of its enchanted colors just as it did when you were twelve years old and thought about it. You think that some glorious happiness of fortune, fame, and triumph will be yours at any minute, that you are about to take your place among great men and lovely women in a life more fortunate and happy than any you have ever known.¹

Beginning with his post-puberty years, the young man's most intense feelings of "lost innocence," which now represent

of puberty after a long phase of latency. . . . we learned that events of childhood begin to be remembered at puberty. Only then memories of childhood, often distorted and disguised, emerge and become objects of conscious recollection." Theodore Reik, Myth and Guilt (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), pp. 160, 165.

¹DM, p. 2.

his spiritual integrity as it were, are increasingly subservient to the control which the feminine principle in the archetypal role of the child-sorceress mother--the mythical "dark Helen"--exerts over his sexual life. In addition, his narcissism, which inexorably becomes more extreme, is emotionally supported by his dependence upon his own mother as a human being. To escape from this castrating emotional bondage, as well as to break both his spiritual fidelity to "lost innocence" and his atavistic sexual attachment to the "dark Helen" of his Oedipal imagination, the young man has to destroy the rigid narcissism which is their reflection by making a personal confirmation or discovery of spiritual evil. At that moment, his pastoral vision of the world begins to collapse, and the young man is free to begin his archetypal search for the spiritual father.

In Wolfe's story "The Lost Boy," young Grover Gant, the gentle son with the strawberry birthmark on his neck, seemed undismayed by change as one spring afternoon in 1904, the year of his death, he stood in front of his father's marble shop at the corner of the town Square and reflected vacantly:

Here is old Grover, almost twelve years old. Here is the month of April, 1904. Here is the courthouse bell and three o'clock. Here is Grover on the Square that never changes. Here is Grover, caught upon this point of time.¹

Grover was mistaken, of course, about the permanence

¹HB, p. 2.

of what he saw and felt, since the twelve year old boy had already begun to lose his childhood vision of life as his body slipped into puberty and as his psyche was unexpectedly confronted by the guilts and fears emerging into his consciousness at the same time his sexual innocence disappeared. For this reason, in the story, after his painful experience with Mr. Crocker in the candy store, young Grover realized, in a somewhat confused way to be sure, that something in his home town had suffered a permanent change: "something had been lost--something forever gained."¹ Since the Square and his father's shop had not altered their appearance, the boy realized that the change must have taken place within himself:

'This is the Square'--thought Grover as before--'This is Now. There is my father's shop. And all of it is as it has always been--save I.'²

Grover's initial anger against the candy store proprietor was drowned by the "swelling tide of guilt"³ which accompanied his dread of what Gant might do when he discovered what had happened: "'Oh God, if papa ever hears!'" thought Grover, as his numb feet started up the steps into his father's shop."⁴ The stonecutter was discovered at work in the room at the back of the shop: "gaunt-visaged, mustache cropped, immensely long and tall and gaunt," holding "in one hand a tremendous rounded wooden mallet like a butcher's bole; and in the other hand, a strong cold chisel."⁵ Grover

¹Ibid., p. 14. ²Ibid., p. 10. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 11.

stood quietly in the room for several minutes, watching his father chisel inscriptions on a block of marble as delicately "as a jeweler might work on a watch, except that in the man and in the wooden mallet there was power too."¹

Soon the guilty boy confessed the argument he had had with Mr. Crocker. The stonecutter immediately dropped his tools, took his son by the hand, and walked swiftly to the candy store, where he angrily accused the owner of mistreating Grover because he had never been a father himself: "'You never knew the feelings of a father, or understood the feelings of a child; and that is why you acted as you did.'"² The two Gants returned across the Square, the son holding tightly to his father's hand, and "light came again into the day."³ For a moment they stopped on the wooden sidewalk in front of the marble shop. Then Gant advised his son to "be a good boy," and the stonecutter, "with his great stride,"⁴ climbed the porch steps leading to his shop and went inside.

Grover remained standing by the porch steps, trying to feel re-assured by the near presence of his father that nothing in his childhood world had really been changed by his unpleasant experience earlier in the afternoon: "'This is Time,' thought Grover. 'Here is the Square, and here is my father's shop, and here am I.'"⁵ Unfortunately, something had happened which could not be reversed, even by his father, and

¹Ibid., p. 12. ²Ibid., p. 13. ³Ibid., p. 14.

⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

which would permanently affect the way the boy envisioned the world. The innocence of his childhood had begun to vanish:

And light came and went and came again--but now not quite the same as it had done before. The boy saw the pattern of familiar shapes and knew that they were just the same as they had always been. But something had gone out of day, and something had come in again. Out of the vision of those quiet eyes some brightness had gone, and into their vision had come some deeper color.¹

In the opening section of The Web and the Rock, the twelve year old "Monk" Webber, like Eugene and Grover Gant of Wolfe's earlier fiction, also seemed unperturbed by the impermanence of what he observed as he lay day-dreaming on the grass in front of his uncle's house. The neighborhood scene was neither strange nor unsettling; rather it was "common, homely, and familiar, and when remembered later, wonderful, the way things are."² With regard to Webber's happiness, what difference did it make if the commonplace things he saw, "the structure of so many little and familiar things as hen houses, barns . . . the slate roofs and the shingles, the lawns, the hedges and the gables, the backyards,"³ were in reality "as accidental as the strings of blind chance."⁴ In the boy's vision they were also "somehow fore-ordained as a destiny: the way things are, because they are the way they are."⁵ Unfortunately the inevitable price of adolescence was the sacrifice of this illusion of an unchanging neighborhood world, and Webber's most pressing problem as he

¹Ibid. ²WR, p. 18. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

grew older was to find something equally comforting and familiar to take its place.

After Wolfe's second protagonist had become a newspaper reporter in New York City, he decided to write a novel centered around "a boy's vision of life over a ten-month period between his twelfth and thirteenth years,"¹ and the book would be called The End of the Golden Weather. Webber gave the novel this title because he wanted to write about that confused period in a boy's life when the "golden weather of childhood begins to change, and, for the first time, some of the troubling weathers of a man's soul are revealed to him."² In other words, he intended to write about the end of childhood innocence as his protagonist entered adolescence.

With this interpretation in mind, the reader easily can understand the symbolism Wolfe employed at the beginning of his own novel, when his protagonist, nicknamed "Monk" because of his peculiar "monkey-like" physique, was introduced as the "child Caliban."³ Monk at this time was just at the threshold of puberty. He resembled the Caliban of Shakespeare's play, "The Tempest," not only because of his animalistic appearance, but because, like the a-moral, naturalistic Caliban, Monk also belonged to a pastoral world in which evil seemed non-existent. It was an innocent world in the vision of the boy because it was pre-sexual, and that Wolfe consciously

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 263. ³Ibid., p. 3.

had this interpretation in mind seems a reasonable inference from the age he gave his protagonist, together with the author's note at the beginning of the novel that its theme was that of "'the innocent man' discovering life."¹ As previously suggested, the disappearance of Monk's sexual innocence coincided with the end of his own "golden weather."

Eugene Gant had been introduced to the golden weather of his child's world by his senses. In the dissertation we have already mentioned that when Eugene was a baby, trapped in the tiny prison of his crib, his most urgent problem had been to communicate to the grown-ups in his family both his physical and emotional needs. His next most urgent problem had been one of knowledge apart from communication. In other words, he faced the problem of how to get to know the alien world of strange bodies, foreign physical objects, and changing nature which surrounded him. His senses instantly came to his aid in helping him solve this problem, for the infant Eugene acquired his earliest knowledge by "piecing the puzzle of sensation together bit by bit."² He saw the dancing fire-sheen on the poker, heard the clucking of the sun-warm hens in the back yard, felt the sides of the large woven basket in which he was confined, smelled the odor of food cooking in the kitchen, and tasted the warm milk from his mother's breast.

As the baby Eugene grew older, he continued to use his

¹Ibid., p. v. ²LHA, p. 38.

senses to obtain knowledge, and in this regard, the world which he gradually discovered seemed uniquely fresh and original, almost as if he were the first person who had ever lived, or perhaps some "explorer suddenly bursting into an undiscovered Eden."¹ Not only were his sensuous impressions unborrowed from someone else, but neither had they been made stale by habit and indifference. Instead they were immediately first-hand, operating always within the present moment, and reflecting the child's pristine physical condition. In addition, they revealed the child's emotional alertness, for his senses did not respond in an emotional vacuum. The impressions which his senses received constantly evoked primary feelings until later in Eugene's memory the two became inseparable. Finally, behind this sensuous and emotional knowledge was still the mystery of his pre-natal memory:

He had been sent from one mystery into another: somewhere within or without his consciousness he heard a great bell ringing faintly, as if it sounded under-sea, and as he listened, the ghost of memory walked through his mind, and for a moment he felt that he had almost recovered what he had lost.²

In the case of Wolfe's protagonist, his sensory equipment was so complete that even before he started to grammar school, "at the moment of perception of a single thing, the whole background of color, warmth, odor, sound, taste, established itself,"³ and years later he could recall the sensation practically in its entirety. As an adult Eugene

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 181.

believed that his childhood sensations had remained so vivid precisely because they had been sensuous and concrete, with each instantaneous response unweakened by sentimental reflection and undistorted by his post-puberty memory. Also he recalled that his abstracting intelligence had played only a minor role in this earliest, thrilling child's discovery of knowledge. Life then had intense meaning for Eugene simply because he accepted uncritically a sensuous, emotionally compelling, innocent and beautiful world.

For a number of years Eugene was permitted to continue his happy existence "within the limitless meadows of sensation,"¹ and during these years, despite the changes which were taking place around him, he felt secure. He certainly could not be troubled by the threat of change as an abstraction, and in his personal life, he was left exhilarated instead of menaced, by his unending succession of new sensations and experiences. Eugene's pre-adolescent vision of a familiar world had little space for conscious terror: his home was the center of the town, his small town was the hub of the world, and keeping the world eternally safe was God in the image of his archetypal father.

In The Story of a Novel Wolfe stated that the controlling myth behind his fiction was the protagonist's search for a father, "not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength

¹Ibid., p. 82.

and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."¹ In terms of this statement, the search for the father was obviously not just a quest for masculine vitality and maturity. Almost literally it was a spiritual search for God, or at least for an adequate mystical substitute for Godhead. What especially complicated this search for the spiritual father in Wolfe's fiction was the protagonist's intense nostalgia for his lost childhood innocence, as well as the enslavement of his psyche after he entered adolescence to the mythical feminine principle. Both of these themes will now be investigated, particularly as they relate to the formation of a narcissistic pastoral vision of life in the imagination of Wolfe's protagonist. The theme of lost innocence will be considered first. The theme of the child-sorceress mother will be given an independent treatment, in which Eliza Gant's personality will be examined as the sustaining metaphor for the archetypal feminine principle in the post-puberty imagination of her son.

II

We have emphasized in this chapter that in the world of pre-sexual innocence, the child's conception of reality is based largely on his pristine sense impressions, given

¹SN, p. 39.

their emotional texture by conditions in the present moment, and for that reason, undistorted by intruding memories or by conscious guilts and fears. After the boy enters adolescence, his guilts and fears emerge into consciousness, as the psychological security provided by the image of the attractive archetypal father is replaced by the image of the vengeful Oedipal father. At this time the boy also begins to respond to the threat implicit in a vision of life in which only the sensation experienced in the present moment is real.

The second section of Look Homeward, Angel begins with the protagonist's entrance into puberty, and during this period he gradually began to realize that although "every moment is a window on all time,"¹ the unsettling corollary of this view might be that everything else in life outside the momentary response is unreal. Eugene believed that the whirling impressions received from the window of a moving train best illustrated this disturbing conflict between "fixity and change":

And it was this that awed him--the weird combination of fixity and change, 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 train did not move. It was as if God had lifted his baton sharply above the endless orchestration of the seas, and the eternal movement had stopped, suspended in the timeless architecture of the absolute.²

Moreover, if only the present moment were real, then the past

¹LHA, p. 192. ²Ibid.

had to represent death, and the unceasing flux in life was little more than a distraction glossing over the ugly reality of man's prolonged dying.

As Eugene entered adolescence, "he did not understand change, he did not understand growth."¹ The past had assumed a new importance for him, but its importance was treacherous, for when the confused protagonist tried to use his memory to recapture what he had actually been like before puberty, he suddenly became the "haunter of himself"² and "ceased at that moment to believe in his own existence."³ Even when he examined his framed baby picture in the parlor, he felt as if he were looking at a representation of part of himself which was already dead, and he "turned away sick with fear at the effort to touch, retain, grasp himself only for a moment."⁴ In his tormented psyche he seemed to have become a ghost, since how could he consciously disentangle his changing personality at any given moment in the present from what it had been in the past or from what it was constantly becoming in the future:

I am, he thought, a part of all that I have touched and that has touched me, which, having for me no existence save that which I gave to it, became other than itself by being mixed with what I then was, and is now still otherwise, having fused with what I now am, which is itself a cumulation of what I have been becoming.⁵

Eugene was a solipsist in his fear that nothing but

¹Ibid., p. 191. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 192.

the self actually exists, but his more deeply entrenched scepticism that his personal identity might be forever unknowable threatened to transform his subjective world into a nightmare. For this reason, to try to find permanence and security in a private world threatened by nightmarish change, the protagonist felt that he had to retain contact with his "lost innocence" as the timeless spiritual center of his pre-puberty self. In his narcissistic imagination, therefore, his immaculate, non-sexual innocence, as a controlling symbol for the true spirit or "ghost" of himself, quickly became an idealistic absolute removed from the menacing changes taking place in the natural world with which his adolescent physical self had become hopelessly confused. Before continuing our examination of this important aspect of "lost innocence," it is first necessary to make connections between Wolfe's psychological treatment of the motif in his fiction and the literary tradition.

The critic Monroe Stearns has commented on Wolfe's handling of "lost innocence" in Look Homeward, Angel, with its Platonic suggestions of the pre-existence of the soul and the reality of governing spiritual absolutes. Mr. Stearns believes that Wolfe undoubtedly owed a debt to the English romantic poets, especially to Wordsworth and Coleridge, for his original interest in the "innocence" theme. The critic also believes that even though Eugene Gant's compelling nostalgia for pre-natal bliss can be given a Freudian

interpretation--that is, Eugene's nostalgia reflects psychologically an atavistic desire to return to the protective maternal womb--the traditional Platonic motif, which includes a strenuous longing for the heaven of ideal essence, is also unmistakably present. In the opinion of the critic, the refrain used throughout the book, "lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost," corresponds mystically to the Platonic "sense of pre-existence of the soul, which vanishes as the individual advances in material time down the river of corporeal existence."¹ Since we agree with Mr. Stearns that Platonic implications, somewhat romantically rendered, are to be found in Wolfe's treatment of "lost innocence," a brief summary will be given of their appearance in his first novel.

We have already indicated that Eugene was born with a disturbing memory of the mystery, as well as the immaculate innocence, of his pre-natal existence. The protagonist felt that as soon as he entered the physical prison of his mother's womb, he had broken contact with his original spiritual innocence. For this reason, birth involved both an exile from perfection and permanent isolation within the confines of a physically corrupted world:

Naked and alone we came into exile, in her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh we have come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.²

The child Eugene remained eternally a prisoner on earth, as

¹Stearns, p. 204. ²LHA, p. 2.

well as a stranger, because he no longer possessed the ability to communicate spiritually with anything outside himself. He was even powerless to communicate with the members of his family:

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?¹

Not only Wolfe's protagonist but all men spiritually are "forever strangers to one another."² Even so, men are born with a dim but urgent recollection of their unfallen condition, and because of this haunting memory they are driven throughout their lives to seek "the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven."³ The romantic Eugene was certain that his own life was "fed by the lost communications of eternity,"⁴ and that if he ever approached perfection, he would recognize it instantly. His mystical idealism, which in his ecstatic moods reverberated within his heart like a solemn music, would not play him false:

The world was filled with silent marching men: no word was spoken, but in the heart of each there was a common knowledge, the word that all men knew and had forgotten, the lost key opening the prison gates, the lane-end into heaven, and as the music soared and filled him, he cried: 'I will remember. When I come to the place, I shall know.'⁵

The distinguished British critic William Empson has related the theme of lost innocence, as developed under the

¹Ibid., p. 37. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 2.

⁴Ibid., p. 286. ⁵Ibid.

general heading "The Child as Swain," to the pastoral tradition in English literature. It is the critic's opinion that a romantic writer such as Wordsworth deified the child not only because the child has fresh, spontaneous feelings, vivid sense responses, and such a large measure of pristine innocence, but perhaps most important of all, because the child seems to have "no sexual desires recognizable as such."¹

This view of Mr. Empson's, implying a connection between the pastoral literary tradition and the romantic writer's attachment to sexual innocence, accords with our own theory. Also it helps illuminate an important connection in Wolfe's fiction between the pastoral vision of his adolescent protagonist and the spiritual authority which Margaret Leonard, as the immaculate mother symbol for his vanished innocence, was able to exert over the boy's imagination.

We have mentioned that when Eugene first entered the Leonards' school, he was moved by Margaret's emaciation. She was an arrested tubercular, and her thin body and ashen skin betrayed the delicate balance she had managed to establish between disease and health. Everything about Margaret, however, despite her disease, was scrupulously clean, "like a scrubbed kitchen board."² Eugene quickly learned to regard even the woman's emaciated flesh as the outward symbol of

¹William Empson, English Pastoral Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1938), p. 278.

²LHA, p. 213.

her spiritual innocence: "If he noticed her emaciation at all now, it was only with a sense of her purification."¹

Puberty had brought to Eugene a new knowledge of the tainted condition of the world, but Margaret, with her non-sexual purity, seemed to have escaped the general taint. For that reason, whenever Eugene was near the woman, he not only responded to her innocence but felt cleansed himself: "All his sin, all his pain, all the vexed weariness of his soul were washed away in that deep radiance."² In addition, the idealized teacher withstood disillusionment so that years later, when Eugene was to ask himself the question: "What had withstood the scourge of growth and memory?" he could answer that Margaret remained. This woman had been the guardian of his spirit when he was a disturbed adolescent boy, and it was her sexual spotlessness to which he had responded and which still seemed removed from change:

One by one the merciless years reaped down his gods and captains. What had lived up to hope? What had withstood the scourge of growth and memory? What had made the gold become so dim? All of his life, it seemed, his blazing loyalties began with men and ended with images; the life he leaned on melted below his weight and looking down, he saw he clasped a statue; but enduring, a victorious reality amid his shadow-haunted heart, she remained, who first had touched his blinded eyes with light, who nested his hooded houseless soul. She remained.³

Enough has already been presented to show the spiritual impulse, emotionally dovetailed with an immaculate mother symbol, behind Eugene's attachment to "lost innocence," and

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 477. ³Ibid., p. 216.

to relate this nostalgia in terms of literary tradition to the English romantic poets. It was suggested previously, however, that the theme of original innocence was identified symbolically by Wolfe with the "ghost-angel-stranger" motif, in which the "ghost" or "angel" represented the unchanging core of Eugene's identity as a kind of spiritual absolute. In this regard, after the protagonist had entered puberty, there were actually two Eugenes: one his corrupted sexual self living in the present, and the other his immaculate spiritual self, removed from contemporary change by being "fixed," both emotionally and spiritually, in his nostalgically lost world of childhood innocence.

The anthropologist Sir James Frazer has mentioned in The Golden Bough how primitive people believe that the soul can be disengaged from the body and "stowed away in some safe and secret place"¹ to insure the life of its owner. This convenient disengagement of the soul from the vulnerable body ordinarily takes place when outside circumstances are unduly threatening:

Accordingly, in such circumstances, primitive man takes his soul out of his body and deposits it for security in some snug spot, intending to replace it in his body when the danger is past. Or if he should discover some place of absolute security,² he may be content to leave his soul there permanently.

Wolfe's protagonist seems to have taken a similar

¹Sir James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 774.

²Ibid.

action with his "ghost-angel" when he was menaced by puberty. In other words, during that confusing and threatening period, he felt that he was protecting his spiritual identity by removing it from his sexual self and securely locating his "ghost-angel" in the timeless, non-sexual world of "lost innocence." There were destructive consequences, however, connected with this schizophrenic splitting of the protagonist's personality. Perhaps the most damaging was that the older he grew, the more extreme became the separation between his emotional-spiritual life, nostalgically attached to an uncorrupted past, and the immediate stimulus of actions and events in the present. Also the protagonist was psychologically tormented by this division of his subjective self into the "beast" and "angel": the "beast" representing his instinctive, yet increasingly calloused allegiance to the masculine principle; and the "angel" reflecting his neurotic dependence upon the castrating feminine principle. In Wolfe's fiction the search of the protagonist for spiritual salvation, on one level certainly, was his attempt to re-unite his two distinct selves which had first been disastrously alienated when he was a fearful and guilt-ridden adolescent.

In the previously mentioned selection "The Lost Boy," Wolfe treated somewhat sentimentally the theme of the "angel" lost emotionally in the childhood past of his protagonist. In the fourth part of this selection, Eugene Gant as a grown man revisited the house in which his family had lived during

the summer of 1904, when they were attending the World's Fair in Saint Louis. This had been a traumatic summer for the child Eugene, who was not quite four years old at the time, not only because of the excitement which accompanied the carnival atmosphere of the Fair, but because of the sudden, unexpected death from typhoid fever of his brother Grover. Because his memories of these experiences had remained so vivid, Eugene felt that if he re-visited the house in which his family had stayed during those impressionable months, perhaps he might be able to re-establish contact with the timeless core of his four-year old self, as well as to recapture, at least momentarily, his childhood vision of life:

And he felt that if he could only sit there on the stairs once more, in solitude and absence in the afternoon, he would be able to get it back again. Then would he be able to remember all that he had seen and been--the brief sum of himself, the universe of his four years, with all the light of Time upon it--that universe which was so short to measure, and yet so far, so endless, to remember. Then would he be able to see his own small face again, pooled in the dark mirror of the hall, and peer once more into the grave eyes of the child that he had been, and discover there in his quiet four-year's self the lone integrity of 'I,' knowing: 'Here is the House, and here House listening; here is Absence, Absence in the afternoon; and here in this House, this Absence, is my core, my kernel--here am I!'¹

After Eugene as a grown man had returned to Saint Louis, he at first was unable even to locate the street upon which the house was built, for apparently the name of the street had been changed since 1904. Not to be discouraged, he doggedly spent an afternoon making inquiries until he finally

¹HB, p. 38.

discovered the re-named street, and soon he was staring at the outside of the ancient house, with its high stone steps and a turret at one corner, which looked, curiously enough, little altered in appearance from the way he had remembered it. As Eugene stood for several moments gazing at the hauntingly familiar frame building, he suddenly realized that the most irrevocable change which the intervening years had brought pitilessly in their wake had been in himself. The image of the small child who had lived in that house with such intensity for one brief, tragic summer was nowhere to be found:

For a moment he stood there, waiting--for a word, and for a door to open, for the child to come. He waited, but no words were spoken; no one came.¹

A woman was sitting in a rocker on the wooden porch of the house, and after Eugene had introduced himself and explained the purpose behind his visit, he inquired if the previous owner of the house, Dr. Packer, were still alive. The woman replied that the doctor had been dead for many years and that the room he had used for his office had since been converted into a bedroom. Except for this alteration, she added that the inside of the house was pretty much the same as it had always been. She then asked Eugene if he wished to step inside and look at the rooms. As soon as the sentimental protagonist entered the darkened hallway leading from the porch, he realized at once that the woman's observation

¹Ibid., p. 32.

about the unchanged interior of the house was true: everything he saw seemed almost preternaturally familiar, "except for absence, the stained light of absence in the afternoon, and the child who once had sat there, waiting on the stairs."¹

Eugene walked to the rear of the house to see if the old board fence and the red carriage house in the backyard were still there; then he asked the woman if he could examine the room in which his brother had died. She obligingly slid back the doors to this room, and as soon as he noticed the arched bay windows at the front, the fireplace with its mottled green tiles, the heavy walnut mantel, and the dresser and bed, "just where the dresser and bed had been so long ago,"² the in-between years miraculously seemed to disappear, and once again he was staring into the sensitive face of his dead brother, seeing clearly and vividly "the dark eyes, the soft brown berry on his neck, the raven hair."³ For a brief moment Eugene's childhood vision had returned, but then it faded, "was lost again."⁴ Eugene thanked the woman and left, knowing that his nostalgic mission to Saint Louis had been a failure. Although he had succeeded in locating the old house, the image of himself associated with the house, together with his magic childhood vision of life, had both vanished:

¹Ibid., p. 37. ²Ibid., p. 39. ³Ibid., p. 41.

⁴Ibid.

And he knew that he would never come again, and that lost magic would not come again. Lost now was all of it--the street, the heat, King's highway, and Tom the Piper's son, all mixed in with the vast and drowsy murmur of the Fair, and with the sense of absence in the afternoon, and the house that waited, and the child that dreamed. And out of the enchanted wood, that thicket of man's memory, Eugene knew . . . the lost boy was gone forever, and would not return.¹

The reader may recall in Look Homeward, Angel that Ben Gant, the son who observed the pretensions and self-righteous hypocrisy of his parents and their fellow townspeople with such "bitter clarity," usually ended his brief remarks in a conversation with a sarcastic glance "upwards and to the side to the companion to whom he communicated all his contemptuous observation--his dark satiric angel."² Eugene's "angel-ghost-stranger" was less sardonic than Ben's, but it represented in a similar fashion the spiritually detached core of his personality, frequently unknowable, yet serving as both the image of, and ironical monitor over, his integrity as a person:

There lay in him something that could not be seen and could not be touched, which was above and beyond him--an eye within an eye, a brain above a brain, the Stranger that dwelt in him and regarded him and was him, and that he did not know.³

When Eugene was first perplexed by the question of how to find salvation in a world of ceaseless, undifferentiated change, he invoked this private spiritual monitor for help:

Come lower, angel; whisper in our ears. We are passing away in smoke and there is nothing to-day but weariness

¹Ibid., p. 42. ²LHA, p. 124. ³Ibid., pp. 493-94.

to pay us for yesterday's toil. How may we save ourselves?¹

At the time of Ben's death, when Eugene was prowling through his mother's boarding house at night, attempting to find some escape from the pain, ugliness, and pity in which he seemed to be hopelessly drowning, he felt his Stranger twisting inside him like a caged bird:

This bright thing, the core of him, his Stranger, kept twisting its head about, unable to look at horror, until at length it gazed steadfastly, as if under a dreadful hypnosis, into the eyes of death and darkness.²

During adolescence Eugene had communicated mystically with his "angel-ghost-stranger" early one morning just before he started on his paper route. It was dark in the boarding house, and after the boy had slipped out of bed, still half-asleep, his spiritual monitor had suddenly addressed him:

Waken, ghost-eared boy, but into darkness. Waken, phantom, O into us. Try, try, O try the way. Open the wall of light. Ghost, ghost, who is the ghost? O lost. Ghost, ghost, who is the ghost? O whisper-tongued laughter. Eugene! Eugene! Have you forgotten? The leaf, the rock, the wall of light. Lift up the rock, Eugene, the leaf, the stone, the unfound door. Return, return.³

The importance of the "angel-ghost-stranger" motif in Look Homeward, Angel cannot be overemphasized. It prepares the reader for the climatic mystical chapter at the end of the book in which Eugene, in the deserted moonlight of the town Square, has a long conversation with Ben's "ghost"

¹Ibid., p. 295. ²Ibid., pp. 548-49.

³Ibid., pp. 295-96.

about the meaning of life. In addition, it helps explain the symbolism behind the angels on the porch of Gant's marble shop; the meaning of the recurrent line, "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again";¹ and the mythical significance of the title Look Homeward, Angel. In each of these instances, the "angel" represents the spiritual kernel of the person involved, real as a symbolic absolute in his "buried life," yet remaining detached from his commonplace existence in the world of physical reality.

At the close of Look Homeward, Angel, when Eugene as an idealistic narcissist was preparing to begin his pastoral search, which would not be concluded until he had made a personal confirmation of evil in his own life, he was sanguine that through the dedicated search he would be able to merge his corrupted sexual self with the immaculate image of his "lost angel." At the same time, the pastoral search involved psychologically his attempt to escape from the castrating feminine principle personified in Eliza Gant. The cardinal passage in the novel which unites these two themes includes an address from Eugene's "ghost" in which both the psychological search of the protagonist for freedom, and his spiritual search to recover lost perfection, are rendered symbolically as the extension of his intimate Oedipal involvement with his mother:

¹Ibid., p. 2.

This little bright and stricken thing stood up on Eugene's heart and talked into his mouth.

O but I can't go now, said Eugene to it. (Why not? it whispered.) Because her face is so white, and her forehead is so broad and high, with the black hair drawn back from it, and when she sat there at the bed she looked like a little child. I can't go now and leave her alone. (She is alone, it said, and so are you.) And when she purses up her mouth and stares so, so grave and thoughtful, she is like a little child. (You are alone now it said. You must escape, or you will die.) It is all like death: she fed me at her breast, I slept in the same bed with her, she took me on her trips. All of that is over now, and each time it was like a death. (And like a life, it said to him. Each time that you die, you will be born again. And you will die a hundred times before you become a man.) I can't! I can't! Not now--later, more slowly. (No. Now, it said.) I am afraid. I have nowhere to go. (You must find the place, it said.) I am lost. (You must hunt for yourself, it said.) I am alone. Where are you? (You must find me, it said.)¹

¹Ibid., pp. 577-78.

CHAPTER XI

THE PASTORAL WORLD

Naked came I from my mother's womb. Naked shall I return. Let the mothering womb of earth engulf me. Naked, a valiant wisp of man, in vast brown limbs engulfed.¹

The pastoral world in which the boy finds himself after he has become an adolescent is possessed emotionally by the feminine principle in the image of the "child-sorceress" mother just as the child's world of innocence was supported imaginatively by the masculine principle in the image of the "golden father." In terms of tradition, perhaps the most reassuring personification of the feminine principle is that of the familiar "earth-mother," and perhaps the most ominous is that of the cannibal "vulture mother" feeding parasitically on her children. Despite their superficial dissimilarity, these two images, the "earth-mother" and the "vulture-mother," are intimately related, and both are controlled symbolically by the "child-sorceress" archetype. All of these symbols appear with varying degrees of incidence in Wolfe's fiction, and all are connected with a pastoral world dominated

¹Ibid., p. 277.

emotionally by the mother of his protagonist.

This pastoral world, governed by the castrating personality of Eliza Gant, was the one Eugene entered when he reached puberty and was forced to disassociate himself from the archetypal image of his father's masculinity. This also was the suffocating world from which he was attempting to flee when he left home to escape Eliza's possessiveness. So long as Eugene remained emotionally and spiritually trapped in his mother's world, however, his view of life represented a "pastoral vision," and his search to escape from his mother's world was a "pastoral search." The bitter irony was that he could remain trapped by determining memories long after he appeared to have made a successful physical escape.

It has been suggested that the psyche of the young man inhabiting the pastoral world for too long a time suffers permanent damage from his excessive attachment to the feminine principle in his sexual, emotional, and spiritual life. This helps explain the symbolism behind the mythical envisioning of the feminine principle in the destructive roles of the a-moral "child-sorceress" mother, the all-possessive "earth-mother," and the cannibalistic "vulture-mother." Also it implies that the pastoral world is no different from the child's except that the affirming imaginative structure of the father's life, together with a masculine image of God, is forever missing. By remaining in the pastoral world, therefore, the young man, frequently without quite realizing

what he is doing, confirms his most infantile feelings until his personality becomes inflexibly neurotic and spiritually sterile. In addition, he frustrates permanently any hope he might have of achieving manhood in the future.

Wolfe's protagonist initially was unaware of the danger implicit in the authority which the feminine principle, found invariably in older women, had over his sexual desire. When he was young, for instance, the sensual, full-bodied Mrs. Selborne became "the living symbol of his desire"¹ precisely because she seemed to represent the exhaustless fertility of the feminine principle:

the dim vast figure of love and maternity, ageless and autumnal, waiting, corn-haired, deep-breasted, blond of limb, in the ripe fields of harvest--Demeter, Helen, the ripe exhaustless and renewing energy, the cradling nurse of weariness and disenchantment.²

Later the same instinctive attachment to the feminine principle inspired his adolescent fantasies of the perfect "child-sorceress" mistress:

She was subtle and a little weary: a child and a mother, as old and as deep as Asia, and as young as germinal April who returns forever like a girl, a mistress, a parent, and a nurse.³

In Eugene's pastoral imagination as a young man, even the sea which he hoped some day would bring him to the "happy land,"⁴ was personified as the feminine principle:

O sea! . . . You are a woman lying below yourself on the coral floor. You are an immense and fruitful woman

¹Ibid., p. 148. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 587.

⁴Ibid., p. 522.

with vast thighs and a great thick mop of curling woman's hair floating like green moss above your belly.¹

Eugene had grown up in a Victorian puritan environment, and it was inevitable that as soon as he had lost his virginity, he should connect the mythical feminine principle with the prostitutes he had known in Exeter:

Lily! Louise! Ruth! Ellen! O mother of love, you cradle of birth and living, whatever your billion names may be, I come, your son, your lover. Stand, Maya, by your opened door, denuded in the jungle web of Nigger-town.²

Actually, as the last sentence of the quotation implies, the connection between the ageless feminine principle and the "sorceress" prostitute had originally been suggested to Eugene when he was a paper boy with a route in the Negro section of Altamont. He frequently had gone to this slum section of the town at night to make overdue collections. On these trips he had gradually sensed that the nocturnal world of the Negroes was "hived with flesh and mystery,"³ and for the first time in his life, "in this old witch-magic of the dark, he began to know the awful innocence of evil, the terrible youth of an ancient race."⁴

One night Eugene found himself inside the dimly-lit shack of the mulatto prostitute Ella Corpening, who was always weeks behind in her subscription. Ella, in her middle twenties, was "a handsome woman of Amazonian proportions, with smooth tawny skin."⁵ When the boy first entered her

¹Ibid., p. 584. ²Ibid., p. 303. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 304.

shack, he discovered the sensual, heavy-bodied Negress "facing the door in a rocking chair, purring lazily in the red glow of a little kitchen range, with her big legs stretched comfortably out on the floor."¹ After learning why the boy had come, Ella offered to pay him the overdue collection in "Jelly Roll." Instead, the adolescent Eugene asked her to take off her flimsy cotton dress and dance for him. The Negress complied nonchalantly, but when she stood naked in front of the boy's bewitched gaze, her breath began to come more quickly, and in an almost sexual trance, she began the ancient, ritualistic pagan dance of the "sorceress" prostitute:²

She began to moan softly, while an undulant tremor flowed through her great yellow body; her hips and her round heavy breasts writhed slowly in a sensual rhythm. Her straight oiled hair fell across her neck in a thick shock. She extended her arms for balance, the lids closed over her large yellow eyeballs. She came near him. He felt her hot breath on his face, the smothering flood of her breasts. He was whirled like a chip in the wild torrent of her passion. Her powerful yellow hands gripped his slender arms round like bracelets. She shook him to and fro slowly, fastening him tightly against her pelt.³

By this time, the terrified Eugene, overwhelmed by the sweat-rilled flesh of the demonic Negress, her mindless passion, and the savage strength of her Amazonian embrace,

¹Ibid.

²It has been mentioned previously that the prostitute, as a symbol for the mythical "child-sorceress" mother, has been given a religious role in most pagan cultures.

³LHA, p. 305.

pushed back desperately to free himself. "Without opening her eyes, moaning,"¹ the transported woman released the struggling boy. Throughout this sensual performance, her voice rising eerily and then sinking to a wailing moan, Ella had repeated a kind of profane witches' chant: "'Jelly Roll! Je-e-e-ly Roll!'"² Even after Eugene had located the outside door, jerked it open, and lunged into the clean-smelling air, the wailing chant of the Negress, "unbroken and undisturbed by his departure,"³ followed him as he fled into the night.

It was not long after Eugene's experience with the mulatto prostitute that he began to identify romantically with anything evil in life which suggested a kinship with "illicit nature."⁴ Because of this association, Shakespeare's King Lear became his favorite play, and the passage which he liked best was Edmund's "terrible and epic invocation"⁵ to nature. This passage--which begins with the line, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess," and which ends with the line, "Now, gods, stand up for bastards"--seemed, in his romantic imagination, "demonic" and "drenched in evil."⁶ Eugene found the bastard son's a-moral vision of nature especially moving:

It was as dark as night, as evil as Niggertown, as vast as the elemental winds that howled down across the hills; he chanted it in the black hours of his labor, into the dark and the wind. He understood; he exulted in its evil--which was the evil of earth, of illicit nature.⁷

¹Ibid., p. 306. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 310.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

It was to be expected that Wolfe's adolescent protagonist, trapped in a pastoral world because of his Oedipal attachment to his mother, would have been stirred by the bastard's son rebellious address to "nature" as the "goddess" responsible for whatever evil existed within himself. The protagonist previously had associated Eliza with nature, in the archetypal role of "earth mother,"¹ and, in addition, even before he entered puberty, had connected his repressed sexual desire with the image of a mythically a-moral "Dark Helen":

So, she turned always into the South, the South that burned like Dark Helen in Eugene's blood, and she always took him with her. They still slept together.²

The use by Wolfe of "Dark Helen in our hearts forever burning"³ as a symbolic refrain in his second and third novels is in accordance with a statement he made in a letter to Maxwell Perkins (December 9, 1930) about the representation of the mythical feminine principle in his fiction:

The woman in various forms, at different times, is: Gaea, Helen, or Demeter--but these things are never told you, and the story itself is direct and simple, given shape by this legend, and by the idea I told you.⁴

The woman with whom Eugene fell in love at the close of Of Time and the River (she is not specifically mentioned by name in the novel) appeared as a person only in the concluding section entitled "Faust and Helen." In this section,

¹The role of Eliza as "earth mother" will be examined later in this chapter.

²LHA, p. 154. ³OTR, p. 281 ⁴Nowell, p. 279.

since Eugene previously had been identified with "Faust," the woman obviously had to be "Helen." Near the close of the preceding chapter of the novel, however, Eugene had experienced a dream in which the mythical Helen appeared in her a-moral role as the "child-sorceress" mistress:

the sea was wine-dark, a gold and sapphire purity of light fell on the walls of Troy, a lucent depthless purity of light welled from the eyes of Helen, as false, fatal, and innocently corrupt a woman as ever wrought destruction on the earth.¹

The reader unquestionably is supposed to make some kind of thematic correspondence between this "mythical Helen" in the protagonist's dream and the personality of the woman who eventually became his mistress in Wolfe's fiction.

The first third of The Web and the Rock illuminates George Webber's introduction to evil after he entered puberty, and invariably the evil which he found most disturbing represented a sexual threat combined with the a-moral innocence of nature. Mrs. Lampley, the sadistic butcher's wife, for example, was described as an a-moral creature, "as innocent as nature, as merciful as a river in flood, as moral as the earth."² In addition, her weak, yet vicious, son resembled his mother in being "a creature criminal from nature and entirely innocent."³

Dick Prosser, the Negro who was lynched in the chapter entitled "The Child by Tiger," had a more complex role in Wolfe's artistic vision than the sadistic Lampleys. At the

¹OTR, p. 898. ²WR, p. 119. ³Ibid., p. 129.

same time, the murderous Prosser was also pictured as "a symbol of man's evil innocence . . . a tiger and a child."¹ In terms of the connection which Wolfe made between innocence and evil, perhaps the most important symbol of the a-moral feminine principle was the protagonist's ingrained hostility to his mother's family, the Joyners, because they "were a race as lawless as the earth, as criminal as nature."² In being identified with the a-moral lawlessness of nature by Wolfe's youthful protagonist, the Joyners were at the same moment removed from "time" as well as morality:

Other tribes of men came up out of the earth, flourished for a space, and then, engulfed and falling, went back into the earth from which they came. Only the Joyners--the horror-hungry, time-devouring Joyners--lived and would not die.³

In a letter to Maxwell Perkins (December, 1930), Wolfe expressed the romantic view that the singular personalities of the inhabitants of North Carolina (Old Catawba in his fiction) had resulted chiefly from the peculiar fertility of the North Carolinian earth, together with its "haunting, brooding quality,"⁴ upon which they and their ancestors had spent such a large part of their lonely lives:

Do you think this is far-fetched? Scott F. did and ridiculed the idea that the earth we lived on had anything to do with us--but don't you see that 300 years upon this earth, living alone minute by minute in the wilderness, eating its food, growing its tobacco, being buried and mixed with it, gets into the blood, bone, marrow, sinew of the people.⁵

¹Ibid., p. 156. ²Ibid., p. 83. ³Ibid.

⁴Nowell, p. 284. ⁵Ibid.

In Wolfe's patriotic estimation, the typical North Carolinian was a person, "rich, juicy, deliberate, full of pungent and sardonic humor and honesty, conservative and cautious on top."¹ Beneath the surface, however, this same conventional person was "wild, savage, and full of the murderous innocence of the earth and the wilderness."² In Wolfe's artistic vision, the "wild, savage" submerged self of the individual, filled with "the murderous innocence of the earth," was invariably identified with the a-moral feminine principle.

In the selection "The Men of Old Catawba," Wolfe attempted to distinguish between the masculine and feminine principles in their relationship to the "earth" as a controlling pastoral image:

The land has a brooding presence that is immensely old and masculine, its spirit is rugged and rather desolate, yet it broods over its people with stern benevolence. The earth is a woman, but Old Catawba is a man. The earth is our mother and our nurse, and we can know her, but Old Catawba is our father, and although we know that he is there, we shall never find him. He is there in the wilderness, and his brows are bowed with granite: he sees our lives and deaths and his stern compassion broods above us. Women love him, but only men can know him: only men who have cried out in their agony and their loneliness to their father, only men who have sought throughout the world to find him, can know Catawba: but this includes all the men who ever lived.³

Men can never find their father because Old Catawba is a spiritual symbol, as well as an imaginative structure of living, independent of the physical reality of the pastoral world. Opposed to this mythical image of the father is the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³DM, p. 187.

exhaustless fertility of the earth, with all of its prolific emotional and physical density, forever symbolizing its lust to possess (figuratively to devour): "the earth is never 'taken possession of'; it possesses."¹ The concluding paragraph of "The Men of Old Catawba" suggests that the feminine earth literally has devoured:

the millions of men who have lived their brief lives in silence upon the everlasting earth, who have listened to the earth and known her million tongues, whose lives were given to the earth, whose bones and flesh are re-compacted with the earth, the immense and terrible earth that makes no answer.²

Throughout his fiction Wolfe continually made use of the expression "everlasting earth" to emphasize that the feminine principle exists outside the stream of time, and also to contrast the "brevity of man's days" with the eternity of the seasons, involving an unceasing pastoral ritualism of birth, youth, maturity, old age, death, decay, then rebirth. Since the ritualism of the seasons is never-ending, the pastoral world controlled symbolically by the "earth mother" is also removed from change. This view agrees with a statement made by Wolfe in a letter to John Hall Wheelock (June 24, 1930) that nature is "the thing that does not change, the fixed principle, the female principle--the earth again."³

We have previously suggested that the pastoral world in which the boy finds himself after he enters adolescence is dominated by the feminine principle in the same way that

¹Ibid. ²WR, p. 204. ³Nowell, p. 235.

the child's world of innocence was controlled by the masculine principle. The pastoral world, in which the earth serves as a fertility symbol for the "child-sorceress" mother, is likewise indifferent to change, time, death, love, morality, and religion. The eternally prolific earth, in terms of the everlasting ritualism of the seasons, is indifferent to change, time, and death. The mindlessly possessive earth is oblivious to even the existence of mutually responsive love. The all-embracing, all-forgiving, "murderously innocent"¹ earth is removed from morality in that it is forever a-moral. Finally, the earth is outside religion in that it parasitically devours the masculine spiritual image upon which the greatest religions in the past have been based. This last aspect of the mythical feminine principle helps explain why Wolfe's narcissistic protagonist, a prisoner in the pastoral world governed by his mother, was frequently depressed not only by the impermanence of the somewhat meaningless life he observed around him, but also by the transient history of the male gods:

He felt suddenly the devastating impermanence of the nation. Only the earth endured--the gigantic American earth, bearing upon its awful breast a world of flimsy rickets. Only the earth endured--the broad, terrific earth that had no ghosts to haunt it. Stogged in the desert, half-broken and over-thrown, among the columns of lost temples strewn, there was no ruined image of Menkaura, there was no alabaster head of Akhnaton. Nothing had been done in stone. Only this earth endured, upon whose lonely breast he read Euripides. Within its

¹WR, p. 156.

hills he had been held a prisoner; upon its plain he walked, alone, a stranger.¹

II

When Wolfe first began to work on the manuscript which eventually became Of Time and the River, he wrote to Maxwell Perkins (July 17, 1930) that he wanted "the desire and longing"² of his protagonist to reflect the "desire and longing of the race--'wandering forever and the earth again.'³ In the same letter Wolfe explained that he believed wandering was "more of a male thing, and the fructification of the earth more of a female thing."⁴ In addition, Wolfe commented that for his new book he planned to make "an extensive use of old myths,"⁵ although he never informed his reader exactly what he was doing:

I am making an extensive use of old myths in my book, although I never tell the reader this: you know already that I am using the Heracles (in my book the City is Heracles) and Antaeus myth; and you know that the lords of fructification and the earth are almost always women: Maya in the Eastern legends; Demeter in the Greek; Ceres in Latin, etc.⁶

According to Wolfe's artistic plan when he wrote this particular letter to his editor, the first section of his book, to be called "Antaeus" or "Immortal Earth," was to contain around twenty chapters, with a half dozen chapters interspersed "concerned with the female thing: the idea of the

¹LHA, p. 423. ²Nowell, p. 243. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., pp. 243-44. ⁶Ibid., p. 243.

earth, fructification, and repose."¹ Moreover, these chapters dealing with the feminine principle were to be "almost entirely about women and told in the language of women: the mother, the mistress, and the child--sometimes all included in one person, sometimes found separately in different women."² Perhaps the best of these stories dealing with "the female thing" and "told in the language of women: the mother, the mistress, and the child" is "The Web of Earth," which, according to his letters, Wolfe completed during the spring months of 1932.³

The long story "The Web of Earth" consists of a ninety-two page monologue by Eliza Gant. The physical setting for the story is Eugene's apartment in Brooklyn or Manhattan,⁴ near enough to the New York harbor for the whistles of the ocean-going ships to be heard, and the season is early spring. At the beginning of the selection, Eliza is introduced talking to her son, who obviously, since the form of the story is a monologue, was unable to participate in his mother's prolonged and highly idiomatic conversation. In the first and last paragraphs of the story, Eliza addressed the thirty-year old Eugene as "'Child, child,'" and throughout the body of the selection, she constantly repeated the word child. The repetitive use of this appellation whenever the mother addressed Eugene serves constantly to remind the reader that

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 339.

