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THOMAS WOLFE: LANGUAGE
AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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THOMAS WOLFE:
LANGUAGE AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

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

by
Barbara Tallon Williams

August, 1980

ABSTRACT

Thomas Wolfe's four novels, Look Homeward, Angel, Of Time and the River, The Web and the Rock, and You Can't Go Home Again, can be studied as a single epic concerning a young man's search for identity. It is Wolfe's aim in each of his novels to show man's need to recognize both his individuality and his role as a member of the American nation.

The development of the character, who changes in name though not in identity, is reflected by the use of narrative, poetic language, or a combination of the two. In the first two novels, lyrical prose dominates the works. The young man, Eugene Gant, is on a search for the ideal existence. He is trying desperately to escape the restrictive bonds of home in order to find himself. Once he escapes, he then tries to identify his role as a person in the nation. His idealized questionings are reflected in the highly subjective tone of poetic language. His personal, romanticized reactions to people, places, and events are related in lyrical prose.

As the search continues in The Web and the Rock, the character, now called George Webber, has begun to mature. Instead of a subjective view of the environment, he takes on a highly objective tone. He tries to look at only the real side of life, eliminating the dream-world of his youth.

When he finally becomes aware of the realities of himself and his environment, in You Can't Go Home Again, George Webber's language of expression combines the highly objective narrative which gives a literal view of his world with the subjective, poetic language which describes his emotional reaction to those same surroundings.

The result is a celebration of self, of one's role as an individual and as an American, which Wolfe feels is necessary for the inhabitants of a democratic nation.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Barbara Tallon Williams entitled "Thomas Wolfe: Language and the Search for Identity." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Clarence Skind
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Charles C. Loef
Second Committee Member

Edward E. Irwin
Third Committee Member

Accepted for the
Graduate Council:

William H. Ellis
Dean of the Graduate School

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The main concern of Thomas Wolfe's writings as reflected in his novels is finding an individual and national identity. Viewed as a whole, his four novels resemble an epic which tells of a man's search for identity. Wolfe's use of poetic language is instrumental in conveying his theme. In the first two novels he expresses in lyrical prose the young dreamer's romantic view of the world in which he lives and the world he seeks; hopes, frustrations, feelings, and insights are seen through the eyes of a young man who has a dream of better knowing himself by first seeing the world. When he comes to the realization that the world he sees is not a representative one, he also discovers that his language of expression can describe only that false world.

At this point, Wolfe alters his use of language. A straightforward presentation of life becomes necessary, so an objective narrative replaces the subjective poetic language. By studying the world from his vantage point, Wolfe sees, and his character relates, that with a realistic image of life as our basis, we can apply subjective reactions to it, maintaining a clear view of ourselves and our roles as citizens of the nation. Here he combines narrative with

lyrical descriptions to present the ideal means of answering the queries each American faces concerning his total identity.

A reading of Thomas Wolfe's novels creates an awareness of the special effort on the author's part to experiment with language in conveying his two major efforts. First, the theme of "...loneliness and the incommunicable self"¹ is expressed through the main characters' personal, emotional responses to events at specific, critical moments in their lives. Second, Wolfe wished to write "an epic portrayal of his native land, one that would reveal America in all its diversity and uniqueness."² His lyrical descriptions of people and places comprise part of that total picture of twentieth century America. The remainder of his picture of America, which becomes the focus of his later novels, is created through a search for the means by which America can be saved from the self destruction to which her people were blindly leading her and, consequently, themselves. The use of lyrics lessens considerably in the last two of Wolfe's novels, which involve the finding of a national identity.

Wolfe's novels deal with man's search for an escape from loss and loneliness. To be successful in this endeavour, man must find his true identity. This search gives unity to Wolfe's novels, which can be studied as an epic with each novel containing one phase of the search.