⁴In the story Wolfe does not indicate the specific location of Eugene's apartment.

in the imagination of the possessive Eliza, her son was not a grown man. Instead, she regarded him emotionally as the same dependent, pre-adolescent boy who had shared her bed at Dixieland some twenty years before.

The psychological setting for "The Web of Earth" is neither Brooklyn nor Manhattan but the pastoral world identified with the mother's past. In this regard, Eliza's "octopal memory," as it so patiently and phlegmatically wove the semblance of a narrative from her almost inexhaustible store of dead experiences, is clearly to be connected with the "web" in the title. The "earth" in the title is a symbol of Eliza's personality as "the female thing." According to this transposition of key words, the title "The Web of Earth" conceivably might read "The Memory World of the Earth Mother." In the story itself, the "earth mother's" life, as interpreted by Wolfe through his conscious selection and arrangement of the memories Eliza has been permitted to resurrect from her dead past, represents symbolically the archetypal feminine principle operating in the de-sexualized pastoral world of the Victorian puritan.

Shortly after the story begins, Eliza is revealed as a compulsive talker with an encyclopaedic memory for seemingly unimportant minutiae from her own life:

'I can remember all the way back to the time when I was two years old, and let me tell you, boy, there's mighty little I've forgotten since.'¹

¹DM, p. 215.

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¹DM, p. 215.

As this garrulous old woman rambled on from one experience in the past to another, each remembered apparently only because it formed a strand in the vast, self-centered web of her life, the story which she related to her son seemed hopelessly disconnected. If the reader will make a closer inspection of Eliza's monologue, he will discover that this disconnected quality is misleading, for behind the exasperating juxtaposition of chance memories is a meaningful form carefully manipulated by Wolfe. Moreover, this form includes an integrated summary of the values of Victorian puritanism, as well as the illumination of their connection with the other leading themes in Wolfe's fiction. Although it is not feasible in this chapter to explicate the whole of "The Web of Earth" to document this statement about the story's controlling form, it does seem important to examine those passages which relate to Eliza's role as the archetypal nineteenth century mother.

At the beginning of the story Eliza was talking to her son about an incident which took place "the year the locusts came, and all of the trees were eaten bare."¹ This passage, which is repeated several times at the opening of the story, as well as various other times later, is a kind of pastoral refrain sustaining the mood of Eliza's reminiscences. In addition, it indicates that Eliza's conception of time was pastoral in that she dated events, not numerically and

¹Ibid., p. 212.

chronologically, but on the more primitive basis of natural events which had lodged in her retentive memory.

A longer quote from the story's opening paragraph:

"'Child! Child! It seems so long ago since the year the locusts came, and all the trees were eaten bare: so much has happened and it seems so long ago,'"¹ also suggests that this important refrain is thematically connected with Eliza's own feelings of immaculate innocence. In other words, "'the year the locusts came, and all the trees were eaten bare,'" on the basis of her subsequent memories in the story, cannot be separated from Eliza's confirmation of sexual evil in her married life. This occurred when her narcissistic, non-sexual vision of life, a chaste legacy from her world of childhood innocence, first had to confront the animalistic realities of her relationship with the lecherous Gant.

In her role of the archetypal nineteenth century mother, Eliza Gant represented the ageless feminine principle, visualized mythically as the forever-prolific, all-devouring, a-moral fertility mother, only after the Victorian puritan imagination had made that image sexually decorous and respectable. In this respect, the immaculate Eliza, perched self-righteously on her pedestal of chaste and frigid virtue, was the eternally innocent child-mother, for at least in her own mind, her innocence, like that of the child's, was uncorrupted by sexual desires. At the same time, her innocence was a-moral,

¹Ibid.

"the murderous innocence of the earth," in that she was obsessed with sexual evil in others at the expense of any recognition of the spiritual dualism between good and evil within her egotistical self. Most incredible of all, as the narcissistic and eternally innocent child-mother, idealized by her children even as she parasitically dominated and exploited their emotional lives, Eliza, by giving birth to a large family, had been able functionally to satisfy the fertility role of the mythical feminine principle without violating her sexual purity in the process.

We have emphasized previously that the nineteenth century mother's sexual innocence, supported by the martyrdom implicit in her role of prolific child-bearer, provided in the pastoral world of the Victorian puritan the ethical foundation for a sacrosanct "mythology" of the family. Also, it helped account for that schizophrenic splitting of the child-sorceress archetype of the feminine principle into two distinct classes of women: the idealized mother and the villified whore. According to this mythology, as revealed through Eliza's monologue, the worst sin a man could commit was one which violated the domestic sanctity of the home. In the story this was the reason that Eliza repeated complacently the admission of the murderer Ed Mears, that even though he had killed several men and had many other crimes on his blackened "soul to atone for,"¹ he had never in his whole

¹Ibid., p. 293.

"'sunk so low as to steal a man's wife away from him.'"¹

Such an ethical vision might seem more convincing today if emotional relationships in the typical nineteenth century family had been regarded less sentimentally by the parents. The fatal weakness, however, of the Victorian puritan temperament, as represented by Eliza Gant, was the ease with which she could blind herself sentimentally against any unpleasant realities in her own home for which she might justifiably have been blamed. The moral vision of Eliza, therefore, was neither honest nor adult, for the spiritual center of that vision always remained her narcissistic attachment to a non-sexual world of childhood innocence.

It has been suggested that the child-woman Eliza Gant, as the archetypal nineteenth century mother in Wolfe's fiction, inhabited a world which was emotionally and spiritually pastoral, not only because she was identified symbolically with the a-moral earth, but because her innocent vision of life was ethically irrelevant. In addition, the idealized innocence of Eliza was psychologically damaging to her children, and in this respect, represented the castrating sterility of the mother in the home as opposed to her much more obvious fertility role as fecund child-bearer. At this point, however, it must be remembered that Eliza's indestructible confidence in life, as revealed especially in "The Web of

¹Ibid.

Earth," belonged to her role as "earth mother," and symbolized the security of the ceaselessly creative feminine principle in a timeless nature.

In the last part of her monologue, Eliza referred smugly to her fertility powers as she complimented the instinctive vitality which had enabled her to bear and raise her large family, despite the intemperate behavior of her husband:

'Lord! Lord! I often think of all that I've been through, and wonder that I'm here to tell it. I reckon for a fact I had the Power of Nature in me; why! no more trouble than the earth takes bearing corn, all of the childern, the eight who lived, and all the others that you never heard about--all of the childern and less married life than any woman that I knew.'¹

Eliza's fertility potential, the "power of nature" in her, was equally visible in the ease with which she grew things in her garden and orchard. One of her neighbors, after observing the luxuriance of Eliza's vegetables, had commented: "'You've got the power of nature in you for a fact. I've never seen the like of it.'² In "The Web of Earth" Eliza admitted that what the neighbor said was true and that she had possessed this magic fertility power since she was a child:

'Why, yes! didn't I have them all, and couldn't I make things grow by touchin' them, and wasn't it that way ever since I was a child--termaters and flowers and corn and vegetables--and all kinds of fruit. Why Lord! it seemed that all I had to do was stick my fingers in the earth and they'd come up for me.'³

¹Ibid., p. 297. ²Ibid., p. 300. ³Ibid.

Even in her old age, after the economic crash of 1929 had taken most of her property and savings, Eliza still retained her pastoral faith. No matter what unsettling changes life might bring, she knew the eternally fertile earth was always there, and because of this knowledge, she was unafraid of the future:

'Oh, but Eliza,' he said, 'it's too late, too late. We're both too old to start again, and we've lost everything.' 'No,' I said, 'not everything. There's something left.' 'What is it?' he said. 'We've got the earth,' I said. 'We've always got the earth. We'll stand upon it and it will save us. It's never gone back on nobody yet.'¹

When the archetypal feminine principle is envisioned as a combination of the a-moral "child" and "earth" mother, the mythical role of the "sorceress" mother inevitably is to be found somewhere in the background. This is true in Wolfe's fiction in which the symbolic role of Eliza Gant as a "sorceress" mother is most frequently associated with her clairvoyant sense of destiny, almost as if she were herself one of the ancient Fates, together with her atavistic emotional and spiritual attachment to a world belonging to a dead past.

"The Web of Earth" is framed by Eliza's superstitious, fatalistic sorceress' memory in that the opening and closing incidents, which provide the excuse for the remainder of the monologue, spring from the old woman's death-haunted faith

¹Ibid., p. 303.

in her own clairvoyancy. Eliza, "the year the locusts came," was sitting in the parlor of her home with her husband when she heard two preternatural voices through the open window: "'Two . . . Two,' the first voice said: and 'Twenty . . . Twenty,' said the other."¹ Eliza was upset by the weird voices, since she was certain their message was supposed to convey some kind of warning. She explained her fears to Gant, but since he had not heard the voices, he told his wife her premonition was probably something she had imagined, nothing else. The psychic Eliza disagreed: "'Oh, no I didn't,' I said. 'It's there! all right!--because I knew, I knew."² In the concluding incident of the story, Eliza gave her own superstitious explanation of the mystery of the voices:

'Two . . . Two,' the first voice said, and 'Twenty . . . Twenty' said the other:--

Twenty days later from that evening Ed Mears came there to our house, to the minute, at twenty minutes to ten o'clock on the seventeenth day of October, twins were born--Ben and Grover were born that night.

The next day as I lay there thinking, it flashed over me, the meaning of it, of course I saw it all. The mystery was explained.

And that's the story, sir, that's just the way it happened.

'Two . . . Two,' the first voice said, and 'Twenty . . . Twenty,' said the other.³

Bill Pentland was Eugene's great-grandfather on his mother's side, and in "The Web of Earth" Eliza told her son the story of how the incredibly strong-willed and clairvoyant old man knew that he was going to die. One day Bill Pentland,

¹Ibid., p. 212. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 303.

advanced in years but apparently still hale and hearty, sent word to his son Sam that he wanted to see him in the father's cabin. When Sam arrived, the old man told him that on the basis of a premonitory call he had just received, he knew that his time to die was the following afternoon:

'Why, Father,' says Sam, 'what are you talking about? You're not going to die,' he says. 'Yes,' says Bill, 'I've made up my mind to die tomorrow,' says 'I've made up my mind to die at ten minutes after six tomorrow afternoon, and that's the reason I sent for you.'¹

As the wind howled and roared that night outside the little mountain cabin, Sam and his father talked about people and events from the dark, remote past. When morning came, they cooked breakfast and talked some more. At noon they cooked dinner and still lay around talking, with the old man seeming "as well and strong as he'd ever been, at peace with mankind, sir, and without a worry in the world."² When six o'clock arrived, however, the father turned to Sam and told him to get ready; then "at ten minutes after six to the dot, he looked at him again and said, 'Good-bye, Sam: it's my time, I'm going son,' and he turned his face to the wall, sir, and died."³ After finishing this story, Eliza commented to Eugene that old Bill's premonition of his death was not unusual in the Pentland family: "We've all had it in us, that same thing, when it came our time to go, we knew it."⁴

The most remarkable of Eliza's mountain kinsmen was

¹Ibid., p. 220. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 221. ⁴Ibid.

not her grandfather but the fanatical backwoods prophet, Uncle Bacchus, whose symbolic role in Wolfe's fiction as the half-pagan, half-puritan fertility god of nineteenth century wilderness America dovetailed with Eliza's own role as the Victorian puritan archetype of the child-sorceress mother. In addition, in terms of Wolfe's historical myth of the American nation in which the Civil War has such a crucial symbolic position,¹ Uncle Bacchus provided a necessary connecting link between Gant's world-seeking masculinity, as representative of the spirit of the victorious North, and Eliza's nostalgic femininity, as typifying the spirit of the defeated South.

Uncle Bacchus, nicknamed "stinking Jesus" because his powerful, fleshy body gave off a stench offensive enough to "put a goat to shame,"² had gone "queer on religion"³ as a young man, when he became convinced that the end of the world was imminently at hand. In addition to his religious fanaticism, this backwoods prophet, more than any other member of the clairvoyant Pentland tribe, was gifted with the preternatural power of being "seen" before a kinsman died. The historical link between the Gants and the Pentlands was also established by Uncle Bacchus, for he was the bearded mountaineer, the "mad Rebel singing of Armageddon,"⁴ who had left

¹In terms of Wolfe's historical myth, the Civil War represented for the American nation a traumatic loss of spiritual innocence similar to that experienced by the young man during puberty.

²OTR, p. 80. ³Ibid., p. 78. ⁴LHA, p. 6.

such a permanent impression on young W. O. Gant's boyhood imagination one hot summer morning in 1863. At the time Gant and his brother had been standing at the edge of a country road in Pennsylvania, watching with mixed feelings the dusty Rebel soldiers as they trudged past on their way to Gettysburg and the bloody battle which would spell the defeat of the Southern cause:

Yes, he had been there that morning, Bacchus Pentland, the fated and chosen of God, the supernatural appearer on roads at nightfall, the harbinger of death, the prophet, chanting even then his promises of Armageddon and the coming of the Lord, speaking for the first time to the fascinated ears of those two boys, the full, drawling, unctuous accents of the fated, time-triumphant Pentlands.¹

Just before Gant met Eliza in Look Homeward, Angel, the stonecutter was standing on the porch of his marble shop at the corner of the Square when he unexpectedly heard the still familiar "flat, drawling, complacent"² voice of the mad Rebel, Uncle Bacchus, and observed, retreating down the board sidewalk, "the burly persuasive figure of the prophet that he had last seen vanishing down the dusty road that led to Gettysburg and Armageddon."³ In Of Time and the River Uncle Bacchus made his final appearance in the death scene of Gant. Just a few moments before the stonecutter died, he suddenly stared with clairvoyant intensity into the face of his wife, and asked: "'Where's Bacchus?'"⁴

The Pentlands were a family "who forgot one another never," but "who saw one another only in times of death,

¹OTR, p. 80. ²LHA, p. 9. ³Ibid. ⁴OTR, p. 262.

pestilence, and terror."¹ They came from the wilderness county of Zebulon in the western part of the state: the mountain isolated home of the death-lusting, goatish-smelling, puritanical seer, Uncle Bacchus. In the fiction, "Zebulon--the syllables that shaped the very clay of his mother's ancestral earth,"² represented for the protagonist the pastoral world of the dead past. It was associated with the feminine principle in Eugene's imagination simply because whatever was most castrating in his mother's personality invariably seemed to suggest the forbidding, sterile, death-haunting vision of life which Eliza had inherited from her mountain kinsmen, trapped, with all of their superstitious ghosts of ancient memory and death, in the world-remote isolation of the Old Catawba hills. This was the reason that the boy, as his father had done before him, instantly connected the smug, drawling mountain voice of Uncle Bacchus with sterility and death the first time he heard it:

The voice was benevolent, all-sure, triumphant, unforgettable--as hateful as the sound of good and unctuous voices that speak softly while men drown. It was the very death-watch of a voice, the voice of one who waits and watches, all-triumphant, while others die, and then keeps vigil by the dead in a cabin in the hills, and drawls the death-watch out to the accompaniment of crackling pine-knots on the hearth and the slow crumbling of the ash.³

All of the Gant children, as well as their father, had been exasperated by Eliza's superstitious fatalism, which they associated with her mountain kinsmen, the Pentlands.

¹LHA, p. 29. ²HB, p. 122. ³Ibid., p. 123.

In Look Homeward, Angel, after Eliza mentioned one of her recent premonitions, Helen had replied good-humoredly, but also with visible annoyance: "'Don't start that Pentland spooky stuff! It makes my flesh crawl.'"¹ Eliza differed from her husband and children in that she took seriously the "Pentland spooky stuff." Moreover, her fatalistic acceptance of destiny, together with her inflexible conviction of moral superiority, was "enforced by her Scotch superstition and the blind vanity of her family, which saw extinction for others but not for itself."² Even when her youngest son's head had almost been crushed by the hoof of a horse, the child-sorceress Eliza, in the superstitious depths of her "clairvoyant Scotch soul,"³ was not dismayed:

But all of this, as Eliza knew in her heart, was part of the plan of the Dark Sisters. The entrails had been woven and read long since.⁴

Almost from her birth Eliza had been convinced that her life was being "shaped to a purpose."⁵ For this reason, "with the infinite composure, the tremendous patience which waits half a lifetime for an event, not so much with certain foresight, as with a prophetic, brooding instinct,"⁶ the clairvoyant, fatalistic woman knew that before she died, the predestined purpose of her life inexorably was going to be fulfilled. On this prophetic level, Eliza as the Victorian puritan archetype of both the child-sorceress and the earth

¹LHA, p. 378. ²Ibid., p. 17. ³Ibid., p. 43.

⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid., p. 21. ⁶Ibid., p. 20.

mother, lived in a pastoral world which seemed utterly outside personal ruin and disaster, just as her innocence also seemed "somehow above and beyond a moral judgment":¹

her spirit was as everlasting as the earth on which she walked, and could not be touched--no matter what catastrophes of grief, death, tragic loss, and unfulfilment might break the lives of men--she was triumphant over the ravages of time and accident, and would be triumphant to her death. For there was only the inevitable fulfilment of her own destiny--and ruin, loss, and death availed not--she would be fulfilled. 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.²

¹OTR, p. 4. ²Ibid., p. 352.

CHAPTER XII

THE PASTORAL VISION

'I shall save one land unvisited,' said Eugene. Et ego in Arcadia.¹

The "pastoral vision" in Wolfe's fiction is the protagonist's view of life while he is living in the "pastoral world." It represents his emotional dependence upon the child-sorceress mother in a world from which has been excluded the spiritual reality of the dualism between good and evil. The feminine principle, as revealed in the idiomatic expression of Eliza Gant: "'Get close to Nature, as the feller says, and' you'll get close to God,'"² is the real divinity in this world. As previously suggested, the spiritual identity of the young man with the "pastoral vision" has been permanently removed from the unsettling present to the innocent setting of his pre-puberty past. Finally, the young man's passion for isolation, intensified by the emotional rejection which he suffered as a child in a Victorian puritan home, together with his disturbed reactions during adolescence to his surfacing Oedipal feelings, is detached as much as

¹LHA, p. 624. ²HB, p. 137.

possible from anything ugly or menacing in his immediate experience. In this respect, his passion for isolation is the expression of his burgeoning self-love, as the narcissistic young man attempts to create within himself a satisfactory psychological retreat from an outside world which appears increasingly indifferent, when it is not clearly antagonistic, to the fulfilment of his romantic desire.

In the previous chapter we stated that to a person existing emotionally and spiritually in the pastoral world, nature seems to provide an answer to the nightmarish threat of a world of continuous change in which the ultimate reality is death. Death is an illusion in nature in that the ritualism of the seasons--that is, the cyclical movement of the months through spring, summer, autumn, and winter--ends with a rebirth each returning spring. It was this pastoral vision of a perpetually self-renewing earth to which Wolfe's adolescent protagonist, after he had become a willing captive to his narcissism, invariably turned whenever he wanted justification for his romantic faith:

Victoriously, he trod the neck of doubt as if it were a serpent: he was joined to the earth, a part of it, and he possessed it; he would be wasted and consumed, filled and renewed eternally; and he would feel unceasingly alternate tides of life and dark oblivion; he would be emptied without weariness, replenished forever with strong joy.¹

The earth, as the expression of the deathless feminine principle in nature, not only affords reassurance because

¹OTR, p. 510.

its fertility is everlasting, but also because the cyclical appearance of rebirth, with each new morning as well as every returning spring, creates the impression that nature everywhere is innocently vibrant with life, fresh, juvenescent, and true:

The earth emerged with all its ancient and eternal quality: stately and solemn and lonely-looking in that first light, it filled men's hearts with all its ancient wonder. It seemed to have been there forever, and, though they had never seen it before, to be more familiar to them than their mother's face. And at the same time it seemed they had discovered it once more, and if they had been the first men who ever saw the earth, the joy of this discovery could not have seemed more strange or more familiar. Seeing it, they felt nothing but silence and wonder in their hearts, and were naked and alone and stripped down to their bare selves, as near to truth as men can ever come.¹

This is the attractive physical world with which the child first associates his pristine sensuous responses and feelings of innocence. It is likewise the completely a-moral and indifferent physical world, "the immense and terrible earth that makes no answer,"² which in the child's imagination, ironically, appears as comforting and familiar as he wishes his own mother to be. For these reasons, the child develops a sympathetic attitude towards nature, and after puberty, does not find it difficult to see in the ritualism of the seasons, a re-assuring symbol of the security provided by his narcissistic attachment to the feminine principle. This seems especially convincing since the possessive feminine principle, symbolized in nature by the all-embracing, germinal

¹Ibid., p. 77. ²DM, p. 204.

earth, is so easily equated emotionally by the son with the completely uncritical, all-forgiving Oedipal mother.

Eugene Gant was still a baby when he "first felt the mixed lonely ache and promise of the seasons."¹ As he grew older and began to accumulate experience, he recognized "the commonness of all things in the earth with a strange familiarity."² He was particularly impressed by the rebirth of nature in the early morning when the town emerged from the darkness with a "washed nascent cleanliness" and "all the world seemed as young as spring."³ Once when he was permitted to accompany his brothers to the railroad yard to watch the circus train unload, he had a mystical sensation of being part of a fresh, innocent world suddenly being reborn in the magic light of dawn:

that unearthly and magic first light of day which seems suddenly to rediscover the great earth out of darkness, so that the earth emerges with an awful, a glorious, sculptural stillness, and one looks out with a feeling of joy and disbelief, as the first men on this earth must have done, for to see this happen is one of the things that men will remember out of life forever and think of as they die.³

Eugene was equally affected by the significance of nature's rebirth in spring. As a child he might be staring at a fruit tree bending stiffly in the icy January wind, yet in his imagination he would be trying to envision the same tree as it blossomed in April or grew heavy with fruit in summer:

¹LHA, p. 68. ²Ibid., p. 162. ³Ibid., p. 179.

⁴DM, p. 205.

The plum tree, black and brittle, rocks stiffly in the winter wind. Her million little twigs are frozen in spears of ice. But in the Spring, lithe and heavy, she will bend under her great load of fruit and blossoms. She will grow young again. Red plums will ripen, will be shaken desperately upon the tiny stems.¹ They will fall bursted on the loamy warm wet earth.¹

To the imaginative boy the familiar setting of Altamont in the spring was literally a garden of delightful innocence, and after entering adolescence, the protagonist extended the Arcadian metaphor to include the outside world:

Spring lay abroad through all the garden of this world. Beyond the hills the land bayed out to other hills, to golden cities, to rich meadows, to deep forests, to the seas. Forever and forever.²

It was this pastoral metaphor of a "garden world," together with his increasing narcissism, which was responsible for much of Eugene's romantic enthusiasm after he left home to begin his pastoral search. In Wolfe's estimation, however, the callowness of his protagonist's pastoral vision of life was offset by the author's attitude toward the "ritualism of experience."³

When Eugene made his first trip from Altamont to Harvard, he stopped off in Baltimore to visit his father, who was then a patient at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He discovered his father sitting on the high porch of the hospital building, surrounded by other old men who had come there to die.

¹LHA, p. 165. ²Ibid., p. 193.

³Wolfe was a romantic "existentialist" in the importance which he attached to experience. In this role, Wolfe believed that before emotional and spiritual truth can be known, it has to be confirmed somehow in one's personal life.

Several of these wasted, feeble men were smiling as they talked with relatives, and in their senile smiles Eugene detected something that was disgracefully impotent, as if the men themselves had been "adroitly castrated in the hospital, and shorn of their manhood."¹

The great sterile engine of the hospital, with all its doctors, nurses, internes, and attendants, its unnaturally clean smells and inhuman perfections, had violated the ritualism of experience for these emasculated old men by stripping death, not only of its ancient terror, but of its human dignity as well. In Eugene's opinion, death was one of the crucial verities of a person's experience which could not be softened or glossed over sentimentally without destroying the ritualistic fabric of life itself. When he tried to picture his own death amid the suave, sterilized perfection of such a hospital, he felt ashamed as a man:

It was an image of death without man's ancient pains and old gaunt aging--an image of death drugged and stupefied out of its ancient terror and stern dignities--of a shameful death that went out softly, dully in anesthetized oblivion, with the fading smell of chemicals on man's final breath. And the image of that death was hateful.²

The "ritualism of experience" applies to all periods of a man's life, and produces a relativistic attitude towards truth as well as behavior. Obviously a young boy should behave like a young boy and not like an old man, but any kind of personal truth for the two individuals is equally

¹OTR, p. 84. ²Ibid.

dependent upon age. In other words, the pastoral vision of life legitimately represents truth for the adolescent boy even though it is both a false and emasculating vision for an older man to retain.

Equally important, the adolescent boy cannot violate the ritualism of experience by using second-hand knowledge to become precociously mature. The only true emotional and spiritual knowledge the boy will ever possess eventually has to be confirmed through his personal experience: through his having lived, made mistakes, suffered the inevitably bitter consequences, and if he is blessed by fortune and self-awareness, having gained a little knowledge. Since this kind of true knowledge is impossible to obtain vicariously, Wolfe's protagonist in The Web and the Rock believed that many of Esther Jack's young acquaintances in the theatrical world of New York City--young actors and actresses who pretended a false sophistication--were spiritually lost individuals because the cleverness of their knowledge had not resulted from their own private experience:

Certainly all of them were still quite young, but already they had lost a great deal of the freshness and the eager and naive belief that is a part of youth. Monk felt powerfully that they 'knew' too much--and that in knowing too much they did not know enough: had lost a good part of the knowledge that should be a part of life before they had ever had a chance to gain it through experience, and now must live blind on one side and confirmed in error.¹

The ritualism of experience helps explain the romantic

¹WR, p. 334.

extravagance of many of Eugene Gant's views in Wolfe's first two novels. Undoubtedly the author was aware of much of this extravagance, but since he believed the views expressed were in keeping with the age and emotional development of his protagonist, he refused to "tone them down." If Wolfe's detachment from his romantic protagonist had been more consciously ironical, however, we agree with many of the critics that his fiction would probably have been improved.¹

II

The "vast aerial world of fantasy"² truly opened its magic doors to Eugene when he first learned to read, and on dark winter nights sat in the parlor brooding over the pages of some fire-lit book. Like most children, he identified imaginatively with whatever he read and soon had developed a romantic image of himself which he tried to keep secret from his family, feeling that "revelation would be punished with ridicule."³ This romantic image emphasized the narcissistic side of his personality which delighted in loneliness. When Eugene was sleeping in his bed at night, and was suddenly awakened by fire bells ringing in the howling wind, his romantic demon "rushed into his heart, bursting all cords

¹In any discussion of Wolfe's lack of detachment as an artist, it must always be remembered that the romantic author was a number of years "detached in time" from whatever was autobiographical in the experiences of his protagonist as he was writing about them.

²LHA, p. 83. ³Ibid.

that held him to the earth, promising him isolation and domination over sea and land, inhabitation of the dark."¹ Again, when he was snuggled securely beneath his bed covers on a chill autumn night, listening to the storm wind pound against the wooden walls of the house, he exulted in his "victorious, dark, all-seeing isolation."²

After Eugene had begun to read adventure novels from the public library, he invariably pictured himself in the role of the fictional hero:

He entombed himself in the flesh of a thousand fictional heroes, giving his favorites extension in life beyond their books, carrying their banners into the gray places of actuality, seeing himself now as the militant clergyman, arrayed, in his war on slum conditions, against all the moneyed hostility of his fashionable church, aided in his hour of greatest travail by the lovely daughter of the millionaire tenement owner, and winning finally a victory for God, the poor, and himself.³

Soon Eugene made a similar identification with the romantic leads of the motion pictures he attended:

He became the hero-actor-star, the lord of the cinema, and the lover of a beautiful movie-queen, as a heroic as his postures, with a superior actuality for every make-believe.⁴

During this period Eugene's chief fear was that some member of his family might intrude accidentally into the private world of his narcissistic imagination. Once when Luke made a sarcastic reference to his brother's daydreaming, "Eugene was startled and confused, feeling that his secret world,

¹Ibid., p. 87. ²Ibid., p. 91 ³Ibid., p. 104.

⁴Ibid., p. 274.

so fearfully guarded, had been revealed to ridicule."¹

When Eugene entered puberty, his desire for secrecy and loneliness became more urgent as his deep-seated sense of rejection and his Oedipal guilts, fears, and resentments were meshed with his increasing self-love. Puberty meant literally that the "prison walls of self"² had enclosed the adolescent boy, and that "he was walled completely by the esymplastic power of his imagination."³ Since Eugene was then making such a total retreat into his narcissistic self, he also had to learn how "to project mechanically, before the world, an acceptable counterfeit of himself which would protect him from intrusion."⁴

Eugene was finished with childhood when he stopped sleeping at night in the same bed with his mother. The particular spring when he obtained that freedom especially was filled with magic enchantment for the boy:

he felt entirely, for the first time, the full delight of loneliness. Sheeted in his thin nightgown, he stood in darkness by the orchard window of the back room at Gant's, drinking the sweet air down, exulting in his isolation in darkness, hearing the strange wail of the whistle going past.⁵

The adolescent protagonist had grown like a weed, and when he observed his gangling figure in the mirror, made unique by the sensitive expressions on his remote, brooding face, he felt that perhaps he was too much "like a dark strange flower

¹Ibid., p. 117. ²Ibid., p. 201 ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

to arouse any feeling among his companions and his kin."¹ If he hoped to find spiritual companionship, he had to conduct his search, not among coarsened people, but in the romantic, lonely darkness.

Eugene by this time had acquired his early morning paper route, and in this work, which supported his feelings of lonely self-sufficiency, he exulted like some youthful prince of darkness:

In winter he went down joyously into the dark howling wind, leaning his weight upon its advancing wall as it swept up a hill; and when in early Spring the small cold rain fell from the reeking sky he was content. He was alone.²

The boy's romantic "vision burned on kingdoms under the sea, on windy castle crags, and on the deep elf kingdoms at the earth's core."³ He preferred the darkness because then it seemed most fitting to hunt "for the doorless land of faery, that illimitable haunted country that opened somewhere below a leaf or a stone."⁴ In the spring and summer he also responded to the darkness because he had connected it with the feminine principle, and in his youthful imagination the night wind "moaned . . . like a fruitful woman, deep-breasted, great, full of love and wisdom; like Demeter unseen and hunting through the world."⁵ Since the feminine principle in nature had retained its innocence, the adolescent protagonist, ashamed of his sexual corruption, felt spiritually cleansed

¹Ibid., p. 204. ²Ibid., p. 301 ³Ibid., p. 277.

⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid., p. 451.

by darkness and the night:

It was night, vast brooding night, the mother of loneliness, that washes our stains away. He was washed in the great river of night, in the Ganges tide of redemption.¹

The school at the Leonards offered a congenial setting for Eugene's pastoral vision, and his years "bloomed like golden apples"² under the tutelage of Margaret. He particularly liked to remain on the school grounds in the late afternoon, after the other boys had gone home, "when he was free to wander about the old house, under the singing majesty of great trees, exultant in the proud solitude of that fine hill."³ The fact that there was no secret place at Dixieland in which to withdraw, "no place proof against the invasion of the boarders,"⁴ had become increasingly galling to the adolescent boy. Still he refused to reveal to the idealized Margaret the sordidness and ugliness of so much of the life that went on in the boarding house. He had to keep this innocent woman, like his possessive mother, "barred from the bitter and lonely secrecy of his life."⁵

Eugene's disillusionment, however, was on the surface only. It had as yet worn no real "grooving in the secret life,"⁶ and his romantic fantasy still provided a sure escape to an imaginative world of heroic deeds:

Walled up in his great city of visions, his tongue had learned to mock, his lip to sneer, but the harsh

¹Ibid., p. 460. ²Ibid., p. 217. ³Ibid., p. 231.

⁴Ibid., p. 137. ⁵Ibid., p. 479. ⁶Ibid., p. 391.

rasp of the world had worn no grooving in the secret life. Again and again he had been bogged in the gray slough of factuality. His cruel eyes had missed the meaning of no gesture. His packed and bitter heart had sweltered in him like a hot ingot, but all his hard wisdom melted at the glow of his imagination.¹

At this time Eugene had a compelling psychological need to believe and affirm. He had observed so much needless emotional waste and confusion in his home that he could not bear to think that a similar chaos existed in the outside world:

Variety, in this unvisited world, was unending, but order and purpose certain: there would be no wastage in adventure--courage would be rewarded with beauty, talent with success, all merit with its true deserving. There would be no peril, there would be toil, there would be struggle. But there would not be confusion and waste. There would not be groping. For collected Fate would fall, on its chosen moment, like a plum. There was no disorder in enchantment.²

Eugene's narcissistic optimism was a romantic reflection of the egotistical determinism of his parents, who saw tragedy only for others, never for themselves. Of course, Eugene would have been dismayed by such a comparison, for the self-centered preoccupation of both Gant and Eliza with the death of other people had always filled him with rage:

Their morbid raking of the items announcing the death of some person known to them, their weird absorption with the death of some toothless hag who, galled by bedsores, at length found release after her eightieth year, while fire, famine, and slaughter in other parts of the world passed unnoticed by them, their extravagant superstition over what was local and unimportant, seeing the intervention of God in the death of a peasant, and the suspension of divine law and natural order in their own, filled him with choking fury.³

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 193. ³Ibid., p. 279.

It was the protagonist's romantic illusion that he was combatting the narrow, selfish interests of his bigoted parents when he pictured himself as a "fantasist of the Ideal."¹ For the narcissistic Eugene, the sun, instead of being a burning planet, was "a lordly lamp to light him on his grand adventuring."² In addition, the boy believed in all the romantic virtues, provided, of course, that they supported the idealistic meaning which he had given to his youthful self-love:

He believed in love, and in the goodness and glory of women. He believed in valiance, and he hoped that, like Socrates, he would do nothing mean or common in the hour of danger. He exulted in his youth, and he believed that he could never die.³

The disillusionment of Eugene's adolescent years served merely to strengthen, not destroy, the vast romantic mythology which his imagination had established. "Beyond the hills were the mines of King Solomon,"⁴ and the pastoral vision of the world was all the more precious because the protagonist recognized so much of its untruth. Moreover, he was beginning to think, with a kind of romantic irony, that "it was not truth that men must live for--the creative men--but for falsehood."⁵ The boy was extremely bitter at his mocking tongue because his heart was so certain of its faith: "Eugene believed in the glory and the gold."⁶

¹Ibid., p. 391. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 193.

⁵Ibid., p. 224. ⁶Ibid., pp. 224-25.

III

When Wolfe's protagonist journeyed eastward from Altamont to attend the state university, he took with him his "pastoral vision" of the outside world, controlled by his narcissistic attachment to the feminine principle in his emotional and spiritual life. The University of Pulpit Hill, located in a small town in the central midland of the forested wilderness of Old Catawba, was like the Leonards' private school in that it provided a setting congenial to the young man's pastoral vision. Although the university had been in existence for almost a century, the school campus still retained the "flavor of the wilderness . . . its remoteness, its isolated charm."¹ In addition to its pastoral location, the university had inherited from the ante-bellum South a slow, casual manner of living, along with the "fine authority of provincialism":²

In this pastoral setting a young man was enabled to loaf comfortably and delightfully through four luxurious and indolent years. There was, God knows, seclusion enough for monastic scholarship, but the rare romantic quality of the atmosphere, the prodigal opulence of Springtime, thick with light, quenched pretty thoroughly any incipient rash of bookishness.³

Most of the students attending the university were native sons who regarded their state as a kind of pastoral fortress. Beyond the boundaries of Old Catawba "the vast

¹Ibid., p. 396. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., pp. 386-87.

champaign of the world stretched out its limitless wonder, but few were seduced away from the fortress of the State, few ever heard the distant reverberation of an idea."¹ For these students the way to greater glory had to be found within the state itself, and because of their uncritical provincialism, few of the university's sons had ever distinguished themselves in the life of the nation:

There had been an obscure President of the United States, and a few Cabinet members, but few had sought such distinction: it was glory enough to be a great man in one's State. Nothing beyond mattered very much.²

Eugene was not quite sixteen years old when he enrolled at Pulpit Hill, and he was the most naive of freshmen with "his opium visions of himself, a stranger in Arcadias."³ At this time, despite his youth, Eugene was over six feet and three inches tall, but weighed less than 130 pounds. The boy was self-conscious about his absurdly tall, awkwardly-coordinated body, and this self-consciousness exaggerated his romantic narcissism. Because of his singular appearance, as well as his unusual sensitivity, the young man thought he heard hidden, scornful laughter and mocking voices as he lunged, with infuriating shyness, across the campus. His life seemed hopelessly ruined, and he now "thought of his former vision of success and honor with a lacerating self-contempt."⁴ In addition, his narcissistic isolation was so

¹Ibid., p. 487. ²Ibid., p. 396. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 395.

complete that he was unable to turn to another student for help: "He was alone. He was desperately lonely."¹

Within a few months Eugene had oriented himself to the strange college world, and instead of being ashamed of his odd appearance, he began to take pride in his "young wild child's face, and his great raw length of body, with the bounding scissor legs."² Certainly he was different from the other students, "the vacantly handsome young men, with shining hair, evenly parted in the middle."³ He was different from these vapid, ordinary young men because he was more unusual and talented than they could ever hope to be. To emphasize his distinguishing uniqueness, Eugene began to draw attention to himself by refusing to bathe, or change his clothes, or have his hair cut:

I think I am hell, and they say I stink because I have not had a bath. But I could not stink, even if I never had a bath. Only the others stink. My dirtiness is better than their cleanliness.⁴

The protagonist had left home spurred by the romantic ambition to prepare himself to be a writer, and his college experience was insidiously pampering his ego until he believed that he was fated to be a genius. About this time, a rash appeared upon his neck, and he took narcissistic pride in this physical blemish, which seemed additional proof of his kinship with the great geniuses of the world:

¹Ibid., p. 396. ²Ibid., p. 394. ³Ibid., p. 395.

⁴Ibid., p. 585.

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. But he looked on the faces of the lords of the earth--and he saw them wasted and devoured by the beautiful disease of thought and passion. In the pages of a thousand books he saw their portraits: Coleridge at twenty-five, with the loose sensual mouth, gaping idiotically, the vast staring eyes, holding in their opium depths, the vision of seas haunted by the albatross, the great white forehead--head mixed of Zeus and the village degenerate.¹

The United States entered World War I in the spring of 1917, but this event brought no sorrow to the narcissistic protagonist: "War is not death to young men; war is life. The earth had never worn raiment of such color as it did that year."² The second summer after the United States had entered the War, Eugene went to Norfolk, Virginia, to get a job. As soon as he entered the war-booming city and saw the lean destroyers and the strange, bright camouflage of the freighters and transports, he was filled with romantic glory and "cried back into the throat of the wind until his eyes were wet."³ All around him he sensed the vast energy of the war-time world, which, with characteristic self-love, he applied instantly to his own life:

He might do all, dare all, become all. The far and the mighty was near him, around him, above him. There was no great bridge to span, no hard summit to win. From obscurity, hunger, and loneliness, he might be lifted in a moment into power, glory, love. The transport loading at the docks might bear him war-ward, love-ward, fame-ward Wednesday night.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 587. ²Ibid., p. 511. ³Ibid., p. 510.

⁴Ibid., p. 511.

Although Eugene exhausted his savings before he finally managed to secure work, he watched his money dwindle without fear as he thrilled to his romantic loneliness in this war-bustling city. He was no ordinary mortal preoccupied merely with how to survive, for as he tramped the pavement of Norfolk, "unclean, unkempt, clothed in rags and hunger and madness, he saw himself victorious, heroic, and beautiful."¹ His poverty and loneliness actually supported the romantic image he had previously formed of himself, forever coming into strange cities at dawn, "striding in among them, and sitting with them unknown, like a god in exile, stored with the enormous visions of the earth."² Why should he worry when his life seemed so unquestionably fated and unique, as if he were a kind of mythically chosen, twentieth century, youthful "Phaeton with the terrible horses of the sun."³

The cynical dance-hall "chippies" of Norfolk failed to share the protagonist's romantic conception of himself as a "youthful Phaeton." As soon as Eugene had obtained work and drawn his first pay check, he took a trolley to one of the nearby Virginia beaches. It was already night as he stepped from the trolley and began to walk down the beach in the direction of the dance halls. The romantic atmosphere stimulated Eugene's imagination, and he responded with moody, self-conscious ecstasy, not only to his own loneliness, but to the re-assuring presence of the darkness and ocean:

¹Ibid., p. 513. ²Ibid., p. 510. ³Ibid., p. 511.

O sea! (he thought) I am the hill-born, the prison-pent, the ghost, the stranger, and I walk here at your side. O sea, I am lonely like you, I am strange and far like you, I am sorrowful like you; my brain, my heart, my life, like yours have touched strange shores. You are like a woman lying below yourself on the coral floor. You are an immense and fruitful woman.¹

Eugene soon located one of the dance platforms in the concession area of the beach, but after he had purchased his ticket he was too self-conscious to ask any of the women to dance. When he had remained on the floor for some time without dancing, he thought he overheard several of the women laughing at him. His embarrassment then became real, and both enraged and ashamed, he plunged away from the platform cursing the cheap dance-hall sluts:

O my sweet bitches! My fine cheap sluts! You little crawling itch of twiddlers: you will snigger at me! . . . Ah, but I'll tell you why you laugh: you are afraid of me because I am not like the others. You hate me because I do not belong. You see I am finer and greater than any one you know: you cannot reach me and you hate me.²

Eugene's exaggerated narcissism was partially the result of the emotional rejection which he had experienced in the home of his parents. As a child he had become convinced that no one could ever really love him, and to compensate for his feelings of being unwanted, he had fallen in love with himself. The protagonist's narcissism helps explain his romantic passion for loneliness and also why he regarded his visit to Norfolk as "a prelude to exile" in which "no other purpose may be read than the blind groping of a soul toward

¹Ibid., p. 522. ²Ibid., pp. 522-23.

freedom and isolation."¹ In Norfolk he had lived unnoticed in a world peopled entirely by strangers, and he had rejoiced with a kind of narcissistic intoxication to the "glory of the secret life":²

He had lived alone, he had known pain and hunger, he had survived. The old hunger for voyages fed at his heart. He thrilled to the glory of the secret life. The fear of the crowd, a distrust and hatred of group life, a horror of all bonds that tied him to the terrible family of the earth, called up again the vast Utopia of his loneliness. To go alone, as he had gone, into strange cities; to meet strange people, and to pass again before they could know him; to wander, like his own legend, across the earth--it seemed to him there could be no better thing than that.³

Both Eugene's sense of rejection and his rebelliousness against the demanding authority of the feminine principle in his life lay behind his unrealistic pastoral vision of the outside world, together with his impelling need to prove himself a genius. He might be neglected in his home town, but once given the opportunity away from home to prove how extraordinary a person he was, he would eventually win the recognition and love he had imagined in his earliest daydreams: "Victory and love. In all of his swarming fantasies Eugene saw himself like this--unbeaten and beloved."⁴

His embittered brother Ben had already warned Eugene that if he desired any real happiness for himself, he would have to look for it away from home:

'You see, they think well of you, once you get away

¹Ibid., p. 516. ²Ibid., p. 527. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 204.

from your people. You'll never have a chance at home, Gene. They'll ruin everything for you. For heaven's sake, get away when you can.¹

For Wolfe's narcissistic protagonist, escape was more than just a matter of getting away from an emotionally suffocating family life dominated and exploited by his mother. His future happiness also depended upon the kind of world into which he escaped. In order to conform to his romantic dreams, it had to be a pastoral world which he could possess creatively:

O, the wonder, the magic, and the loss! His life was like a great wave breaking in the lonely sea; his hungry shoulders found no barriers--he smote his strength at nothing, and was lost and scattered like a wrack of mist. But he believed that this supreme ecstasy which mastered him and made him drunken might some day fuse its enormous light into a single articulation.²

Eugene's experiences at college buttressed his self-confidence. He had succeeded beyond expectation in this new environment, his first real test away from his family. Most important with regard to his future, his success at college seemed to vindicate his narcissistic opinion of his unusual powers. In the protagonist's pastoral vision of the world, people were deprived of happiness, not because life was hopelessly bad, but chiefly because they were unable to measure up to all that life had to offer. Eugene had partially been a failure himself. In the future he was convinced, however, that as he gained more artistic control over his extraordinary talents, his ability to live completely, and with

¹Ibid., p. 508. ²Ibid., pp. 510-11.

self-fulfilment, would increase proportionately:

The conviction had grown on him that men do not escape from life because life is dull, but that life escapes from men because they are little. He felt that the passions of the play were greater than the actors. It seemed to him that he had never had a great moment¹ of living in which he had measured up to its fulness.

Eugene's romantic philosophy not only included a belief in the freedom of the will, a view which had been impressed upon him by his Victorian puritan parents, but made it crucial if one hoped to achieve success and happiness in life. Especially reassuring for the gifted man, this philosophy supported a pastoral future with unlimited opportunities to exploit and enjoy:

The world lay before him for his picking--full of opulent cities, golden vintages, glorious triumphs, lovely women, full of a thousand unmet and magnificent possibilities. Nothing was dull or tarnished.²

The narcissistic ebullience of Wolfe's protagonist became extreme during the final month of his senior year in college. At night frequently he felt like some "centaur, moon-eyed and wild of mane, torn apart with hunger for the golden world,"³ and he would hurl himself "squealing through the streets and along the paths, touched with the ecstasy of a thousand unspoken desires."⁴ Convinced that he was a fated genius, Eugene regarded the distant cities of the North as a kind of personal challenge, and he was certain that as soon as he entered their fabulous streets, he would win for himself the fame and love he so passionately desired. At the

¹Ibid., p. 589. ²Ibid., p. 602. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

same time, he realized that graduation from college meant the end of his youth:

He saw the vast rich body of the hills, lush with billowing greenery, ripe-bosomed, dappled by far-floating cloud shadows. But it was, he knew, the end.

Far-forested, the horn-note wound. He was wild with the hunger for release: the vast champaign of earth stretched out for him its limitless seduction.¹

Shortly before graduation Eugene had mockingly pictured himself in the mythical roles of: "Gant, the Olympian Bull; and Heracles Gant; and Gant, the Seductive Swan; and Ashtaroth and Azrael Gant, Proteus Gant, Anubis and Osiris and Mumbo-Jumbo Gant."² Even so, the protagonist's pastoral vision of life, supported emotionally by his own narcissistic ebullience and romantic optimism, was still the expression of his faith in an archetypal feminine principle controlling the universe. In Eugene's pastoral imagination, even the history of mankind, with "the billion living of the earth, the thousand billion dead,"³ represented little more actually than documentation in terms of time of the recurrent appearance of "germinal spring" and the everlasting triumph of the feminine principle in deathless nature:

And in his vision he saw the fabulous lost cities, buried in the drifted silt of the earth--Thebes, the seven-gated, and all the temples of the Daulian and Phocian lands, and all Oenotria to the Tyrrhene gulf. Sunk in the burial-urn of the earth he saw the vanished cultures. . . . But, amid the fumbling march of races to extinction, the giant rhythms of the earth remained. The seasons passed in their majestic processionals, and germinal Spring returned forever on the land--new crops, new men, new harvests, and new gods.⁴

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 604. ³Ibid., p. 592. ⁴Ibid., p. 625.

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¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 604. ³Ibid., p. 592. ⁴Ibid., p. 625.

Eugene's allegiance to the feminine principle was in keeping with the title of the class poem he wrote for commencement exercises: "O Mother of Our Myriad Hopes."¹ After the exercises were over and he stood on the campus beside Eliza, filled "with pride and joy there in the lovely wilderness,"² his attachment to the feminine principle provided the foundation for his final pastoral vision of an outside world which "was panting for his embrace."³ Finally, the role of the dominating feminine principle in the protagonist's emotional and spiritual life was intimately connected with the significance of the "pastoral search," during which Eugene hoped to re-establish contact with his lost innocence:

'On coasts more strange than Cipango, in a place more far than Fez, I shall hunt him, the ghost and haunter of myself. I have lost the blood that fed me; I have died the hundred deaths that lead to life. By the slow thunder of the drums, the flare of dying cities, I have come to this dark place. And this is the true voyage, the good one, the best. And now prepare, my soul, for the beginning hunt. I will plumb seas stranger than those haunted by the albatross.'⁴

¹Ibid., p. 623. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 625.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ARCHETYPAL DUALISM

Who are we, that must follow in the footsteps of the king? Who are we, that have no kings to follow? We are the unkinged men. Have we left shadows on forgotten walls? Have we crossed running water and lived for seven timeless years with the enchantress, and shall we find our son who is ourself, and will he know us?¹

Before examining the archetypal dualism in Wolfe's fiction, the following question must again be raised: To what extent was Wolfe, as a conscious artist, aesthetically in control of the multiple themes and symbolism in his novels? We believe that this question can never be answered satisfactorily simply because Wolfe's conception of artistic vision, which he used to justify the significance of his fiction, assumes that the writer's creative imagination can shape and control material in which many of the important meanings have not been fully grasped by his critical intelligence. In other words, Wolfe believed that the writer can control his fiction imaginatively even though he may lack an adequate conscious understanding of its significant form.

Obviously the serious writer tries to reach a stage

¹OTR, p. 856.

where his critical intelligence is synchronized with his creative imagination so that the act--one might even say mystery--of comprehension, representation, and illumination are inseparably joined. Even so, it was Wolfe's romantic conviction that the writer who possesses the critical intelligence without the informing vision seldom becomes a truly significant artist. Conversely, the writer with the illuminating vision of the great artist, no matter how fatuous his critical defects may be, can succeed, although never completely, in his aesthetic intention.

We have written this dissertation on the assumption that Thomas Wolfe possessed the imagination of a gifted artist, which helped excuse his shortcomings as a romantic writer. To put it another way, we believe that even though Wolfe as a romantic writer may have failed to dominate and control his material the way a conscious artist ideally should, he did succeed, on the level of at least artistic vision, in giving the body of his fiction an integrated and meaningful form. Certainly a close inspection of the novels reveals that significant themes are present and that they fit into a coherent aesthetic pattern.

The symbolism which Wolfe used throughout his fiction presents an equally confusing problem, since patently much of this symbolism, on one level at least, can be given a romantic interpretation which is deceptively convincing. It is our opinion, however, that in addition to the obvious

romantic meaning, there is frequently another level of meaning which, in terms of Wolfe's controlling artistic vision, can be called "archetypal" for want of a better term. Moreover, beginning with The Web and the Rock we believe that the specific significance of the archetypal symbolism was consciously in Wolfe's mind when he was creating. In this respect, the first half of The Web and the Rock serves as a "kind of key"¹ which the reader can use to interpret the symbolism in the remainder of Wolfe's fiction.

When Wolfe finished Look Homeward, Angel, he realized that the form of the novel was incomplete, and that the themes of narcissistic isolation and lost innocence, especially as affected by his protagonist's psychological past, would have to be examined more fully in the later fiction. Judging from Wolfe's correspondence, he had consciously arrived at this view not too long after the publication of his first novel, for it has previously been noted in this dissertation that in the letter supporting the author's application for a Guggenheim Fellowship (December 16, 1929), he had explained to Mr. Moe how the dominant theme in his new book would be an extension of the "isolation-lost innocence" theme of the first:

the book has a great many things in it but its dominant theme is again related to the theme of the first: it tries to find out why Americans are a nomad race (as this writer believes . . . looking for a door, a happy

¹In a letter to Maxwell Perkins (July 17, 1930), Wolfe explained to his editor that in summarizing the symbolic themes he planned to use in his new fiction, he was trying to give Perkins a "kind of key."

land, a home, seeking for something they have lost, perhaps racial and forgotten.¹

In the Guggenheim letter Wolfe mentioned that he had also selected a title, The October Fair, for his new book.² The inclusion of this particular title in the letter of application is significant because it reveals that by December, 1929, Wolfe was conscious enough of the controlling form for his new fiction to wish to use a title specifically related to the important experiences of his protagonist during the October Fair in Munich. Since this is true, it would seem reasonable to conclude that before Wolfe did any actual writing for his second book, he had already made thematic connections between the narcissistic predicament of Eugene Gant, with his pastoral vision of life, at the beginning of Of Time and the River, and his crucial discovery of spiritual evil at the close of The Web and the Rock. In addition, Wolfe apparently realized at this time that the "search" theme would provide the significant form for the emotional and spiritual discoveries of the protagonist in his new fiction.

Wolfe's first reference to the search theme in his correspondence appeared in a letter to Maxwell Perkins

¹Nowell, p. 212.

²The title The October Fair, which appears frequently in Wolfe's correspondence during the years from late 1929 to 1933, included the manuscript that was used for both Of Time and the River and the last half of The Web and the Rock. With regard to the controlling form of the fiction, this manuscript corresponds with the "pastoral search" of the protagonist.

(July 17, 1930), in which he explained that "contained in the book like a kernel from the beginning, but unrevealed until much later, is the idea of a man's quest for his father."¹ With regard to the archetypal dualism which he had mentioned previously in letters to John Hall Wheelock, as well as to his chief editor,² the quest for the father represented the masculine or withdrawal phase of the dualism. Opposed to this masculine or archetypal search for the father was the feminine return, for Wolfe now consciously believed "that when a man returns he returns always to the female--he returns (I hope this is not disgusting) to the womb of earthly creation, to the earth itself, to fixity."³ Finally, in the fiction the masculine and feminine dualism would eventually be merged with a spiritual dualism foreshadowed in his second novel by the Biblical quotation on the title page: "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth."

In this dissertation we have used the identifying phrase, "the pastoral search," to include the discoveries of Wolfe's protagonist while he is emotionally and spiritually a prisoner of the pastoral world, since during this period, despite his repeated withdrawals into the masculine flux of

¹Nowell, p. 244.

²Letter to John Hall Wheelock (June 24, 1930); letter to Maxwell Perkins (July 1, 1930).

³Nowell, p. 244.

experience, his attachment to the feminine principle insures his isolation from evil. The reader of this dissertation may regard the application of such a label as "the pastoral search" to these experiences of Wolfe's protagonist as somewhat arbitrary, if not confusing as well, since frequently the feminine search and the search for the father seem to appear simultaneously in the fiction. For this reason, it must be emphasized that the distinction between the two searches made in this chapter has been critically derived, not from the suggestive comments to be found in Wolfe's correspondence, but from a careful, exhaustive study of the dualism as it is represented and developed in the four novels.

In Wolfe's published manuscript, the pastoral search begins with Of Time and the River and ends with the protagonist's discovery of spiritual evil in the closing chapters of The Web and the Rock. At the beginning of the first of these books, Wolfe's protagonist, as he stands on the platform of the railroad station in his home town, waiting for the train that will take him to a metropolitan city in the East, is a representative symbol for the confused, romantic young American, driven by his restlessness and sense of exile to try to discover some meaning in the unending flux of experience. More specifically, the protagonist is also a microcosm for the narcissist at the beginning of his search for self-fulfilment and happiness: a search that takes place ostensibly in the outside world but whose final significance

depends upon the discovery within himself of his true emotional and spiritual nature. In this regard, the search certainly contains "elements of the universal experience," for it is taken for granted that every man at this stage of his life is a narcissist, even though he may not be a dedicated romantic in the sense of Wolfe's protagonist.

II

In Of Time and the River Wolfe used the river to symbolize, in a world in which the archetypal structure of the father's life still has meaning, the flux of experience, prolific, vital, yet constantly moving from the present moment to the past, and time provides the framework in which this change takes place. Only at one instant in the present, however, does the moment come to complete life, when it is grasped by the senses, given its emotional texture, and intellectually oriented. Then it lapses into the oblivion of the past. Living, therefore, represents the continuous death of individual moments, and man's problem is to discover something which endures outside this remorseless progression of time.

In Wolfe's artistic vision, since the reality of the present moment is fleeting, life itself could be regarded as an illusion, a "dream of time."¹ Memory includes that part of the past which can still be resurrected, and in a world

¹OTR, p. 27.

of flux it represents the psychological permanence of dead experience. Whenever memory usurps too much of the role of the contemporary event, the illusion of life as a "dream" is changed into that of life as a "nightmare." To avoid life as a psychological nightmare, every man eventually has to come to terms with his own past, which persists in his conscious and subconscious memory as a determining influence upon the present.

In Wolfe's fiction the world of the present moment, as opposed to the nightmare world of neurotic memory, is especially that of the pre-puberty child. With the unreflecting child it is always the immediate response, vividly perceived by the senses and emotions, which makes the moment come to intense life. The child does not prejudge experience. He accepts it implicitly. In addition, the child's imaginative world is comfortable and familiar, "drawn in very bright and innocent and thrilling colors"¹--where the grass is "very, very green, the trees sumptuous and full-bodied, the streams like sapphire, and the skies a crystal blue."² It is the innocent world of the pristine imagination which is still unclouded by conscious guilts and fears.

Wolfe's protagonist connected the vitality of this childhood world with the attractive structure of his father's life, and it was the symbolic death of the childhood father, an experience which inevitably took place during puberty as the

¹WR, p. 12. ²Ibid.

result of the protagonist's sexual development meshing with his Oedipal attachment to his mother, which produced the collapse of his childhood vision of life. After this traumatic experience had taken place, the protagonist increasingly became the prisoner of his sexually divided memory. The structure of his father's life still served imaginatively as an archetype for vitality, but emotionally it was subordinated to the protagonist's dependence upon the feminine principle personified in his mother. In this way, the protagonist was able to transform emotionally the masculine image to conform to his own narcissistic desire, and to locate that false image in a romantically seductive future. The innocence of his childhood vision of life he then instinctively associated with the immaculate mother image.

After the protagonist had entered puberty, real time, in terms of his emotional and spiritual adjustment, was nostalgically associated with this "lost world . . . in all the radiant and enchanted color of his childhood, in all its proud, dense, and single fabric of passion, certitude, and joy";¹ whereas his subsequent experiences, especially when they brought to the surface his Oedipal guilts and fears, became "this dream of time,"² which always contained the threat of turning into a psychological nightmare. In order to find a time that was permanent and real--that is, some kind of emotional and spiritual security with which to confront the

¹OTR, p. 58. ²Ibid., p. 52.

menacing, ceaseless flux of experience in the present moment-- the increasingly narcissistic protagonist believed that he had to re-establish contact with the world of childhood innocence which he had lost with puberty.

In Wolfe's artistic vision, the nostalgia of his protagonist for his vanished childhood world, dominated imaginatively by the image of his father but emotionally by his mother, alerted him to the possible psychological origin of all his dualistic feelings and attitudes. This, in turn, suggested that even his spiritual dualism had its roots in his psychological experience, and that any understanding of good and evil for himself was finally dependent upon an understanding of his divided feelings towards his parents, as well as the symbolic world which each represented. In addition, the protagonist felt that if he could master this psychological dualism within himself, he could be liberated from the prison of determining memory: that is, he could "defeat time."

We have previously mentioned that in addition to time, Wolfe used the theme of the search or pilgrimage to unify his novels. This theme was also connected with the symbolic roles of the father and mother in the protagonist's "buried life," and in this respect illuminated Wolfe's interest in the theme of how his protagonist was to find meaning in a world of constant change. It has been emphasized that Wolfe believed the most important search in a man's life was his "search to find a father." In Wolfe's fiction the search

for the father represented the archetypal search for masculine vitality and spiritual authority. The protagonist, as Wolfe explained in The Story of a Novel, was not looking merely for "the lost father of his youth,"¹ but for that "strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger,"² which, not to be confused with the actual person of his father, had been associated by the child protagonist with the masculine structure of his father's life as an archetypal image. If the protagonist ever hoped to free himself from his most castrating guilts and fears, he ultimately had to discover within himself a strength and maturity similar to that suggested by the archetypal father's image; and outside himself, he had to find a compelling spiritual authority capable of filling the symbolic role of the father as God. Instead of trying to recover emotional vitality and perfection from a world of vanished innocence, the protagonist through the archetypal search for the father was attempting to free himself from the psychological bondage of a dead past so that he could experience emotional and spiritual health in the present.

The second search motif in Wolfe's fiction was the protagonist's "pastoral search" to discover perfection in a world controlled by the image of the "child mother": phrased slightly differently, it represented the protagonist's attempt to live up to the narcissistic image of himself given its

¹SN, p. 39. ²Ibid.

emotional and spiritual shape by his attachment to the feminine principle in an immaculate world of lost innocence. The search was atavistic in its psychological consequences in that it expressed the protagonist's urgent need to solve his emotional and spiritual problems in the present by retreating to a remote past, dead in time yet neurotically alive in his memory.

The search for the archetypal father ideally resulted in the destruction of the protagonist's determining past, but the pastoral search was impelled by his desire literally to resurrect the world of lost time by re-establishing as an adult, the same dependent relationship with a mother figure which as a child he had known with his own mother. Moreover, this new mother figure could be a substitute for the feminine principle rather than an actual woman: that is, another man, a city, nature, a nation, even faith in an intellectual set of beliefs or credo.

On a primary level the pastoral search revealed the protagonist's repressed infantile yearning to return to the security of his mother's womb. It was an emotionally sterile search in that the feelings of the protagonist as he aged had less and less correspondence with the stimulus of the immediate experience. Instead, they tended to become inflexibly rigid projections of the feelings which he had known as a child. Finally, the search was pastoral in that the protagonist, his innocence protected by the dependent relationship

he had established with an uncritical, all-forgiving mother image, was a narcissist whose awareness of the dualism between good and evil in the world outside himself was divorced invariably from the spiritual realities of his own nature.

In Wolfe's fiction the protagonist was made miserable by this division within himself, and sensed, even though he did not clearly understand, the threat which it posed of gradually increasing emotional and spiritual sterility. At the same time, the narcissistic protagonist remained, in his own estimation at least, an idealist who was dedicated to carry the pastoral search for perfection to its inevitable conclusion. The end of the search coincided with the discovery of evil which had always existed in his personality, but which his neurotic loyalty to the past, supported by his attachment to the uncritical feminine principle, had previously helped conceal. At that instant, when the protagonist made a personal discovery of his own spiritual evil, his memories of lost innocence, with their psychological foundation in his Oedipal feelings toward his mother, would begin to lose their determining influence over his contemporary experience, and the pastoral search was concluded. In addition, it was only then that the archetypal search for the father could begin to have any really serious meaning.

In this chapter it is impossible to document the various stages of the pastoral search in Wolfe's fiction. Nevertheless, it is our critical opinion, based on a close study of

the themes in Wolfe's novels, that the pastoral search was intentionally a controlling theme in Of Time and the River and The Web and the Rock. In addition, Wolfe used the informing theme of lost innocence to connect the experiences of his protagonist during the pastoral search with his frustrated feelings of bewilderment and rage as he attempted to adjust to a dualistic universe whose emotional content had been largely fixed by his childhood attitudes toward the neurotic personalities of his archetypal Victorian puritan parents, Gant and Eliza.

If Wolfe's protagonist can be regarded as a representative symbol for modern man, ravaged by his egotism as he attempts to impose a pastoral order of his own creation upon the meaningless flux of a naturalistic universe, then the significance of Wolfe's artistic achievement is clear. Wolfe has shown that the intellectual and spiritual confusion of our age is in part merely an extension of each individual's failure to free himself from a neurotic attachment to his private childhood past, distorted in terms of general culture by the heritage of emotional subterfuge and sentimentalized indifference to evil from the Victorian puritan world of the nineteenth century.¹ We have already indicated that we

¹With regard to the conscious connection between the experiences of Wolfe's protagonist and the world of the Victorian puritan, it is interesting to note that the subtitle of Look Homeward, Angel--"A Story of the Buried Life"--was taken from a poem by Matthew Arnold.

believe Wolfe in The Web and the Rock consciously provided documentation for this interpretation of the experiences of his protagonist. For this reason, it now seems pertinent to present a brief summary of the controlling symbolism used in the first half of that novel.

In the opening chapters of The Web and the Rock, Wolfe stressed the divided family background of George Webber, his new protagonist. George's father, John Webber, was a brick mason who had come to the Southern community of Libya Hill in 1881 to work on a new hotel which was being constructed at the time. Since he was a native of Pennsylvania, from the moment of his arrival in the "little isolated mountain village,"¹ he was regarded as a stranger from the hated North. Even so, Webber was an excellent builder, preferring always to use brick to construct something that "was solid and enduring,"² and he rapidly succeeded in a business way. By 1885 his practical success had enabled him to court and marry Amelia Joyner, a young woman from one of the oldest mountain families in the region, whose father, "Fate" Joyner, had moved to Libya Hill shortly after the end of the Civil War. John and Amelia lived together without children until the birth of their only son, George, in 1900; then they continued living as man and wife until 1908, when Webber deserted Amelia to establish a common-law relationship with a young married woman living in the town. Webber maintained this

¹WR, p. 4. ²Ibid.

scandalous relationship until his death in 1916.

Shortly after Webber had deserted his wife, Amelia died, and her Joyner relatives went to the courts to secure custody of her orphaned child. From that time until the autumn of 1916, when George used the small inheritance he had received from his father's will to attend the state college of Pulpit Hill, he lived in the house of his mother's unmarried sister, Aunt Maw, who, born thirty years before Amelia, was then already in her seventies.

During these years Wolfe's protagonist not only was subjected to the castrating influence of this aged spinster, but he was the natural target of the puritanical views of all his Joyner relatives, who had felt such a "sense of outraged righteousness"¹ at the public scandal of his father's life. They taught the boy what a good woman his mother had been, the exact opposite of his father, for in most respects, except for her unfortunate marriage to the brick mason, Amelia's life had been no different from their own. The protagonist's Joyner relatives went into specific detail discussing the wickedness of his father's life until "the story of his father's crimes, his father's sinfulness, his father's lecherous, godless, and immoral life was written on his heart."² The boy's conscience told him that he should believe the criticism of these puritanical censors, but always, after their "chronicle of his father's infamy"³ had ended, there

¹Ibid., p. 9. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

remained in George's imagination a picture of his father's world that:

was pleasant and good, and full of secret warmth and joy to him. All of the parts of the town, all of the places, lands, and things his father's life had touched seemed full of happiness.¹

In The Web and the Rock Wolfe employed primary symbols to illuminate the determining influence which the boy's divided attitude toward his parents exerted upon his later life. The symbols which Wolfe used to express the attractiveness of the masculine principle--that is, the father as a sexually potent and emotionally and spiritually vital man--are the following: phallic symbols--the rock, the river, the bridge, the skyscraper, the vertical city, soaring movement, the train; color symbols--light, any sparkling or radiant color, green or blue; pastoral symbols--the mountain, the earth as golden, morning and afternoon warmth, coolness (but not extreme heat or cold), the seasons spring through autumn; space symbols--the North, spaciousness, movement involving space; time symbolism--life in the present or any life in the past associated with the archetypal image of the father.

In addition to these primary symbols, there are secondary symbols with a somewhat localized meaning. Examples of Wolfe's employment of such secondary masculine symbols are the following: the circus, the carnival, the baseball game,

¹Ibid.

the cigar store, the wrestling match, the bar, the livery stable, the streetcar, the lumber yard, the hardware store, etc. Finally, all of these symbols, both primary and secondary, are fitted into a context emphasizing emotional and spiritual vitality: love, passion, desire, sexual attractiveness, beauty, friendship, affection, energy, sanity, health, happiness, joy, knowledge, certitude, freedom, independence, imagination, goodness, self-confidence, hope, faith, success, fame, salvation, order, security, dispatch, activity, abundance, wealth, etc.

The primary symbols which Wolfe used to express the unattractiveness of the feminine principle in the imagination of the son--that is, the mother as a sexually frigid and emotionally and spiritually castrating person--are the following: womb and castration symbols--the womb, the maw, the web, the cave, the ocean bottom, the pit, the prison, burial, sinking movements, drowning, smothering, suffocation, strangulation, castration, blindness, toothlessness; color symbols--black, red or gray, any glaring or drab color; pastoral symbols--the earth (especially the earth as barren in The Web and the Rock), the lost hills of the past, shadeless noon, night, extreme heat or cold, the seasons late autumn through early March; space symbols--the South, lack of movement, confinement; time symbols--dateless time, the past, memory, death.

With regard to the feminine principle, the secondary

symbols are of minor importance. They include, however, the afternoon kitchen with its left-over food, a greasy lunch-room in summer, a cheap clothing store or pawn shop, the slum district across the railroad tracks, niggertown, a mournful cotton field in South Carolina, a wake in a mountain cabin, the smells of camphor and turpentine surrounding death, etc. The context into which these feminine symbols are incorporated emphasizes emotional and spiritual sterility: shame, fear, guilt, hostility, rage, fury, depression, disgust, loathing, egotism, dependence, isolation, rejection, self-hate, puritanism, repression, frigidity, impotence, homosexuality, unhappiness, lethargy, despair, desolation, horror, doom, sickness, death-in-life, decay, pain, disease, grief, misery, pessimism, malice, hate, bitterness, cynicism, suffering, ugliness, lust, animalism, madness, evil, etc. The bridge between these contrasting sets of masculine and feminine symbols is provided by the archetypal theme of "withdrawal and return," or as Wolfe most frequently expressed it, "of wandering and the earth again."¹

The use of archetypal images to provide a symbolic texture for his art was not unique with Wolfe. The critic Richard Chase has shown how Melville made use of corresponding primary symbols in his fiction. The major poetry of Shelley reveals a similar dualism supported by archetypal imagery. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge--and this is

¹WR, p. 157.

especially important in connection with Wolfe's artistic development--on one level can be given an archetypal interpretation. Even Shakespeare, certainly in his tragedies, made extensive use of archetypal imagery.

Using these writers as examples, it would seem reasonable to infer that the creative imagination of the gifted romantic writer, as distinguished from that of the more mechanical romantic artisan, instinctively responds to those archetypal symbols of feeling that are buried in the human psyche, and that either consciously, or intuitively, or probably both, it utilizes an imagery in its art whose primary significance is rooted in the subconscious of all people. On this level Wolfe's treatment of the search themes in his fiction is revealing because he so specifically related his controlling symbols to the archetypal roles of the father and mother in the protagonist's childhood world of lost innocence.

George Webber, Wolfe's protagonist in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, did not begin to understand the significance of the psychological dualism of his childhood until after his father had died; then he realized that "from the first years of coherent memory,"¹ he had possessed an attractive vision of the world which he had always associated with the masculine image of his father's life, just as he had connected the life he hated at home with his mother's people, the Joyners:

¹Ibid., p. 83.

His whole picture of his father's world--the world in which his father moved--as he built it in his brain with all the naive but passionate intensity of childhood, was not unlike a Currier and Ives drawing, except that here the canvas was more crowded and the scale more large. It was a world that was drawn in very bright and very innocent and very thrilling colors . . . It was a rich, compact, precisely executed world, in which there were no rough edges and no bleak vacancies, no desolate and empty gaps.¹

George's allegiance to his father's world, embedded in his earliest memories, was brought home clearly to the protagonist in one of his adolescent dreams in which he was traveling with a circus train through country he had never visited before. The time in the dream was shortly before dawn, and for some reason or other, the train had stopped by a small river which ran close to the tracks. When George observed the countryside from the circus car, he realized "that what at first he thought had been the sound of silence was the swift and ceaseless music of the river,"² and at that moment he recognized where he was:

He knew he had come at last into his father's land. Here was his home, brought back to him while he slept, like a forgotten dream. Here was his heart's desire, his father's country.³

Throughout the first half of The Web and the Rock, the country of the protagonist's father, his "house, his life, the whole world that he has made and shaped with his own single power, his unique color, his one soul,"⁴ is invariably "the beautiful, rich country which the boy has never seen

¹Ibid., p. 12. ²Ibid., p. 89. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 63.

with his own eyes, but which he has visited ten thousand times with his heart, his mind, his spirit, and man's ancient, buried, and inherited memory, until that country is as much a part of him as if he had been born there."¹ It is a land in which there are "no waste and barren places,"² and which is "bathed forever in a full-hued golden light."³ In addition, it is the magic land of emotional health, "certitude, peace, joy, security, and abundance":⁴

And now, like an image of certitude, peace, joy security, and abundance to restore his life out of the filth and shambles of that other vision, he sees his father's land. He sees the great red barns, the tidy houses, the thrift, the comfort, and the loveliness, the velvet pastures, meadows, fields, and orchards, the red-bronze soil, the nobly-swellng earth of southern Pennsylvania. And at the moment that he sees it, his spirit comes out of the brutal wilderness, his heart is whole and sound and full of hope again.⁵

In the imagination of the child protagonist, watching over and protecting this magic country, almost like God, forever looms "the huge salvation of his father's figure."⁶

As a boy frequently George was depressed by memories of his Joyner inheritance, as if their accumulated guilt had "stained his life, his flesh, his spirit, and was on his head as well as theirs."⁷ In these despondent moods, he would turn to the reassuring image of his father for help, and as soon as that image appeared, the boy would feel like some person "who is drowning and feels a rock beneath his feet . . . who sees a light, comes suddenly upon a place of shelter,

¹Ibid., p. 62. ²Ibid., p. 91. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 63. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid., p. 62.

warmth, salvation."¹ Then George would realize how strong his attachment was to the structure of his father's life, which could save him from the drowning feelings associated always with the memories of his mother's people:

The image of his father's life, that image of decent order, gaunt cleanliness and dispatch, the image of warmth, abundance, passionate energy and joy, returns to the boy now with all that is beautiful and right in it, to save him, to heal him instantly, to restore him from the horror and abomination of that memory in which his spirit for a moment drowned.²

George's dependency upon the symbolic image of his father's life, rather than upon the presence of his father as a person, is not to be confused with the boy's emotional dependency upon his mother substitute, Aunt Maw. He resented that relationship with his foster mother because it threatened to keep him permanently in the role of the helpless child. His father's life was attractive for just the opposite reason. Imaginatively George identified with it, and with the masculine vitality and independence which someday in the future he hoped to have for himself. Thus, in "the green-gold somnolence"³ of summertime, the boy would lie upon the grass in front of his uncle's house and daydream about his father's life, trying to imagine just what his father was doing at each specific moment in the afternoon, thinking: "'Now he's here. At this time of the day he will be here.'"⁴ Perhaps he would picture his father first in the cigar store,

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 9. ⁴Ibid.

leaning upon the counter and talking to the owner. Then he could see his father entering the barber shop next door for a shave. From the barber shop he would pass around the corner and walk through the swinging wicker doors of O'Connell's bar. In a short while he would be back upon the street, strolling leisurely towards the livery stable:

So did he think forever of his father's life, his father's places, movements, the whole enchanted picture of his father's world.¹

The boy's vicarious identification with the life of his father had resulted in a conviction that his home town could be divided into good and bad places. The good ones, of course, were invariably associated with his father; the bad places were connected with his mother's relatives. By the time George had reached puberty, he had "constructed a kind of geography of his universe, composed of these powerful and instinctive affections and dislikes,"² centered around the opposing images of his father and mother. The attractive side of this personal little universe, "the one the Joyners said was bad, was almost always one to which his father was in one way or another attached."³

George's picture of the good world first included specific localities: his father's brick and lumber yard, Ed Battle's cigar and tobacco store, John Forman's barber shop, Miller and Cashman's livery stable, the stalls and booths of the City Market, the fire department, the Opera House,

¹Ibid., p. 10. ²Ibid., p. 11. ³Ibid.

McCormack's drug store, Sawyer's grocery. In addition, it contained general places, such as carnival or circus grounds, as well as anything connected with railroad depots, trains, freight cars, and station yards:

All of these things, and a thousand others, he had connected in a curious but powerful identity with the figure of his father; and because his buried affections and desires drew him so strongly to these things, he felt somehow that they must be bad because he thought them 'good,' and that he liked them because he was wicked, and his father's son.¹

George's vision of a divided universe extended beyond his home town, and "strangely, through some subtle chemistry of his imagination, some magic of his boy's mind and heart,"² he associated his father with "the bright and shining city of the North,"³ even though his father had come to Libya Hill not from the city but from a farm in Dutch Pennsylvania. This inconsistency did not trouble the son, for the "golden city" he envisioned was a symbolic city, identified with the attractive masculine structure of his father's life and not with his father as a person. Even after George had grown up and had gone to New York City to live, he still retained this childhood image of the city:

And at the end, forever at the end of all the fabled earth, there hung the golden vision of the city, itself more fertile, richer, more full of joy and bounty than the earth it rested on. Far-off and shining, it rose upward in his vision from an opalescent mist, upborne and sustained as lightly as a cloud, yet firm and soaring with full golden light. It was a vision simple, unperplexed, carved from deep substances of light and shade, and exultant with its prophecy of glory, love, and triumph.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 12. ²Ibid., p. 91. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

Obviously the "golden city" was a target for the romantic desires of the protagonist; nevertheless, we are convinced that the "golden city" is an archetypal symbol as well. With regard to Wolfe's theory of psychological time, the symbolic city represents the potential vitality which exists forever in the present moment, as opposed to the sterility of the past, and it also suggests the promise of the future: that is, the hope of the protagonist that someday he can assume the manhood represented by his father's structure of life. In addition, the symbolic city affords something permanent to oppose the meaningless flux of experience, since, as an unchanging archetype for masculine vitality, it exists removed from the stream of time.

George Webber's relations with his mother's people, on the other hand, existed very much within the submerged stream of past psychological time, which only reached the surface of the contemporary moment after having been neurotically distorted. This oppressive burden from the determining past became increasingly unbearable to the protagonist after his father died:

True, he had been separated from his father for eight years, but, as he said, he had always had the sense that he was there. Now, more strongly than before, he felt himself caught fast in all that web of lives and times long past but ever present in which his Joyner blood and kin enmeshed him, and some escape from it became the first necessity of his life.¹

In Wolfe's fiction the word maw has three meanings:

¹Ibid., p. 172.

literally it means mouth or throat; figuratively it means womb; colloquially it means Ma or Mother. When George was living with his Aunt Maw, therefore, he was trapped symbolically in the dark womb of his emotional dependency upon his mother--trapped, that is, in the psychological time of dead experience so long as his attachment to the feminine principle remained alive in his memory. Opposed to the sterility associated with Aunt Maw and the past was the freedom and vitality of the present, represented by George's imaginative identification with the masculine structure of his father's life and with the phallic image of the soaring and golden city. In the light of this dualism, the escape of Wolfe's protagonist to the city to search for the father is typical of the psychological search every man must make who hopes to free himself from the determining influence of his childhood emotional past.

It has been mentioned that Aunt Maw was a spinster in her seventies when the eight-year old George went to live in the little one-story frame house which her father, old "Fate" Joyner, had built forty years before, shortly after he had brought his numerous family out of the hills to town. Aunt Maw's gloomy, superstitious memory, however, had never left the mountains:

From this dark old aunt of doom, and from the drawling voices of his Joyner kin, a dark picture of his mother's world, his mother's time, all the universe of the Joyner lives and blood, was built up darkly, was wrought slowly, darkly, with an undefined but overwhelming horror, in

the memory, mind, and spirit of the boy.¹

On winter evenings the small boy would be alone with this child-sorceress mother in a little room lit by only a single kerosene lamp, and as he listened in the partial darkness to the endless monotone which came from her aged throat, croaking its dismal tales of "death and doom and terror and lost people in the hills,"² he felt himself transferred almost bodily to "the wind-torn rawness, the desolate bleakness of lost days in March along clay-rutted roads in the bleak hills a hundred years ago."³

In Aunt Maw's stories someone invariably was dead in a mountain cabin at night. The wind was howling around the eaves of the cabin, and inside, the bare boards creaked eerily under the tread of mountain feet. There was no light except the wavering flare from the pine logs burning in the fireplace. Against the wall was a bed upon which rested the sheeted figure of a corpse, and around the fireplace were grouped the protagonist's Joyner ancestors, who "attended the death of others like certain doom and prophecy."⁴ As the boy listened to his aunt's death-haunted tale, he felt that he was inside the rude mountain cabin with these people, could see the fire flame on their faces, hear their subdued, drawling voices, smell the camphor and turpentine, and the stench from the rotting corpse. Then the boy realized that the corpse was a symbol of something sterile and dead in the

¹Ibid., p. 8. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

lives of the Joyners in the contemporary world, which imaginatively he had associated with their vanished mountain kinsmen and "something lost and stricken in the hills long, long ago."¹ It was this connection between his Joyner relatives and emotional and spiritual sterility which left George with such "a nameless horror of the lost and lonely world of the old-time, forgotten hills from which they came."²

We have stated that Aunt Maw figuratively stands for the womb of the past. For this reason, whenever George reflected upon her world, he always connected it with "some dark, unfathomed place in nature."³ In the boy's imagination the threat of drowning was also present in this castrating world controlled by the ageless feminine principle:

Aunt Maw's world came from some lonely sea-depth, some huge abyss and maw of drowning time, which consumed all things it fed upon except itself--consumed them with horror, death, the sense of drowning in a sea of blind, dateless Joyner time.⁴

George's fear of drowning was so intimately connected with his "Aunt Maw's life, her time, her world"⁵ that the mere sound of the woman's voice at night, with its "fathomless intonations,"⁶ would immediately "overwhelm his spirit in tides of drowning horror."⁷ In addition, he visualized his aunt's interminable memory as a "terrific web"⁸ in which there was "everything on earth--except joy."⁹ The "fatal quality of

¹Ibid., p. 9. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 68. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid., p. 69. ⁷Ibid., p. 68.

⁸Ibid., p. 69. ⁹Ibid.

that weblike memory drowned the boy's soul in desolation."¹

Aunt Maw's dark picture of life, with its "death and sorrow, the lost and lonely lives of men there in the wilderness,"² was able to evoke an image of the past as "carrion." This was true because the voracious, time-devouring memory of this ageless crone, the symbolic "vulture mother," "fed on all the loneliness and death of the huge, dark past with a kind of ruminant and invincible relish, which said that all men must die save only these triumphant censors of man's destiny, these never-dying, all-consuming Joyner witnesses of sorrow, who lived and lived forever."³ The protagonist, of course, was his aunt's nephew, and her Joyner inheritance was his own. Knowing this to be so made the boy even more desperately convinced that he had to repudiate the foster mother's Joyner world--symbolically the womb of the emotionally sterile past forever alive in his memory--to save his life in the future:

And he belonged to that fatal, mad, devouring world from whose prison there was no escape. He belonged to it, even as three hundred of his blood and bone had belonged to it, and must unweave it from his brain, distill it from his blood, unspin it from his entrails, and escape with demonic and exultant joy into his father's world, new lands and mornings and the shining city--or drown like a mad dog, die!⁴

According to George's private "geography of the universe,"⁵ the most depressing section of his hometown was a slum district on the other side of the railroad tracks.

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 11. ⁵Ibid., p. 83.

This district was inhabited by wretched people whose ancestors had once lived in the mountains, and for that reason alone it belonged to the Joyner half of the boy's universe. The streets and alleys in the slum section were unpaved; the houses were wooden shacks perched against the gutted sides of the hills; and the yards were grassless, treeless blots of red clay. The entire slum district was a picture of depressing, ugly sterility:

No birds sang in that barren world. . . . In Summer the heat beat down upon that baked and barren hill, upon the wretched streets, and on all the dusty, shadeless roads and alleys of the slum, and there was no pity in the merciless revelations of the sun. It shone with a huge and brutal impassivity upon the hard red dirt and dust, on shack and hut and rotting tenement.¹

Whenever the memory of this world entered George's mind, it was "like drowning, drowning, not to be endured."² He saw the mountain women on their ramshackle porches, gaunt, slatternly, loveless creatures, while scrabbling on the clay yards below were their unkempt children: "hideous little scarecrows, with tow hair, their skinny little bodies unrecognizably scurfed with filth and scarred with running sores."³ When George made his initial and "grotesque discovery"⁴ of this brutish world of rickets and squalor, it seemed so foreign to his own experience that "he could hardly believe it was there."⁵ At the same time, with his "buried memory" he had the feeling of making a "loathsome rediscovery,"⁶ for he

¹Ibid., p. 57. ²Ibid., p. 61. ³Ibid., p. 57.

⁴Ibid., p. 56. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

sensed that as a Joyner he was related to this world. For this reason, its ugliness and sterility would always remain a terrifying symbolic threat in his life:

and it seemed to him that, so far from being different from these people, he was of them, body and brain and blood to the last atom of his life, and had escaped from them only by some unwarranted miracle of chance, some hideous insecurity of fortune that might return him into the brutish filth and misery and ignorance and hopelessness of that lost world with the same crude fickleness by which he had escaped.¹

In this chapter our summary of Wolfe's use of primary and secondary symbolism ended with the statement that the author used the archetypal theme of "withdrawal and return"--that is, "wandering and the earth again"--to serve as a bridge between the contrasting worlds of the father and mother. In other words, the "withdrawal and return" motif symbolically connects the psychological dualism of the protagonist's childhood with the theme of the archetypal search.

In The Web and the Rock the protagonist became aware of this connection the winter before he left home for college, when in the evenings after school and on Sundays he would take long walks with his Uncle Mark up and down the sides of the mountains near the edge of town. For some reasons, on these hiking expeditions George's imagination would soar beyond the mountains to the great world outside, and when this took place he would sense instantly the "huge, bitter conflict of those twin antagonists, those powers discrete that

¹Ibid., p. 57.

wage perpetual warfare in the lives of all men living--wandering forever and the earth again."¹

In Wolfe's artistic vision, the familiar earth symbolized his protagonist's emotional dependency upon his mother or the feminine principle; the world which extended beyond the mountains represented his imaginative attachment to his father's life or the masculine principle; and the strength of his ambivalent feelings, the bitterness of their conflict within himself, suggested the psychological dialectic of "wandering forever and the earth again," which would have such an important role in his search for the father once he had left home: that is, the constant shifting between the masculine and feminine principles in terms of his private emotional experience. Of course, the withdrawal and return dualism was merely a method--that of obtaining the experience necessary for a confirmation of emotional and spiritual truth--which could provide Wolfe's narcissistic protagonist with no final wisdom until he had made a personal discovery of the spiritual evil within himself. Until then, "wandering forever and the earth again" remained a psychological projection into the meaningless stream of contemporary time of the protagonist's childhood feelings toward the twin worlds of his mother and father:

The two hemispheres that touched but never joined, contended, separated, recombined, and wove again. First came the old dark memory of time-haunted man and the

¹Ibid., p. 157.

lost voices in the hills a hundred years ago, the world-lost and hill-haunted sorrow of the time-triumphant Joy-ners. Then his spirit flamed beyond the hills, beyond lost time and sorrow, to his father and his father's earth.¹

With this brief discussion of the withdrawal-return dualism, it now seems sensible to include a summary of the broader implications of Wolfe's treatment of the archetypal dualism throughout all of his fiction.