Look Homeward, Angel begins the conflict where Eugene Gant, a highly autobiographical character, is buried in a

world of pettiness and seeks an escape so he can be himself. Of Time and the River and The Web and the Rock make up the body of the whole story. In the former, Eugene escapes from his home and begins to face thought-provoking experiences. The latter focuses on the relationship of the main character (now named George Webber) and his lover, Esther Jack. The final work, You Can't Go Home Again, is the resolution of all the conflicts faced in the preceding novels. The character, representing Wolfe, has found himself; he is an American who must face grim truths about his country and try to work towards its betterment. The dream world he has been seeking does not exist. The door for which he has been searching opens onto his own consciousness, and there he finds the same hope for improvement that was the very basis of this country's founding.

In this long quest, Wolfe is searching for a language of expression in the persons of Eugene Gant and George Webber. Eugene is immersed in the search for self which makes him a romantic like Wolfe. At the time of Eugene's creation, Wolfe is still searching for answers; he is lost and lonely. The highly emotional state in which Wolfe is immersed carries over to his fictional representative, Eugene. Wolfe's emotions lend themselves easily to subjective, lyrical expression until he becomes aware of the futility of his fantasy. When he discovers the individualism he has been seeking, he realizes it is not totally unique, but part of a larger identity which involves man as a member of American

society. He feels, though, that for many Americans, the belief in dreams and fantasies leads to personal weakness. When the fantasies end, men have no basis of reality on which they can rely to begin their lives again.

Wolfe, having abandoned the character Eugene in favor of George, moves to a more objective view of the world adding poetry less often; when he is poetic, the effect of that language is still very strong. His lyrical prose comes to serve as a reaction to objectively recorded incidents common in American experience. Thus his character, George, does not live in a dream-like state and respond to that world in an equally non-substantive way as Eugene does.

Paradoxically, the lyricism which Wolfe eventually suppresses is a necessary step in a man's search for self. It is when reality intrudes on his soothing dream world that Wolfe's character becomes aware of the importance of an objective look at the world. Without accepting a true image of the real world one cannot cope when reality snatches away dreams.

Wolfe experiments with language in hopes of finding a unique way of effectively expressing his searches and discoveries:

I believe with all my heart...that each man for himself and in his own way, each man who ever hopes to make a living thing out of the substance of his one life, must find that way, that language, and that door--must find it for himself.³

The new language which Wolfe develops eventually shows Eugene Gant and, later, George Webber where to find the answers to their queries about loneliness and isolation: the answers are not under a stone or behind a door; they are within the individual.

Wolfe also believes that a new language is needed to express the "American experience."⁴ He combines the theme of self with the depiction of America by pointing out that the immensity of this country causes some people to suffer identity problems while at the same time allowing them the freedom of language to resolve those problems:

...he [American man] must make somehow a new tradition for himself derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of American life...it is even more than this, that the labor of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him.⁵

Wolfe takes on this task in writing his novels. By acting as an example, he encourages man, as a universal being and as an American, to find his lost self through language.

It is of note that Wolfe deviated from the use of language to find self. Remarkably, it is when he publicly makes a move to stress his individuality that his style becomes less subjective. When Wolfe breaks with Scribner's and Maxwell Perkins, he does so to prove himself independent of the editorial influence which the public accuses him of using as a literary crutch.

In The Web and the Rock, his work which most closely follows the break with his first publisher and editor, Wolfe's writing lacks the intensity of language which his earlier works possess. In Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River, Wolfe uses narrative freely laced with realistic dialogue and powerful lyrical prose as the language of Eugene Gant's expression. The Web and the Rock introduces George Webber, a slightly less autobiographical character than Eugene Gant. Webber's language of expression lacks an abundance of poetry until, as the story progresses, eventually spilling over into You Can't Go Home Again, Wolfe resorts to his natural tendency of using poetic language to illustrate the search for ideals. However, poetry alone does not suffice; it must be balanced with reality. Because the character of Eugene Gant was created during Wolfe's early passion to write, he is more emotive than George Webber, who was developed as part of the author's intent to change his natural writing style.

In the case of George Webber, the character still bears a strong resemblance to Wolfe. However, Wolfe withholds part of himself from George as he whisks him through the same experiences through which he allows Eugene to roam. Thomas Wolfe did not seem in a hurry to get through life; he only seemed rushed to record it. Naturally the amount of emotive response to George's hurried pace would be less than it would be to Eugene's troubled wandering through life.

Unlike Eugene, George partially ceases his search for self when he becomes involved with Esther Jack. He feels that with her, he has found something necessary to the individual. With his new self image, George directs his attentions to a two-fold relationship and neglects a self-centered and world (American)-centered person. He believes that as a couple, they make up a world of their own. It is this type of thinking that he comes to see as a fantasy: shutting out the rest of the world means living in a dream world.

At this point, to complete The Web and the Rock, Wolfe turns to a piece of work which he wrote at the time he completed Of Time and the River. After he has made the effort to reduce the amount of his subjective writing, it may seem incongruous to return to a highly lyrical style to complete this novel. However, Wolfe believes that living in a fantasy leaves one exposed to the utmost evils of reality, should they intrude. He has discovered that people like Esther Jack are guilty of perpetuating the image of falseness as the most desirable way of life in America. Thus, while George Webber basks in this social climate, he and his environment are treated in the subjective manner which Wolfe believes appropriate for them.

In his final novel, Wolfe combines the best qualities of his objective and subjective writing skills. In this culmination of his search for America, he feels it is his duty to portray honestly the evils of the country, the

personalities who are responsible for them, and those who suffer from them.

He also includes lyric responses to these portraits of people and their actions. It is through these lyrically expressed emotions that George Webber comes to terms with the changes he must undergo in accepting the answers he has wrought for so long. In fact, the poetic passages reveal those answers.

The realism of George Webber finally combines with the romanticism of Eugene Gant. The result is an emotional response to a guiding realism, a combination which is necessary to finding and understanding truths.

ENDNOTES

¹C. Hugh Holman, "Thomas Wolfe," American Writers, ed. Leonard Unger (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 450.

²Paschal Reeves, Thomas Wolfe's Albatross: Race and Nationality in America (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1968), p. vii.

³Holman, "Thomas Wolfe," p. 464.

⁴Ibid., p. 470.

⁵Ibid., p. 470.

CHAPTER TWO

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL: THE SEARCH BEGINS

With his first novel, Look Homeward, Angel, Thomas Wolfe begins relating the struggles of an individual searching for an escape from loneliness. Eventually this search leads to the additional quest for a national identity.

Wolfe creates the character Eugene Gant as his spokesman. Gene's family and his life's chronology correspond directly with Wolfe's own. In every notable way, Eugene is Thomas Wolfe. Though numerous details in the novel are not exact duplicates of events in Wolfe's life, they still bear marked similarities to the writer's biography. It stands to reason then that Wolfe has strong emotional ties to Gene. Through this character he can relate his inner feelings about people and occurrences from his past.

The character Eugene personifies Wolfe's theme of loneliness as he journeys from birth to early manhood in this novel. Eugene's isolation is as apparent as his constant search for an understanding of it. Wolfe continuously reminds the reader of this through lyrical "O lost" passages. These and other lyrical sections serve as emotional releases for Eugene.

Wolfe's entire response to Gene is purely subjective. Because of Wolfe's close ties to Gant, he has

this character speak, think, and act as he would like to do himself. The language he uses for Gene is poetry:

Staggering blindly in the whitewashed glare, his eyes, sleepcorded opened slowly as he was born anew, umbilically cut from darkness.

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... Here, O here, Eugene...The way is here, 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. (pp. 244-245)¹

Eugene hears the voice beckoning him to find an escape from the darkness of his soul's imprisonment. It taunts him with the knowledge of a better place and way of existing. Eugene knows what the voice hints at is true and that it comes from within himself. He cries, "I will remember. When I come to the place, I shall know" (p. 245).