The child-sorceress mother symbolically represents the womb and castration. With regard to psychological time, her pastoral world is that of the present moment emotionally determined by the past. In this respect, it is especially the neurotic world of the grown man who has continued his Oedipal dependency upon his mother into adult life. In Wolfe's fiction this is also the world of lost innocence, in which both the spiritual and emotional life of the adult is disconnected from the stimulus of the contemporary experience but remains fixed in an immaculate childhood past dominated and exploited by the possessive feminine principle.

The world of the child-sorceress mother, which excludes the tragic vision of life,² is also the pastoral world of the

¹Ibid., p. 90.

²Comedy is the ironic representation, within an appropriate literary genre, of the pastoral vision of life. The pastoral vision of life is one controlled by the archetypal feminine principle which denies the spiritual reality of evil. Tragedy is the fatalistic representation, again within the appropriate literary genre, of the spiritual vision of life. The spiritual vision is one controlled by the archetypal masculine principle which affirms and illuminates the

romantic narcissist, as well as that of the Victorian puritan, in which nature is visualized symbolically as a forgiving mother, guilt has no religious meaning, and evil is an illusion, since it always exists in others, never significantly in oneself. The person who inhabits this world is of necessity an egotist who deals with reality chiefly in terms of his private desire. His viewpoint, in other words, is that of the narcissistic solipsist, and despite his nostalgic attachment to innocence, he is spiritually a-moral. In this regard he resembles the pre-puberty child. There is almost no reciprocal love between equals in this world since the individual's strongest feelings tend to be merely a transplanting into the present of emotional responses and attitudes fixed in childhood. For this reason, even the individual's sensitivity to the suffering of other people springs chiefly from a sentimental identification motivated by self-pity. In conclusion, it is the modern world of the emotionally and spiritually sterile adult existing without free will in a meaningless stream of contemporary time.

The golden father symbolically represents the phallus and vitality. With regard to psychological time, his world is that of the present moment independent of the determining influence of the past. In this respect, it is ideally the

dualism between good and evil in human nature. Also the vision interprets the consequences, in any given culture, of the absence of a recognition of the age-old spiritual dualism within man.

emotionally sane world of the mature adult who has managed to free himself from his atavistic attachment to the feminine principle. In Wolfe's fiction, it is the opposite of the world of lost innocence, for the adult in this world has also destroyed the narcissistic image of himself which reflected his childhood allegiance to immaculate perfection.

The world of the golden father is neither romantic nor pastoral, but an implicitly tragic world in which the adult realizes that he participates in evil and must assume responsibility for his evil intentions and actions. This means that he has a conscious recognition of his own egotism, and that he attempts to control it by dealing with a reality whose final meanings are divorced from his selfish desire. In this regard, his viewpoint is no longer that of the solipsist, but it is a moral viewpoint, and on a spiritual level represents his ethical awareness of the brotherhood of man. The mature adult has learned that love--or affection--is two-directional, and through personal suffering, removed from sentimentalized feelings governed by self-pity, knows compassion. In conclusion, it is the world of the emotionally responsive and spiritually mature man living with psychological free will in a stream of time which has become significant through the dialectic of his own spiritual experience.

Ideally the experience which should provide the bridge between these two worlds is the discovery of Christian love. In Wolfe's novels, however, the bridge for modern man, with

his capacity for love anesthetized by his nineteenth century background of Victorian puritanism, is the personal confirmation and spiritual recognition of the evil which exists inside himself. It is the reality of the spiritual dualism within man--a dualism which includes love as well as evil--as the mature replacement for the narcissist's atavistic feelings of lost innocence, controlled by his dependence upon the a-moral feminine principle, which prevents man psychologically and spiritually from ever being able to "go home again":

When George realized all this he began to look for atavistic yearnings in himself. He found plenty of them. Any man can find them if he is honest enough to look for them. The whole year that followed his return from Germany, George occupied himself with this effort of self-appraisal. And at the end of it he knew, and with the knowledge came the definite sense of new direction toward which he had long been groping, that the dark ancestral cave, the womb from which mankind emerged into the light, forever pulls one back--but that you can't go home again.¹

It might be pertinent to end this chapter with a reference to Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov. In the trial scene in this novel, Dmitri Karamazov pleads passionately that he is willing to suffer for the evil which he has committed in his life--and he realizes that his life has had more than its share of evil--but he wants to be punished for the evil which originated in his destructive will, and not for the evil, despite his being its agent, for which he feels spiritually innocent. Dmitri's feelings can be used to

¹YCGHA, p. 707.

symbolize those of Wolfe's protagonist as a microcosm for modern man, confused by the implications of a mechanistic world philosophy. The protagonist's archetypal search ultimately represents the attempt to distinguish, in the light of his personal experience, between religious guilt, which is connected with the evil for which he is spiritually responsible, and neurotic guilt, which represents, in a world stripped of spiritual significance, his psychological inheritance from a determining past for which he rightfully does not feel to blame.

CHAPTER XIV

PERSONAL DISCOVERY OF EVIL

The flesh had not betrayed him. It had been strong, enduring, and enormously sensitive within the limitations of its senses. The arms were too long, the legs too short, the hands and feet a little close to the simian than most men's are, but they belonged to the family of the earth, they were not deformed. The only deformity had¹ been in the madness and bitterness of his heart.

The American critic Herhert Muller has written that "the key to Wolfe's achievement is the gradual widening and deepening of the implications of his theme, the transformation of a private legend into a public myth--a modern Pilgrim's Progress."² Mr. Muller's use of John Bunyan's work to illustrate Wolfe's achievement is interesting not only because both writers employed the pilgrimage as a means of artistic form but because their choice of that particular form reflected their preoccupation with man's lost innocence. Wolfe in his search for meaning in a contemporary world of endless, naturalistic change had to make an exhaustive examination of his childhood environment dominated by Victorian puritan parents, and through this examination he discovered

¹WR, p. 692. ²Muller, p. 6.

the emotional atavism which lay behind his own attachment to lost innocence. In addition, he discovered that a similar atavism provided the emotional basis for the values of Victorian puritanism, and that the spiritual deterioration which these values reflected had been the loss of a personal awareness of evil.

The primary allegiance to innocence had received its first literary formulation in England in the seventeenth century. In this respect, both John Bunyan and John Milton, along with the lesser puritan writers of their period, represent the end of one spiritual tradition in English literature as well as the beginning of the new pastoral vision of life. Milton's pastoral elegy, "Lycidas," in a very limited way to be sure, is a nostalgic lament for his own lost innocence, and the emotional ambivalence behind the poet's treatment of Satan in the first two books of Paradise Lost reveals a similar atavism. That Wolfe was conscious of his artistic kinship with Milton seems obvious from his turning to "Lycidas" to borrow the title for his first novel, Look Homeward, Angel.

With regard to the controlling form of Wolfe's fiction, it has already been suggested that the author's awareness of the various connections between lost innocence, Victorian puritanism, and the pastoral vision of life enabled him to use his first book as the psychological foundation to illuminate both the pastoral and the archetypal search of his

protagonist for meaning in the last three novels. This chapter, which includes a summary of the pastoral search in Wolfe's fiction, assumes that the particular meaning which the protagonist discovered at the close of The Web and the Rock was a spiritual recognition, confirmed by his personal experience, of the age-old dualism between good and evil, which in English literature had broken down after the Renaissance.

I

The protagonist of Wolfe's first two novels, Eugene Gant, had been so emotionally involved at home with the members of his family that when he finished college, a flight from their ingrown world had seemed a psychological necessity if he expected to free himself from "the blind and powerful and obscure impulses, the tormented nerves, the whole tragic perplexity of soul which was the very fabric of their lives."¹ Eugene was convinced that his family were unable to change the neurotic patterns of their lives, but he hoped for himself that in a different environment removed from the physical presence of these people, he might be able to discover the secret of the happy life. From childhood he had preserved a vision of what this happiness represented, but it had always existed as more of a dream than some carefully worked-out blueprint in his mind of how he actually intended

¹OTR, p. 8.

to spend his days. In this respect, he was certain of only one thing about this new existence: it would have nothing in common, if he could prevent it, with what had made him miserable at home.

We have previously indicated that Eugene had no sense of vagueness when it came to documenting his unhappiness at home, for he felt that he had been all too acutely aware, both as a child and adolescent, of what he had resented in his family environment, especially in the personalities of his father and mother. He had hated the vulgar, uncontrolled, and completely selfish manner with which his father had indulged his sensual desires, together with Gant's inability to express any sensitive affection for his family. All emotions involving love for this puritanical lecher seemed to have operated solely on the level of appetite, for he was as much the animal in his love-making as he was in his eating and drinking. In addition, the ugliest side of Gant's nature was brought to the surface when he was drinking, and the cruelty and abuse which he inflicted upon his family at these times revealed his calloused lack of consideration for all of them.

Combined with this indifference was Gant's exaggerated concern and pity for himself, as if he alone were shouldering all of the burdens and hardships of the household. To support this view he refused to admit his own failings and had the heartiest contempt for people who were much different

from himself. In the family circle, of course, he was forever the injured party, and soaked in a maudlin self-pity, he delighted in reminding his children of how worthless they were contrasted with himself. Also he emphasized the eternal debt which they owed him for having so selflessly provided them with food, clothing, a home, and an education, and he opposed these undeserved advantages against the privations of his own youth. In this light, the children appeared as little more than economic parasites, and Gant prophesized with malicious pessimism that eventually they would all be rewarded with the failure which they so richly deserved for having refused to appreciate fully his own role as devoted father and self-made success.

Eliza's selfishness expressed itself differently from her husband's, but it had proven equally damaging to her children. One particular evidence of this selfishness was the encyclopedic attention which she gave to every trivial incident which was even remotely connected with whatever she had thought, felt, or experienced. On this level, her egotism resembled some gigantic leech, vampirishly sucking strength and vitality from the emotional lives of her own children, as well as from anything else with which she had ever come in intimate contact. Eliza's devouring vanity, combined with the slow, octopal movements of her temper and her drawling, mouth-pursing speech, provided an infuriating psychological foundation for the more obvious puritanical elements in her

personality.

In Eugene's imagination, of course, the puritan world from which he wished so desperately to escape was early associated with his mother and her Pentland relatives. This bleak and narrow world of emotional repression, intolerance, and moral bigotry was also beyond criticism or judgment no matter how much he hated it. Eugene felt this way not only because his mother had a maddening sense of her own destiny, as if from the beginning her life "had been shaped to a purpose" which nothing could seriously alter, but because she had such a fatalistic sense of her moral perfection as well, supported by her indestructible determination and will.

Eugene's own personality seemed weak and ineffectual when contrasted with the character of this integrated puritan, and he was further castrated by his mother's blindness to the human needs of other people, including her children's, so that in the cramped field of her moral vision, she could blame all of the troubles in life on drinking and sex. For this reason, no matter what mistakes other people might make, Eliza knew that she herself was always blameless, and her feelings of self-righteousness, impossibly smug and complacent to her family, could triumph over their most embittered criticism. True, she realized that there was real ugliness and unhappiness in her own household, but to protect herself from this unpleasantness, she wore rose-colored blinders which enabled her never to admit the truth of any

reality which threatened to be too disturbing. Emotionally Eliza lived as a child, reducing human nature to a single dimension, completely dismissing the unsettling ambiguities in life, and supporting this oversimplification by the eternal optimism in her temperament in conjunction with her indiscriminating loyalty to the most hackneyed platitudes about experience and nature. Other people might know failure and death, but not Eliza, and it was this display of invincible egotism which Eugene found unbearable in his mother.

Eugene also was enraged by Eliza's obsessive stinginess as it expressed itself in the bleak and chill gloom of her boarding house. His mother seemed never really to have cared about the house on Woodson Street to which her family were attached, and when the opportunity arose, she had been only too eager to leave this place to live in a property which she could use to make money, even if it meant renting out most of her home to strangers. This did not seem to disturb Eliza in the least, for she blindly defended whatever was profitable to herself. In order to be the successful proprietress of a boarding house, therefore, she was more than willing to neglect her family, to treat her help with niggardly cruelty, and to accept uncritically all boarders who applied so long as they could pay the rent. At the same time, the more money she accumulated, the more emphatically she preached the mythology of poverty to her children so that they should never forget the permanent debt which they owed their concerned,

self-sacrificing mother. To complete her role as family martyr, Eliza buried her frustrations and guilts in long hours of work around the boarding house.

Eugene was especially humiliated by the public disorder and ugliness of Dixieland, together with the surrender of the privacy of the home which boarding house life entailed. In addition, he resented the constant nagging of his mother, the neurotic inflexibility of her temperament, and her appalling lack of imagination and sympathy, as well as the puritanical importance which she attributed to work and making money. A home environment dominated by this obsessive woman, so pre-occupied with her narrow, selfish interests and pragmatic values, was a psychological dungeon from which her son knew he had to escape if he desired any happiness of his own. Since Eugene was also an emotionally castrated son, he felt that his only hope of escape was through romantic flight, for he was bitterly aware that he could never defeat this iron-willed, domineering woman in any face-to-face struggle. The real question for the son was whether he could arrive at the self-confidence, the self-fulfillment, and independence he was seeking once he had removed himself merely from the physical presence of his mother.

A summary has just been presented of the salient characteristics in the personalities of Gant and Eliza which Eugene disliked when he was living at home. Actually it was not the individual characteristics themselves, as the boy

Eugene supposed, which had made him miserable, but rather the demanding, exploitative egotism in his father and mother which these characteristics reflected. For this reason, even if his parents had been able to change some of their most obnoxious habits, there still could never have been any lasting happiness around the Gant home unless the parents had been willing to sacrifice part of their egotism. This Gant and Eliza had never done, and until the day Gant died, they were as selfishly unconcerned about the real needs of their children as they were antagonistic to the emotional needs of each other.

Gant and Eliza were strangers when they married, and because of their rigid egotism, they had remained strangers throughout their married life. Perhaps they may have felt sensitive affection when they first went together, but after the marriage ceremony, any affection which had existed before quickly degenerated into hostility. For this uncompromising couple, wedded life had the advantage chiefly of providing a legitimate stage for their savage domestic struggles. Quite naturally the children which these neurotic parents brought into the world, exposed to the "confusion, antagonism, and disorder" of their parents' personalities, early learned to regard themselves as isolated little centers in an unfriendly universe. Emotionally they were rejected children in the truest sense of the term. Also as children they were defenseless individuals to be selfishly exploited by Gant and

Eliza in the parents' deadly feud to compensate for their own frustrations. Because of his unwilling involvement in this kind of an unhappy home situation, Eugene was resentful towards all of his family, and once he escaped from these people, he was determined never again to be trapped in a human relationship in which he was emotionally vulnerable. In other words, Eugene as a rejected child was conditioned by his parents to distrust affection and love.

Gant and Eliza not only had lost the capacity to respond to other people with normal affection, but they took extravagant pride in the very egotism which emotionally and spiritually had ravaged their personalities. Instead of being loved, they preferred to be right, and they were infuriated by criticism from their children that they might have made serious mistakes in their lives. To these Victorian puritans, children were not supposed to criticize. Instead, their duty was to provide reassuring support by publicly living up to their parents' neurotic conviction, and thereby helping prove to the outside world that all was well within the inner confines of the Gant domicile. Later, of course, when the children were making their own money, they were permitted a measure of criticism. This meant that they had earned the privilege, still as inferiors, of participating in their father and mother's wholesale assault upon all people who were different from themselves.

These "different" people included practically the

entire world, for Gant and Eliza made no attempt to understand, nor had they any real sympathy for, the differences and failings of others. To such unimaginative egotists, most people who had troubles undoubtedly deserved them, especially if they had deviated in any particular from the way normal people--meaning Gant and Eliza--were supposed to conduct their lives. Eugene's parents felt this way because, except for malicious pleasure, they were not really interested in the unhappiness of anybody except their own. What they wanted most from other people was to impress upon them how unusual Gant and Eliza were, and above everything else, to be removed from humiliating censure. The fact that the rest of the world might be wrong in light of the prejudices of this self-centered couple did not seriously disturb them. It was still their privilege to be invincibly right themselves.

The Christian attitude toward evil embraces an awareness of the sin of spiritual pride. On this score Gant and Eliza were unregenerate sinners, for the inordinate vanity which should have aroused their spiritual queasiness was to them the very backbone of their personalities. Surely they were not supposed to be ashamed of that side of themselves in which they took such egotistical and self-righteous delight, for again as typical Victorian puritans they could not conceive of evil existing inside themselves but only inside other people. It is true that Gant had experienced strong

feelings of guilt as the psychological aftermath of some of his drinking sprees, but these neurotic guilts had little to do with any spiritual awareness of the evil in his own nature. He was wicked because he had gotten drunk and fornicated with whores, not because his ruthless egotism had inflicted less discernible but more lasting damage upon the people with whom he had had intimate human relationships.

Eliza was even guiltier than her husband in being oblivious to the harm which her demanding egotism had brought to the lives of the people closest to her, for in her own eyes this genuinely selfish woman was not only spiritually chaste but completely "above and beyond a moral judgment."¹ In her lifetime Eliza had committed "crimes of error, avarice, ignorance, thoughtlessness,"² yet no matter what she had done nor "what suffering or evil consequences may have resulted to other people through any act of hers, her life was somehow above these accidents of time, training, and occasion, and the woman was guiltless as a child."³ She was not guiltless, of course, and neither was her husband. Eugene recognized his parents' guilt intellectually, but the most difficult part of his pastoral search had been for him as the rejected son to accept their guilt emotionally and spiritually. In fact, he was able to do this only after his own neurotic guilts, cooperating with his exaggerated, wanton narcissism, had led him to an awareness of the spiritual evil inside

¹Ibid., p. 4. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

himself.

When Eugene began his search, he was not concerned about the problem of evil, for he was an enthusiastic romantic who believed in a pastoral world in which evil, no matter how real for other people, afforded no personal threat to himself. His role at this time, at least in his own imagination, was that of the inspired narcissist, further protected from evil by his sense of dedication to an ideal, and even though he might be a spectator or voyeur of the inhumanity in life, he did not feel that his position was that of a morally responsible, involved participant.

With regard to the evil in Gant and Eliza, Eugene wanted to escape from these people not because they were spiritually corrupted individuals, but because they were castrating parents, and he had enough insight to realize that for himself the happy life had to include emotional salvation from their influence as well as the discovery of how to become a great writer. As a rebellious romantic he also was determined to escape from the sterility of the puritanical inheritance to which he had been subjected at home, and to accomplish this he was granting himself the license to indulge the very desires which his parents had taught him to regard as most wicked. He felt that he could do this safely because the pristine condition of his self-love united to his idealistic ambition supported his most immaculate feelings of lost innocence.

On this score, Eugene was mistaken about the inviolate security of his psyche. His idealized narcissism, which helped him dismiss the reality of external evil, did not offer him much protection against his subjective guilts, fears, and resentments. These were the psychological debt which he still owed his parents, and whenever his behavior ran counter to the precepts which his parents had implanted in his childhood consciousness, he had to pay emotionally. The neurotic suffering which this produced in Eugene, however, had almost nothing to do with any spiritual recognition of the evil within himself. For this reason, it seemed to be pointless suffering whose chief effect was the slow, tortuous disintegration of his personality, including the coarsening of both his sensibility and desires, and producing eventually the threat of emotional sterility.

As a young romantic Eugene saw little resemblance between his exultant narcissism and the intolerant egotism of Gant and Eliza. He found their egotism repellent because it was both parasitical and needlessly cruel, whereas his own altruistic narcissism was dedicated to bringing happiness to other people by his becoming a great writer. In addition, he believed that he was an undefeated seeker after the truth, who affirmatively accepted the good and bad in life and who had an idealistic faith in the future. All he needed was to discover the proper "target for his fierce desire" so that he could create for the enjoyment of others the life and

beauty with which his imagination was crowded. If his lost innocence continued to elude him as a seeker, he would recapture part of it at least by succeeding as an artistic idealist. In addition, as a successful writer he would most certainly win fame, love, and the reassuring approval of mankind.

Eugene's romantic concern for other people as part of his ambition to become a great writer had as little connection with any genuine interest in their lives as human beings as did the self-centered indifference of Gant and Eliza. In this respect, the narcissism of the son differed from the egotism of the parents only in that it expressed the temperament of a romantic young man instead of the personalities of two middle-aged, embittered Victorian puritans. Eugene had the compelling faith that he had been selected from the common run of humanity to be a genius, and he wanted the outside world to support that faith by being responsive to his personal needs. In other words, imaginatively he wanted the world of people, as well as the world of nature, to serve as the comforting pastoral projection of his ego. This meant that he was further insulated from reality, and that like his mother he was forced to wear blinders against the actual evil in life because it menaced his idealistic dream which also served as his private religion. His relationships with people, therefore, were unimportant compared with his dedication never to betray that "single integrity

of purpose and design" which his artistic faith imposed upon his life.

Eugene did not regard this isolation as any real sacrifice, for although on the pastoral search he certainly hoped to find some release for his pent-up Oedipal feelings, he did not expect to find this release through affectionate love. With regard to this kind of mutually responsive love, he was still the self-pitying rejected child who had almost no conception of what a satisfying relationship as an equal with another person might mean. Such a relationship had never existed in the Gant household, where the members of the family were strangers to one another; moreover, because of his neurotic involvement with his mother, he was suspicious of creating any new emotional ties which might become too close or binding. What Eugene really wanted was a love affair in which the sexual experience was central, yet which made no intrusive demands upon his narcissistic privacy. For this reason, from the very start of his pastoral search, his Faustian hunger for all knowledge and all experience had never included the desire for an intimate relationship with a woman in which he might be forced to share part of his secret self.

Divorced from affection, the Faustian hunger for experience swiftly turns into undisciplined appetite, and when this happened to Eugene, his self-love began to change into self-hate. This did not mean that he had gained any real

understanding of the evil inside himself, but it did signify that his neurotic guilts and fears, reflecting his early involvement with his parents as well as his feelings of lost innocence, were brought so close to the surface of his consciousness that his emotional world began to resemble a psychological nightmare. His narcissism now became the "prison walls of self" in actuality, and instead of being an inspired seeker, he became the "driven man" upon the furious streets of night, tortured by an unresting "frenzy of the flesh."

As an idealist Eugene still felt that he had not compromised with the dedicated nature of his search, but the original goals had been lost until his life seemed merely a succession of new experiences that "when found, filled him with weariness, boredom, and horror of the spirit," and which represented little more than the indiscriminate pursuit of sensation for its own sake. The disillusioned Eugene had come to realize that without the governing will, there was no limit to the sense world and to the appetite which it excites. On this level, mankind was the same the world over, and there was a steady coarsening of responses and a kind of "idiot repetition" to all experience. Near the close of Of Time and the River, Eugene was sick of his purposeless wandering, of his animal nature, almost of life itself. The question which he asked himself was when would it all end:

When shall it cease--the blind groping, the false desires, the fruitless ambitions that grow despicable as they are reached, the vain contest with phantoms, the

maddening and agony of the brain and spirit kindled in all the rush and glare of living, the dusty tumult, the grinding, the shouting, the idiot repetition of the streets, the sterile abundance, the sick gluttony, and the thirst that goes on drinking?¹

At this stage of bewildered despair, Wolfe's protagonist was willing to surrender enough of his preciously guarded narcissism to have a romantic affair with the woman, old enough to be his mother, who would soon become "the image of immortal one-ness that again collected him to one, and hurled the whole collected passion, power and might of his one life into the blazing certitude, the immortal governance and unity, of love."²

II

George Webber spent his childhood and youth in the environment of his mother's people, the Joyners, who early indoctrinated him with a vision of life that was "clannish, provincial, and opinionated--in the most narrow and dogged sense of the word puritanical."³ George's father, John Webber, did not subscribe to the puritanical views of his wife's relatives, and in The Web and the Rock the divorce between John Webber and Amelia Joyner has the symbolic function of emphasizing the divided nature of George's family background which in later life would be responsible for most of his neurotic suffering. In other words, the Joyners impressed upon young George how "evil and abominable" his father was, but

¹Ibid., p. 909. ²Ibid., p. 912. ³WR, p. 6.

since his father's life was the one which secretly attracted the boy, he soon developed "a feeling of personal guilt that was to torment him for many years."¹ As a result, after George was a grown man he was still psychologically affected by his actions, not on the basis of their real consequences, either upon himself or others, but according to whether they supported or violated what he had been taught as a child. Before George was able to gain any awareness of evil that was not hopelessly subjective, even more than Eugene Gant he had to escape the emotional dualism of his childhood background so that he could distinguish consciously between guilts and fears whose origin was chiefly psychological and those which sprang from his own genuinely evil desire and action.

As a child George Webber had disliked the puritanical world of the Joyners for the same reasons that Eugene Gant had resented the Victorian puritan household of his parents. George had hated the memory of Fate Joyner as a kind of tutelary family saint, with all of his insufferable priggishness and virtue, his "purity of character, piety, fine words, no profanity,"² and no liquor in the house opposed to his very real "cruelty and blind indifference."³ Also, the boy had rebelled against being the emotional dependent of Fate's unmarried daughter, Aunt Maw, who had inherited her father's unshakable conviction of being morally superior to the rest

¹Ibid., p. 11. ²Ibid., p. 166. ³Ibid.

of mankind, yet who reminded her nephew symbolically of a human vulture feeding maliciously "on all the loneliness and death of the huge dark past with a kind of ruminant and invincible relish."¹ George was afraid of this woman with her superstitious fatalism, her family pride, her morbid nostalgia for the past, and her self-righteous morality, but the relative whom he disliked most heartily was his embittered Aunt Mag. This vindictive and sterile woman had absolutely no sympathy for the misery of other people even though superficially she also measured up to the puritanical standards of the Joyners.

Young George felt that something was wrong with these standards which had so little connection with human dignity, the needless infliction of suffering, and the capacity to feel affection and love. In addition, he sensed a repressed and corrupted sexuality behind the Joyner obsession with alcohol and adultery, so that if you didn't drink or use indecent language and remained sexually chaste, you might commit any sins against humanity, with the good life extolled as a "non-drinking, non-smoking, non-gambling, non-card playing, non-fornicating state of single blessedness."²

The experience of adolescence made George realize that sex was the real bridge between the world of the boy to the world of the man, and that if this bridge were denied, the desires which such a denial frustrated could easily be

¹Ibid., p. 9. ²Ibid., p. 195.

channelled into a general hostility towards life which was perverse simply because it was sterile. This would explain the connection between Aunt Mag's frigidity and her sour discontent, as well as her eagerness to persecute. Also it would explain George's instinctive allegiance to the world of his father which was both the sexual and sinful world--sinful, of course, because it aroused George's guilts springing from the fear he had of his Joyner relatives and their condemning attitude toward sexual desire.

In the words of Wolfe, The Web and the Rock "belongs to the nature of the story--'the innocent man' discovering life,"¹ and at the beginning of the book George Webber is introduced as still innocent of sex and evil. In the remainder of the novel he does not remain innocent, for sex provides him with the bridge not only to his manhood but to the neurotic discovery of evil inside himself based upon his feelings of lost innocence. It also provided George with the increasing realization that the egotism of his Joyner relatives, which he had resented so bitterly as a child, was intimately connected with sex, although in their case with sexual frustration rather than sexual indulgence.

The sexual frustration of these Joyners helped explain their living in an emotionally repressed world which had almost no room for the easy uninhibited display of affection, as if there were something shameful about revealing the way

¹Ibid., p. v.

you actually felt to another person. Instead, the Joyners had always maintained their dignity by preserving their selfish isolation and reserve. For this reason, although they were ruthless in attempting to satisfy what remained of their frustrated desire, they had feelings of outrage when confronted with desires different from their own in other people, particularly in their children. Such desires, especially if they were overtly connected with sex, had to be mercilessly suppressed, not only because they were regarded as dangerous to the future happiness of the children but because they were menacing to the emotional equilibrium of the parents. The children fought to save their desires through duplicity and by retreating into themselves, but eventually their narcissistic privacy was invaded as the guilts and fears of the children became increasingly meshed with the neurotic frustrations of the parents.

George early had made a narcissistic retreat from his mother's relatives, but his rejection by these Joyners had been so complete that in their presence, despite his carefully guarded self-love, he felt like "life's criminal, some pariah, an outcast to their invincible rightness, their infallible goodness, their unsullied integrity."¹ His sense of personal unworthiness was so great that even though "he hated with every instinctive sense of loathing and repulsion"² the puritanical lives of these people, he still was convinced

¹Ibid., p. 7. ²Ibid., pp. 10-11.

that they were right and that he deserved no pity simply because "he was unworthy to be a death-triumphant, ever-perfect, doom-prophetic Joyner."¹ At this stage in George's development, his guilts, reflecting the struggle taking place in his subconscious, were neurotic because they had so little connection with the outside world. In addition, his guilts were damaging to the boy because they implied that the egotism of the Joyners was something to be miserably imitated rather than contemned. This helped account for the protagonist's aggressive narcissism and his compulsive need to prove to the world that he was a genius after he had left home.

George arrived in New York City with a sense of fury at the repressing sterility of the puritan inheritance which still kept its dead hand upon his desire. In this respect, the word fury as used by Wolfe symbolized George's unrest in the city as he sought to find the knowledge which would prevent him from repeating the mistakes of his Joyner relatives, and which would also bring him emotional and spiritual peace from the torment of his neurotic suffering. Since, with regard to his family, he was searching for psychological freedom, he still carried with him his fear of becoming entangled in an intimate relationship with another person, as well as his childhood delight in secrecy and loneliness.

George had not discovered at this time that his lack

¹Ibid., p. 9.

of interest in people had much to do with the romantic passion with which he looked forward to the happy, fortunate life which lay ahead of him. At the same time, he did derive an almost smug narcissistic pleasure from observing how his own purposeful search contrasted with "the confusion, the error, the loss, the miserable blind fumbling"¹ of most Americans. In New York City these were the city dwellers whom he regarded, not as individuals, but as an undifferentiated "manswarm." The human ciphers which formed the manswarm aroused his fury when they interfered with his romantic ambition, but otherwise he was indifferent to their existence, feeling that if they were defeated, unhappy people, undoubtedly they deserved their fate, having made weak or shameful compromises in their lives which he was determined never to make in his own.

Wolfe's romantic protagonist, in fact, was as intolerant and self-righteous about his idealistic narcissism as the Joyners had been about their puritanical egotism, and he shared the inability of his relatives to project his imagination sympathetically into the lives of people different from himself. He early had been taught that life becomes corrupt to the spiritually corrupt, but he felt that he was protected so long as he remained the aspiring idealist who never broke faith with "that heroic dignity which is outside man, which cannot be touched or conquered, and to which his

¹Ibid., p. 462.

own life must be united if he will be saved."¹ As for the rest of mankind, George did not care greatly whether they were saved or damned so long as he had discovered through his creation a private way to salvation.

George's ego-centric image of himself as the inspired artist, fearless and uncompromising, whose life has been dedicated to the pursuit of an ideal, represents an emotional stage mid-way perhaps between the normal narcissism of the child and the warped egotism of the embittered Victorian puritan. George is the romantic zealot who keeps the faith and who never betrays his dream, his immaculate vision of perfection, no matter what happens, for without this unquestioning allegiance to his self-love, there could never have been the pastoral search in the first place. In other words, as a narcissist he always had to believe that answers existed somewhere with regard to idealistic self-fulfillment, but these answers were for himself only; they did not include other people or involve any recognition of evil in the outside world which might interfere with the goal which he was so strenuously attempting to reach. Even so, he had been forced to take into account the entrenched hostility of the world for the uncompromising individual, as well as the lonely isolation of the romantic idealist who must rely solely upon himself for support in his pastoral search.

In all of these views, George's emotional role was that

¹Ibid.

of the rejected child still attempting to compensate for the love which he had not received from his parents, and his psychological compulsion to impress other people with his genius also betrayed his unrequited need for affection. As a romantic narcissist, however, George consciously desired success and fame more than he did love, and his pre-occupation with his pastoral dedication had become increasingly self-centered. The search had never been primarily to enjoy life nor to establish satisfying human relationships, but now it was purely to create, with undeviating integrity to his artistic ideals as his single virtue. The egotism behind this attitude is apparent in George's arrogant contempt for people with aesthetic interests who he felt, unlike himself, lacked the ability, devotion, and sustained energy to produce great art. Also the ugly side of his egotism was increasingly revealed in the mounting fury which began to disrupt his personal life.

George came to New York City to free himself emotionally so that the "surging well of life and power" within himself could find the right artistic channel for expression. He was filled with all the raw egotism of youth at this time, and he was exultantly confident of his superabundant strength and talent. Most people, George believed, were defeated because they were not strong or talented enough for life, but he was certain that he had such a wealth of ability, combined with a resolute, purposive will, that even the threat of

eventual failure seemed somewhat irrelevant to his dedicated ambition.

George, of course, still had not succeeded in exploiting his unusual literary gifts, and his frustrations on this score had already made more extreme the "mad coil and fury of his life."¹ At the same time, the ungovernable desire, symbolized by his "fury," did not seriously disturb the romantic protagonist, for he took narcissistic delight in the power behind his lack of control, as if it too offered another incontestable proof of his extraordinary vitality. He was a young man, to be sure, "stupid, blind, and ignorant" at times but not wilfully evil, and the fury of his emotions was but a necessary counterpart of his rapacious devourer's attitude toward experience, as he "sucked as from an orange the juice out of new lives, new cities, new events."²

George's fury was also part of the inevitable deterioration of his romantic desire into animalistic hunger, for during these years just before he met Esther Jack, he "worked, toiled, sweated, cursed, whored, brawled, got drunk, spent all his money--and then came back with greater fury and unrest than ever before."³ This undisciplined life had activated his neurotic guilts and fears, but his dissatisfaction with himself had not yet reached the point where he connected the lack of control in his life with spiritual corruption. In this regard, George was still the romantic rebel against

¹Ibid., p. 276. ²Ibid., p. 296. ³Ibid.

Victorian puritanism who felt that evil was the consequence of physical desire which in a naturalistic sense had become repressed or perverted. Since he did not wish this to happen to himself, he continued to indulge his appetites with unscrupulous abandon.

With regard to the cruelty and suffering which other people had to endure in life, George had retained his childish role of spectator or "emotional voyeur" who was unwilling to relate evil to himself. He did affect a narcissistic pity for suffering humanity, but this had little to do with either good or evil, since pity has spiritual meaning only when it is divorced from the self-pity of the narcissist and is based on a candid awareness of his egotism. Such an honest admission was unthinkable to George, who was unable to distinguish between real feeling and the false rhetoric of emotion, and who had sentimentalized his relationship with an abstract mankind chiefly to alleviate his neurotic guilts. What he really wanted most was to preserve enough emotional peace so that he could continue to enjoy his "wild and intolerable loneliness of ecstasy and desire."¹ When his fears and guilts made this impossible, he turned to a love affair with a mother substitute to help him rejuvenate his exhausted, yet still narcissistically attractive, romantic passion for living.

From the beginning of his love affair with Esther Jack,

¹Ibid., p. 116.

George's position with regard to this middle-aged woman was that of the self-centered young man who was concerned with the exultancy of his desire rather than with sensitive affection. Sexually he wanted to possess Esther's body, and emotionally he wanted her to support his narcissistic pretensions to genius, but he wanted both of these without having to make any real sacrifices himself. Even his conviction that this mistress was "the creature of incomparable loveliness to whom all other women in the world must be compared"¹ was more the product of his romantic imagination than it was of either his capacity or willingness to respond with genuine feeling to Esther as a human being in her own right.

George's extreme narcissism had left him emotionally sterile so that he was psychologically incapable of falling in love, especially with a woman his own age. Instead, he had to return to the world of his childhood to gain the emotional responsiveness necessary for a love affair, and he did this by concentrating his passion upon a woman old enough to be his mother, which enabled him to imitate in his affair with Esther Jack the earlier relationship he had established with Eliza-Aunt Maw. This could not be satisfactory to the young man, for his dependent status as a lover brought to the surface all of the guilts, fears, and resentments he had accumulated as a rejected child. In addition, having an affair with a mother substitute involved vicarious incest and

¹Ibid., p. 314.

revived painful memories of his position in the Oedipal situation at home. This gave a paranoiac twist to the dualism in his personality, rooted emotionally in his divided attitude toward the contrasting images of his divorced parents. To intensify this paranoia, George's self-love, wedded to its world of immaculate innocence, was gradually being ravaged by the day-to-day attrition of coarsening experience.

The narcissist cannot continue to simulate affection when his self-love is kept separate from his self-respect, and this had become George's dilemma. Independent of Esther he had no genuine self-respect left (he had not yet succeeded as a writer), but their romance had reached the stage where it threatened to rob him permanently of "the soaring music of his isolation."¹ He now either had to break with Esther completely to save his self-love, or else he had to modify his personality to satisfy the emotional needs of this possessive mistress.

As both the rejected child and, by symbolic transference, the son participating in an incestuous love affair, George psychologically was unable to change his personality to make his romance with Esther mutually satisfying, especially since from its beginning he had resented being dependent upon the love and strength of an exploiting mother figure. At the same time, the neurotic guilts which he had inherited from his close relationship with his own mother were

¹Ibid., p. 556.

such that he could not break off his romance with Esther unless he felt convinced that he was the innocent party. This seemed impossible in the light of his selfish, and at times, inexcusably crude behavior during the years that they had gone together.

George had not been an unimpassioned witness of his own conduct, and even if he had, he lacked the knowledge of what an intimate relationship with a sensitive woman might entail to use as a standard by which to judge his own performance. Also during this love affair he had continued to regard himself as the dedicated idealist who was able to rationalize even his most outrageous actions. Finally, his inability to forget the psychic wounds of his childhood, so that he could project himself with warmth and sympathy into the personality of another human being, was extreme. Since George was unaware of his emotional deficiencies, as well as the real nature of his egotism, he was determined to convince himself that he had to leave this corrupting mistress to save his soul. The proof which he advanced was Esther's violation of his world of lost innocence, her interference with his artistic dedication, and the shameful demands of her insatiable sexual desire.

The romantic narcissist has an exaggerated response to the damaging effects of experience upon his personality because emotionally he has never accepted the loss of his pre-puberty innocence. Enclosed behind the prison walls of self,

like both Eugene Gant and George Webber, he preserves his innocence by interpreting life through his inflexible super-ego and by a self-centered preoccupation with his pastoral dream: his impossibly romantic vision of a world conforming to his private desire in which he will never be defeated or corrupted. He protects this pastoral dream by blinding himself against any outside evil which is too menacing and by refusing to admit unpleasant truths about his own nature.

Then one day the romantic narcissist suddenly realizes that he is not unique, that the innocence for which he desperately yearns can never be recovered, and that life has coarsened him as it does everyone else. He is not prepared for this disillusionment, and since his narcissism has always been based on uncritical self-love instead of self-respect, his feelings swiftly degenerate into self-contempt. Still he is not ready to accept personal responsibility for what has happened to him, which would mean fatally compromising his egotism; therefore, if the narcissist, painfully disturbed by the realities of his own condition which he cannot dismiss, is forced to come to terms with his own failure, whenever possible he will still seek one last neurotic escape, and this is the ugliest escape of all in which he sadistically transfers his feelings of guilt and hostility to other people. This means, of course, that spiritually the narcissist still refuses to accept the reality of evil within himself.

During the final months of his love affair with Esther, George was disturbed by the irreparable loss of innocence in his personality as he contrasted the dissipated man he had become with the pristine condition of the romantic youth who had first left home to come to New York City. Life had coarsened him in a way which could never be made good, and each passing year resulted in an increased deterioration of that within himself which had once seemed priceless. Instead of being an idealistic seeker, he had become a frenzied, guilt-ridden creature, at the same time driven by uncontrollable desires and haunted by the emptiness of meaning in experience. Even his self-love was turning into self-disgust as he realized that he was unable to change his depraved habits.

George was willing to admit that he had helped bring this nightmare of the flesh upon himself by indiscriminately indulging his appetites, but he did not feel that he was to blame for the spiritual cheapening his personality had suffered, since he had remained fantastically loyal to his original artistic mission. Someone else was responsible for this spiritual ruin, and the obvious culprit was his middle-aged mistress. This treacherous woman, like his mother when he was a boy, had set a trap for his love in order to betray him later by stripping him of his strength and independence. In addition, Esther had used her demanding lust to poison his own sexual desire so that now he was living in an

"abomination of shame."¹ If he hoped to avoid further corruption, he had to bring his romance with this "sorceress" mistress to an abrupt close.

After George had learned that his manuscript had been rejected by the publisher to whom he first submitted it, his feelings of betrayal and self-disgust, the paranoiac side of his narcissism, became even more exaggerated, and he surrendered with hopeless despair to "the black rout of the avenging furies."² He had always been enraged by the "nameless fury of the manswarm,"³ an attitude which revealed his lack of genuine interest in other people, but in his new black moods of paranoiac bewilderment and disgust, he saw on the faces of the creatures who passed him on the city streets, only their cruelty, vileness, cowardice, and defeat. His emotional isolation was already as complete as it had ever been before he left home, but since his guilts and fears were no longer held in check by his idealistic narcissism, the outside world, instead of offering a pastoral setting for his romantic dreams, had taken on the horrible distortion of a nightmare.

George's search for pleasure on the level of "raw ego-tism" had turned into the insane pursuit of sensation, and he was completely the victim of his animal nature, desperately existing in a "kaleidoscope of blind furious days and drunken demented nights."⁴ Despite the uncontrollable fury of his

¹Ibid., p. 554. ²Ibid., p. 583. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 547.

life, his passion was now no more than the stale butt of his previous desire, and even what emotional power he had retained had been turned into destructive channels: the lust to hurt and destroy for their own sakes as if inside himself there were actually some "deliberate scourging of the soul to hate."¹ Still he could not make the psychological leap to connect "this black convulsion of madness, shame, and death"² with his own ravaging egotism. Instead he placed the blame on sex as he had been conditioned by his puritanical training. In this matter he felt again that Esther Jack, not himself, was the real betrayer, together with her "world of privilege" which cynically accepted every kind of sexual license and perversity. Through his naive love for this corrupt woman, he had let himself be seduced and emasculated by this world. Even so, he still had the hope of regaining some of his lost innocence if he severed relations with the possessive mistress who had wrecked his life. For this reason, he planned to leave for Europe alone to effect this separation automatically.

George arrived in Europe with his self-respect as conspicuously absent as it had been during the final months of his love affair with Esther in New York City. In Paris he continued to be the slave of a "relentless and exhausted restlessness which took no joy in what it saw, which was obsessed only with the notion of change and movement, as if

¹Ibid., p. 546. ²Ibid., p. 486.

the devils which dwelt in his spirit could be outdistanced and left behind."¹ As always, these devils were the neurotic legacy from his childhood which, cooperating with his abandoned animalism, had so ironically turned his self-love into self-loathing.

In the French metropolis, George's vision of life remained a projection of his self-hate, and everywhere he went in the city he again saw only the nauseating evidences of man's lust, treachery, cowardice, and defeat. After dark the streets were crowded with perverse creatures of the night, and the self-contemning protagonist was both revolted and insidiously attracted by their sexual depravity. Like any other American puritan, he climaxed his stay in Paris with a visit to the whorehouse, and then he went to Munich to cleanse his tainted flesh in the fresh, cool mountain air of the German Alps. Contrary to George's expectations, at the celebrated October Fair in this Bavarian city, he witnessed a display of animalism which was genuinely evil, not because it had anything to do with sexual corruption, but because it revealed something which was spiritually atavistic and genuinely evil in both the Germans and himself. The shock of this personal discovery of evil led to the protagonist's savage brawl in the mud outside "The Roasted Ox" beer hall, and to his resulting confinement in a Munich hospital from injuries suffered in the drunken fight.