As a child, Wolfe is not likely to have expressed his emotions poetically. Yet looking back on his childhood, he can have the character who represents himself react in a way the adult Wolfe sees as the most expressive form of depicting a child's intense emotions. With what words can one describe utter loneliness? Wolfe believes it can be done most effectively through the figurative language of poetry. This is what Wolfe gives his childhood counterpart, Eugene.

The awareness of his fate as a lost, lonely person has been with Eugene since he was a young child. This same fate is imposed on all mankind at birth:

...his life must always walk down lonely passages. Lost. He understood that men were forever strangers to one another...that imprisoned in the dark womb of our mother, we come to life without having seen her face, ...and that, caught in that insoluble prison of being, we escape it never, no matter what arms may clasp us...Never, never, never, never, never. (p. 31)

As Wolfe states his belief that man is a creature lost and without an identity, he writes in a poetic style. He believes all Americans can relate to this style because they share the experience being described and need a special language to express it.

Wolfe's use of poetics is so intense that John Wheelock compiled The Face of a Nation, a work consisting of poetic passages taken from Wolfe's writings which were published before his death. In his introductory statements, Wheelock states that Thomas Wolfe is a poet who elected to write in prose.² He goes on to point out that Wolfe does not see himself as a poet; Wolfe believes that form makes poetry, not spirit. Concerning Wolfe's work, there is no question that spirit oversteps form and qualifies this man as a poet. His poetry is all too evident within his prose, even in cases relating typical, everyday experiences. For example, Eliza Gant becomes frustrated with Eugene when he weeds her vegetable garden, a task he approaches with little enthusiasm. The style of his personal reaction to her screaming about his inefficiency can be taken for nothing but poetry and, thematically, a cry of loneliness:

The bread that I fetch will be eaten by strangers, I carry coal and split wood for fires to warm them. Smoke, Fuimus fumus. All of our life goes up in smoke. There is no structure, no creation in it...We are passing away in smoke and there is nothing to-day but weariness to pay us for yesterday's toil. How may we save ourselves? (p. 244)

Here the spirit of Wolfe takes an ordinary situation and relates it to the American experience. Eugene is not just bemoaning his fate of helping to provide for his mother's boarders, whose presence he does, in fact, resent. He recalls the lack of direction for the nation's people who wish to escape the drudgery of their own lives so they too may wander and search for themselves.

Gene knows he is trapped in his hometown, Altamont, for the time being. As a school-aged boy, he relies on fantasies to take him on the journeys for which he longs. When Gene begins school, he becomes more intensely aware of his loneliness and the constant turmoil of his home life. As a result, he dreams of the places to which he might someday travel; thus he escapes existing miseries:

He had heard already the ringing of remote church bells over a countryside on Sunday night; had listened to the earth steeped in the brooding of dark...and he had heard thus the far retreating wail of a whistle in a distant valley, and faint thunder on the rails; (p. 68)....

.....

And now, whetted intemperately by what he had felt, he began...to breathe the mixed odors of the earth, sensing in every squat keg, rich port, fat Burgandy; smelling the jungle growth of the tropics, the heavy odor of plantations, the salt-fish smell of harbors, voyaging in the vast, enchanting, but unperplexing world. (p. 70)

The cataloging of descriptions, reminiscent of Walt Whitman's poetry, is ingeniously fitted into Eugene's thoughts as part of his emotional reaction to his awareness of self-loss.

While Eugene does dream of visiting far-away places, he also has a sense of the special meaning which his immediate environment holds for him. This awareness, though suppressed at times, proves important in Gene's search once he leaves Altamont, and later, America:

He knew the inchoate sharp excitement
of hot dandelions in young Spring grass
at noon; the smell of cellars, cobwebs
and built-on secret earth; in July, of
watermelons bedded in sweet hay...of
the flat moist plug of apple tobacco,
of wood-smoke and burnt leaves in
October; of the brown tired autumn
earth; of honey-suckle at night; of a
room of old pine boards in which books
and carpets have been stored.... (p. 69)

Even though the urge to travel to other countries preys on Gene's mind, Wolfe reminds the reader that Gene also has a sense of home, America, and its good qualities.