¹Ibid., p. 634.

III

The final chapter of The Web and the Rock is entitled "The Looking Glass," with the mirror or "looking glass" ironically symbolizing the shattered narcissism of George-Monk Webber. The chapter opens with Monk sitting on the edge of his hospital bed in Munich, staring into a wall mirror above the dresser in his room. As he observed the reflection of his bandaged head in the mirror, he was reminded of the quotation, "Man's image in a broken looking glass," in which the word image referred to his immaculate self-love, and the broken looking glass to the imperfect body which he revealed to the outside world. Immediately Monk reversed the words in the quotation to ask himself this question: "What of his broken image in a glass unbroken?" To George-Monk this suggested that even though his battered face--the physical and "Monk" side of himself--was staring back at him from the mirror, it was not really his flesh-and-blood face which had been damaged in the fight but instead that narcissistic image of himself--his "George" side--which had nothing to do with his body. The entire reflection of his body, in all of its simian grotesqueness, now emerged "out of the dark pool of the looking glass,"¹ and as he scrutinized it, this "thing which he had despised since he was a child because it had debauched his dreams, not Himself, but It,"² suddenly aroused

¹Ibid., p. 689. ²Ibid.

feelings of loyalty and warmth in himself. Then he addressed his flesh with sarcastic affection:

'Christ! What a mug!'

It grinned back crookedly through its battered mask; and suddenly--all pride and vanity destroyed--he laughed. The battered mask laughed with him, and at last his soul was free. He was a man.¹

There had been a period in Monk's childhood, a magic time of innocence, when he had not seen himself as he appeared to others. During those years of innocence he remembered how the image of his narcissistic adoration and his simian body "were the hero of a thousand brave and romantic exploits, they were beautiful and brave together."² Then the time arrived when he had learned to hate "his body because he thought it was ugly and absurd and unworthy of him, because he thought it was the source of all his troubles and grief, and because he felt it had betrayed him."³ During that disturbed period he had wanted to shout to people that the grotesque, ugly figure which they observed was not really himself, that beneath the unattractive veneer of flesh there was a lovely, noble spirit which represented his true self.

As the years passed, Monk had become increasingly disenchanted with his body, not only because it was physically forbidding but because it lacked the strength and discipline to match his idealistic ambition: "He despised it because its powers of smell, taste, sight, sound, and touch let slip forever, as all flesh must, the final, potent, and complete

¹Ibid., p. 690. ²Ibid., p. 691. ³Ibid.

distillation of life, the matchless ecstasy of living."¹ Because he was dissatisfied with his body, chained by all the weaknesses and limitations of the imperfect flesh, he had taken a masochistic revenge upon it, "driven and abused it under the terrible lust of his insatiate thirst and hunger . . . because it could not do the inhuman task he set for it, hated it because its hunger could not match his hunger, which was for the earth and all things living in it."²

The drunken fight in the mud outside the Munich beer hall ironically seemed to have destroyed this bitterness, for as Monk sat on the hospital bed in front of the mirror and studied the reflected image of his simian body, he realized that "this flesh had not betrayed him."³ The real evil "had been in the madness and bitterness of his heart,"⁴ and in his romantic narcissism, "too centered on itself, too inward turning, too enamoured of the beauties of its own artistic soul and worth to find itself by losing self in something larger than itself."⁵ His body, ugly and imperfect to be sure, was not evil, and now that he had learned to accept its limitations, it aroused in him "the emotion of friendship and respect"⁶ which it had always deserved:

Now he looked at his body without falsehood or rancor, and with wonder that he dwelt there in this place. He knew and accepted now its limitations. He knew now that the demon of his mortal hunger would be inches and eternities from his grasp forever. He knew that we who

¹Ibid., p. 693. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

are men are more than men and less than spirit. What have we but, the pinion of a broken wing to soar half-heavenward?¹

The Web and the Rock ends with a symbolic conversation between Man and Body: that is, between Monk's spirit and his flesh. The two are discussing the Worm, which represents evil. Body tells Man that the Worm is his, a part of the spirit and not of the flesh, and that, in addition, in Monk's childhood world--even in that nostalgic world of apparent spiritual innocence--there was evermore "the Worm incipient, Worm progressive, Worm crawling in the blood, just stirring in the leaf."² Man refuses to accept Body's explanation of the spiritual corruption of the child. Evil was not present in the child from birth; it had its beginning at a particular moment later, and that moment was inside of, not removed from time: "Somewhere, somewhere begun--where? when? Was that the Worm?"³ Body cannot answer Man's question specifically, but replies: "Long, long ago--where hatched, God knows, or in what particle of memory--perhaps with sunlight on the porch."⁴

Body's indefinite answer makes Man or spirit recall his earliest innocence. It was a "good time then,"⁵ and Man asks Body if he were there. Body replies that his existence only goes back "to the limits of mortality"⁶--that is, to the limits of the flesh--and not "to the pits of time and memory"⁷ which are connected with the "first intrusions of the blind,

¹Ibid., p. 692. ²Ibid., p. 693. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

compulsive Worm."¹ The corruption of Man, therefore, was part of his spiritual childhood, while Body lay removed, "fat-legged in a wicker basket, feeling light."² Body adds that as an infant he could feel "discomfort sometimes--not regret,"³ since regret belongs to "the sickness of the Worm--not mine! Mine the sun!"⁴

Man, still refusing to accept the responsibility for evil, asks Body, "And then?"⁵ but Body objects to the use of the word then. This word, which implies distinctions in time, is unacceptable to Body, for with the flesh everything happens in the contemporaneous present, "the plain immediate."⁶ Moreover, in this "plain immediate" of the flesh, time and memory, as well as the spiritually symbolic Worm, have no part.

Man begins a sentence about his childhood, "The time that is good--"⁷ but Body interrupts to finish the sentence with "is the time when once there was a tiny little boy."⁸ Since Man is unable to recognize his spiritual evil, he is still nostalgic for the tiny little boy and for his world of lost innocence. To support his nostalgia, he commences an oral revery, changing Body's use of the verb was to the present tense, for in Man's atavistic memory, divisions between the past and present seem irrelevant. In other words, his world of childhood innocence is emotionally and spiritually

¹Ibid., p. 694. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid. ⁸Ibid.

divorced from time:

That is the good time because it is the time sunlight came and went upon the porch, and when there was a sound of people coming home at noon, earth loaming, grass spermatic, a fume of rope-sperm in the nostrils and the dewlaps of the throat . . . the warm and common mucus of the earth-nasturtium smells, the thought of parlors and the good stale smell, the sudden, brooding stretch of the street car after it had gone, and a feeling touched with desolation hoping noon would come.¹

Body tells Man that his memory is sentimental, and that even in the delightful pastoral world of his childhood, Man's sense of "desolation" represented already "the turnings of the Worm."² Man, however, is preoccupied with his childhood revery, and instead of replying to Body's sceptical comment, continues to reminisce of "Crane's cow again, and morning, morning in the thickets of the memory."³ Man particularly recalls the lost sound of his mother's voice as she called "Son, where are you?" and then Man adds regretfully, "That was a good time then."⁴ Body agrees but also warns Man that "you can't go home again."⁵ In this advice, Body, or the flesh, is telling Man, or the spirit, that he can never hope to regain the innocent vision of the world which he knew as a child. Both Man's separation from his mother and his discovery of the spiritual evil inside himself are permanent.

IV

On the pastoral search Wolfe's protagonist had not found the personal salvation he was seeking, but he had

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 695. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

discovered something about the connection between narcissism and evil, and he felt that what was true for himself must be true for other people. He had learned that the idealistic search for perfection is potentially evil by the very nature of the emotions which generated the initial motive for the search. In other words, emotionally the searcher is not an idealist at all, but a rejected child, seeking to compensate for not having been loved by imposing his own ego-centric interpretations of experience upon an antagonistic world. For this reason, the searcher can never be saved by keeping absolute faith with his dream, for his original dream is corrupted. In addition, the searcher is a human being, and in attempting never to betray the best inside himself, meaning his narcissistic image rooted in its setting of lost innocence, he inevitably betrays his fallible humanity. This means that for the dedicated idealist, the search has to involve an increasing struggle with imperfection, not only in a world which frustrates his desires, but within his own uncompromising self.

Wolfe's protagonist had blamed his parents for being hypercritical of the weaknesses in others, but he realized that because of his lust for perfection, he had been just as critical, although he had used a sentimental concern for suffering humanity to camouflage his intolerance. Such a view of humanity in the abstract was dangerous since it represented the extension of his own egotism and not any real feeling for

the happiness or unhappiness of other people as individuals. For this reason, in his embittered moods he had regarded the nighttime inhabitants of New York City as the living dead who deserved their fate simply because they lacked the necessary vitality to cope with life, and he had scornfully contrasted their failings with his own strength. Now he had to learn to project into the lives of these people as human beings, accepting their imperfections as he had painfully come to accept his own, and realizing that the spiritual evil which he had to fear had never been principally in others but in himself.

Wolfe's protagonist also realized that the freedom of the idealistic searcher, relying only upon himself for support, is imaginary, and that even the virtue of uncompromising integrity, when removed from its human setting, becomes destructive. In other words, man's fate as a faulted human being is to seek perfection but never to find it, and in the search he not only has to make compromises forced upon him from the outside but he voluntarily has to contrive his own. If he blinds himself to this side of his nature, attempting to preserve his world of lost innocence unviolated, he eventually loses the capacity to respond to experience, and his self-love turns into paranoia. The protagonist had made this discovery through his exaggerated reaction to the coarsening effects of his own experience. He had also learned, however, that even though the passage of time results in physical

deterioration for all people, it is spiritually devastating especially to the disillusioned egotist. Such a person, if he ever hopes to escape his neurotic tortures, has to accept his true emotional and spiritual condition. For the protagonist, this meant accepting his spiritual corruption, as well as coming to terms with that part of himself which had remained a Victorian puritan.

In Wolfe's fiction the Victorian puritan is the symbol for the self-righteous egotist: that is, the narcissist who actually has succeeded in sacrificing his relations with other people to preserve his self-love. The protagonist had discovered that the ugly egotism of the Victorian puritan was no different in kind from the narcissism of the idealistic seeker, and that both were connected with the craving for isolation which they had developed as rejected children. The romantic pride which the protagonist had taken in his raw egotism, as well as his obsession with failure and his paranoiacal fury whenever the outside world interfered with his desires, was only a superficial veneer covering the great wound to his psyche which had been inflicted during his earliest years. Since he had felt lonely and unwanted as a child, he had never later been able to establish a satisfying relationship with another person, but instead had concentrated on impressing people with how unusual he was so that he could win their admiration.

The protagonist's neurotic compulsion to prove his

superiority had resulted in the arrogance which he displayed towards individuals less gifted than himself, and in his inflexible conviction that he was always right whereas others were wrong. In this respect, he was the carbon copy of his parents, for like them he had subverted the complexity of human nature to his ruthless ambition. Now the protagonist had learned that no person, whether he is a romantic idealist or a Victorian puritan, can remain complacently self-righteous about his egotism and retain his emotional sanity. In addition, he had painfully learned that a person's spiritual nature is determined not by the vigor of his narcissistic desire but by his being able to feel tolerance, sympathy, and understanding for people different from himself. This had been the most difficult lesson of all for the idealistic narcissist: that his egotism, as expressed in his relations with other people, had been more destructive than his animal appetites.

The protagonist on the pastoral search, of course, had learned a great deal about the true nature of his desires, together with their connection with his self-love. He had discovered that it is the man who is too insecure to respond to affection who is unable to control his desires, and that there is a causal relationship between the frustrations of such a man, stemming from his earliest memories as a rejected child, and his uncontrollable compulsions to indulge himself. The Faustian narcissist is this kind of person, and for this

reason, his hunger for all knowledge and experience inexorably changes into the indiscriminating pursuit of sensation for its own sake, with his ungovernable appetite being the result not only of his animalism but of his emotional isolation. In this respect, the hunger of the narcissist to give and receive love, the strongest of all his desires, is perverted in that it is blocked psychologically from the channels it normally would use to fulfill itself. The protagonist now understood that it is this perversion of the affections, not sexual perversion, which helps create the lust for evil action.

The protagonist had once believed that his puritanical inhibitions were responsible for his neurotic suffering, and that if he were ever emancipated so that he could indulge freely all of his appetites, he would be a happy man. This approach, since it had almost nothing to do with his affections, had failed, and on this basis his life had slowly degenerated into an animalistic nightmare. Now he realized that every person has to learn to discipline his physical desires, not because appetite in itself is good or evil, but because it refuses to remain on the level of the flesh, and inevitably becomes the instrument for expressing one's aggressive egotism. Again, this does not mean that indulgence in sensual pleasure is necessarily evil, as his Victorian puritan parents had assumed, but it does mean that there is a connection between evil and the uncontrolled animalism which

self-indulgence can lead to, and that both are especially attractive to the person who psychologically is unable to love. The same holds true of the connection between sexual perversion and evil, for although sexual perversion is also physical in its expression rather than spiritual, the physical perversion is too frequently only a sterile substitute for affection. All of this had made the protagonist aware of the importance of sexual neurosis as an indicator of man's emotional susceptibility to evil.

From the time he entered puberty the protagonist had been sexually maladjusted himself, and even though he realized that his nature had been ravaged primarily by his egotism, still his sexual frustrations, along with the neurotic feelings which had distorted them, had left him predisposed to exactly this kind of corruption. In addition, he felt that he could legitimately blame his parents for this, since his sexual frustrations had been so ruthlessly determined by their own when he was a child. On this level, the pastoral search of the protagonist had actually been the attempt to free himself from the neurotic pattern of feelings which he had inherited from his parents.

The protagonist was now soberly aware that no individual can ever escape his emotional past, no matter where he goes or what he does, for he will always carry that past with him in the form of determining memories. The only solution is for him to come to terms with his childhood emotions so

that he no longer rebels either pointlessly or destructively against that side of his personality which he shares with his parents. This, in turn, means accepting without reservation that side of himself which he does not share with his parents and for which he alone is accountable. Since this involves a mature recognition of his own failings, the end of the pastoral search for the narcissist, if the search is to have any serious meaning, has to be his awareness of the evil which exists inside himself.

The protagonist, of course, had long taken refuge in his paranoia to avoid admitting his personal responsibility for evil. This had enabled him to use his sense of outrage at a stupidly cruel and intrusive world to excuse his behavior, but it also had left him so completely the slave of his appetites that his emotional life had become a nightmare world of neurotic guilts and fears. Even so, his most abysmal feelings of shame at this time had not represented true remorse, since he had never really been penitent about the consequences of his actions, either upon others or upon himself. What he had chiefly regretted was that by violating the moral precepts which his parents had instilled in his childhood consciousness, he had once again proven himself a naughty boy and failure in their eyes, and perhaps most injurious to his adult personality, had demonstrated that they had been right in rejecting him as an unworthy offspring. The psychological effects of this defeat had been to turn his

self-love into self-hate, which he had immediately projected upon the outside world as he had continued blindly to deny that he was being corrupted by his egotism.

The collapse of the protagonist's love affair, however, had made even his paranoia an unsuitable retreat for his hopelessly wounded egotism. Throughout this love affair his role had been that of the self-centered young man, striving for emotional salvation at the expense of his partner, and the fury of his romantic passion had never represented true affection. After his egotism had degenerated into self-loathing, his romantic feelings had suffered the same ugly alteration until his love affair had become the symbol of all the evil in the outside world which he felt had betrayed his idealistic dream. In addition, he had been threatened by this evil in a way he had never known previously, for its appearance had coincided with the terrifying discovery that he was becoming emotionally sterile. He had fled to Europe to try to use what remained of his purposive will to recapture his lost ability to feel, but he had not succeeded. Instead, his uncontrollable animalism in Munich, together with his closeness to the "old Germanic and swarm-hearted mind of man,"¹ had finally brought to the surface his most atavistic and destructive urges. Then at last he had been forced to recognize personally the existence of spiritual evil, that "hell that man forever creates for himself."²

¹Ibid., p. 861. ²YCGHA, p. 728.

The personal discovery of evil by the protagonist ends the pastoral search. He has learned that he can never "go home again" spiritually, not only because any serious attempt to recapture his childhood world of pre-puberty innocence results in emotional sterility, but because, by the very fact that he is a human being, he is an involved participant in the evil in the world and is spiritually accountable for what he is and what he does. Moreover, it is only after he is willing to accept the blame for his own corruption that his awareness of the evil in the world outside himself can become truly significant.

The trouble with modern man is that he has wanted to reform the evil in others without really admitting his own. Also modern man has had a materialistic approach, as if there were simple quantitative truths connected with evil which, once they were recognized and isolated, could be eliminated from life. This is not so, for the vitality of evil is always spiritual, and for this reason, even the quantitative measurement of evil actions or their consequences is unreliable. In addition, there are no simple truths connected with evil except that it is as old as mankind and springs from the incompleteness of human nature: man's tragic condition that he is eternally a fallen creature. At the same time, although evil can never be removed from man's nature, it has to be fought continuously by the individual if he ever expects to find spiritual peace. Equally important is

the knowledge that evil does not dominate life completely, for there is always love. With this certain knowledge, that love counterbalances in part the evil against which man is doomed to struggle until the end of time, Thomas Wolfe in his fiction affirms the mystery and the greatness of the human spirit.

CHAPTER XV

THE ARCHETYPAL RESOLUTION

That was what was wrong with most of us at Pine Rock College twenty years ago. We had a 'concept' about Truth and Beauty and Love and Reality--and that hardened our ideas about what all these words stood for. After that, we had no doubt about them--or, at any rate, could not admit that we did. This was wrong, because the essence of belief is doubt, the essence of reality is questioning. The essence of Time is Flow, not Fix. The essence of faith is the knowledge that all flows and that everything must change.¹

You Can't Go Home Again, the novel which completes Wolfe's tetralogy, was published two years after the author's death. This fact, of course, must be kept in mind by any critic interpreting the themes in Wolfe's fiction, for the author unquestionably would have made innumerable changes in his last book, as well as in The Web and the Rock, before permitting them to be published in the partially fragmented condition in which they now exist. At the same time, the posthumous novels were probably damaged less by Wolfe's premature death than would have been the fiction of any other modern writer, chiefly because of their author's unorthodox approach to artistic form.

¹YCGHA, pp. 731-32.

We have previously suggested that Wolfe throughout his fiction attempted to use a group of dominant themes, illuminated and unified by his creative vision, as a substitute for the carefully organized structure of the well-made novel. We have also indicated that despite the judgment of many contemporary critics that Wolfe failed in his romantic attempt to dismiss the importance of aesthetic form in his creation, we believe that Wolfe was an archetypal artist¹ as well as a romantic writer, and that his failure in the former role was certainly less complete than has been generally assumed. Accordingly, it is our hope that the final chapter of this dissertation will reveal that You Can't Go Home Again, Wolfe's fourth and last novel, contains an intelligent resolution of the controlling themes explored by their author in the other three books of his tetralogy.

I

The reader is aware that the form of Wolfe's fiction is based on the search of an autobiographical protagonist, Eugene Gant-George Webber, to discover adequate symbols for an emotional and spiritual father in the chaotic world of the twentieth century. In The Web and the Rock the episode connected with the Munich beer hall at the close of the novel

¹Wolfe's role as an archetypal artist includes his exploration of the connections between lost innocence and the pastoral vision of life as a necessary part of the mythical dualism between the masculine and feminine principles in the "buried" emotional and spiritual life of his protagonist.

represented symbolically the protagonist's discovery of the spiritual evil within himself. This discovery had a central position in the protagonist's search, for it meant that eventually he might free himself from the narcissism which had made his romantic isolation originally so attractive, yet whose slow disintegration Wolfe had already carefully documented in his second and third novels. Before the protagonist could secure emotional and spiritual freedom from his emasculating self-love, however, he had to have his knowledge of evil sufficiently confirmed by his own experience to make it completely real.¹ You Can't Go Home Again is the novel which contains those final experiences necessary to confirm the protagonist's knowledge of the spiritual reality of evil for modern man.

The novel is divided into seven books or sections, and the first of these is called "The Native's Return" since it deals with George Webber's experiences in New York City and Libya Hill shortly after his return from Germany. It was a "native's return" because the protagonist, through his personal discovery of evil in Munich at the end of The Web and the Rock, had begun to lose his narcissistic sense of isolation. In other words, he had returned to America feeling like a native instead of the perennial exile. Even so, the liberation which he had experienced at the end of his stay

¹It should be noted again that the importance which Wolfe attached to "confirming experience" places him in the existentialist stream of contemporary literature.

in Europe from the mythical image of the "child-sorceress" mother was still not complete, and his search for the archetypal father was affected by the "withdrawal and return" pattern of his former dependency upon the feminine principle in his emotional and spiritual life. For this reason, despite Webber's resolve the year before that the thing he wanted most was "to get away from the woman he loved,"¹ he had resumed his affair with Esther Jack shortly after coming back to America.

The book opens in New York City with Webber living in an old house on Twelfth Street. The date is April, 1929, the spring season representing the pastoral rebirth of nature and co-inciding with the protagonist's feelings of having made a new beginning in his own life. What he saw and heard as he leaned on the sill of a back window in the house is presented in terms of sense impressions, all of them contributing to give him a re-assuring feeling of belonging to a familiar world. Even the Victorian house in which he lived added to his sense of belonging.² Webber felt a "simple joy . . . at being once more a part of such familiar things,"³ the seeming antithesis of the nightmare world which he had confronted recently in Europe.

¹YCGHA, p. 5. ²In Wolfe's fiction the sense of the "familiar" connected with Victorian life almost invariably reflects the protagonist's nostalgia for the "structure of the world" identified with the masculine image of his father. The "nightmare" world, on the other hand, is associated symbolically with the image of the "sorceress mother." ³YCGHA, p.5.

As previously noted, Webber's experiences in Europe had reached their climax in a beer-hall fight in Munich after he had already spent a number of weeks "cursing, whoring, drinking, brawling his way across the continent."¹ Admittedly, on one level of experience that had been a stupid, naturalistic way for the protagonist to "withdraw," but on a deeper level its results in terms of his spiritual discoveries had not been meaningless. At least, Webber did not think so as he lay in his hospital bed in Munich after the fight, when "for the first time in many years he had felt at peace within himself."²

During the days the protagonist remained in the hospital, as he re-examined his life, and his thoughts "wove into a kind of leading thread, trailing backward through his past and out into the future,"³ he began to feel that because of what had happened to him in Europe, "now, perhaps he could begin to shape his life to mastery, for he felt a sense of new direction deep within him."⁴ He had confirmed his discoveries painfully through his own experiences, yet somehow he believed that was the only means by which knowledge could ever become emotionally and spiritually real:

For he had learned some of the things that every man must find out for himself, and he had found out about them as one has to find out--through error and through trial.⁵

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 6.

⁵Ibid., pp. 5-6.

As previously indicated, despite his new knowledge the protagonist had resumed his dependent relationship with Esther Jack after his return to New York City, "the one thing he had once been sure would never happen."¹ Even more discouraging in light of his search for the archetypal father, he was "very happy to be back."² As he reflected upon this inconsistency, Webber rationalized that he was twenty-eight years old and "that the emotional pattern of one's life, formed and set by years of living, is not to be discarded quite as easily as one may throw away a battered hat or worn-out shoe."³ In this regard, the withdrawal and return pattern of his search conformed to Goethe's statement that human growth, which almost never proceeds in a straight line, might be compared "to the reelings of a drunken beggar on horseback."⁴ Webber, however, was comforted by the knowledge that even though the beggar was drunk, at least he was "mounted on his horse, and, however unsteadily, was going somewhere."⁵ In other words, in the symbolic role of Goethe's drunken beggar, the protagonist had not yet accepted a permanent pastoral return to the feminine principle. Nevertheless, he rightfully felt guilty about resuming his affair with Esther: "Must the beggar on horseback forever reel?"⁶

Webber may have matured during his stay in Europe, but Esther, whose spiritual life was uninvolved with the confirming

¹Ibid., p. 7. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

withdrawal-return dualism, had remained unchanged. In the next incident in the novel, Wolfe described Esther waking up in the morning, and the details in this brief description emphasize that she was the same woman who appeared in the last half of The Web and the Rock: that is, the same ambiguous mixture of sensuous vitality, professional competence, devious innocence, and self-love.

After Esther had awakened, "as quick and sudden as a bird,"¹ she lay upon her back in the bed, surveyed her body admiringly, and was instantly alive, almost as if she were still a young girl. Beside the bed her little clock (the time symbol for her personality) "ticked eagerly its pulse of time as if it hurried forward forever like a child toward some imagined joy."² After a servant had brought coffee and rolls, Esther turned to the theatrical section of the morning newspaper and laughed happily when she noticed that her design work had been praised in one of the gossip columns, and also that she had been referred to as Miss instead of Mrs. Esther Jack. After she had dressed and was going downtown to Twelfth Street to meet Webber, Esther was feeling quite "gay and happy and pleased with herself."³

Webber and Esther were back together, but not in the apartment on Waverly Place which previously they had shared. The two large rooms Webber had rented in the house on Twelfth Street represented a different arrangement, for now he felt

¹Ibid., p. 8. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 9.

it necessary to safeguard "the mastery of his life, his separate soul, his own integrity,"¹ and to keep "love a thing apart."² For this reason, the new apartment "was his place, not theirs, and that fact re-established their relations on a different level."³ At least the protagonist, as he struggled to free himself from his emotional dependency upon his mistress-mother substitute, hoped that it did. The disturbing question was whether Esther would accept such a compromise:

Would she take his love, but leave him free to live his life and do his work? That was the way he told her it must be, and she said yes, she understood. But could she do it? Was it in a woman's nature to be content with all that a man could give her, and not forever want what was not his to give? Already there were little portents that made him begin to doubt it.⁴

It was Webber's opinion that what he especially desired was to keep his creative life independent of Esther's rich friends and the world of the theatre. What he really wanted, as he soon discovered, was to break away from the woman completely since her possessiveness represented a permanent block in his search for the father. For this reason, one morning when Esther, in a somewhat troubled mood, asked Webber if he would keep on loving her forever, he refused to reply. Esther needled him until she saw that he was losing his temper. Realizing that further talk was useless, she slipped her arm through his, and standing by the front window together, they watched the city life unfolding on the streets below.

¹Ibid., p. 11. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

They observed a group of little Jewish tailors involved in a heated argument in front of a union hall, then saw the young Irish cops who moved in brutally to break up the argument. They saw and heard the cars roaring through the city streets like projectiles, and the undending stream of shrill voices, bodies, faces passing on the sidewalks "with the monotony of everlasting repetition."¹

It was a fine spring morning, the sky blue and cloudless, the trees just coming into leaf, and the sunlight spilling magically into the streets. The city people whom they had observed, however, were not part of this fresh and innocent rebirth in nature. They were spiritually corrupted human beings, and that was the new knowledge which Webber had gained in Germany and which he suddenly found so difficult to explain to his mistress infatuated with her innocent vision of life:

Esther glanced at George and saw his face grow twisted as he looked. He wanted to say to her that we are all savage, foolish, violent, and mistaken; that, full of our fear and confusion, we walk in ignorance upon the living and beautiful earth, breathing young, vital air and bathing in the light of morning, seeing it not because of the murder in our hearts.

But he did not say these things. Wearily he turned away from the window.

'There's forever,' he said. 'There's your forever.'²

One of the reasons that the protagonist was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his affair with Esther was that he had established another dependent relationship to

¹Ibid., p. 14. ²Ibid.

take its place. Immediately after returning to New York from Europe, he had gone to the publishing firm of James Rodney and Company, whose chief editor, Foxhall Edwards, had expressed an interest in his manuscript, Home to Our Mountains. Within a week the manuscript had been accepted, Webber had been given an advance of five hundred dollars, and "he was happier than he had ever been in all his life."¹ At last he seemed to be on the threshold of success and fame, although he still had to work with his editor to cut and revise the manuscript to make it publishable.

During this period, when he and the editor were working together on the manuscript, Webber's old madness seemed to have disappeared from his life altogether, and he was sustained by the wonderful belief that finally he was "in triumphant control of his destiny."² What made this belief spuriously convincing was that the protagonist had not yet discovered the mature father within himself. Instead, in the "shining image of Fox Edwards,"³ it merely seemed to Webber that he had found at last the archetypal father who could give his life the spiritual direction that it required:

Little by little it seemed to George that he had found in Fox the father he had lost and had long been looking for. And so it was that Fox became a second father to him--the father of his spirit.⁴

Webber's personal discovery of evil in Germany had only partially freed him from his narcissism, and his turning to

¹Ibid., p. 19. ²Ibid., p. 15. ³Ibid., p. 27. ⁴Ibid.

Edwards as a substitute father was proof of his continuing emotional and spiritual dependency. At the same time, the experience in Germany was the central spiritual discovery upon which the protagonist would build until his knowledge of evil had been sufficiently confirmed to enable him to find the true, instead of the false, spiritual father. In Wolfe's artistic vision, however, the reality of evil is always complemented by the reality of love: that is, man is not totally evil since his destructive death will, symbolized by the "murder in his heart," is forever opposed by an equally urgent life will "to love and create." Unfortunately, at least in terms of the controlling symbolism in this particular novel, the protagonist's life was partially castrated so long as he remained dependent upon his publishing editor as the false archetypal father.

In the chapter which precedes the lengthy examination of the financial collapse and spiritual ruin in Libya Hill--that is, evil in the familiar world of one's childhood--Wolfe emphasized again, as a kind of pastoral introduction to this new material, that his protagonist's discovery of evil was not completely Calvinistic or naturalistic, since, in addition to the corruption in man, there always exists love, symbolized in nature by the life forces which produce beauty as well as the unending, seemingly meaningless cycle of physical birth, the savage, a-moral struggle for survival, and death. In other words, nature aesthetically offers a mystical

affirmation to the spiritual dualism within man.

In the summer of 1929 Webber frequently noticed a man seated at a desk behind a large window of the warehouse across the street. What attracted the protagonist's attention about this man was that the fixed, remote expression upon his face suggested an almost total indifference to the "thronging traffic of life"¹ which circled around him in the warehouse and on the outside pavement. During Webber's life, certain things, apparently trivial in themselves, had gotten embedded deeply in his memory: "and always they were little things which, in an instant of clear perception, had riven his heart with some poignant flash of meaning."² This man's remote, abstracted face was one of those memories, and to the protagonist it came to symbolize not only the "exile of an imprisoned spirit,"³ but the brooding, patient resignation which is part of wisdom near the close of a man's life, when he has discovered, through the confused, bitter dialectic of his personal experience, the tiny measure of truth which it seems is all that man has been destined to know.

This final ironic truth is that only a few things survive the continuous flux of time and change, and that most of these are connected merely with death and rebirth in nature: "all things proceeding from the earth to seasons, all things that lapse and change and come again upon the earth."⁴

¹Ibid., p. 42. ²Ibid., p. 43. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 44.

The evil in man's heart, represented symbolically by "the tarantula, the adder, and the asp,"¹ also is permanent, and "pain and death will always be the same."² Despite the cruel reality of evil joined to the inexorable triumph of death in the natural world, it was the mystical faith of Wolfe's protagonist, increasingly religious rather than romantic in its overtones, that always "under the hoof of the beast above the broken cities, there will be something growing like a flower, something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life like April."³

II

Wolfe's selection of the search theme for his fiction meant that his chief interest had to be the emotional and spiritual growth in his protagonist as he sought to exchange his narcissistic sense of exile, associated symbolically with an innocent past and his childhood dependence upon a castrating mother, for the creative vitality and capacity to experience love in the present, represented by the image of the archetypal father. Since the protagonist's isolation, in one way or another, was central throughout the search, this meant that Wolfe faced technical difficulties in his fiction whenever he wished to deal with a group of people in a single setting. His protagonist could not be eliminated from the dramatic representation, assuming that was the method Wolfe had

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

selected to reveal the personalities of the characters involved, yet since for some years the protagonist had been alienated from conventional society, where could Wolfe find a suitable setting in which the different people would have enough in common, even if superficially, so that the important themes could be developed through dialogue? Wolfe's solution was to use the dinner party or the pullman car of a passenger train as settings into which he could introduce a selection of characters with his protagonist as a foil.

The chapter at the beginning of Wolfe's investigation of evil in small town America was called "The Hidden Terror" by its author, and its setting was the pullman car K 19, returning from New York to Libya Hill, the protagonist's home town. The passengers on the pullman with important roles in the chapter were George Webber, Nebraska Crane, Jarvis Riggs, Mayor Kennedy, Parson Flack, and Judge Bland. The title, "The Hidden Terror," related to the blind Judge, whose genuinely corrupted personality in the eyes of the townspeople of Libya Hill, was the symbol of evil. Ironically, at least in the estimation of the author, these townspeople were the men and women who were spiritually blind, not the sightless Judge, for he did not share the self-righteous obliviousness of his fellow citizens to the sterility and evil in their own lives. In this respect, Judge Bland, with his cynical awareness of man's corruption, including his own, was symbolically the physically blind man with spiritual vision whose depraved life

personified the reality of evil, "the hidden terror," within the fallen nature of every person.

In Wolfe's artistic vision, Libya Hill was a microcosm for middle class America with a Victorian puritan heritage during the boom years of the 1920's, and its three representative citizens in the pullman car--Jarvis Riggs, Mayor Kennedy, and Parson Flack--were men whose spiritual superficiality, if not blindness, had enabled them to accept uncritically the most devious values of a materialistic culture. The life of Jarvis Riggs, the poor boy who was forced to quit school when his father died and who then worked at various jobs to support his mother until he became a bank president, illustrated the American legend which Gant and Eliza had constantly preached to their children: "that of the poor boy who profits from the hardships of his early life and 'makes good.'"¹ Eventually, because of unscrupulous management, the bank managed by Riggs failed and most of its investors were ruined financially. Mayor Kennedy, the weak-principled tool of the influential moneyed people in Libya Hill, was the forward-looking, glad-handing totem symbol of the town's optimistic faith in progress and bigger and better business. After the collapse of real estate values in Libya Hill, the Mayor committed suicide. Parson Flack, who acquired the nickname "Parson" by never missing a prayer meeting at the Campbellite Church, represented the hypocritical business

¹Ibid., p. 361.

promoter who clothed his activities with respectability to exploit the superficial puritanical morality, as well as the gullibility, of his townspeople. Wolfe did not indicate what happened to the slippery Parson after the crash.

These three men, in addition to their spiritual blindness, shared a common exploitative attitude towards nature: that of the economic speculator with his abstract approach to the land solely in terms of its real estate values. In Wolfe's vision the abstract approach to life was always potentially evil, since it was divorced from man's human condition with its sharply fixed limits in terms of time and space. For this reason, the concern of the business man with shifting market prices as an indication of worth involved a repudiation somewhere along the line of human values. With regard to real estate as a business, this was especially true, for Wolfe's pastoralism included the mystical faith that nature, represented in this instance by the land, was sacred in that its final meaning, still undeciphered by science, remained a religious mystery.

At this point, it must be emphasized again that Wolfe's artistic vision, even at this late date, was schizophrenic. In other words, on a superficial level he was the romantic writer whose lack of detachment and sentimental failings have been justly pointed out by discriminating modern critics. On this superficial level Wolfe's interpretation and criticism of capitalism in America revealed the typical left-wing bias

of liberal sentiment during the depression years. On a primary level, however, Wolfe was the archetypal and increasingly religious artist who was interested in the American business man as a human being, and who attacked his shortcomings, not as the inevitable consequences of the fallible economic system to which he belonged, but as a spiritual sterility which accompanied his shallow employment of the idols of materialism to blind himself to his true nature.

Except for the protagonist, the last representative citizen from Libya Hill in the pullman car was Nebraska Crane, the home town boy who had become a big league baseball player. This man, who was a substitute father figure for Webber in childhood, was Wolfe's sentimentalized version of the modern American who had retained at least a part of his emotional and spiritual inheritance as a human being. The name, Nebraska Crane, has a symbolic significance: Nebraska representing Wolfe's preference of the tradition-free West over the tradition-fettered East, and Crane suggesting that the man, with his Indian blood, had not completely violated the pattern of his intuitive responses to nature. For this reason, the baseball player still conceived "of the land as a place on which to live, and of living on the land as a way of life."¹ In other words, Crane had not been infected by the real estate fever of the times, and his pastoral dream of happiness, after he had finished playing baseball, was to return to the

¹Ibid., p. 80.

three hundred acres of land he had purchased in Zebulon County and to farm them for a living. Neither was Crane ignorant of the evil in life which he accepted with the "cheerful fatalism" which "had always been the source of his great strength and courage. That was why he had never been afraid of anything, not even death."¹

George Webber was returning to Libya Hill because he had received a telegram that his Aunt Maw, who had taken charge of him when he was eight years old and who had "brought him up with all the inflexible zeal of her puritanical nature,"² had finally died. Judge Bland had been subjected to a similar indoctrination in the values of Victorian puritanism when he was small, and the emotional rejection which this teaching re-inforced eventually had turned him into the town's outcast, prowling through the vacant streets at night beneath "blank and sterile corner lights, past windows that were always dark, past doors that were forever locked."³

Judge Bland came from a distinguished Southern family whose members had been prominent lawyers for over a century. For this reason, the Judge as a young man had studied the law, and after being admitted to the bar, for one term had been a police court magistrate from which he obtained the title "Judge." Also during his early manhood, the Judge had married a beautiful, dissolute woman, whom he had divorced

¹Ibid., p. 64. ²Ibid., p. 45. ³Ibid., p. 71.

shortly to return to his mother, "a stately, white-haired lady to whom he rendered at all times a faithful, solicitous, exquisitely kind and gentle duty."¹ They lived together in a pleasant old Victorian house until she died, and during these years he indulged his mother with every comfort:

and if she ever guessed by what dark means her luxuries had been assured, she never spoke of it to her son. As for women generally, Judge Bland divided them brutally into two groups--the mothers and the prostitutes--and, aside from the single exception in his own home, his sole interest was in the second division.²

The Judge had given up his legitimate law practice many years before, and since that time had made his money from a secondhand furniture store, incredibly filthy and piled with junk, which he used as a blind for the criminal usury which he practiced with the ignorant negro population of the town. On the second floor of the store were two rooms which at one time had served as distinguished law offices for his father and legal partner. Both were in a state of utter disrepair, although the second room, in addition to its dusty bookcases and a few ramshackle chairs, contained a plush sofa. Around the town it was whispered that this was the room where the lecherous, evil old Bland "took his women."³

The Judge had begun to lose his eyesight before Webber left Libya Hill, and he was brutally frank even then in admitting that the venereal disease causing his blindness "had been engendered in his eyes."⁴ In the estimation of the

¹Ibid., p. 77. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 78.

townspeople, the Judge was not just a bad man: "No, 'bad' is not the word for it. Everyone knew that he was evil--genuinely unfathomably evil."¹ He was so "stained with evil,"² with "something genuinely old and corrupt at the sources of his life and spirit,"³ that it had even been absorbed into his flesh:

It was palpable in the touch of his thin, frail hand when he greeted you, it was present in the deadly weariness of his tone of voice, in the dead-white texture of his emaciated face, in his lank and lusterless auburn hair, and, most of all, in his sunken mouth, around which there hovered constantly the ghost of a smile. It could only be called the ghost of a smile, and yet, really, it was no smile at all. It was, if anything, only a shadow at the corners of the mouth. When one looked closely, it was gone. But one knew that it was always there--lewd, evil, mocking, horribly corrupt, and suggesting a limitless vitality akin to the humor of death, which welled up from some secret spring in his dark soul.⁴

Even the corrupt Judge had not been able to escape the moral pressures of Victorian puritanism in a small Southern town, and he continued to mask his life, with cynical irony, "in all the outward aspects of respectability."⁵ The "insolent shamelessness" of his life, however, was so well-known in the community that "he was in total disrepute, and yet he met the opinion of the town with such cold and poisonous contempt that everything and everyone held him in a kind of terrified respect."⁶ The people feared him because it seemed as if "his blind eyes saw straight through them."⁷ Most

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 77. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 84. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

enigmatical of all was the Judge's attraction for people who sensed, in addition to "the force of death and evil working in him . . . the phantom, the radiance, the lost soul, of an enormous virtue."¹

The businessmen in the center of the pullman car were discussing the real estate boom in Libya Hill when Judge Bland, in quiet, toneless accents, asked the protagonist to sit down beside him: "Let the dead bury their dead. Come sit among the blind."² In the same toneless, sterile voice that carried throughout the length of the pullman, the Judge referred to Reeves, Kennedy, and Flack as being "as eminent a set of sons-of-bitches as were ever gathered together"³ at one time in a parlor car. Then he commented on the protagonist's recent European trip, and asked Webber if he had found "the French whores any different from the home-grown variety."⁴ The Judge observed sardonically that the difference had to be small, since "syphilis makes the whole world kindred. And if you want to lose your eyesight, you can do it in this great democracy as well as anywhere on earth."⁵ After being informed that Webber was returning to Libya Hill to attend his Aunt Maw's funeral, the Judge asked if the young man were foolish enough actually to believe that he could go home again. When the protagonist replied that he was not certain, the Judge cackled maliciously: "The guilty fleeth where no man pursueth. Is that is, son?"⁶ The evil old man's parting

¹Ibid., p. 81. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

advice to Webber about his return home was: "But don't forget I tried to warn you."¹

Webber was unable to go home again spiritually because creative vitality and love, the values that the mature father symbolized in his imagination, were not to be found in Libya Hill. Judge Bland through his almost Calvinistic awareness of evil represented one aspect of the mature father, and the symbolism used to suggest this was the "heavy walnut walking stick"² which the Judge carried. In other words, the protagonist connected the evil image of the Judge with spiritual vitality, but it was a "kind of terrible vitality"³ with the ambiguous "attractiveness of a ruined angel."⁴ The creative side of the spiritual dualism was absent, and on this score the sterility in the infamous old man was shown symbolically through his sightless eyes, his "dead and lifeless white hair,"⁴ his pale, emaciated skin, and his blackened "rims of teeth."⁵

Riggs, Kennedy, and Flack lacked even the vitality that was part of a cynical awareness of evil. For this reason, during the conversation in the pullman, Judge Bland's naked comments aroused in the businessmen "a sense of stark, underlying terror."⁶ The sterility and fear in these men was further revealed in the washroom scene, when Webber unexpectedly caught Mayor Kennedy cleaning his false teeth in the basin.

¹Ibid., p. 84. ²Ibid., p. 82. ³Ibid., p. 70.

⁴Ibid., p. 84. ⁵Ibid., p. 82. ⁶Ibid.

The Mayor, hearing a noise behind him, turned around in fright, and his usually plump face, with its cheerful, amiable, reassuring expression, "was all caved in."¹ For a startled moment, the Mayor, stripped of his optimistic camouflage, was frantic, and he waved his false teeth "in a grotesque yet terrible gesture indicative of--God knows what!--but despair and terror were both in it."² Only after he had replaced, with trembling, fumbling gestures, the false teeth in his mouth was he able to recapture in his expression some of his previous geniality and false confidence. After this incident in the washroom, the protagonist detected a similar fear behind the spurious optimism and heartiness of the other businessmen as they discussed the miraculous rise of real estate values in their "booming" home town:

Among all of them was the same kind of talk that George had heard before. 'It's worth all of that,' they told each other eagerly. 'It'll bring twice as much in a year's time.' They caught him by the lapel in the most friendly and hearty fashion and said he ought to settle down in Libya Hill and stay for good--'Greatest place on earth, you know!' They made their usual assured pronouncements upon finance, banking, market trends, and property values. But George sensed now that down below all of this was just utter, naked, frantic terror--the terror of men who know that they are ruined and are afraid to admit it, even to themselves.³

When Webber arrived in Libya Hill, he discovered that the sleepy little mountain town he had known as a child was "now foaming with life, crowded with expensive traffic, filled with new faces he had never seen before."⁴ The animation of

¹Ibid., p. 85. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 109.

the townspeople was contagious, and yet the protagonist felt that the energy and enthusiasm which he observed all around him represented a forced vitality which had more in common perhaps with insanity than with any genuine emotional and spiritual satisfaction. Libya Hill was a "boom town" at the pinnacle of its real estate craze, and the people on the streets gave "the impression of an entire population that was drunk--drunk with an intoxication which never made them weary, dead, or sodden, and which never wore off, but which incited them constantly to new efforts of leaping and thrusting exuberance."¹ The real estate promoters were all over town, and everyone, "the barbers, the lawyers, the grocers, the butchers, the builders, the clothiers,"² was buying property at fantastic prices and paying for it with paper: "And there seemed to be only one rule, universal and infallible--to buy, always to buy, to pay whatever price was asked, and to sell again within two days at any price one chose to fix."³

The protagonist was still nostalgic for the leisurely Victorian life associated with the childhood image of his father, and this more casual way of life seemed to be a special target for the "spirit of drunken waste and wild destructiveness"⁴ which accompanied the real estate fever. In the center of Libya Hill when Webber was a boy, on top of a beautiful green hill, had been a rambling old wooden hotel surrounded by trees, flowers, and immense lawns. This hotel, a symbol of

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 110. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 111.

leisurely Victorian life, had extensive verandas with comfortable rocking chairs on every side, innumerable eaves and projecting gables, wings, corridors, spacious parlors with thick red carpets, and "a splendid dining room filled at mealtime with laughter and quiet voices, where expert Negroes in white jackets bent and scraped and chuckled over the jokes of the rich men from the North as with prayerful grace they served them delicate foods out of old silver dishes."¹ Now, not only the rambling hotel but the beautiful green hill upon which it was built, had already been "mutilated at untold cost,"² the hill having been leveled "to an ugly flat of clay,"³ and then paved with the "desolate horror of white concrete."⁴

To the protagonist everything that was being constructed during the boom, the stores, garages, office buildings, and parking spaces, appeared "raw and new,"⁵ and the sixteen story hotel which was being erected on the very spot where the old one formerly had stood was an ugly mechanical structure "of steel and concrete and pressed brick . . . stamped out of the same mold, as if by some gigantic biscuit-cutter of hotels, that had produced a thousand others like it all over the country."⁶ The last vestiges of Victorian life were being obliterated from the American scene, and Wolfe's protagonist regarded this change as another sterile feature of the crass

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid., p. 112.

⁶Ibid.

materialism to which the nation succumbed during the 1920's. The image of the Victorian father had been destroyed, but no new symbol had been discovered in modern middle class America to take its place.

In Libya Hill "the high priest and prophet of this insanity of waste"¹ was the town drunkard, Tim Wagner. Tim had run through two fortunes before his twenty-fifth year, and from that time on "had slipped rapidly into a state of perpetual sottishness."² This befuddled, shambling drunkard, the emotionally and spiritually devastated man, was Wolfe's symbol of the sterility and death just beneath the surface of the town's life. Tim Wagner's sunken face had a deathly sallow complexion except over the nose, which had a flaring network of swollen purple veins. Also the ruined drunkard, like Mayor Kennedy, had toothless gums "equipped with such an enormous set of glittering false teeth that the lips could not cover them, and they grinned at the world with the prognathous bleakness of a skeleton."³

Everything about the man suggested debauchery, waste, and death, including the ironic fact that his home--at any rate, the place where he slept at night--was an abandoned horse-drawn hearse which he had obtained from one of the local undertaking firms just so it could be removed from the premises. Symbolically this diseased and broken drunkard living in a hearse represented "death-in-life," and yet he

¹Ibid., p. 118. ²Ibid., p. 116. ³Ibid., p. 114.

was the person to whom most of the townspeople turned superstitiously for advice in their real estate speculations. In a world which had become emotionally and spiritually sterile, the grotesque, emasculated figure of the town drunkard served adequately as the false father image created by the values of his fellow citizens.

The protagonist was staying with his old friends, Randy and Margaret Shepperton, during his visit to Libya Hill. Randy had been filled with vitality as a boy and young man, but the years had taken their toll, and when Webber first saw his friend at the train station, he felt "a bit ashamed to see how old and worn"¹ Randy looked. This change was especially noticeable in his friend's eyes: "Where they had once been clear and had looked out on the world with a sharp and level gaze, they were now troubled, and haunted by some deep preoccupation which he could not quite shake off."² The cause of this haunted expression, Webber soon discovered, was Randy's boss, Mr. David Merrit, the symbol of the spurious father created by big business in the image of an Egyptian Santa Claus.

Both Randy and Mr. Merrit worked for the Federal Weight, Scales, and Computing Company, "a far-flung" organization which sold machines used in weighing, measuring, and testing those particular values with significance in the business economy. It was Mr. Merrit's responsibility, as a company

¹Ibid., p. 92. ²Ibid.

supervisor, to see that the salesmen remained happy with their work, and to accomplish this he visited the district agents every two or three months, arriving "like a benevolent, pink-cheeked Santa Claus, making his jolly little jokes, passing out his fat cigars, putting his arm around people's shoulders, and, in general, making everyone feel good."¹

To an outsider, such as the protagonist, it appeared that Mr. Merrit's functions were largely ambassadorial, for during a typical visit he was in the agent's office only for a short while. Actually he seemed to devote most of his time to taking the salesmen to dinner, being pleasant to the customers, and in general "inaugurating an era of good feeling and high living."² Since the supervisor was obviously such a good-natured, well-intentioned man, Webber was glad that his visit to the Sheppertons happened to coincide with that of Mr. Merrit's, whose personality represented somehow the "vital and mysterious force"³ the Company had become in the lives of all of its employees.

Mr. Merrit's name symbolized the fairness of the Company in using the "merit system" as the basis for promotion within the organization. Moreover, it was a "merit system" which was mechanically exact and just, since it was based on the "quota system" for each member of the sales department:

¹Ibid., p. 129. ²Ibid., p. 130. ³Ibid.

The unit of the quota system was 'the point,' and a point was forty dollars' worth of business. So if a salesman had a quota of eighty, this meant that he had to sell the products of the Federal Weight, Scales, and Computing Company to the amount of at least \$3200 every month, or almost \$40,000 a year. The rewards were high. A salesman's commission was from fifteen to twenty percent of his sales; an agent's, from twenty to twenty-five percent. Beyond this there were bonuses to be earned by achieving or surpassing his quota. Thus it was possible for an ordinary salesman in an average district to earn from \$6000 to \$8000 a year, while an agent could earn from \$12,000 to \$15,000, and even more if his district was an exceptionally good one.¹

As an additional incentive, if the salesman filled his quota satisfactorily, he was admitted to the Hundred Club or "Company Heaven" with appropriate honors and rewards.

There was a "Company Hell" also, for in the vision of its President, "the Great Man himself, Mr. Paul S. Appleton, III,"² who had "erected the magnificent edifice of the true church and living faith which was called 'the Company,'"³ what purpose would Heaven serve "if there were no hell?"⁴ The Hell was established by never reducing a salesman's quota once it was fixed at a certain point, and then if the salesman achieved the quota during the year, to raise it at the beginning of the new year. It was a system which automatically resulted in progress for each salesman, since if he "did not belong to the Hundred Club, the time was not far distant"⁵ when he no longer belonged to the Company either.

The founder of the business, the grandfather of

¹Ibid., pp. 134-35. ²Ibid., p. 131. ³Ibid., p. 133.

⁴Ibid., p. 135. ⁵Ibid.

President Paul S. Appleton, III, had been ambitious to see one of his "machines in every store, shop, or business that needs one, and that can afford to pay for one."¹ The founder's philosophy was completely out-of-date by the standards of 1929, for according to the modern approach, "known in more technical phrase as 'creative salesmanship' or 'creating the market,'"² the obligation of every salesman was never to inform a potential customer that he was getting along all right without one of the Company's machines, but to make "him buy one anyhow,"³ to "make him see the need; in other words, to create the need."⁴ As far as his advancement with the Company was concerned, woe to the derelict salesman who failed to live up to the letter obligations of this philosophy.

President Paul S. Appleton, III, inspired by "the unknown vistas of magic Canaan"⁵ in the contemporary world, had succeeded in building "an organization which worked with the beautiful precision of a locomotive piston."⁶ It was a business system, designed by a pragmatic, money-minded descendant of puritan forebears, which promoted increased efficiency in its employees, at the same time it gave their work a pseudo-religious significance. The Company definitely was supposed to have a spiritual position in the lives of its employees, and "it also was true that Mr. Paul S. Appleton, III,

¹Ibid., p. 132. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 133. ⁶Ibid.

was a theologian who, like Calvin, knew how to combine free will and predestination."¹

According to its President, the Company was perfectly conceived, theologically as well as mechanically, and the spiritual emphasis on "get out and hustle or else,"² known as "keeping up the morale of the organization,"³ meant in religious terms that the salesmen who succeeded did not have to wait until some remote hereafter to enjoy the rewards of having led the good life. Their Heaven was here on earth, especially once a year when the Company financed the "Week of Play" for all members belonging to the Hundred Club. During the celebrated "Week of Play":

twelve or fifteen hundred men--for on these pilgrimages, by general consent, women (or, at any rate, wives) were debarred--twelve or fifteen hundred men, Americans, most of them in their middle years, exhausted, overwrought, their nerves frayed down and stretched to the breaking point, met from all quarters of the continent 'at the Company's expense' for one brief, wild, gaudy, hectic week of riot.⁴

Wolfe's protagonist was puritanically grim when he contemplated "what this tragic spectacle of business men at play meant in terms of"⁵ the emotional and spiritual sterility of the culture to which they belonged. At that moment, he also began to understand the significance of some of the changes which had taken place in the personality of his good friend, Randy Shepperton.

¹Ibid., p. 135. ²Ibid., p. 136. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 137.

Before Webber returned to New York City, one day he was in the outer salesroom of Randy's office when he heard "voices, confidential, ominous, interspersed with grunts and half-suppressed exclamations,"¹ coming from the little partitioned space at the rear of the room. One voice he easily recognized as Randy's, but at first he thought he had never heard the rasping, cutting, ugly accents of the other voice before:

But as he listened to that voice he began to tremble and grow white about the lips. For its every tone was a foul insult to human life . . . and as he realized that that voice, these words, were being used against his friend, he had a sudden blind feeling of murder in his heart.²

In a flash Webber recognized that "this devil's voice"³ was coming from the genial little Santa Claus, Mr. Merrit, who after having been a guest in the Shepperton house for a week, was telling Randy that if he failed to increase his business thirty percent, he would soon be out of a job: "The Company doesn't give a damn about you! It's after the business."⁴

At length the glazed door to Randy's office opened, and Mr. Merrit emerged violently. As soon as he saw Webber standing in the outer office, his expression, like a chameleon's skin, changed instantly: "his plump and ruddy face became wreathed in smiles,"⁵ and he turned back to Randy, who had followed him out, and "winked humorously . . . in the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 139.

⁵Ibid., p. 138.

manner of a man who is carrying on a little bantering by-play."¹ The protagonist was revolted as he watched this falsely-genial man, "smiling, ruddy, plump, cheerful, a perverted picture of amiable good will to all the world,"² saunter smugly through the door. When Webber turned and saw the shameful look on his friend's face, he was reminded of a picture he had once seen representing the building of the Great Pyramid in Egypt:

It was a picture he had seen in a gallery somewhere, portraying a long line of men stretching from the Great Pyramid to the very portals of great Pharaoh's house, and great Pharaoh stood with a thonged whip in his hand and applied it unmercifully to the bare back and shoulders of the man in front of him, who was great Pharaoh's chief overseer, and in the hand of the overseer was a whip of many tails which he unstintedly applied to the quivering back of the wretch before him, who was the chief overseer's chief lieutenant, and in the lieutenant's hand a whip of rawhide which he laid vigorously on the quailing body of his head sergeant, and in the sergeant's hand a wicked flail with which he belabored a whole company of groaning corporals, and in the hands of every corporal a knotted lash with which to whack a whole regiment of slaves, who pulled and hauled and bore burdens and toiled and sweated and built the towering structure of the pyramid.³

Wolfe's attack upon the monolithic business organization in America seems to have more relevance at the present moment when applied to the slave-labor communes in China. At the same time, Wolfe was investigating and criticizing a problem which has meaning for the entire modern world: that of the powerful system, abstract and always potentially evil, opposed to the concrete, human interests of the individual.

¹Ibid., p. 139. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., pp. 139-40.

It has been pointed out that the spiritual sterility of the businessmen in Asheville was connected with their exploitative approach to nature. These same emotionally and spiritually sterile people, given the opportunity to function with power in a large organization, whether it was a part of business, labor, government, the military, or education, would preserve the same exploitative approach to their fellow man. For this reason, if one accepts the reality of evil in human nature, he realizes, like Wolfe, that the individual always has to be protected against the impersonal system which possesses such tremendous power to magnify and abuse that evil. Part of Wolfe's attack upon the weaknesses in capitalism, therefore, is essentially a criticism of any unregulated system which permits big organizations to flourish without a sense of responsibility for the human decency of the individuals who depend upon those organizations for their existence.

The remainder of Wolfe's attack upon the capitalistic Company represents a criticism of materialism as an inadequate way of life. The Egyptian Pharaoh was a false tyrannical father image, in a religious as well as a political, military, and economic sense, and the business organization in America is equally false when it becomes mystically paternalistic. Wolfe used the Company Heaven and Hell for satirical purposes in this episode, but even so, real spiritual perversion is involved in giving religious overtones to the economic

philosophy of high pressure, cutthroat big business. In addition, there is the emotional falseness behind "creating a need," inasmuch as this kind of salesmanship appeals chiefly to those people who are so sterile that they no longer respond to their basic human needs.

In Wolfe's artistic vision the uncritical worship of materialistic idols ultimately wrecks the human conscience. That was America's problem in 1929, and it is still with us today. For this reason, Wolfe pictured the Company salesmen during the "Week of Play" as spiritually barren, emotionally exhausted men who had lost the capacity to enjoy life. In the person of Mr. Merrit as a hypocritical Santa Claus, with Mr. Paul S. Appleton, III, the false father image of a materialistic culture in the remote background, Wolfe revealed even more nakedly the latent evil which exists in every powerful organization, together with the inhumanity which results from applying machine psychology to human relationships. People are human beings first, not merely functional mechanisms to be manipulated and exploited. That is Wolfe's Christian message throughout You Can't Go Home Again.

III

During George Webber's visit to Libya Hill, he had a nightmare in which he saw himself "running and stumbling over the blasted heath of some foreign land, fleeing in terror from he knew not what. All that he knew was that he was

filled with a nameless shame."¹ This fright and shame soon became so overwhelming that he felt as if he were completely outside the pale of human understanding and compassion: "putrescent with a taint for which there was neither comprehension nor cure . . . rotten with a vileness of corruption that placed him equally beyond salvation or vengeance, remote alike from pity, love, and hatred, and unworthy of a curse."² There were no clouds in the oven-like sky above the heath over which he was fleeing in this particular nightmare, but only a "vast, naked eye--searing and inscrutable--from which there was no escape, and which bathed his defenseless soul in its fathomless depths of shame."³

Suddenly the scene in the nightmare changed, and Webber was no longer "an exile in the center of a planetary vacancy which, like his own shameful self, had no place either among things living or among things dead."⁴ Instead he had returned to the town he had known as a child, and as he first entered the familiar streets, he was certain "that he had returned to the springs of innocence and health from whence he came, and by which he would be saved."⁵ Such was not the case, for the townspeople already were aware of his inextinguishable guilt, and whenever he approached them on the street, "their faces, which had been full of friendliness and affection when they spoke to one another, went dead."⁶ They even turned away

¹Ibid., p. 126. ²Ibid., p. 127. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

from Webber's outstretched hand, "as if they wanted but one thing--that he should depart out of their sight."¹ Shortly the scene in the nightmare had changed, and the protagonist was back on the heath fleeing "beneath the pitiless sky where flamed the naked eye that pierced him with its unutterable weight of shame."²

This nightmare incident helps illuminate the search for the father theme in the novel. It must be remembered that Aunt Maw was the protagonist's foster mother. Her death, in terms of the overall structure of Wolfe's fiction, was necessary because of Webber's discovery of evil and consequent loss of narcissism in Germany, which meant, in terms of the search theme, that he had freed himself only partially from his attachment to the feminine principle in his emotional and spiritual life. His freedom was obviously incomplete in that he was still dependent upon Esther Jack, not to mention his dependent position in his new relationship with Foxhall Edwards. Despite the symbolic death of Aunt Maw, therefore, Wolfe's protagonist at this time was not the liberated narcissist entering maturity. For this reason, his atavistic feelings of childhood innocence, on the one hand, and his neurotic guilts and fears, on the other, were still confused with his new knowledge of evil, and momentarily he was able to believe that by returning home, he might indeed find again "the springs of innocence and health from whence he came, and

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 128.

by which he would be saved."¹ His guilts and fears, of course, and not his sentimental attachment to innocence, triumphed at the close of the nightmare.

George Webber's homecoming represented the pastoral return phase of the withdrawal-return emotional and spiritual dualism. To make this clear, even before the protagonist boarded the train, Wolfe included in the novel a summary of Aunt Maw's life in terms of his controlling archetypal symbolism. Aunt Maw in her archetypal role as the "child-sorceress" mother was like "some great force in nature"² completely removed from man's fallible humanity. Her life was outside time, for from as far back as Webber could remember, the woman "had seemed an ageless crone, as old as God."³ All of the stories which she told belonged to the remote past, "the hills of Zebulon in ancient days before the Civil War,"⁴ and invariably each of her dismal tales was connected in some way with death. Moreover, she was like a symbolic vulture as she feasted with "an air of croaking relish"⁵ upon all of the "sickness, death, and sorrow"⁶ which belonged to this vanished past.

The protagonist had received from this "child-sorceress" mother an "image of the Joyner world"⁷ which was part of the nightmare side of life. It was a superstitious, ghastly, death-haunted world in which his mountain kinsmen had

¹Ibid., p. 127. ²Ibid., p. 46. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid., p. 33.

possessed weird telepathic powers. They were "forever hearing voices and receiving premonitions"¹ of someone's death, or "popping up on country roads and speaking to people as they passed, only to have it turn out later that they had been fifty miles away at the time."² Especially if one of their mountain neighbors or relatives had died unexpectedly, the Joyners would assemble from miles around, sitting up with the corpse throughout the night and telling how "they had received intimations of the impending death a week before it happened."³

The protagonist believed that "although other men would live their day and die,"⁴ the members of Aunt Maw's family were "not subject to this law,"⁵ despite the fact that in his imagination their lives had always symbolized sterility, decay, and death. Perhaps for this very reason, because "they fed on death,"⁶ the Joyners "were triumphant over it"⁷ and "would go on forever."⁸ This was Webber's most unsettling fear with regard to the nightmare world of his mother's people. Also it was a fear which had always posed such a threat to the masculine principle in his own life identified with the image of his father. For this reason, at first he had found it almost impossible to believe the telegram which contained the news that "Aunt Maw, the oldest and most death-triumphant Joyner of them all, was dead."⁹

¹Ibid., p. 46. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 47.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid. ⁸Ibid. ⁹Ibid.

In The Web and the Rock Wolfe connected his protagonist's introduction to evil after puberty with the egotistical indifference of the puritanical Joyners to spiritual evil in their own lives. In the episode dealing with the funeral and burial of Aunt Maw, Wolfe made similar connections between the emotional sterility and spiritual blindness of the townspeople in Libya Hill during the real estate boom, and the repression, frigidity, and spiritual shallowness of the Joyners as representative Victorian puritans. In other words, according to Wolfe's interpretative rendering in the novel, the Victorian puritan morality of middle class America during the nineteenth century helped provide a necessary foundation in the twentieth century for the obsessive devotion of all classes of society to the values of an exploitative materialism.

Aunt Maw's funeral was held in the weathered frame house which her father, old Fate Joyner, had built with his own hands years before. The black coffin was on display in the small front room, and as soon as Webber entered the house and was confronted by the stench of the decaying corpse, he knew that his Aunt Maw "had been victorious over death"¹ in that she would go to her grave without any man's having seen her naked body. This virgin spinster had always been terrified that some man "might see her in the state of nature after she was dead,"² which helped explain her dread of

¹Ibid., p. 96. ²Ibid.

undertakers. Because of this fear, a number of years before she died Aunt Maw had made her brother Mark, and her sister-in-law, Mag, promise solemnly "that no man would see her unclothed corpse, that her laying out would be done by women, and above all else, that she was not to be embalmed."¹ Mark and Mag carried out her wishes to the letter, and since the weather was still hot and the old woman had been dead for three days before her final rites, the protagonist thought it grimly fitting "that the last memory he would have of that little house, which in his childhood had been so filled with the stench of death-in-life, should now be the stench of death itself."²

The funeral service seemed interminable to Webber. In addition, it impressed him as being in bad taste since the most demonstrative mourner was Aunt Mag, "who for fifty years had carried on a nagging, internecine warfare with Aunt Maw."³ To intensify the protagonist's discomfort, the Baptist minister conducting the service, after having given a microscopic eulogy of the most trivial events in Aunt Maw's life, also felt called upon, with all of "the unconscious callousness of self-righteousness,"⁴ to rehearse the story of the family scandal:

He told how George Webber's father had abandoned his wife, Amelia Joyner, to live in open shame with another woman, and how Amelia had shortly afterwards 'died of a broken heart.' He told how 'Brother Mark Joyner and his God-fearing wife, Sister Maggie Joyner,' had been filled with

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

righteous wrath and had gone to court and wrested the motherless boy from the sinful keeping of his father; and how 'this good woman who now lies dead before us' had taken charge of her sister's son and brought him up in a Christian home. And he said he was glad to see that the young man who had been the receiver of this dutiful charity had come home again to pay his last debt of gratitude at the bier of one to whom he owed so much.¹

The minister's indignantly smug rehearsal of that part of Webber's early family life, which had done so much later to exaggerate the destructive nature of his emotional dualism, now left his face flushed "with shame and anger and nausea."²

After the funeral service in the home was finally over, a procession of cars formed for the long, slow drive to the cemetery. Webber had escaped from the family group to ride to the cemetery with his friend Margaret Shepperton in one of the public limousines which had been rented for the occasion. Just as this limousine was about to take its place in the procession of automobiles, Mrs. Delia Flood, a life-long friend of Aunt Maw's, opened one of the car doors and uncere- moniously climbed in. This woman was actually Eliza Gant of the first two novels, which meant that Wolfe, in having Aunt Maw die, symbolically got rid of only one of his protagonist's mothers. With regard to the author's interpretation of the emotional coarseness behind Victorian puritan morality, it also suggested that the lack of taste displayed by Mrs. Flood in her conversation, during the drive to the cemetery as well as at the cemetery itself, had the doubly ironic function of

¹Ibid., p. 97. ²Ibid.

reflecting the obsessive egotism in the archetypal mother's personality even when she was a spectator at her own funeral.

Despite the fact that one of her oldest and dearest friends had died only three days before, most of Mrs. Flood's conversation was devoted to the latest real estate prices in Libya Hill. As soon as the limousine in which she was riding had arrived at Rivercrest, the town's new cemetery, Mrs. Flood shook her head regretfully and commented "'Too bad, too bad, too bad,'"¹ when it crossed her mind that property with such fine real estate value had actually been wasted to make a cemetery. After Aunt Maw's coffin had been lowered into the ground, Webber linked his arm in Margaret's, and together they took a stroll over the hill away from the cemetery grounds. Their purpose in doing this was to escape from Mrs. Flood and the Joyners, for the protagonist especially was in no mood to "be forced to hear the shreds of Aunt Maw's life torn apart and pieced together again."²

By the time Margaret and Webber had returned to the Joyner burial plot, it was almost dark, and the only other person in the cemetery, except for the driver asleep at the wheel of the rented limousine, was the indefatigable Mrs. Flood. The old woman was prowling among the graves, stooping down to peer at the inscriptions on the tombstones in the rapidly fading twilight. When the two strollers reached her side, she was standing in front of a weather-stained stone

¹Ibid., p. 102. ²Ibid., p. 103.

that marked the grave of Amelia Webber, George's mother. Mrs. Flood then asked the protagonist if he was familiar with the story of how his mother's coffin had been moved. Since he wasn't, the tactless, garrulous old woman at once began to tell what she knew.

When Amelia died, the protagonist's father, John Webber, despite the fact that he had been separated from his wife for a number of years, claimed her body and had it buried in a private plot which he had purchased in the old cemetery. Several years later Amelia's brother, Mark Joyner, who had already obtained a family plot in the burying ground which eventually became the new cemetery, had decided to move his sister's coffin to his own plot since he could not abide the thought that his own flesh and blood was resting permanently in Webber earth. Mark's wife and sister had tried to convince him of the folly of his idea, but when he had proved adamant, they had withdrawn their objections.

The brother, the sister, and a few of Aunt Maw's friends were at the cemetery when the removal of the coffin actually had taken place. Mrs. Flood was among those present, and after the coffin had been unearthed by an ancient darky called old Prove, she had personally heard several of the other women ask to have a look inside. Acceding to their wishes, old Prove had pried open the coffin lid, but Mrs. Flood had turned her back, not wishing to look. In a moment, however, she had been given a vivid description of the

rotting corpse by one of her less squeamish friends:

'Oh, Delia!' she says, 'it was awful! I'm sorry that I looked!' she says. 'Ah-ha!' I said. 'What did I tell you? You see, don't you?' And she says, 'Oh-h, it was all gone!--all gone!--all rotted away to nothin' so you couldn't recognize her! The face was all gone until you could see the teeth! And the nails had all grown out long! But Delia!' she says, 'the hair was beautiful! It had grown out until it covered everything--the finest head of hair I ever saw on anyone! But the rest of it--oh, I'm sorry that I looked!'¹

Throughout the painful recital of her story, Mrs. Flood seemed oblivious of the presence of the two listeners who "had stood transfixed, a look of horror on their faces."² Neither did she appear to notice Margaret and George after she had finished. Instead, she stood thoughtfully in front of Amelia's tombstone and reflected about the bitterness of domestic strife between husband and wife, carried even beyond the grave, yet which in the darkening loneliness of the cemetery suddenly seemed to have lost its meaning: "'She lies here, and he's all alone in his own lot over there on the other side of town, and that old trouble that they had seems very far away.'"³ Mrs. Flood concluded her reflections with a typical platitude, although one which curiously she seemed to express with "deep conviction":⁴

'I believe that they have joined each other and are reconciled and happy. I believe I'll meet them some day in a Higher Sphere, along with all my other friends--all happy, and all leading a new life.'⁵

In these closing sentimental remarks of Mrs. Flood, it was almost as if Eliza Gant, having been given a final

¹Ibid., p. 107. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

insight into the meaning of her own life, were commenting sincerely about the pointlessness of the bitter feud which she and Gant had waged throughout most of their married life. Wolfe seems to have intended this meaning, for after this final episode in which Eliza, Aunt Maw, and Amelia each has her role, no more actual mothers of the protagonist appear in the remainder of You Can't Go Home Again. With regard to the search for the father, the disappearance of the mother suggests symbolically that the original dualism within the protagonist between the conflicting personalities of his father and mother as neurotic parents--that unmitigated struggle which had exaggerated his childish feelings of exile to such an extent that the search for the father later became psychologically compulsive--had at last been resolved.

The archetypal dualism was not resolved, however, and Mrs. Flood's conversation at the conclusion of the burial episode was incidentally connected with this controlling theme. The talkative old woman had relapsed into the role of civic booster for Libya Hill when she laid her hand on the protagonist's shoulder and told him that after he had finished his wandering, he would discover one day that there was no better place to settle down and enjoy life than his home town: "'We've got a fine town here, and fine people to make it go--and we're not done yet.'"¹ After finishing her little speech, Mrs. Flood paused momentarily, as if she were

¹Ibid., p. 108.

waiting for Webber "to answer and corroborate her judgment."¹ He remained silent, but nodded to show that he had paid attention to what she had said. Taking the young man's nod for an agreement, the old woman continued:

'Your Aunt Maw always hoped that you'd come home again. And you will!' she said. 'There's no better or more beautiful place on earth than in these mountains--and some day you'll come home to stay.'²

The first section of You Can't Go Home Again was designed purposely by Wolfe to show why his protagonist felt that he could not "go home again."

IV

The second section of You Can't Go Home Again is called "The World That Jack Built," and throughout this section Wolfe has continued his investigation of the evils of materialism. The Jack in the title was the husband of the protagonist's mistress, Mrs. Esther Jack, with his name being symbolic. The slang word jack stands for money, and on this level, since Mr. Jack was a wealthy New York speculator, the title reads "The World That Big Money Built." Many of Wolfe's names, however, are also related to animals (see Fox Edwards, Piggy Logan, the business man as the Wounded Faun, etc.), and on this level, jack refers to the jackass as a masculine potency symbol in the same way that Mr. Rosen in The Web and the Rock was identified with a bull. The jackass as a potency

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

symbol, of course, has ludicrous connotations, and this also seems to have been a part of Wolfe's intention. In the novel Mr. Jack was the gulled husband as well as the false father image of the world of high finance.

The first section opens with a lengthy description of Mr. Frederick Jack's activities on a typical weekday morning before he left his Park Avenue to journey downtown to Wall Street. In this description Wolfe concentrated heavily on sense details; a technique which seems appropriate in light of his evaluation of the symbolic meaning of Mr. Jack's way of living. This financier, the image of the completely successful materialist who had realistically found happiness in the idols of power and physical comfort, might be only a "grain of living dust"¹ in the ultimate scheme of things, but within the security of his expensive New York apartment, he was "a plump atom of triumphant man's flesh, founded upon a rock of luxury at the center of the earth's densest web."² Moreover, he was a "Prince of Atoms"³ since only because of his great wealth, together with the aristocratic status which it supported, had he been able to purchase "the privileges of space, silence, light, and steel-walled security out of chaos with the ransom of an emperor."⁴ He was also the "Prince of Atoms" in that his materialistic values had reduced him to the sense-limited man.

Mr. Jack was not concerned, however, with philosophical

¹Ibid., p. 150. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

ambiguities, for as a practical-minded, successful financier he was certain that he had a much firmer grasp of reality than the intellectuals who might criticize his values. The "proof of the pudding" was the amount of money he actually had made on Wall Street, as well as the position in the world of privilege which the possession of that money enabled him and his family to maintain and enjoy. For this reason, Mr. Jack was not disturbed by the furious tempo of unending change which was apparent throughout most of the city's life. Always opposed to this change, at least in his realistic imagination, was the materialistic permanence of the New York skyscrapers, along with the fabulous wealth and power of the nation's business life which the soaring buildings so concretely represented:

Every cloud-lost spire of masonry was a talisman of power; a monument to the everlasting empire of American business. It made him feel good. For that empire was his faith,¹ his fortune, and his life. He had a fixed place in it.¹

Mr. Jack knew that most of the young people who came to the city from the small towns in America were ambitious for just what he had achieved in his own life: "All of them come looking for the same magic wand. Power. Power. Power."² Inevitably most of them would be defeated either by circumstance or lack of native ability, but a few potentially successful young people would defeat themselves. Mr. Jack did not have to fear even this kind of failure, for long ago he

¹Ibid., p. 156. ²Ibid., p. 153.

had mastered the compromising middle way until now no disturbance in his public or personal life could seriously unsettle him. This had necessarily involved a detachment from those areas of experience which were somewhat dangerous, together with a conscious kind of self-blinding to certain aspects of truth. If one wished to enjoy the practical rewards of success, however, Mr. Jack "had learned, like many men, to see, to marvel, to accept, and not to ask disturbing questions."¹

This helped account for the business man's fondness for a relatively simple-patterned world in which there was no room for the eccentric or the irregular, and in which everything had its ordered time and place. Paradoxically, this was another reason that the life in the big city appealed to Mr. Jack, for even in the streaming crowds on the pavements:

he saw order everywhere. It was order that made the millions swarm at morning to their work in little cells, and swarm again at evening from their work to other little cells. It was an order as inevitable as the seasons, and in it Mr. Jack read the same harmony and permanence which he saw in the entire visible universe around him.²

The order which the financier observed actually existed in his pastoral imagination, not in the life of the city, as he mistakenly assumed, nor relevantly, at least with regard to his own private experience, in the "visible universe." In this respect, the practical-minded Mr. Jack was a romantic solipsist, much like Wolfe's narcissistic protagonist in the

¹Ibid., p. 151. ²Ibid.

first two novels, and his vision of the world was equally an unrealistic projection of his wishful thinking and self-love.

Mr. Jack was a materialist who liked things which were solidly grounded and which gave the impression that the familiar world which he experienced from day to day was completely real and permanently secure. For this reason, whenever he detected a slight vibration in the stone walls of the apartment building in which he lived, he invariably "paused, frowning, and an old unquiet feeling to which he could not give a name stirred in his heart."¹ Shortly after moving to his Park Avenue address, Mr. Jack had been informed by the doorman that the re-occurring tremor in the walls of the apartment building was the result of its having been constructed over two depths of railroad tunnels. If some train passed "deep in the bowels of the earth,"² the building shook very slightly. The doorman then had assured Mr. Jack that there was nothing to get alarmed about: "the very trembling in the walls, in fact, was just another proof of safety."³ Even so, the business man would have liked it much better if the tall building, a symbol of the permanence and stability of his world, "had been anchored on solid rock."⁴

Mr. Jack as the sense-limited materialist was interested first, in power, and second, in physical comfort; moreover, both of these interests could be used to subdue any

¹Ibid., p. 152. ²Ibid., p. 153. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

vague fears which threatened to undermine his complacency. In order to emphasize the attention which Mr. Jack paid to his "creature comforts," Wolfe described in detail the business man's sensuous responses when he awoke in the morning: the way his face and muscles felt, the quality of the October air in the room, and the lush softness of the carpet as his naked feet groped for his expensive slippers of red Russian leather. Later, in his description of Mr. Jack's activities in the bathroom, Wolfe went to extreme lengths in his use of concrete physical detail to suggest the materialist's attachment to anything which contributed to his bodily pleasure. In Mr. Jack's case, however, the increase in comfort had been achieved at the expense of almost all strong or passionate feeling. In Wolfe's artistic vision, in other words, the successful materialist, like the real estate promoters in Libya Hill, was emotionally and spiritually an emasculated man, and the chapter closes symbolically with Mr. Jack's uttering "a sigh, long, lingering, full of pleasure,"¹ as he "stepped carefully into the luxurious sunken tub"² in his bathroom "and settled his body slowly in its crystal-blue depths."³

In the next chapter devoted to Mr. Jack, Wolfe investigated the spiritual sterility implicit in the more nightmarish aspects of the world of high finance. Mr. Jack was driven to his office in Wall Street by a chauffeur in whose

¹Ibid., p. 161. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

"veins there seemed to throb, instead of blood, the crackling electric current by which the whole city moved."¹ It was an "unnatural and unwholesome"² energy which seemed completely divorced from nature, and for this reason, it was able to evoke in the ego-centric imagination of the wealthy financier, "an image of the world he lived in that was theatrical and phantasmal."³ Instead of seeing himself and his driver as they really were, two relatively unimportant human beings among the seven million inhabitants of New York City, Mr. Jack visualized both of them "as two cunning and powerful men pitted triumphantly against the world."⁴ On this score, Mr. Jack again was little different from Wolfe's protagonist in the first two novels, since each man regarded the city as an antagonist against which he hurled his unusual strength, "with the phantasmagoric chaos of its traffic, the web of the streets swarming with people . . . nothing more than a tremendous backdrop for his own activities."⁵ With the wealthy financier, this sense of conflict had been fused into the core of his personality, and Mr. Jack, exulting in the power which had come from his successful speculations on Wall Street in the intoxicating world of high finance, felt a "heady joy as he rode downtown to work"⁶ and sensed the impending "menace, conflict, cunning, power, stealth, and victory, and, above everything else, the sense of privilege"⁷ which were

¹Ibid., p. 188. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 189. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

part of his life.

At an early age Mr. Jack had been confronted with the evil in other people, and he had discovered quickly that "if a man wanted to live in this world without getting his pockets picked, he had better learn how to use his eyes and ears on what was going on around him."¹ Of course, Mr. Jack was also an intelligent realist who had learned on his road to success when "not to use his eyes and ears"²--that is, when to be oblivious to evil. All of this made for a pleasant existence, and since success had made the speculator increasingly self-satisfied, he came to regard himself as essentially a moderate, self-controlled, well-meaning, civilized individual who had learned that almost always "the secret of wise living was founded in a graceful compromise, a tolerant acceptance."³ The withdrawal-return emotional and spiritual dualism held no attraction for this eminently realistic, urbane inhabitant of the world of privilege.

Mr. Jack, like most other practical-minded business men "in the glamorous, unreal, and fantastic world of speculation,"⁴ had a minimum of faith in human nature; neither was he upset unduly by the unpleasant truth "that every man had his price, just as every woman had hers."⁵ Since no person could really be trusted, Mr. Jack derived a certain amount of "cynical amusement"⁶ from the knowledge that his drivers

¹Ibid., p. 160. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 187.

⁵Ibid., p. 190. ⁶Ibid.

were swindling him constantly, or that a steady supply of clothing, food, and drink disappeared from his household via most of the maids: "All of this was so much of a piece with what went on every day in big business and high finance that he hardly gave it a thought."¹ In addition, Mr. Jack was privileged to feel indifferent because he was so convinced of the security of his own economic position:

He was convinced that the fabric of his world was woven from threads of steel, and that the towering pyramid of speculation would not only endure, but would grow constantly greater. Therefore, the defections of his servants were mere peccadillos, and didn't matter.²

We have already mentioned that Wolfe during the 1930's was typically "left-wing" in his economic criticism of the weaknesses of the capitalistic system, and that on this level his exposure of the corruption existing in the so-called "world of privilege" seems dated today. It has also been emphasized that Wolfe had a more primary interest in spiritual evil, as opposed merely to economic corruption, and that his examination and criticism of "the world that big money built" on this level still has meaning. Mr. Jack, the false father figure of a world of high finance devastated by materialistic values, was at the same time a spiritually blind man incapable of making any real distinctions between the true and the false. In this regard, as Wolfe stressed, Mr. Jack and the other members of his class certainly were not "the most practical, and hard-headed men alive";³ instead, they were

¹Ibid., p. 191. ²Ibid. ³Ibid.

romantic creatures "tranced by fatal illusions."¹ Their central illusion, despite their cynical awareness of the corruption in other people, sprang from a refusal to come to terms with the spiritual reality of evil within themselves, reinforced by the stereotyped emotional pattern of their lives.

The favorite cocktail stories of Mr. Jack and his business friends "had to do with some facet of human chicanery, treachery, and dishonesty."² Still, most of these people, if Mr. Jack might serve as an example, were smugly content with themselves, and, in a very real sense, since they had no mature father image against which to measure their incompleteness, were unconcerned about the destructive consequences of the egotism which controlled their actions. In addition, they shared the genuine indifference of fashionably sophisticated men and women to the importance of the creative principle in their lives, as well as the cynical dismissal of the transforming power of love, especially in a single, meaningful human relationship.

Emotionally and spiritually the materialistic world of cynical privilege to which these people belonged was truly a counterfeit pastoral world of ravaged innocence in which the soaring towers of the New York skyscrapers, their talismen of narcissistic power and prestige, were built not on rock, but like Mr. Jack's apartment building, were constructed over the sterile, menacing emptiness of tunnels deep

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 192.

within the bowels of the earth. For this reason, it did not seem surprising to Wolfe to recall, after the stock market crash in the autumn of 1929, the number of once wealthy men who "were so little capable of facing harsh reality and truth that they blew their brains out or threw themselves from the high windows of their offices into the streets below";¹ or the other men from the world of privilege, who, even though they were not ruined by the crash, during the bleak financial years of the depression "shrank and withered into premature and palsied senility."² In Wolfe's fiction, therefore, on the primary level of his artistic vision, the collapse of the American economy at the close of the 1920's at least had the therapeutic effect of bringing to the surface of our national life the sterility which emotionally and spiritually had provided the foundation for the materialistic debauch of an immature people during the years of illusion which followed World War I.

The central symbolism in this section of the novel, "The World That Jack Built," was connected with the party given by Esther Jack the night of October 17, 1929, only a week before the Wall Street financial crash. This party, attended by guests from the world of privilege, was climaxed by an unscheduled fire which got completely out of control before it was finally extinguished by the fire department in the early hours of the morning. The fire, patently related to the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

stock market catastrophe, gave the wealthy residents of the Park Avenue apartment building a momentary sense of reality which was not false. Actually all of the incidents connected with the party, including the fire, take place within a twenty-four hour period, as if Wolfe, throughout this section, were attempting to illuminate the true meaning of the crash by documenting as concretely as possible the quality of living enjoyed by a few favored people at the top of the economic class structure in America.

The protagonist's wealthy mistress, like her husband, Mr. Jack, was a materialist, but she was, in addition, a sensitive, attractive woman who, because of her somewhat genuine interest in people and art, had been able to preserve more of her native emotional warmth, spontaneity, and creative vitality than either her husband or the other members of their privileged class. The falseness was in Esther, nevertheless, and as first revealed in The Web and the Rock, Wolfe connected it with the middle-aged woman's emotional and spiritual allegiance to innocence. In other words, Esther's uncritical vanity, mixed with atavistic emotions which were still attached, in memory at least, to a childhood which seemed uncorrupted, was a true expression of her narcissistic blindness to the evil within herself.

In Wolfe's fiction whenever a character has been given alert sensuous perceptions, it almost always indicates that the author believed that the character had retained some part

of his or her creative vitality. In the description of Mrs. Jack waking up in the morning, therefore, Wolfe's statement that "she woke like a child, completely alert and alive, instantly awake all over and with all sleep shaken clearly from her mind and senses the moment that she opened her eyes,"¹ was not written to be interpreted merely as the author's criticism of the grown woman's false nostalgia for innocence. When Wolfe described the narcissistic pleasure which Esther derived from visualizing herself as a human being in the role of the grown-up child, however, he was emphasizing what he found to be most spurious in the woman's personality, and why he finally became convinced that to save his own integrity, he had to break away permanently from this possessive image of the "child-sorceress" mother. Throughout the remainder of the description of Esther's waking up in the morning, Wolfe skillfully stressed these ironic implications behind Esther's childish vanity to prepare the stage for his protagonist's decision at the end of the party to bring their love affair to a close.

Esther was still in the role of the sensuous child after she had flung back the covers from her bed and had started to examine, with an "expression of childlike wonder and vanity,"² each marvelous part of "her small opulent body."³ She observed "her small feet with a look of wonder and delight,"⁴ for "the sight of her toes in perfect and solid alignment

¹Ibid., p. 162. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

and of their healthy, shining nails filled her with pleasure."¹ Next she surveyed her "deft and beautiful hands,"² and as she slowly raised her left arm, revolving her hand at the same moment, she watched with "fascinated eyes . . . how the small and delicate wrist obeyed each command of her will."³ Then she slowly lifted her other arm, "and turned both hands upon their wrists, still gazing at them with a tender concentration of delight."⁴ Esther was delighted with her hands not only because, in her own estimation, they were physically attractive, but because their brown narrow backs and shapely fingers were connected with her success as a theatrical designer: "What magic! she thought. What magic and strength are in them! God, how beautiful they are, and what things they can do!"⁵ Most important of all, the aesthetic design which her hands so competently shaped was "always the clear design, the line of life, running like a thread of gold all through me back to the time I was a child."⁶

After Esther had finished the narcissistic examination of her hands and arms, she leaned her head downwards and observed the remainder of her body, touching approvingly "the full outline of her breasts, and the smooth contours of her stomach, thighs, and legs."⁷ When this inspection was over, she lay for a few minutes motionless upon her back: "toes evenly in line, limbs straight, head front, eyes staring

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 163. ³Ibid., p. 162. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid., p. 163.

gravely at the ceiling--a little figure stretched out like a queen for a burial, yet still warm, still palpable, immensely calm and beautiful, as she thought."¹ Esther was self-indulgently pleased with each part of her lovely, satin-fleshed body, and all at once, "as if the inventory of these possessions filled her with an immense joy and satisfaction, she sat up with a shining face"² and then arose quickly from her bed.