Wolfe's catalog of sights and smells carries the same celebration of America that Walt Whitman's poetry has. However, Gene, representing Wolfe, must search elsewhere before he can have a meaningful appreciation of the American virtues which Whitman exemplifies in his work. When Gene describes the sights he sees, the reader knows that even though the character acknowledges them, he has not yet discovered their true value.

Like Whitman, Wolfe puts himself on record as a person of his time period in America. Wolfe exemplifies the lost, searching persons who he feels abound in this country. He is not satisfied with only describing that person, though he does so in great detail. Beyond that, he puts Gene through the same self-seeking journey on which he embarks himself.

While many events in Wolfe's life remind him of his need to find himself, the death of his brother Ben has a special impact. Wolfe had been closer to Ben than to anyone in the family. Losing him moved Wolfe farther into the depths of loneliness. Ben had been strong and transferred that strength to Tom's search for self. Wolfe reveals his own emotions at the time of Ben's death through Eugene, whom he puts through the same situation with Ben Gant of Look Homeward, Angel. Here is John S. Barnes'³ arrangement of the prose poem reflecting Gene's thoughts the moment after Ben passes away:

We can believe in the nothingness of life,
 We can believe in the nothingness of death
 And of life after death--
 But who can believe in the nothingness of Ben?

...
 He lived here a stranger,
 Trying to recapture the music
 Of the lost world,
 Trying to recall
 The great forgotten language,
 The lost faces,
 The stone, the leaf, the door.

O Artemidorus⁴, farewell!⁵

Ben had once helped Gene to understand his feelings of loss and isolation, but now Gene stands alone. With a source of his strength gone, Gene faces the continuation of his search without the aid of Ben's support. Gene's poetic lines, reflecting confusion and fear, seem most expressive of the loss he suffers.

Through both his life and death, Ben helped Gene to realize that man must escape from loneliness by working with others who share this misery. By supporting those in whom we sense an imprisoned self, we create a unified strength which can free that self.⁶ Before he can see this, though, Gene is convinced that while he is left to suffer loneliness, Ben has escaped it: "Death...had come to free him, to heal him, to save him from the torture of life" (p. 467).

Eugene is more determined than ever to escape his imprisonment in Altamont. In his escape, he believes he will find the door into a world where he is both an individual and part of a larger, cohesive identity. Together, all the people who share in this experience can work toward improving their society for the benefit of all Americans. This is the America Gene (and Wolfe) dreams of: one with pride in its whole self and its separate, individual members. It is this idealistic, romantic Eugene Gant who is best depicted in a language which bears the same subjective spirit that he does. This attitude makes Thomas Wolfe's poetry work toward conveying the theme of the novel.

When Eugene finally works out a financial compromise with his family which will allow him to leave for Harvard, he ends a part of his conflict. At last he can really embark upon the search for a door which will open to his true self. No longer is he to be faced with the pettiness and constriction of the environment to which he has been tied for so long. Wolfe celebrates the triumph of Gene's release by reuniting him with the one person who shared that insatiable desire for escape, Ben.