Esther had an appealing body, to be sure, but it was her "small, firm, and heart-shaped"³ face which revealed the ambiguous and "strange union of child and woman"⁴ in her personality. For this reason, whenever a stranger was introduced to Esther for the first time, he usually received the impression that "this woman must look exactly the way she did when she was a child. She can't have changed at all."⁵ At the same time, Esther's complexion and features were unquestionably those of a middle-aged woman; it was only when her "countenance was lighted by a merry and eager animation that the child's face was most clearly visible."⁶ Since Esther was invariably most animated when she was the center of attraction in a group of people, the casual acquaintances whom she had met under these circumstances, unaware of the "somber, brooding"⁷ side of her personality which frequently wrinkled her features "with a look of perplexity and grief . . . as of

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 164. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

something priceless that was lost and irrecoverable,"¹ usually remembered the woman best:

as a glowing, jolly, indomitably active and eager little creature in whose delicate face the image of the child peered out with joyfulness and immortal confidence. Then her apple-cheeks would glow with health and freshness, and when she came into a room, she filled it with her loveliness and gave to everything about her the color of morning life and innocence.²

Shortly after eight o'clock on the night of October 17, 1929, the wealthy, cynically assured guests began to assemble in the Jacks' apartment. Each of the guests for this particular part was intentionally selected by Wolfe as the type of person who in real life would have attended such an affair. In addition, the guests were supposed to form enough of a representative group from the materialistic world of privilege to make convincing Wolfe's attack upon their emotional and spiritual decadence, with the party itself being employed as a symbol.

It is impossible in this chapter to describe the symbolic roles of the important people at the party, except to comment that with almost every guest, Wolfe used sexual corruption as the basis for his preliminary attack. Wolfe, in other words, revealed a sterility of his own through his somewhat Calvinistic preoccupation with sexual evil as the inevitable indicator of emotional and spiritual decadence. Nevertheless, since the two so frequently are joined, Wolfe's criticism of the men and women at the party still has some

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 165.

pertinence if the reader is willing to overlook the puritanical bias in the author's treatment.

The guest at the party whose genuinely ruined innocence provided an ironic foil to Esther's affected childishness was Amy Carleton. Amy was an extremely wealthy heiress whose personality, even though she was still a young woman, had already reached such a state of disintegration that her speech consisted principally of incoherent "splintered phrases."¹ Nevertheless, the young woman's "elflike head with its unbelievable harvest of ebony curls, the snub nose and the little freckles . . . radiant with an almost boyish quality of animation and enthusiasm,"² seemed almost incredibly to have preserved the "freckled, laughing image of happy innocence."³ But Amy was certainly not innocent. Her recent past was notorious, and what was rumored to be true was even more shameless than what had been publicized in the metropolitan tabloids: sordid rumors of an American heiress who had been discovered by the police "in the corruptest gatherings of Paris, drugged fathoms deep in opium, foul-bodied and filth-bespat-tered, cloying in the embraces of a gutter rat, so deeply rooted in the cesspool that it seemed she must have been bred on sewage and had never known any other life."⁴

Pampered with every luxury as a girl, Amy Carleton had quickly become the willing "slave to her advantages. Her

¹Ibid., p. 250. ²Ibid., p. 246. ³Ibid., p. 247.

⁴Ibid., p. 248.

wealth had set a premium on every whim, and no one had ever taught her to say no."¹ In this respect, her life as a young girl had been little different from that of many other daughters of the rich. As Amy grew older, she had become increasingly "the child of her own time,"² and her life had begun to express itself "in terms of speed, sensational change, and violent movement, in a feverish tempo that never drew from its own energies exhaustion or surcease, but mounted constantly to insane excess."³

The sterile kind of life in which Amy was involved had turned her interests to "things more bizarre and sinister and hidden,"⁴ and in these more depraved pursuits, again "her wealth and powerful connections opened doors to her which were closed to other people."⁵ At length her self-indulgent career had reached its completely degenerate phase, yet even then Amy had "possessed an intimate and extensive acquaintance among the most sophisticated and decadent groups in 'Society,' in all the great cities of the world."⁶ This hopelessly promiscuous, devastated woman, protected by her connections with the world of corrupt privilege, was Wolfe's symbol of the "will-to-death" behind the materialist's irresponsible infatuation with sensation at the expense of his or her true emotional and spiritual nature:

It seemed, therefore, that her wealth and power and feverish energy could get her anything she wanted in any

¹Ibid., p. 248. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

country of the world. People had once said: 'What on earth is Amy going to do next?' But now they said: 'What on earth is there left for her to do?' If life is to be expressed solely in terms of velocity and sensation, it seemed there was nothing left for her to do. Nothing but more speed, more change, more violence, more sensation--until the end. And the end? The end could only be destruction, and the mark of destruction was already apparent upon her. It was written in her eyes--in her tormented, splintered, and exploded vision. She had tried everything in life--except living. And she could never try that now because she had so long ago, and so irrevocably, lost the way.¹ So there was nothing left for her to do except to die.¹

Amy Carleton had already been pointed out to George Webber before he attended Esther's party, but even if he had not known who she was or had been ignorant of the scandalous story of her life, he believed "he would have guessed a part of it by the tragic look of lost innocence in her face."² This expression, he now clearly understood, like the sterile values permeating the world of privilege which had contributed to Amy's ruin, was a counterfeit image of innocence which no longer served to camouflage the depravity underneath. As the protagonist continued to stare "at that elflike head, that snub nose, that boyishly eager face,"³ surrounded by a group of lecherous men, who reminded him "of a pack of dogs trailing after a bitch in heat,"⁴ he realized suddenly that he was actually "looking at the dread Medusa,"⁵ or at some enchantress of Circean cunning whose life was older than the

¹Ibid., p. 249. ²Ibid., p. 259. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵In Wolfe's fiction "Medusa" is probably the most mythical archetype of the "sorceress mother."

ages and whose heart was old as hell."¹

The degenerate waste and sterility in the life of Amy Carleton was a convincing symbol to Wolfe's protagonist that the myth of lost innocence, which included Esther Jack's delight in being the eternal child, had neither emotional nor spiritual validity in a fallen world. Rather the myth of innocence was the central illusion to which the self-pitying egotist gave his allegiance whenever he sought to justify his refusal to face the ugly moral implications of the evil which had always been active in his life.

In Wolfe's fiction, on the primary level of his artistic vision, every man is spiritually corrupt, but the force inside man which gives that corruption the energy it needs to become viciously destructive in terms of human relationships is his self-pitying egotism in combination with his emotional and spiritual sterility. This is the reason that Wolfe believed that the cynical acceptance of evil was potentially so dangerous in a materialistic culture whose shallow values operated as a defense against attaching too much spiritual importance to either good or evil.

With regard to his own corruption, George Webber, during the opening hours of the party, had become increasingly scornful as he witnessed "these repeated signs of decadence in a society which had once been the object of his envy and his highest ambition."² Later he had remembered that he was

¹Ibid., p. 246. ²Ibid., p. 259.

in no position to feel superior to most of these people since he was a guest at the party solely because of his adulterous relationship with a wealthy man's wife. At the same time, he was unable to make a sympathetic identification with the other guests, and their cynical tolerance especially disturbed him:

Yes, all these people looked at one another with untelling eyes. Their speech was casual, quick, and witty. But they did not say the things they knew. And they knew everything. They had seen everything. They had accepted everything. And they received every new intelligence now with a cynical and amused look in their untelling eyes. Nothing shocked them any more. It was the way things were. It was what they had come to expect of life.¹

At the close of this reflection, Webber came to the conclusion that the decadence in the lives of the men and women who composed the world of privilege could not be separated from "their attitude of acceptance . . . their complaisance about themselves and about their life, their loss of faith in anything better."² If the protagonist, through his immoral relationship with a wealthy woman, remained in close contact with this kind of cynical acceptance, he believed that eventually he would become apathetic about the sterility and evil in his own life. When this happened, whatever integrity he possessed as an artist would vanish also, and "this was one of the reasons, he now knew, why he did not want to be sealed in this world that Esther belonged to."³ The reality of spiritual corruption in the world of privilege,

¹Ibid., p. 260. ²Ibid., p. 263. ³Ibid., p. 260.

as well as within himself, left him no other choice.

Again it should be stressed that Wolfe's conception of evil as a romantic writer and left-wing liberal was entirely different from his primary vision of evil as an archetypal artist with a puritanical bias. In the first role Wolfe was a sentimentalist who tended to connect evil with imperfect systems and who felt free to generalize glibly in terms of a pastoral approach to the world. In the second role Wolfe was almost Calvinistic in his insistence that man is a hopelessly fallen creature.

In Wolfe's artistic vision, however, the hopelessness of man's symbolic fall does not mean that he is free to deny the existence of evil for his own selfish ends or to abandon the spiritual struggle within himself merely because it is inexorably doomed to failure. Moreover, whenever man embraces this kind of cynical dismissal of evil, it has the same meaning in terms of his human potential as the pastoral return to the feminine principle of the withdrawal-return dualism. In other words, as soon as evil has lost its spiritual significance in his life, man soon becomes the uncritical slave of his possessive egotism, and by so doing makes an atavistic return to his childhood dependency upon the "child-sorceress" mother. Because of the castrating nature of this pastoral return, gradually he becomes emotionally and spiritually impotent. Once in this condition, which is the nightmarish "life-in-death" existence of the memory

ravaged neurotic chained pitilessly to a determining past, he is compulsively driven to seek relief from his frustrations either by lapsing into a state of extreme depression or by actively hating and destroying others, as well as himself, in a world stripped of meaning.

When the compulsive drive to hate and destroy takes precedence over the human need to love and create, man's will-to-die, using Freudian language, has become more urgent than his will-to-live. Wolfe, again on the primary level of his artistic vision, constantly made use of this dualism in interpreting the cultural failure of modern man, although he employed the phrases "love of life" and "love of death" in place of the Freudian "life will" and "death will." Of course, given the permanent vitality of the destructive forces within every individual, psychologically the product of an unholy union between the a-moral Id and the narcissistic Super-ego, man is capable of the most abominably cruel and perverse action once the will-to-die has gained an ascendancy in his life. This is particularly true when the individual's destructive egotism dovetails with the values of a pastoral culture in which evil is no longer spiritually real.

Wolfe believed that Nazi Germany during the 1930's provided a terrifying example of just this kind of atavistic culture which had blinded itself to the ineradicable evil in human nature. (In Wolfe's fiction, the same criticism applies generally to all Fascist and Marxian cultures.) In this

regard, Hitler and the other leading Nazis were not only sterile, vicious people themselves in whom the death-will had triumphed, but the nation which they had helped create supported a similar death-will in all of its subjects. In Wolfe's fiction, therefore, Hitlerism symbolically represented a return to "the dark ancestral cave, the womb from which mankind emerged into the light."¹ This archetypal womb was the death-will operating in a pastoral setting of savage primitivism--the most ancient and primitive of all archetypes representing the destructively a-moral "child-sorceress" feminine principle.

George Webber was critical of the world of privilege in America because he was still too much the callow egotist who found it re-assuring to identify spiritual evil with an abstract economic system. In the submerged part of his personality, however, he was fearful of this world to which his mistress belonged because it represented a self-defeating return to the myth of lost innocence as the justification for corruption. In this respect, the protagonist believed that the decadence which he observed in the wealthy men and women at Jack's party conformed incipiently to the pattern which was responsible for the entrenchment of evil in any culture, and which, in his puritanical imagination, invariably expressed its potentially vicious nature by an attachment to the sexually perverse. This kind of spiritual decadence,

¹Ibid., p. 704.

pampered by an economic system in which the people at the top were irresponsibly wealthy, helped account for "the whole tissue of these princely lives, he felt, these lesbian and pederastic loves, these adulterous intrigues, sustained in mid-air now, floating on the face of night like a starred veil."¹ Also it helped explain Esther's selection of Mr. Piggy Logan and his circus of wire dolls to provide the entertainment for her party.

Throughout history every ruling class has had its favorite buffoon, and it was Wolfe's impression that the homosexual entertainer, represented at the party by Mr. Piggy Logan, had acquired such a role in the sterile world of privilege during the 1920's:

Webber knew that the people of this fellow's type and gender were privileged personalities, the species being regarded tenderly as a cross between a lap dog and a clown. Almost every fashionable hostess considered them essential functionaries at smart gatherings like this. Why was it, George wondered. Was it something in the spirit of the times that had let the homosexual usurp the place and privilege of a hunchbacked jester of an old king's court, his deformity become a thing of open jest and ribaldry? However it had come about, the thing itself was indubitable. The mincing airs and graces of such a fellow, his antics and his gibes, the spicy sting of his feminine and envenomed wit, were the exact counterparts of the malicious quips of ancient clowns.²

The simpering, pasty-faced Piggy Logan, with his "hips that wiggled suggestively as he walked,"³ was unashamedly a homosexual, yet as he minced effeminately among the guests, speaking in a high-pitched voice and accentuating his bawdy

¹Ibid., p. 261. ²Ibid., p. 259. ³Ibid.

remarks with "a maidenly gesture of his wrist,"¹ the comical effect seemed to be so irresistible with most of the guests that "the ladies shrieked with laughter, and the gentlemen spluttered and guffawed."²

As a prologue to Mr. Piggy Logan's entertainment, a typewritten paper of instructions was read to the audience which contained the advice that to enjoy the circus, each of the guests had to "make an effort to recover his lost youth and have the spirit of a child again."³ After the prologue had been read, the fatuously pleased Piggy began to manipulate his wire dolls in such an amateurish fashion that his audience quickly grew bored. Piggy was oblivious to the reaction of his audience, however, and his performance was not only embarrassing because of his clumsiness but because it seemed interminable as well. For the grand climax, the famous sword-swallowing act, Piggy raised a small rag doll in one hand, and with his other free hand "took a long hairpin, bent it more or less straight, forced one end through the fabric of the doll's mouth, and then began patiently and methodically to work it down the rag throat."⁴

The sadistic nature of this performance at first made the guests smile at each other "in a puzzled, doubting way."⁵ Unfortunately Piggy ran into quite a bit of difficulty ramming the pin down the doll's stuffed body, and whenever "some

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 279. ⁴Ibid., p. 280.

⁵Ibid.

impediment of wadding got in his way he would look up and giggle foolishly."¹ This performance "went on and on until it began to be rather horrible,"² and for some time before the final act was over, a number of the guests had already retreated from the living room to the hall. Still the homosexual persisted in his sadistic exhibition:

As Mr. Logan kept working and pressing with his hair-pin, suddenly the side of the bulging doll was torn open and some of the stuffing began to ooze out. Miss Lily Mandell watched with an expression of undisguised horror and, as the doll began to lose its entrails, she pressed one hand against her stomach in a gesture of nausea, said 'Ugh!'--and made a hasty exit. Others followed her. And even Mrs. Jack, who at the start of the performance had slipped on a wonderful jacket of gold thread and seated herself cross-legged on the floor like a dutiful child, squarely before the maestro and his puppets, finally got up and went into the hall, where most of her guests were now assembled.³

One of the assembled guests, glancing with irritation at the living room where Piggy was "still patiently carrying on,"⁴ muttered wearily to his hostess: "'It's like some puny form of decadence.'"⁵ Mr. Piggy Logan and his circus of wire dolls, this "puny form of decadence," had the symbolic role in Wolfe's novel of connecting false innocence, sexual perversion, and sadism with the emotional and spiritual sterility of Esther Jack and her friends from the world of moneyed privilege.

In the archetypal imagination of Wolfe, the father image was associated with the protagonist's search for creative vitality and the capacity to love in a fallen world in which

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 282. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

evil was spiritually real. Since the wealthy people at the party belonged to a materialistic society whose members cynically excused evil because invariably they related it to the unprincipled selfishness and cruelty in others, and almost never to the destructive egotism within themselves, their world was symbolically a pastoral setting governed by the values of lost innocence. For this reason, it was impossible for the world of privilege to contain an adequate father image, and Wolfe's protagonist, in his quest for emotional and spiritual maturity, had to search elsewhere if he ever expected to find what he was looking for.

We have already pointed out that Wolfe employed the apartment building in which the Jacks lived to symbolize the dubious pastoral foundation upon which was grounded the faith of the so-called hard-headed, realistic business men who controlled the world of big money. Mr. Jack was a successful financier who was convinced that he and his rich friends, by not permitting themselves to be deceived by anything in life connected with the impractical or visionary, had remained in pristine contact with reality: that is, in contact with a materialistic reality which could be enjoyed and trusted as well as exploited. This explained Mr. Jack's fondness for the stone apartment building in which he lived, since, if only he dismissed its slight tremors, it left the comforting impression in his mind that the values of the business world were likewise solidly grounded on the hard bedrock of money

and common sense.

We have also suggested that in Wolfe's artistic vision, the practical-minded Mr. Jack was not regarded as a realist at all, but as merely another variety of the romantic ego-tist who had made and accepted a pastoral return to the feminine principle in his emotional and spiritual life. This return necessarily involved a willing acceptance of those illusions which supported his private desire, but it had nothing to do with the successful materialist's being able to distinguish clearly between the real and the false in life. Actually, in terms of final values, the sense-limited Mr. Jack was the man with fatal illusions, not the realist at all. In this respect, the massive stone apartment building in which he lived, an archetypal symbol like so many of the houses in Wolfe's fiction, was an image of the false father in American culture of the pastoral values of big business:

The building was so grand, so huge, so solid-seeming, that it gave the impression of having been hewn from the everlasting rock itself. Yet this was not true at all; the mighty edifice was really tubed and hollowed like a giant honeycomb. It was set on monstrous steel stilts, pillared below on vacancy, and sustained on curving arches. Its nerves, bones, and sinews went down below the level of the street to an underworld of storied basements, and below all these, far in the tortured rock, there was the tunnel's depth.¹

The fire in the apartment building broke out after the party at Jacks' was over and most of the guests had already departed. Shortly after the people in the building realized

¹Ibid., p. 197.

that it was on fire, part of the electric current failed and a large number of the rooms and hallways instantly became dark. By this time the smoke from the fire was circulating rapidly throughout the building, and the tenants in the darkened apartments were searching frantically for candles to help guide them through the unlighted corridors and down the stairways to the safety of the outside streets or courtyard. Although the elevator service had broken down when the electricity failed, there was a feeble current passing through the dim lights on the service stairways. Even so, the tenants, who only a few minutes before had been so complacently secure in their expensive apartments, still clung to their candles when they reached the stairs "with an instinctive feeling that these primitive instruments were now more to be trusted than the miracles of science."¹

Wolfe believed that people who failed to confirm their emotional and spiritual knowledge through the withdrawal-return dialectic usually remained prisoners of their egotism. The inhabitants of the apartment house represented this kind of people, and, in this respect, their money had enabled them to preserve intact the walls which safeguarded their narcissistic isolation. Ironically, under the leveling pressure of the circumstances attending the fire, which left these people faced with a menacing, naturalistic environment in which their money suddenly lost its protective power, their

¹Ibid., p. 292.

interior barriers had quickly broken down, freeing their sympathies and permitting them for a few hours to respond to each other as human beings:

And in a little while, as the excitement and their need for communication broke through the walls of their reserve, they began to show a spirit of fellowship such as that enormous beehive of life had never seen before. People who, at other times, had never deigned to so much as nod at each other were soon laughing and talking together with the familiarity of long acquaintance.¹

At first the basement of the building seemed to be the only section on fire, and the tenants, all of whom had managed to escape safely from their upper-floor apartments, were milling in the large inner courtyard. The crowd was well-behaved for the most part, with the exception of Philip J. Baer, an influential motion picture executive, who was hysterical about the "seventy-five million dollars' worth of records"² which still remained in his bachelor quarters. Mr. Baer had been in another part of the city when the fire started, and as he attempted to push his way into the building, he was warned by a policeman guarding one of the entrances that he could not enter.

To the cinema executive, "the effect of this refusal was instantaneous and shocking,"³ for "the one principle of Mr. Baer's life was that money is the only thing that counts because money can buy anything."⁴ Yet here he was suddenly faced with an unfamiliar situation in which his money no longer seemed to possess its unquestioning power:

¹Ibid., p. 292. ²Ibid., p. 296. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

So the naked philosophy of tooth and claw, which in moments of security and comfort was veiled beneath a velvet sheath, now became ragingly insistent. A tall, dark man with a rapacious, beak-nosed face, he became now like a wild animal, a beast of prey. He went charging about among the crowds of people, offering everyone fabulous sums if they would save his cherished records.¹

The hysterical executive ran to a group of firemen, seized one of them frantically by the shoulder, and shouted that he, Philip J. Baer, would pay the man ten thousand dollars just to retrieve his records. The fireman replied that he didn't care who Mr. Baer was supposed to be, and pushed "the great man" roughly aside.

The fire had not seemed too serious at first, but when all of the illumination in the building suddenly went off, the police began to direct the people in the courtyard to the outside streets. As this maneuver was taking place, the conversation of most of these rich men and women still remained "friendly and casual,"² except that in their voices there was a querulous "note of perturbation,"³ as if the fire represented an unnatural violation of their secure, well-ordered lives:

Men of wealth and power had been suddenly dispossessed from their smug nests with their wives, families, and dependents, and now there was nothing they could do but wait, herded homelessly into drug stores and hotel lobbies, or huddled together in their wraps on street corners like ship-wrecked voyagers, looking at one another with helpless eyes.⁴

The fire as a symbol meant that these people from the world of privilege, despite their power and their arrogant

¹Ibid., p. 297. ²Ibid., p. 304. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

pretensions to being realistically in control of the economic life of the nation, were, like everyone else, caught in a financial web "whose ramifications were so vast and complicated that they had not the faintest notion where it began or what its pattern was."¹ Moreover, within a week the Wall Street crash would be all the proof necessary to indicate that something was seriously wrong with their materialistic values:

They were the lords and masters of the earth, vested with authority and accustomed to command, but now the control had been taken from them. So they felt strangely helpless, no longer able to command the situation, no longer able even to find out what was happening. But, in ways remote from their blind and troubled kenning, events had been moving to their inexorable conclusion.²

It was almost dawn before the fire was finally put out, and the spirit of the well-to-do tenants as they returned to their deserted apartments was completely different "from what it had been a few hours earlier."³ By this time "each little family group had withdrawn frigidly into its own separate entity,"⁴ and most of the returning apartment dwellers acted as if they were embarrassed by "the informality and friendliness that they had shown to one another during the excitement."⁵

Two of the building's elevator operators who were trapped in their steel cages when the electricity failed had been suffocated to death. Esther Jack was unaware of the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 313. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

death of these men when she remarked callously to the surviving operator in her part of the building that it had been such "a thrilling evening,"¹ and asked if ever before in his life he had known "such excitement, such confusion, as we had tonight?"² The childlike obliviousness of this wealthy woman to the suffering and tragedy in the lives of people outside her secure world of privilege, in combination with her cynical indifference to evil, was the reason at the close of this particular section of the novel that Wolfe's protagonist was able to make his final break from his mistress-mother: "he to his world, she to hers."³

V

The protagonist's first novel, Home to Our Mountains, had been published in the early part of November, 1929, and "the date, through the kind of accidental happening which so often affects the course of human events . . . coincided almost exactly with the beginning of the Great American Depression."⁴ The publication of the book, however, had produced results in Webber "quite different from any he had expected,"⁵ and although he learned a great deal during this period about his own life "that he had never known before . . . it was only gradually, in the course of the years to come, that he began to realize how the changes in himself were related

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 322. ⁴Ibid., p. 325.

⁵Ibid.

to the larger changes in the world around him."¹

The protagonist believed that in his novel he had managed "a naked directness and reality that was rather rare in books,"² and that it was this uncompromising honesty which had provoked his novel's hostile reception in Libya Hill. In other words, by the author's revealing the truth which exists beneath superficial appearance--that is, the false world of illusion to which most people both blindly and selfishly subscribe--it was as if "he had ripped off a mask that his home town had always worn, and "this was what people were afraid of. This was what made them mad."³

When Webber had visited Libya Hill the preceding summer for his Aunt Maw's funeral, "he had seen the boom-mad town tottering on the brink of ruin,"⁴ and he later realized that "madness such as this was unprepared to face reality and truth in any degree whatever."⁵ In addition, his home town was below the Mason-Dixon line, and the unwillingness of his townspeople to face the truth honestly was connected with something false and evil in the South: "something twisted, dark, and full of pain which Southerners have known all their lives--something rooted in their souls beyond all contradiction, about which no one had dared to write, of which no one had ever spoken."⁶

Several months after the publication of Webber's novel,

¹Ibid., p. 324. ²Ibid., p. 326. ³Ibid., p. 327.

⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

the Citizen's Trust Company of Libya Hill, the bank with Mr. Jarvis Riggs as its president, closed its doors. The same day the body of Mayor Baxter Kennedy, a large part of his head exposed by a gaping bullet wound, was discovered lying on the floor of Judge Bland's upstairs toilet room. The connection between the two happenings soon became common knowledge to the townspeople. At least two years before the actual failure of the bank, its directors knew that it was in a bad financial shape, and when this unsettling information reached the ears of "the cheerful, easy-going Mayor,"¹ he had gone to the bank's president to withdraw the city's funds. President Riggs, however, had been able to convince the Mayor that he could not jeopardize the future of the town's growth by going through with a major withdrawal which would wreck the bank:

'You can't sell Libya Hill short,' he said, using a phrase that was in great vogue just then. 'We've not begun to see the progress we're going to make. But the salvation and future of this town rests in your hands. So make up your mind about it. What are you going to do?'

The Mayor made up his mind. Unhappy man.²

Things drifted along, and although a vague rumor began to be circulated around the town that the Citizen's Trust Company was in trouble, few of its depositors believed it. On the surface there was apparently nothing to justify the ugly rumor, and, as a reassuring symbol of the bank's solidity, its physical appearance had remained unchanged: "The Citizen's

¹Ibid., p. 364. ²Ibid., p. 365.

Trust maintained its usual appearance of solid substance, business-like efficiency, and Greek templed sanctity,"¹ with its "broad plate-glass windows opening out upon the Square"² seeming "to proclaim to the world the complete openness and integrity of the bank's purpose."³ The townspeople could look for themselves to see that nothing was being hidden: "The bank is Libya, and Libya is the bank."⁴ Then came the fateful morning of March 12, 1930, when "the fastest-growing bank in the state"⁵ closed its doors. The bank's failure perhaps had been precipitated by the Wall Street crash, but in Wolfe's estimation it had not been caused by it. That cause was rooted in the emotional and spiritual sterility of the townspeople of Libya Hill which had been given concrete expression in the madness of the real estate boom.

The body of Mayor Kennedy had been discovered shortly before noon the day of the bank failure. The blind Judge Bland had gone to the toilet, prompted by the urgency of a call of nature, and pushing open the door leading into the darkened room, with its "pervasive smell of the tin urinal,"⁶ had stumbled against something with his feet. Leaning down to discover what the obstruction was, the blind man had unexpectedly plunged his white, emaciated fingers "into the foundering mass of what just five minutes before had been the face and brains of a living man."⁷ With regard to Wolfe's

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 366.

⁵Ibid., p. 368. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

artistic intention, the symbolic meaning behind Judge Bland's discovery, on the floor of a filthy toilet room, of the suicide of the Mayor of Libya Hill is clear. The sightless Judge, with his Calvinistic knowledge of evil, was the ironic guardian of the spiritual truth which the other townspeople had forgotten, just as the falsely optimistic Mayor, through his dishonest repudiation of evil, represented their spiritual blindness culminating in the crash as a kind of symbolic suicide:

So it was that weak, easy-going, procrastinating, good-natured Baxter Kennedy, Mayor of Libya Hill, was found--all that was left of him--in darkness by an evil old blind man.¹

According to Wolfe's interpretation, the depression revealed a "more corrosive ruin"² in American life than merely that accompanying the breakdown of an economic order in which nearly everyone had some kind of selfish stake: "And this deeper ruin--the essence of the catastrophe--was the ruin of human conscience."³ This was the reason that when real estate values collapsed in Libya Hill, "the town almost literally blew its brains out"⁴ for the people "had no inner resources with which to meet"⁵ their tragedy. Wolfe believed that the significance of the depression had been erroneously interpreted "in the learned tomes of the overnight economists as a breakdown of the system, the capitalist system."⁶ Instead it represented the inevitable consequences of a

¹Ibid., p. 369. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

betrayal by individual human beings of their emotional and spiritual resources:

It went much deeper than the mere obliteration of bank accounts, the extinction of paper profits, and the loss of property. It was the ruin of men who found out, as soon as these symbols of their outward success had been destroyed, that they had nothing left--no inner equivalent from which they might now draw new strength. It was the ruin of men who, discovering not only that their values were false but that they had never had any substance whatsoever, now saw at last the emptiness and hollowness of their lives. Therefore they killed themselves; and those who did not die by their own hands died by the knowledge that they were already dead.¹

The perplexing question was how to "account for such a complete drying up of all the spiritual sources in the life of a people?"²

Wolfe in his fiction had already provided a partial answer to this question, but in the next chapter, entitled "The Wounded Faun," he attempted to present his answer somewhat discursively. The protagonist and his friend Randy Shepperton were having a discussion in the author's New York apartment. Webber was in a discouraged, self-pitying mood because his book had aroused so much misunderstanding and bitterness in his home town. In order to defend himself, he began to explain to his friend "about the 'artist'"³ as a kind of privileged escapist who "could achieve his 'art' only through a constant state of flight into some magic wood, some province of enchantment."⁴ Therefore, anyone who aspired to be a real artist, Webber declared, was inexorably

¹Ibid., p. 370. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 383. ⁴Ibid.

"doomed to be an outcast from society. His inevitable fate was to be 'driven out by the tribe.'"¹

Randy Shepperton had replied bluntly that Webber, in this particular self-pitying mood, was affecting the role of "the wounded faun."² The protagonist painfully was forced to recognize the truth of his friend's criticism. With regard to the defects in Webber's first novel, the criticism also implied that too frequently the author had let "the false personal"³ distort the truth of his central artistic vision:

'There's the guilt. That's where the young genius business gets in--the young artist business, what you called a while ago the wounded faun business. It gets in and it twists the vision. The vision may be shrewd, subtle, piercing, within a thousand special frames accurate and Joycean--but within the larger one, false, mannered, and untrue. And the large one is the one that matters.'⁴

The larger vision in which the protagonist had failed was that of the romantic writer whose unresolved pastoral narcissism, "the wounded faun," had prevented him from detaching himself sufficiently from his creation to control its aesthetic form. Moreover, since the goal of Webber as a narcissistic artist had not been creative maturity, but instead that kind of public success which would confirm his self-esteem, together with enjoying the sense of power connected with the undisciplined exuberance of his creation, he had not been sufficiently disturbed by the romantic nature of his failure.

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 385. ⁴Ibid.

Now the protagonist realized that to develop and mature as an artist--in other words, to create "not just the record of my life--but something truer than the facts--something distilled out of my experience and transmitted into a form of universal application"¹--there could be "no more false personal, no more false pride, no more pettiness and injured feelings."² Instead he had to appraise as honestly as possible the distortion which his pastoral narcissism had produced in his fiction, and using his discovery of evil as the new foundation for his artistic vision, had to try "to kill the wounded faun"³ completely.

It was Wolfe's opinion that the failure of his protagonist to find a satisfactory image of the father in the pastoral values of success and power based on self-love again could be related to the emotional and spiritual sterility in American life which the depression had brought so disturbingly to the surface. The American business men, for example, at least in their private imaginations, were romantic individualists like Webber, and their struggle to obtain money and power in the financial world conformed to the same narcissistic pattern which had given a false meaning to his strenuous ambition to become famous as a writer. Again like the protagonist in Wolfe's fiction, the business men, when eventually confronted with the inadequacy of their values, were "afraid to think straight--afraid to face themselves--

¹Ibid., p. 387. ²Ibid., p. 386. ³Ibid.

afraid to look at things and see them as they are."¹ In other words, they too became self-pitying "wounded fauns":

Well, Randy had been right about the wounded faun. For George knew now that his own self-pity was just his precious egotism coming between him and the truth he strove for as a writer. What Randy didn't know was that business also had its wounded fauns. And they, it seemed, were a species that you could not kill so lightly. For business was the most precious form of egotism--self-interest at its dollar value. Kill that with truth, and what would be left?²

VI

The next section of You Can't Go Home Again is called "The Quest of the Fair Medusa," and the symbolism in this title relates significantly to the controlling dualism employed by Wolfe throughout most of his fiction, but especially in the first half of The Web and the Rock. In the mind of the protagonist, Fame was the "fair Medusa." It was fair because the structure of life which Fame suggested served as a false father image in his imagination after he had left Esther Jack and moved to Brooklyn. This meant that Webber, despite his increasing knowledge, had not yet had his intellectual disillusionment with Fame confirmed sufficiently by his own experience to make it completely real. Even at this late date, the protagonist still hoped that somehow by becoming, not just successful but actually famous and admired as a writer, he might be able to recover all of his lost emotional and spiritual vitality:

¹Ibid., p. 393. ²Ibid., p. 396.

And he felt then that things would be for him once more as they had been, and he saw again, as he had once seen, the image of the shining city. Far-flung and blazing into tiers of jeweled light, it burned forever in his vision as he walked the Bridge, and strong tides were bound around it, and the great ships called. So he walked the Bridge, always he walked the Bridge.¹

The jeweled city and the Bridge were at the same time both romantic, as well as archetypal, images of the protagonist's hope, not of the reality which lay ahead of him. In this regard, Fame was not even a father symbol at all, for the Medusa in the title indicates that Webber's attachment to fame was still part of his dependence upon the castrating feminine principle--the treacherous sorceress Medusa that turns men into stone--in his emotional and spiritual life. At the same time, the four years which Webber spent in Brooklyn did represent a meaningful "spiritual withdrawal," and to understand this phase of the mythical dualism, it is first necessary to digress on Wolfe's role as a religious writer.

Edward C. Aswell has written that Wolfe "was a deeply religious man in the unconventional and truest sense of the word,"² and the editor's observation seems to be supported by various statements in Wolfe's correspondence, together with the religious content of his essay "God's Lonely Man." Wolfe wrote to Maxwell Perkins (July 31, 1930) that during his recent lonely months in Europe, he had discovered that the Bible was superior even to Shakespeare:

¹Ibid., p. 398. ²HB, p. 381.

I have not read the Bible since I was a child--it is the most magnificent book that was ever written: when Walter Scott was dying, he called for 'The Book,' and they asked 'What book?' and he said 'There is only one'--and it is true. It is richer and grander than Shakespeare even, and everything else looks sick beside it.¹

Throughout the remainder of the letters, there are statements to document that Wolfe retained a serious interest in the Bible until he died.²

Edward Aswell has noted that among Wolfe's papers he found various drafts of "God's Lonely Man," and that the first draft, "written probably as early as 1930,"³ was entitled 'On Loneliness at Twenty-three.'⁴ This particular title was dropped in the later versions, no doubt because by then Wolfe realized "that loneliness was not a phenomenon confined to youth,"⁵ and because of his gradually increasing religious faith. In other words, the name of the deity in the title was not used ironically by Wolfe but reflected a new spiritual vision in which he actually had begun to see himself as "God's" lonely man. Again according to Aswell, the essay was written in the first person and has to be regarded as "straight autobiography."⁶

The first part of the essay, which includes a brief summary of Wolfe's personal experiences with loneliness from the time he was fifteen years old, serves as an introduction to

¹Nowell, p. 247. ²Ibid., pp. 255, 275, 324, 479, 748.

³This date coincides roughly with the period when Wolfe first developed a serious interest in the Bible.

⁴HB, pp. 380-81. ⁵Ibid., p. 381. ⁶Ibid., p. 380.

the last part. In the opening section Wolfe emphasized that even though his personal experience with loneliness had been extreme, he did not believe that his isolation had "been different in kind from that of other men,"¹ only sharper in intensity."² In fact, at least at the time he wrote the essay, it was his conviction "that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence."³ It was also his belief that loneliness helped account for the psychological dualism within all kinds of people, not only "the grief and ecstasy of the greatest poets, but also the hunger and huge unhappiness of the average soul."⁴ With regard to his own role as a writer, he had discovered that loneliness was unavoidably a part of the withdrawal-return dualism:

And the eternal paradox of it is that if a man is to know the triumphant labor of creation, he must for long periods resign himself to loneliness and suffer loneliness to rob him of his health, the confidence, the belief and joy which are essential to creative work. . . . then suddenly, one day, for no apparent reason, his faith and his belief in life will come back to him in a tidal flood. It will rise up in him with a jubilant and invincible power, bursting a window in the world's great wall and restoring everything to shapes of deathless brightness. Made miraculously whole and secure in himself, he will plunge once more into the triumphant labor of creation.⁵

On a romantic level, Wolfe's loneliness was the expression of his narcissism, but on a spiritual level,

¹Ibid., p. 187. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 186.

⁴Ibid., p. 187. ⁵Ibid., pp. 187, 189-90.

paradoxically, it represented "the surest cure for vanity."¹ This, he believed, accorded with the religious significance given to loneliness in the Bible. Wolfe's favorite books in the Old Testament were Job and Ecclesiastes, the former being "the most tragic, sublime, and beautiful expression of human loneliness"² which he had ever read, and the latter, "the grandest and most philosophical."³ These two Biblical books had convinced Wolfe that the emotional dualism within himself, which the psychologists might interpret merely as paranoia, belonged to an inclusive spiritual dualism which supported one ironic truth about human existence: namely, that "the lonely man, who is also the tragic man, is invariably the man who loves life dearly--which is to say, the joyful man."⁴ This was the reason that the book of Job, despite its almost unmitigated account of man's suffering and grief, was in its final meaning such an affirmative, joyful book:

For the book of Job, far from being dreary, gray, and dismal, is woven entire, more than any single piece of writing I can recall, from the sensuous, flashing, infinitely various and gloriously palpable material of great poetry; and it wears at the heart of its tremendous chant of everlasting sorrow, the exulting song of everlasting joy. . . . That is joy--joy solemn and triumphant; stern, lonely, everlasting joy, which has in it the full depth and humility of man's wonder, his sense of glory, and his feeling of awe before the mystery of the universe.⁵

In addition to the books of Job and Ecclesiastes,

¹Ibid., p. 187. ²Ibid., p. 190. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid., pp. 191-93.

Wolfe believed that the other books of the Old Testament, each in its way, was a history of man's loneliness, and that taken together, they provided "the most final and profound literature of human loneliness that the world has known."¹ Opposed to "the total, all contributory unity of this conception of man's loneliness"² was Christ's vision of the life of love, expressed throughout "the gospels of the New Testament with the same miraculous and unswerving unity."³ According to Wolfe's interpretation, the purpose of Christ's life was to destroy the life of loneliness here on earth by establishing in the hearts of men the life of love:

What Christ is saying always, what he never swerves from saying, what he says a thousand times and in a thousand different ways, but always with a central unity of belief, is this: 'I am my Father's son, and you are my brothers.' And the unity that binds us all together, and that makes this earth a family, and all men brothers and the sons of God, is love.⁴

Wolfe admitted that the "way and meaning of Christ's"⁵ life of love represented a "far, far better way and meaning"⁶ than the spiritual isolation which had figured so prominently in his own. Still he was unable to accept the Christian vision in good faith because from his own experience he had "found the constant, everlasting weather of man's life to be, not love, but loneliness."⁷ Wolfe closed his essay with a tribute to loneliness in keeping with the tone of some of the romantic apostrophes which he had included in

¹Ibid., p. 193. ²Ibid., p. 194. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 196. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

Of Time and the River and From Death to Morning.

Apparently by the time Wolfe wrote You Can't Go Home Again, his artistic vision had become more Christian, for throughout the latter half of the novel he emphasized man's brotherhood, not just his loneliness, in a world in which both love and evil are spiritually real. At the end of Wolfe's tetralogy, therefore, his controlling symbolic dualism (its representation in the fiction still affected by a schizophrenic division in the author between the sentimentalist and the artist with primary insight) had become a religious dualism between good and evil in a world whose spiritual values are implicitly in harmony with those of the New Testament which affirm the sanctity of the individual in the eyes of God.

With regard to the search for the father, the only conclusion which can be drawn from the climactic expression of the religious dualism in the closing chapters of Wolfe's fiction is that no human father could finally serve the protagonist as "the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."¹ That spiritual role of the father was reserved for God, just as the protagonist eventually had to discover within his own fallen nature the creative vitality and capacity to love rightfully associated now with the masculine image of the father as a mature, but

¹SN, p. 29.

imperfect, human being.

The archetypal search had not provided Wolfe's protagonist with any new formal knowledge which was unavailable in books, but it had given him the necessary emotional and spiritual experience to confirm that traditional knowledge and to make it meaningful in his own life. His personal discovery of evil was especially important in that it shattered enough of his narcissism, still umbilically connected with his dependence upon the feminine principle in a nostalgic world of lost innocence, to make possible his subsequent emotional maturity. The discovery of evil was also vital in that it gave that emotional maturity a spiritual definition in terms of the orthodox Christian interpretation of the dualism between good and evil in a fallen world.

The first chapter of Wolfe's abbreviated account of his protagonist's withdrawal into "the huge and rusty jungle of South Brooklyn,"¹ a bitter, prolonged experience which coincided with the worst period of the economic depression in America, is called "The Locusts Have No King." In this title the word locusts apparently refers to the swarms of inhabitants living in the naturalistic "jungle of Brooklyn" who remain undifferentiated as human beings because there is no adequate father symbol, either emotional or religious, in their world: that is, in the most sardonic sense of the word, they have "no king." For four grim years this forgotten

¹YCGHA, p. 399.

manswarm of the big city were Webber's neighbors--"for the most part Armenians, Italians, Spaniards, Irishmen, and Jews" living in "all the shacks, tenements, and slums in all the raw, rusty streets and alleys of South Brooklyn"¹--and during this time he learned a great deal about these people as suffering, complex human beings.

When the protagonist first came to Brooklyn, he rented a cellar room in one of the tenement districts of the city, and to a stranger this room might have appeared "more like a dungeon than a room that a man would voluntarily elect to live in."² Webber had selected such a place deliberately, however, "driven by a resolution to seek out the most forlorn and isolated hiding spot that he could find."³ For this "wilderness period of his life"⁴ he had "stripped himself down to the brutal facts of self and work,"⁵ and these were all he had to help him through four years of desperate experience: "lonely years, years of interminable writing and experimentation, years of exploration and discovery, years of grey timelessness, weariness, exhaustion, and self-doubt."⁶ Nevertheless, he had emerged from this experience freed from much of the self-pitying egotism which previously had distorted both his life and writing:

He saw himself more clearly now than he had ever done before, and, in spite of living thus alone, he no longer

¹Ibid., p. 400. ²Ibid., p. 399. ³Ibid., p. 401.

⁴Ibid., p. 408. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

thought of himself as a rare and special person who was doomed to isolation, but as a man who worked and who, like other men, was a part of life. He was concerned passionately with reality. He wanted to see things whole, to find out everything he could, and then to create out of what he knew the fruit of his own vision.¹

From a psychological viewpoint, the protagonist's need to isolate himself for four years in the slum region of Brooklyn can be interpreted as a masochistic compulsion to control his neurotic guilts and fears by punishing himself. From a religious viewpoint, however, his experiences in Brooklyn represented a genuine spiritual withdrawal in keeping with the overall pattern of the search for the archetypal spiritual father which Wolfe had attempted to explain earlier in a letter to Maxwell Perkins (July 17, 1930):

But I dare go so far as to believe that the other pole--the pole of wandering--is not only a masculine thing, but that in some way it represents the quest of a man for his father. I dare mention to you the wanderings of Christ upon this earth, the wanderings of Paul, the quests of the Crusaders, the wanderings of the Ancient Mariner who makes his confession to the Wedding Guest.²

From this wilderness period of his life, Wolfe's protagonist gained a religious vision which conformed in its essential humanity with the life of love taught by Christ after His own spiritual withdrawal into the desert wilderness. The religious nature of Webber's new vision of life was most apparent when early in the morning he would walk to the Brooklyn Bridge and cross it to Manhattan. On these early morning walking expeditions, despite the unrelieved, almost

¹Ibid. ²Nowell, p. 244.

grotesque human misery which he witnessed, the protagonist's growing faith in the Christian brotherhood of man was strengthened instead of destroyed:

And in these nightly wanderings the old refusals dropped away, the old avowals stood. For then, somehow it seemed to him that he who had been dead was risen, he who had been lost was found again.¹

At the end of this particular chapter, "The Locusts Have No King," Wolfe's lengthy statement of his faith in man and the spiritual potentialities included in human existence has to be interpreted in the light of his protagonist's increasing religious faith. Moreover, when interpreted on a religious level, it is a sentimental affirmation only to the reader who regards the Christian faith as being equally sentimental in its final meaning.

Wolfe's vision of man's true nature is dualistic, for the author's personal discovery of evil had made him aware that any spiritual affirmation of man's destiny in a fallen world is sentimental unless it is based first upon an almost Calvinistic recognition of the depravity which exists in every person. Love is a spiritual reality as well as evil, however, and the Calvinists made their fatal mistake in repudiating the former. Nevertheless, in a contemporary world in which the Christian dualism between good and evil has lost its spiritual vitality, both love and evil remain sentimental illusions, spiritually associated with the atavistic

¹YCGHA, p. 399.

values of the world of lost innocence, until the individual has suffered in terms of his personal experience an agonizing confirmation of his fallen nature. When that knowledge becomes compelling enough to break down the narcissistic insulation which protects the core of his secret self from an intruding outside world, he is finally in a position where he is able to experience the reality of love. Wolfe's achievement as a religious writer, again on the primary level of his artistic vision, was to re-affirm the ancient spiritual dualism between good and evil on terms acceptable to modern man.

In the novel Wolfe's affirmation opens with a description of man's animalistic baseness:

This is man: for the most part a foul, wretched, abominable creature, a packet of decay, a bundle of degenerate tissues, a creature that gets old and hairless and has a foul breath, a hater of his kind, a cheater, a scorner, a mocker, a reviler, a thing that kills and murders in a mob or in the dark, loud and full of brag surrounded by his fellows, but without the courage of a rat alone . . . this is man . . . the most glorious of all the animals, who uses his brain for the most part to make himself a stench in the nostrils of the Bull, the Fox, the Dog, the Tiger, and the Goat.¹

Wolfe mentions man's spiritual depravity, and how, on this score, "it is impossible to say the worst of him, for the record of his obscene existence, his baseness, lust, cruelty, and treachery is illimitable."² Next the author alludes to man's presumptuous conceit, which enables him to become fatally convinced that he alone has found "the one way, the

¹Ibid., p. 434. ²Ibid.

true way, for himself, and calls all others false--yet in the billion books upon the shelves there is not one that can tell him how to draw a single fleeting breath in peace and comfort."¹

Man is the egotistical, rationalizing creature who interprets the history of the world to support his vanity, and who arrogantly attempts to control the fate of nations despite the pessimistic reality that "he does not know his own history, and he cannot direct his own destiny with dignity or wisdom for ten consecutive minutes."² Finally man is the unimaginative, cowardly slave of convention and habit whose life, for the most part, is a "travesty of waste and sterile breath,"³ and whose "days are mainly composed of a million idiot repetitions"⁴ during which he can scarcely forget, even for an instant, "the bitter weight of his uneasy flesh, the thousand diseases and distresses of his body, the growing incubus of his corruption."⁵

The depravity in man, however, represents but one side of the ambiguous dualism in human nature, for, according to Wolfe's spiritual vision, there also exists in man an almost unbelievable creative potential and emotional capacity to love and affirm life. For this reason, the historical record of man's earthly existence has been inspirational as well as revolting:

Behold his works:

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

He needed speech to ask for bread--and he had Christ!
 He needed songs to sing in battle--and he had Homer!
 He needed words to curse his enemies--and he had Dante,
 he had Voltaire, he had Swift! He needed cloth to cover
 up his hairless, puny flesh against the seasons--and he
 wove the robes of Solomon, he made the garments of great
 kings, he made the samite for the young knights! He
 needed walls and a roof to shelter him--and he made
 Blois! He needed a temple to propitiate his God--and
 he made Chartres and Fountains Abbey!¹

Man's achievements in a corrupted world have been incredibly
 impressive simply because of "one faith that is man's glory,
 his triumph, his immortality--and that is his belief in life.
 Man loves life, and loving life, hates death, and because of
 this he is great."² Moreover, "out of his strong belief in
 life, this puny man made love. At his best he is love."³
 Wolfe's affirmation of man, therefore, at least at its close,
 is patently consistent with the Christian idealism that "God
 is love."

VII

The attempt has been made to show that George Webber's
 experiences in Brooklyn during the depression years repre-
 sented a spiritual withdrawal from which he gained an almost
 traditionally Christian awareness of the importance of love
 and the brotherhood of man. His search for the archetypal
 father, however, was still not finished, and the remainder
 of You Can't Go Home Again deals with the examination and
 collapse of three spurious images of the father in the

¹Ibid., p. 435. ²Ibid., p. 436. ³Ibid.

emotional and spiritual life of the protagonist. The first was Foxhall Edwards as a false spiritual father. The second was Fame as the false father image connected with the protagonist's literary ambitions. The third was Germany as the unsatisfactory symbol of mystical paternity going back to the structure of life associated with the archetypal father in the protagonist's childhood imagination.

When Webber was living in Brooklyn, Foxhall Edwards was both his friend and publishing editor, and such a relationship would have been eminently satisfactory if no other feelings or attitudes had been involved. The older man, however, "was not merely friend but father to the younger,"¹ and it was this "act of spiritual adoption,"² willingly accepted by the protagonist as well as his editor, which was wrong. For this reason, the three chapters at the end of the fourth section of You Can't Go Home Again contain a detailed examination of Edwards' personality to show the reader why the protagonist, in terms of the overall search pattern, was driven finally to end the dependent and spurious relationship he had established with a fallen human being in the role of his true spiritual father.

In these three chapters Edwards is referred to as Fox, with the nickname connoting the deceptive split in his nature. The editor was a gifted and unusual man in that like the fox, he too had "acute animal perceptions"³ which he

¹Ibid., p. 437. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 491.

constantly employed in interpreting reality. Fox responded to life initially with his senses, and only after he felt he had a sure grasp of the concrete quality of experience did he permit his abstracting intelligence to generalize about its meaning. For this reason, in the novel when Fox read the newspaper account of Green's suicide, he first visualized the sense details connected with the man's death: "saw sky above him, Admiral Drake behind him, lamp post, pavement, people, Brooklyn corner, cops, rouged Jewesses, the motor cars, the subway entrance, and exploded brains."¹ At the same time, Fox was not limited by his sense perceptions and never allowed "concrete, brick, stone, skyscrapers, motor cars, or clothes"² to obscure the true significance of what had occurred. If Fox had actually been a witness of Green's suicide, he would have seen it all, but, in addition, "would have seen clearly and seen whole."³

Fox was an intelligent, egotistical man who "knew everything, or almost everything,"⁴ and who usually was plain-spoken enough to "call it as it was."⁵ Also he was a pessimist, with puritanical inclinations, who had "the tragic sense of life."⁶ He realized that the end of human activity is vanity, yet he still believed: "Don't whine, and don't repine, but get work done."⁷ Fox did not blind himself to the

¹Ibid., p. 484. ²Ibid., p. 491. ³Ibid., p. 484.

⁴Ibid., p. 483. ⁵Ibid., p. 484. ⁶Ibid., p. 493.

⁷Ibid.

evil in life, for he recognized quite clearly the "gigantic web of hatred, greed, tyranny, injustice, war, theft, murder, lying, treachery, hunger, suffering, and devilish error"¹ in which all of the people on this unfortunate earth are trapped. At the same time, Fox was somewhat dispassionate about this evil, his pessimism being re-inforced by an attitude of fatalistic acceptance. This was the tragic flaw in his personality, for in Wolfe's opinion, the man's fatalistic acceptance of evil was the ironical reverse side of his narcissistic attachment to spiritual innocence.

The editor, therefore, was "a guileful Fox"² in that his realistic appraisal of the evil in other people was not accompanied by an equally realistic awareness of the aggressive, destructive egotism within himself. Because of this defect, Fox was able to take seriously his pose of being the completely well-intentioned man, and even to enjoy the impression he made upon others of having remained somehow "life's boy . . . life's trustful child."³ In the imagination of Wolfe's protagonist, when Fox was asleep he especially resembled "a breathing portrait of guileless innocence,"⁴ as if indeed "in sleep, no other part of Fox was left except the boy."⁵

This illusion of innocence, the spiritual "kernel of his life,"⁶ was treasured by the editor because it seemed

¹Ibid., p. 498. ²Ibid., p. 439. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 438. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

"to have excluded all transitions, to have brought the man back to his acorn, keeping thus inviolate that which the man, indeed, had never lost, but which had passed through change and time and all the accretions of experience."¹ When the man was asleep, it appeared literally that the innocence "had been restored, unwoven back into the single oneness of itself."² In waking life, of course, the same innocence was false, and more than anything else, it helped explain why Foxhall Edwards had to remain inadequate in his role as the protagonist's spiritual father:

And yet it was a guileful Fox, withal. Oh, guileful Fox, how innocent in guilefulness and in innocence how full of guile! How straight in cunning, and how cunning straight, in all directions how strange-devious, in all strange-deviousness how direct! Too straight for crookedness, and for envy too serene, too fair for blind intolerance, too just and seeing and too strong for hate, too honest for base dealing, too high for low suspiciousness, too innocent for all the scheming tricks of swarming villainy--yet never had been taken in a horse trade yet.³

VIII

In the late summer of 1934, at the end of his four-year spiritual withdrawal in Brooklyn, George Webber sailed from New York to continue his "self-imposed exile"⁴ in England. While he was in England he encountered Mr. Lloyd McHarg,⁵ "a living embodiment of his own dearest and most secret

¹Ibid., p. 439. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 510.

⁵Mr. Lloyd McHarg was obviously suggested to Wolfe by Sinclair Lewis.

dream . . . that fair Medusa, Fame herself."¹ Mr. McHarg was the American novelist who recently had been awarded the Nobel prize in literature, and, for this reason, if his life impressed the protagonist as being insufficient, the only conclusion to be drawn was that Fame represented a counterfeit father image.

Webber had been living in London for several months before he met Mr. McHarg, and during this time he had become superficially acquainted with Mrs. Daisy Purvis, the English charwoman whom he had hired to prepare his meals and clean up his lodgings. Mrs. Purvis, "a self-respecting female of the working class,"² was a plump, good-natured woman in her middle forties who might have served as "the prototype of a whole class."³ In this role, she was a paradoxical creature who displayed an affection for animals which was extravagant in its sentimentality, and yet who seemed almost pitilessly indifferent to the sufferings of the poor:

Her attitude toward the poor, of whom she was one, was remarkable for its philosophic acceptance. Her feeling seemed to be that the poor are always with us, that they are quite used to their poverty, and that this makes it unnecessary for anybody to bother about it, least of all the miserable victims themselves.⁴

Despite her calloused sentiments toward people from her own class, Mrs. Purvis had a reverential attitude toward that emasculated potential father figure, the Duke of Wales.

¹Ibid., p. 510. ²Ibid., p. 514. ³Ibid., p. 513.

⁴Ibid., p. 530.

In her spiritual imagination the Duke was practically a secularized divinity, and it was only after a moment of sentimental silence, "as if some great and unseen presence had entered the room,"¹ that Mrs. Purvis would "clear her throat, and with holy quietness pronounce the sainted name of 'E.'"²

Webber was less impressed than his charwoman by the mystical traditions surrounding kingship and nobility, especially when he began to realize, during that bitterly cold winter in London, that there were "really two different orders of humanity in England . . . the Big People and the Little People."³ In appearance the Big People were almost always "fresh-skinned, ruddy, healthy, and alert,"⁴ who revealed by their well-toned flesh that they had seldom in their lives gone without enough to eat:

At their physical best, they look like great bulls of humanity. On the streets of London one sees these proud and solid figures of men and women, magnificently dressed and cared for, and one observes that their faces wear the completely vacant and imperturbable expression of highly bred cattle. These are the British Lords of Creation.⁵

If one remained in England long enough, however, he gradually became aware of the countless numbers of Little People. These Little People were like "a race of gnomes."⁶ Evidently they and their ancestors had lived submerged lives for so many centuries that they had "all become pale and small and wizened."⁷ In England they represented the stunted,

¹Ibid., p. 523. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 530. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid., p. 531. ⁷Ibid.

deprived men and women whose exploitation throughout the centuries had helped insure the continuance of the English aristocratic tradition with the king as the nation's titular father symbol.

After Webber became aware of the preponderant numbers of the Little People, he realized that the English tradition, whose honorific significance even then was becoming increasingly esteemed by ex-patriate American intellectuals, had been achieved, like practically everything else in a class-oppressed Europe, at the price of untold human waste and suffering. For this reason, nothing Webber "might read or hear about the country thereafter would make sense to him if it did not take the Little People into account."¹ The protagonist also believed that the democratic American system with its idealistic emphasis upon equal opportunities for all people, common or uncommon, was superior to the aristocratic British tradition:

So, then, to every man his chance--to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity--to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him--this, seeker, is the promise of America.²

Mr. Lloyd McHarg was the successful American author whose life, to the protagonist, represented either the fulfillment or the shortcomings of artistic fame as a self-created paternity symbol in a liberal culture in which the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 508.

image of a mystical spiritual father was "most conspicuous by its absence."¹ Mr. McHarg, "at the zenith of his career"² during the winter of 1934, had used the occasion of his Nobel acceptance speech to praise the protagonist's novel, Home to Our Mountains. After Webber had recovered sufficiently "from the astonishment and joy which this unexpected news had produced in him,"³ he had written Mr. McHarg a letter of appreciation. The latter had replied graciously; in addition, he had suggested that since he was making another trip to Europe shortly, he would try to visit Webber at his London lodgings.

The protagonist had seen photographs of McHarg many times in the newspapers and magazines, but it was not until he encountered the man in the flesh that he realized how "fantastically ugly"⁴ Mr. McHarg was, and "to this ugliness was added a devastation of which George had never seen the equal."⁵ The celebrated author had been on a drunken tour through northern Europe for several weeks prior to their meeting, and his physical appearance was in keeping with his recent dissipation: "the inflamed face, the poached blue eyes, the emaciated figure and nervously shaking hands."⁶ In spite of Mr. McHarg's ugliness and dissipation, together with "all that was jangled, snarled, and twisted in his life,"⁷ Webber recognized that somehow the man had still

¹Ibid., p. 537. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 538.

⁴Ibid., p. 545. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid., p. 571. ⁷Ibid.

retained his "integrity and courage and honesty."¹ Even so, he obviously had not discovered in Fame any cure for the destructiveness and sterility in his own life:

cure, really, for life-hunger, for life-thirst, for life-triumph, for life-defeat, life-disillusionment, life-loneliness, and life-boredom--cure rather for devotion to men and for disgust of them, cure for love of life and for weariness of it--last of all, cure for the feeding mouth, for the thing that eats and rests not ever till we die.²

Since Mr. McHarg had found no "cure" for his spiritual wound, the Fame which his life personified was a false father symbol. This knowledge was particularly impressed upon the protagonist when he accompanied the American author on a night-time motor drive through the English countryside. This nocturnal drive, the last experience of the protagonist with the nightmare world of neurotic illusion for its setting, enabled him to make final connections between his personal disillusionment with Fame, the spiritual reality of evil, lost innocence, and the pastoral return to the feminine principle, for others as well as himself.

The journey was one which Webber "remembered later with nightmare vividness."³ They were riding in a limousine with a hired driver, and Mr. McHarg was already sprawled unconscious on the back seat, much like Francis Starwick during the nightmare drive described in Of Time and the River, before the car had left the seemingly endless outskirts of London: "street after street wet with a dull gleam of rain

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., pp. 561-62. ³Ibid., p. 585.

fogged lamps, mile after mile of brick houses, which seemed steeped in the fog and soot and grime of uncounted days of dismal weather, district after district in the interminable web, a giant congeries of uncounted villages, all grown together now into this formless, monstrous sprawl."¹ As soon as they had reached the loneliness of the countryside, behind them in the distance the vanishing night-time lights of London, dense with its humanity and accumulated evil, symbolically gave "an immense corrupted radiance"² against the heavy ceiling of the clouds.

In his pastoral imagination Webber had early associated evil with "that tainted and tormented web"³ of modern life, the metropolitan city. For this reason, since he had been existing in London from the time of his arrival the previous summer, he now began to feel, surrounded by the familiar and "abiding strength and everlastingness of the earth . . . a sense of exultation and release."⁴ In escaping from the "naturalistic jungle" of the modern city, it was almost as if he had actually freed himself from the corruption in human nature, a freedom made even more precious after intolerable months of city life: "months of sweat and noise and violence, months of grimy brick and stone, months of the incessant thrust and intershift and weaving of the endless crowd, months of tainted air and tainted life, of treachery, fear, malice, slander, blackmail, envy, hatred, conflict, fury,

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 596. ³Ibid., p. 586. ⁴Ibid.

and deceit, months of frenzy and the tension of wire-taut nerves and the changeless change."¹ Evil was not an illusion, however, whether identified with the city as a symbol of man's depravity or not, and once again Webber had the knowledge confirmed that if he attempted to recapture innocence by making a pastoral return to the all-forgiving, uncorrupted earth, he abandoned vitality at the same time:

And yet, unfathomable enigma that it is, he has found earth and yet, finding it, has lost the world. He has found the washed cleanliness of vision and of soul that comes from earth. He feels himself washed free of all the stains of ancient living, its evil and its lust, its filth and cruelty, its perverse and ineradicable pollution. But curiously, somehow, the wonder and the mystery of the city remains, its beauty and its magic, its richness and its joy, and as he looks back upon that baleful glow that lights the smoky blanket of the sky, a feeling of loss and loneliness possesses him, as if in gaining earth again he has relinquished life.²

Mr. Rickenbach Reade, an English acquaintance of Mr. McHarg's, was a man who had tried to make a success of the "pastoral return" in his life by purchasing a pleasant farm house and retreating to it as a twentieth century country squire. Mr. Reade's farm house had been the goal of their drive from London, which, after the city lights were lost in the distance, had become "a nightmare of halts and turnings and changes of direction."³ The night was stormy, the wind howling "remote, demented, in the upper air,"⁴ and a pale moon "driving in and out, now casting a wild, wan

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 587. ³Ibid., p. 590.

⁴Ibid., p. 591.

radiance over the stormy landscape, now darting in behind a billowing mass of angry-looking clouds."¹ Mr. McHarg was still stretched out upon the back seat of the car, and his face "in the wan fitful light of the spectral moon . . . looked livid and deathlike."²

The driver of their limousine had already lost his way several times, and during the last part of the journey, "it seemed to Webber that they were climbing the fiendish slope of Nightmare Hill, and he rather expected that when the moon broke from the clouds again, they would find themselves in a cleared and barren circle in the forest, surrounded by the whole witches' carnival of Walpurgis Night."³ Before they reached the top of this particular hill, they rounded a bend in the road and saw, at a further elevation in the distance, the shadowy outlines of a farm house from whose tiny "windows issued the beaconing assurance of light and warmth."⁴ At this moment, after their stormy night's encounter with reality as a bad dream, the pastoral security of Mr. Reade's way of life looked treacherously inviting.

Both Mr. Reade and his wife were amiable people, and their house with its low ceilings and wood-paneled rooms was a warm, comfortable place. After supper was over and Mr. Reade had finished several brandies, he was in excellent

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 592. ³Ibid., p. 593.

⁴Ibid., p. 594.

spirits to tell "engaging stories about himself, his wife, and the good life they were making here in the isolated freedom of their rural retreat."¹ The simple, innocent pleasures of the pastoral existence which Mr. Reade described made an "idyllic picture,"² the kind perhaps which in some form has "haunted the imagination of almost every man in the turmoil, confusion, and uncertainties of the complex world we live in."³ At the same time, as the protagonist "listened to his host and felt the nostalgic attractiveness of the images that were unfolded before him, he also felt a disquieting sense of something else behind it all which never got into the picture, but which lent colorings of doubt and falsity to every part of it."⁴

Mr. Rickenbach Reade's pastoral life was false in that it held no place either for the archetypal dualism between sterility and creative vitality or for the spiritual dualism between good and evil. In addition, despite its bucolic setting in the lovely English countryside, Mr. Reade's life was not even in harmony with the elementary rhythms of the natural world. Actually the man, instead of having his spirit mystically in tune with nature (if such a mystical harmony is indeed possible), was a somewhat superficial dilettante of nature for whom the "ritualism of the seasons" had become the thrilling "adventure of the seasons."⁵ As far as Webber was concerned, Mr. Reade's life was significant chiefly

¹Ibid., p. 605. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

because it was so patently a symbol of "the fugitive pattern"¹ which the protagonist had observed in many other men. Moreover, Mr. Reade's rationale for a pastoral return to innocence was the typical defense employed by these people who were unwilling to face the "tough realities,"² particularly the menacing spiritual reality of evil, in the contemporary world:

The American expatriates who had taken up residence in Europe were essentially the same kind of people, though theirs was a more desolate and more embittered type of escapism. . . . And always with this race of men it seemed to George that the fundamental inner structure of illusion and defeat was the same, whether they followed the more innocuous formula of flight to the farm, with its trumped-up interest in rock gardening, carpentry, hollyhock culture, and the rest of it, or whether they took the more embittered route of retreat to Europe and the racked saucers. And it made no difference whether they were Americans, Englishmen, Germans, or Hottentots. All of them betrayed themselves by the same weaknesses. They fled a world they were not strong enough to meet.³

Because of his distrust of Mr. Reade's pastoral existence, the next evening as the protagonist returned with Mr. McHarg to the "jungle warren"⁴ of the big city, he felt as if he were re-entering the world of reality when he "saw again the vast corrupted radiance of the night--the smoke, the fury, and the welter of London's unending life."⁵

IX

The sixth section of You Can't Go Home Again is called

¹Ibid., p. 610. ²Ibid., p. 605. ³Ibid., p. 611.

⁴Ibid., p. 618. ⁵Ibid.

"I Have A Thing To Tell You," and in this title the word thing refers to the diabolical connection between evil and emotional and spiritual atavism, not only in the Germans, but in all people. With regard to the archetypal dualism, the incidents in this section provided a traumatic confirmation of Webber's personal discovery of evil at the close of The Web and the Rock. This final confirmation meant that the protagonist's narcissistic dependency upon the feminine principle had been broken to such an extent that he could envision the search for the father in its definitive dualistic pattern applicable to all mankind.

On a human level the protagonist had learned that every individual has to find the emotionally mature, creative father within himself. On a religious level, however, he had discovered that any secular value or human individual employed as a father symbol, no matter how idealistic in its assumed implications, is none-the-less perverse in its inevitable consequences. If one believes that life has any spiritual significance, that particular father image belongs only to God, or in Wolfe's fiction, to a genuinely mystical substitute for God-head consistent with the reality of man's spiritual fall.

During Webber's last visit to Germany, his friend and mistress, Else von Kohler, informed him that as an artist he was a "religious man."¹ This statement was in keeping with

¹Ibid., p. 658.

the title "The Dark Messiah" of the first chapter of the section "I Have A Thing To Tell You." Hitler, of course, as the human being who presumptuously had assumed the role of the false spiritual father for an entire nation of people, was the "dark Messiah" or "evil Saviour" referred to in the title.

In Wolfe's artistic vision, Germany was a nation of disillusioned, spiritually ruined people coddling their wounded egotism, and the repudiation by these people of the dualism between good and evil, together with their worship of Hitler in the spiritual role of a perverted Christ, symbolically represented their pastoral return to the most atavistic kind of dependence upon the feminine principle. In other words, the German people were evil because they had attempted "to go home again" by returning spiritually to "the dark ancestral cave"¹ of their own savage past, the feminine, a-moral "womb from which mankind emerged into the light."²

Webber had always been fond of Germany because it was the country, after America, in which he had "felt most at home, and with whose people he had the most natural, instant, and instinctive sympathy and understanding."³ Also it was the country whose "mystery and magic"⁴ he had early learned to identify with the archetypal image of his own father, John Webber. When the son came to Germany in May, 1936. at first

¹Ibid., p. 704. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

he had believed that it still represented the "golden country" which he had envisioned in his childhood imagination:

The month of May is wonderful everywhere. It was particularly wonderful in Berlin that year. . . . The crowds sauntered underneath the trees on the Kurfurstendamm, the terraces of the cafes were jammed with people, and always, through the golden sparkle of the days, there was a sound of music in the air. George saw the chains of endlessly lovely lakes around Berlin, and for the first time he knew the wonderful golden bronze upon the tall poles of the kiefen trees.¹

Webber's second novel had just been published, and the German critics had been impressed with what he had written. For this reason, Fame contributed "an added radiance"² to his life, and as he strolled happily through the Berlin streets, he felt that even the people on the sidewalks "responded to him eagerly, instinctively, with instant natural liking, as men respond to the clean and shining light of the young sun."³ Also he had fallen in love with Else von Kohler, and the days and nights they spent together were "filled with the mysterious enchantments of a strong and mutually shared passion."⁴ The spiritual isolation of Webber's Brooklyn years, together with the confusion of his other "years of wandering and exile,"⁵ suddenly seemed unreal, as if in the magic weather of that German spring, the self-confident protagonist, a famous man now in love with a beautiful woman, had finally discovered his own golden image of paternity in the country of his archetypal father:

¹Ibid., p. 622. ²Ibid., p. 623. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 625. ⁵Ibid.

In some strange fashion, the image of his own success and this joyous release after so much toil and desperation became connected in George's mind with Else, with the kiefen trees, with the great crowds thronging the Kurfurstendamm, with all the golden singing in the air.¹

From the beginning of their love affair, Else refused to discuss the Nazi regime with the protagonist. Other people were less discreet, however, and as the weeks passed, Webber began to hear extremely disturbing rumours about the changes that were taking place in Germany, although during this period he did not witness personally "any of the ugly things they whispered about."² One of his most outspoken German friends, Franz Heilig,³ had referred bitterly to Hitler as "The Prince of Darkness," and one afternoon during the week of the Olympic games, Webber had been presented with the opportunity to observe this evil spiritual leader of the German nation:

At last he came--and something like a wind across a field of grass was shaken through that crowd, and from afar the tide rolled up with him, and in it was the voice, the hope, the prayer of the land. The Leader came by slowly in a shining car, a little dark man with a comic-opera mustache, erect and standing, moveless and unsmiling, with his hand upraised, palm outward, not in Nazi-wise salute, but straight up, in a gesture of blessing such as the Buddha or Messiahs use.⁴

By the end of the summer the protagonist had begun to realize that the spiritual roots of the tragedy taking place in Germany were "much more sinister and deep and evil than

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 628.

³The name Heilig is symbolic. ⁴YCGHA, p. 629.

politics or even racial prejudice could ever be."¹ What had begun to shape itself in his mind "was a picture of a great people who had been psychically wounded and were now desperately ill with some dread malady of the soul."² Moreover, this sickness "was a kind of creeping paralysis which twisted and blighted all human relations."³ In terms of the archetypal dualism, it even suggested a spiritual drowning in the mindless feminine principle. Certainly whatever was left of the German culture which had produced Goethe was managing to survive under these new conditions, "only as drowning men survive--by clutching desperately at any spar that floated free from the wreckage of their ship."⁴ In Webber's spiritual imagination, Hitler had truly been accepted as a "dark Messiah" by this nation of hopelessly lost people:

So the weeks, the months, the summer passed, and everywhere about him George saw the evidences of this dissolution, this shipwreck of a great spirit. The poisonous emanations of suppression, persecution, and fear permeated the air like miasmatic and pestilential vapors, tainting, sickening, and blighting the lives of everyone he met. It was a plague of the spirit--invisible, but as unmistakable as death. Little by little it sank in on him through all the golden singing of that summer, until at last he felt it, breathed it, lived it, and knew it for the thing it was.⁵

Franz Schoenberger, the anti-Hitler German critic, has praised Wolfe for his shrewd discernment of the evils in Nazism "before it was fashionable to do so."⁶ The critic

¹Ibid., p. 631. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 633.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Franz Schoenberger, "My Discovery of Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser, p. 310.

believes that Wolfe, in less than one hundred pages of You Can't Go Home Again, revealed "a deeper insight into the much discussed 'German problem' than all the endless cables and reports of all the legions of American correspondents"¹ who were in Germany during the tragic years before World War II. The most impressive chapters of the one hundred pages mentioned by Mr. Schoenberger are those in which the setting is the compartment of a train going through Germany into Belgium. These chapters include the story of the German who was taken captive by Nazi policeman just before the train crossed the Belgian border.

The protagonist, with three other passengers in his compartment, had witnessed this capture. After it had taken place and the train once again had started to move, they saw through the window the terrified face of the Jew standing on the station platform surrounded by Nazis. For one brief instant the prisoner returned their stare:

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.²

From the time Webber was a child, he had connected Germany with the image of his father. In this respect, Germany had always seemed less of an actual country to him than a symbolic "geography of heart's desire, an unfathomed domain

¹Ibid., p. 297. ²YCGHA, p. 699.

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¹Ibid., p. 297. ²YCGHA, p. 699.

of an unknown inheritance."¹ After the protagonist had left his childhood home, he still had retained the mystical belief that this foreign country in particular represented an important, familiar part of his emotional and spiritual heritage: "He had been at home in it, and it in him. It seemed that he had been born with this knowledge."²

This was proven when Webber first encountered German as a spoken language, for at that time he felt as if "he had known the language of its spirit before he ever came to it, had understood the language of its tongue the moment he had heard it spoken."³ Even during his final day in Germany, when he was a train passenger for the last time leaving this mystical country identified with the structure of John Webber's life, he had retained enough remnants of his childhood feelings that he found it difficult to adjust his discovery of evil in Berlin with the archetypal meaning of the green and golden German landscape which he observed through the train window:

The dark solitude of the forest was around them now, the loneliness of the kiefern trees, tall, slender, towering, and as straight as sailing masts, bearing upon their tops the slender burden of their needled and eternal green. Their naked poles shone with that lovely gold-bronze color which is like the material substance of a magic light. And all between was magic, too. The forest dusk beneath the kiefern trees was gold-brown also, the earth gold-brown and barren, and the trees themselves stood alone and separate, a polelike forest filled with haunting light.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 703. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 666.

As soon as Wolfe's protagonist had freed himself from the will-to-death culture of the Nazis, he had a final moment of truth during which he recognized clearly that so long as he had remained emotionally and spiritually dependent upon the feminine principle in an uncorrupted world, Germany represented the destructive child-sorceress mother as well as the false image of the archetypal golden father: "It was the dark, lost Helen that had been forever burning in his blood,"¹ and which "he had found"² when he first came to Germany. The soulless evil in Nazism, however, had provided such a terrifying confirmation of the latent evil within all people that at the close of this section of Wolfe's novel, Webber realized finally that Germany was "the dark, found Helen he had lost."³ In other words, the protagonist, after having broken away from his castrating reliance upon a symbolic mother substitute, could no longer play the romantic lead of an uninvolved, a-moral Faustus, who, on the basis of a spiritual compact with his own atavistic feelings of innocence, had been able to dismiss the reality of evil. That had become "the way of no return":

For this was the way that henceforth would be forever closed to him--the way of no return. He was 'out.' And, being 'out,' he began to see another way, the way that lay before him. He saw now 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, could be left to feed upon their own substance and nourish their own little self-absorbed designs.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 704. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

The protagonist, in order to make his life consistent, was forced to repudiate the seductive images of a spuriously mythical father and mother, whose false roles, emotionally fixed in his childhood past, had so largely determined the pattern of his subsequent narcissistic search for fame, power, and romantic love in a pastoral world of lost innocence:

'Therefore,' he thought, 'old master, wizard Faust, old father of the ancient and swarm-haunted mind of man, old earth, old German land with all the measure of your truth, your glory, beauty, magic, and your ruin; and dark Helen burning in our blood, great queen and mistress, sorceress--dark land, dark land, old ancient earth I love--farewell!'¹

X

The last section of You Can't Go Home Again, which consists of a long letter from Webber to his publishing editor, Foxhall Edwards, is called "A Wind Is Rising, And The Rivers Flow." In this title the wind and rivers serve as pastoral symbols of the author's mystical faith that the universe has a final meaning, embedded in man's deepest conscience, which is affirmative, which supports creative vitality and love, and which, despite the unchanging reality of evil in terms of an abstract eternity, remains unalterably opposed to the existence of evil in terms of the concrete contemporary fact. The protagonist was able to write this letter because his personal experiences with evil in Germany during the summer

¹Ibid.

of 1936 had made him realize the grievous error of his own attempts to make a spiritual father out of an imperfect human being. On the basis of this new knowledge, he had arrived at the inevitable decision that he had to end his dependent relationship with his publishing editor.

In Germany the protagonist "had come face to face with something old and genuinely evil in the spirit of man which he had never known before, and it shook his inner world to its foundations."¹ Of course, before this experience of Webber's took place in its final form, "for years his conception of the world and of his own place in it had been gradually changing, and the German adventure merely brought this process to its climax."²

After Webber returned to New York, he related this knowledge of evil to "the whole temper of the times"³ in which he lived, and "it made plain to him, once and for all, the dangers that lurk in those latent atavistic urges which man has inherited from his dark past."⁴ He understood now that Hitlerism was a terrible recrudescence of "that primitive spirit of greed and lust and force"⁵ which "had always been the true enemy of mankind."⁶ Also he recognized that this evil was not limited to Germany, but was part of man's universal heritage:

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 705. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.
⁶Ibid.

One saw traces of it everywhere. It took on many disguises, many labels. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin--each had his own name for it. And America had it, too, in various forms. For wherever ruthless men conspired together for their own ends, wherever the rule of dog-eat-dog was dominant, there it bred. And wherever one found it, one also found that its roots¹ sank down into something primitive in man's ugly past.

When Webber examined his own life, he found similar "atavistic yearnings,"² and "plenty of them";³ moreover, he realized that every "man can find them if he is honest enough to look for them."⁴

The protagonist's self-examination continued throughout the year which followed his return from Germany, and at the end of this period, he was more certain than ever "that the dark ancestral cave, the womb from which mankind emerged into the light, forever pulls one back--but that you can't go home again."⁵ This phrase, "you can't go home again," which applied to the life of every man in terms of his urgent compulsion to try to make a pastoral return to one of the innumerable "escapes of Time and Memory,"⁶ seemed to sum up the knowledge which the protagonist had obtained from the withdrawal-return dialectic of his own experience:

The phrase had many implications for him. You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile, to escape to Europe and some foreign land, back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake, back home to aestheticism, to one's youthful idea of 'the artist' and the all-sufficiency of 'art' and 'beauty' and 'love,'

¹Ibid., p. 706. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

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 of 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.¹

This knowledge also "led inexorably to a decision which was the hardest he had ever had to make."² Webber knew that finally the time "had come to leave Fox Edwards."³

The last section of Wolfe's novel is actually a summary, discursively presented in the form of a long letter from Webber to Foxhall Edwards, of what the protagonist felt he had learned during his search for creative vitality and love in the twentieth century. At the beginning of the section Webber explained that he was writing the letter because "the great web"⁴ of his life, in which Edwards had been "the magic thread,"⁵ was now "finished and complete";⁶ for this reason, he knew the time had come to bid Fox a final farewell. The protagonist employed two other metaphors in the letter to describe the inevitable collapse of his relationship with his publishing editor. One was "the road" down which he and Fox had gone together, and "we two alone know how completely it has ended."⁷ The other was the "circle,"⁸ rounding out and finally completing itself, as a symbol of both their lives; "and each of us in his own way now has

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 707. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid. ⁸Ibid.

rounded it: there is no further circle we can make."¹ Nevertheless, Webber believed that the completion of his own role in their circle demanded a parting letter of explanation to his editor, especially since he was convinced that "few men can ever know, from first to last, a circle of such whole, superb finality."²

The first chapter, "Young Icarus," contains a summary of the protagonist's experiences as a romantic young narcissist struggling for artistic perfection. Webber explained to Fox that this struggle, "the beginning of the road,"³ started when he went to college and was first taught to "think"--that is, to examine life critically--by Plato Grant, his favorite philosopher teacher:

He was a vital force because he supplied to many of us for the first time in our lives, the inspiration of a questioning intelligence. He taught us not to be afraid to think, to question; he taught us to examine critically the most sacrosanct of our native prejudices and superstitions. So of course, throughout the state, the bigots hated him; but his own students worshipped him to idolatry. And the seed he planted grew--long after Hegel, 'concepts,' 'moments of negation,' and all the rest, of it had vanished into the limbo of forgotten things.⁴

As an undergraduate student, Webber was editor of the college newspaper and also wrote poems and stories for the literary magazine. With regard to his future, however, the most important event of his college years was his participation in a hazing experience in which the young victim was

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 710. ³Ibid., p. 711.

⁴Ibid., p. 710.

killed. Since the boy's death was obviously accidental, the students involved were not given a prison sentence. Nevertheless, for the protagonist it was a bitter experience which left in his personality for a number of years, strong feelings of guilt, fear, and hostility, and which made him feel at times that he had been betrayed by life. Its real significance went deeper than that, for it actually provided Webber with an introduction to a world in which the ambiguous reality of evil was a permanent threat to his precious egotism: that was punishment enough--"the knowledge of the Done inexorable, the merciless insistence in our souls of that fatal and irrevocable 'Why?'"¹

After graduating from college Webber went to New York City to work on a metropolitan newspaper. By this time he had decided that he was ambitious to become a writer, and during his first year in the city he soon became acquainted with bright young men and women living in "the Village," whose interests in literature and art were as narcissistic as his own. He "talked a great deal about 'art' and 'beauty'"² with these people, and a great deal more about the artist as "the sensitive man of talent, the young genius,"³ struggling idealistically against a hostile environment:

So conceived, the artist that we talked about so much, instead of being in union with life, was perpetually in conflict with it. Instead of belonging to the world he lived in, he was constantly in a state of flight from it. The world itself was like a beast of prey, and the

¹Ibid., p. 713. ²Ibid., p. 721. ³Ibid.

artist, like some wounded faun, was forever trying to escape from it.¹

This kind of rationalizing helped produce in Webber and his companions "a niggling and over-refined aestheticism which was not only pallid and precious,"² but which provided a perfect excuse for their own feelings of insecurity and self-love. When Webber first met Fox, he was still this kind of "small and precious snob,"³ who as an aspiring artist felt infinitely superior to other people, and who faced bitter years of experience before he "learned that one cannot really be superior without humility and tolerance and human understanding."⁴

After publishing his first novel, Webber went to Brooklyn, where his "personal and self-centered vision of the world"⁵ was gradually destroyed by his increasing knowledge of "man's inhumanity to man."⁶ After these desperate years were over, he "was still enamoured of that fair Medusa, Fame,"⁷ despite the disillusionment he had experienced in England when Mr. McHarg made his frenzied visit. Of course, Webber should have profited more from Mr. McHarg's example, except that again his precious egotism intervened:

Does not one's glorious sense of 'I'--this wonderful, unique 'I' that never was before since time began and never will be again hereafter--does not this 'I' of tender favor come before the eye of judgment and always plead especially exception. I thought: 'Yes, I see how

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 720. ³Ibid., p. 722. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 725. ⁶Ibid., p. 723. ⁷Ibid., p. 726.

it is with Lloyd McHarg, but with me it will be different--because I am I.' That is how it has always been with me. I could never learn anything except the hard way. I must experience it for myself before I knew.¹

Webber arrived in Germany where he had his knowledge of evil personally confirmed "as the hell that man forever creates for himself . . . the corruption of man's living faith and the inferno of his buried anguish."² Most important, after this experience he was detached enough from his own self-blinding egotism to make a final spiritual evaluation of evil in the contemporary world. The protagonist recognized that evil was something "as old as hell, a universal ill of man seen here in Germany at its darkest,"³ and that it existed in his own country as well as in European nations. Even so, he believed that America "was still the New World of mankind's hope,"⁴ provided only that his fellow countrymen were not "afraid to look into the face of fear itself, to probe behind it, to see what caused it, and then to speak the truth about it."⁵ In Webber's spiritual vision there still existed one remedy which "could cleanse and heal the suffering soul of man,"⁶ and that was "the plain and searching light of truth, which had here, in Germany, been darkened to extinction."⁷

After Webber's grim confirmation of evil in Germany, he knew that he had to break away from Foxhall Edwards, "the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid., p. 729. ³Ibid., p. 730. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

parent and the guardian"¹ of his "spirit in its youth,"² but not in its maturity. He was not leaving Edwards, however, because he identified the editor with those dishonest men in America, previously alluded to, who were afraid to face the truth. Webber knew that Fox, like the pessimistic Preacher in Ecclesiastes, had a stern yet forthright vision of "the tragic underweft of life into which man is born, through which he must live, out of which he must die."³ In addition, Fox had a shrewd vision of the specific evils which conceivably might make the tragic nature of existence too severe even for the puritan granite of his own New England conscience to endure. In Webber's estimation, this latter aspect of the editor's tragic vision, compromised by his self-pitying cynicism, did not agree with what the protagonist himself had learned about evil through the withdrawal-return dialectic of the archetypal search:

Beyond the limits of my own mortality, the stern acknowledgment that man was born to live, to suffer, and to die--your own and the great Preacher's creed--I am not, cannot be, confirmed to mere fatality. Briefly, you thought the ills which so beset mankind were irremediable: that just as man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, so was he born to be eternally beset and preyed upon by all the monsters of his own creation--by fear and cruelty, by tyranny and power, by poverty and wealth. You felt, with the stern fatality of resignation which is the granite essence of your nature, that these things were doomed to be, and be forever, because they had always been, and were inherent in the tainted and tormented soul of man.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 735. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 734.

⁴Ibid., p. 736.

Webber admitted that in terms of an abstract Mankind and eternity, the ancient wisdom of Edwards and the Preacher, the "stern fatalism of the rock,"¹ was true: "Man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot."² Certainly this pessimistic truth could not be denied "in the final end."³ Nevertheless, the protagonist believed that "we must, dear Fox, deny it all along the way,"⁴ since Man-Alive is concrete, not abstract, and instead of being "fashioned for eternity,"⁵ exists only "for a day."⁶ This knowledge provided the core of Webber's liberal faith, slanted by the depression climate of the thirties, "that man's greatest enemies, in the forms in which they now exist--the forms we see on every hand of fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty and need--can be conquered and destroyed."⁷

Webber's final criticism, not as a political liberal but as an artist with a spiritual vision, of Edwards' resigned fatalism was connected with the ironic contrast between the editor's pessimistic recognition of evil in the outside world opposed to his narcissistic attachment to innocence in his personal life. Viewed from this approach, Edwards' attitude was morally irrelevant in that his pessimism, serving partially as a blind for his egotism, seemed to negate any spiritual meaning which the struggle between

¹Ibid., p. 737. ²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid., p. 738.

good and evil might have either in the outside world or within himself. The publishing editor was wrong in his practice, therefore, even if Webber were to admit that he and the fatalistic Preacher were right on the basis of abstract theory:

You and the Preacher may be right for all eternity, but we Men-Alive, dear Fox, are right for Now. And it is for Now, and for us the living, that we must speak, and speak the truth, as much of it as we can see and know. With the courage of the truth within us, we shall meet the enemy as they come to us, and they shall be ours. And if, once having conquered them, new enemies approach, we shall meet them from that point, from there proceed. In the affirmation of that fact, the continuance of that unceasing war, is man's religion and his living faith.¹

In You Can't Go Home Again the final renunciation by the protagonist of Foxhall Edwards as a false spiritual father means simply that Wolfe, at the end of his creative life, remained convinced that the evil within man, even though it can never be conquered, always has to be fought. That is the one truth--the significance for each individual of the dualistic struggle within himself between good and evil, the will-to-live and the will-to-die, the passion to create and the passion to destroy, love and hate, the golden father and the child-sorceress mother--which the fiction of Thomas Wolfe undeviatingly supports from the first novel through the last. Moreover, it is a truth which is romantic only when superficially interpreted. On a spiritual level it is a truth which agrees with the vision of every mystical writer who affirms life finally as a religious mystery:

¹Ibid.

Dear Fox, old friend, thus we have come to the end of the road that we were to go together. My tale is finished--and so farewell.

But before I go, I have just one more thing to tell you:

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.'¹

The End

¹Ibid., p. 743.

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