The mystical meeting, which occurs in the pre-dawn hours on the day of Eugene's departure, contains some of the most moving lyrics of this novel. Ben has come to ask Gene why he is going. Gene responds that Ben's death has made him acutely aware of the need to escape. Ben's spirit forces Gene to further examine his reasons for leaving and to state exactly what he hopes to find. He prepares Gene for all the setbacks he will face during his search by showing him a vision of immutable time, thus revealing that Gene's quest may end as fruitlessly as did Ben's:

He saw the billion living of the earth,
the thousand billion dead: seas were
withered, deserts flooded...but, amid the
fumbling march of races to extinction, the
giant rhythms of the earth remained. The
seasons passed in their majestic procession-
als, and germinal Spring returned forever
on the land...In his moment of terrible
vision he saw, in the tortuous ways of a
thousand alien places, his foiled quest
of himself. (p. 519)

Gene is upset by this vision and insists there must be goodness somewhere. Ben has forced him to verbalize his

intentions about the search; through that action, Gene's resolve is strengthened. His journey is not just a vague dream; it is part of a plan he is making to know himself and his fellow man better. He declares his intent once again:

...prepare, my soul, for the beginning hunt. I will plumb seas stranger than those haunted by the Albatross...he stood before the lost land of himself....

O sudden and impalpable fawn, lost in the thickets of myself, I will hunt you down until you cease to haunt my eyes with hunger. I heard your foot-falls in the desert, I saw your shadow in old buried cities...but I did not find you there. And no leaf hangs for me in the forest; I shall lift no stone upon the hills; I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter.... (p. 521)

Eugene is determined to find the identity which is so important to him. Thomas Wolfe, having felt the same need himself, captures the enthusiasm and optimism of youth in a special language. A boy's dreams of successfully accomplishing his ultimate goal cannot be stated in simple prose and still project the intensity with which the dreamer relates his plan.

Since the beginning of America's image as a land of plenty and opportunity, Americans have dared to dream the impossible; yet they lack a language to convey the self-confidence they feel about their realizations of freedom and success. Wolfe finds a language for Eugene Gant and others like him. Though, practically speaking, odds are against

Gene's success. Wolfe so perfectly captures the spirit of the moment, the reader is carried away with high hopes for that success.

Eugene is now searching even more desperately for an end to the loss and loneliness he feels in Altamont. The conflict within him continues to grow throughout the novel. Every event in the book depicts the pettiness which Wolfe feels exists in life: family quarrels and differences, racial discrimination, dishonest business practices, romances. All of these involve stifling injustices which are especially evident to a sensitive young person like Wolfe. He is filled with the need to examine life beyond the confines of his own childhood community in order to find another way for himself.

Through Eugene, Wolfe reveals the frustrations which he has harbored and which he believes typical of most Americans, but he can have Gene say things in a way he could not have used in reality.⁷ The shy, reserved Tom Wolfe can have Eugene vocalize all the private thoughts and feelings which Wolfe had held inside for so many years.

While this novel concentrates on the search for the soul's escape from the prison of self, Wolfe is already developing the underlying theme of an American identity. Eugene and his family represent the American people; his hometown is all of society and, finally, all of America. In the next novel, Of Time and the River, Gene literally escapes his hometown environment; the move from an individual

to a member of society is apparent. However, the same type of lyrical language which conveys Gene's inner struggles and emotions carries over into his expanded search for a more encompassing identity.

ENDNOTES

¹Citations from Wolfe in this chapter are to Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).

²John Hall Wheelock, "Introduction," The Face of a Nation: Poetical Passages from the Writings of Thomas Wolfe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. v.

³Barnes rearranged some of Wolfe's prose into poetic form. His volume is A Stone, A Leaf, A Door (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954).

⁴The Artemidorus cited in this line would likely be Artemidorus Daldianus, a Greek soothsayer and dream interpreter whose work, The Interpretation of Dreams, helps explain rites, myths, and opinions of the ancients. Webster's Biographical Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1976).

⁵Barnes, A Stone, A Leaf, A Door, pp. 8-9.

⁶Maxwell Geismar, "Diary of a Provincial," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe: Biographical and Critical Selections, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 118.

⁷Edwin Berry Burgum, "Thomas Wolfe's Discovery of America," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe: Biographical and Critical Selections, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 183.

CHAPTER THREE

OF TIME AND THE RIVER: THE GROWTH OF A YOUNG MAN'S FURY

The second novel in Wolfe's series begins with the same day on which Look Homeward, Angel ends. Regarding the chronology of Gene's life, Of Time and the River flows naturally from the preceding work. The structural presentation is somewhat different, though, in that this work is like a picaresque novel.¹ Wolfe performs an interesting literary innovation with this form: he links the episodes by using lyrical passages like those in Look Homeward, Angel to convey Gant's reactions to the people and incidents he encounters. Through these emotional expressions, Eugene comes to understand himself; and he begins to find some concrete answers to questions with which he has been concerned since childhood.

In Of Time and the River, Wolfe experiments more with language as a means of relating American experience than he did in Look Homeward, Angel. The lyrical expressions which mark Eugene's emotional growth become such a natural part of Wolfe's writing that they increasingly steal into minor descriptive passages that have no part in Gene's emotions. Edward Aswell notes that at times Wolfe becomes so taken up with the "cadence of his own words" that he resorts

to rhythm and leaves meaning to suffer.² While Of Time and the River is a very lengthy novel, it does not suffer loss of meaning because of excess poetic language. Instead that language serves to increase the reader's understanding of Gene's struggle and growth.

The unifying element of the novel is Gene's motivation to continue the search which will help him end the imprisonment of his soul in spite of doubts and setbacks which were foreshadowed by Ben's ghost at the end of Look Homeward, Angel. Gene is driven by a passion which his friend, Frank Starwick, envies because it makes success possible and life a constant adventure rather than a burdensome bore:

There is a great river of energy in you [Gene] and it keeps bursting over and breaking loose. You could not hold it back if you tried...I [Frank] have not got that great well of life and power in me, and I could not speak as you do if I tried....(p. 320)³

Because he lacks fury, Frank is an unfulfilled artist. Both he and Eugene feel the same emotions about life in America, but Gene has a gift which Frank lacks.

My God...to have the spirit of the artist and to lack his hide, to feel the intolerable and unspeakable beauty, mystery, loveliness, and terror of this immortal land--this great America--and a skin too sensitive...to declare its cruelty, its horror, falseness, hunger, the warped and twisted soul of its frustration.... (p. 323)

Gene is blessed to have this driving fury which forces him to record his world; consequently he celebrates America and

her people in a manner befitting the vastness of her parts. Using the same broad, poetical lines as Walt Whitman, he searches for the American identity and eventually finds it. Yet he not only relates his findings, he takes the reader along on the search so the sufferings are shared, thus making the discovery more intimate and meaningful for all involved.

Before one can find a national identity, he must know himself. This is the main search embarked upon in Of Time and the River. To find oneself, Wolfe feels a person must see his relation to intangibles. He relates this search by using lyrics, characteristically endowed with figurative language, which assist with a concrete understanding of abstracts.

Wolfe describes Of Time and the River as consisting of two cycles.⁴ The first is a period of wandering in a man's youth, and the second is a period of greater certitude for that young man. The bulk of the novel belongs to the first cycle wherein young Gene goes to Harvard, makes a permanent emotional break from home, decides on a career course for his life, and travels in search of inspiration for his writing. Throughout this period he meets various personalities of differing social standings and nationalities. He embarks on adventures which Wolfe relates on an objective level and has Eugene react to on a purely subjective level. It is through observations filled with feelings of loss and loneliness that Gene grows nearer an understanding of his

world and his role therein. As in Look Homeward, Angel, the intensity of a young man's emotions is best described in language that is emotive in itself. Wolfe was not only trying to find a place for himself but a way for all men, all Americans, to do the same. The lyrics he used made Gene's experiences more than just words to which some, maybe many, readers could relate. He created a language which Americans, all of whom are lost, can use and through which they can learn about themselves.

It is the lack of a language for expressing the American experience which in part motivates Gene's impassioned search. Not only does he wish for an identity, but also for an adequate way of expressing his feelings:

All that we know is that we lack a tongue
that could reveal, a language that could
perfectly express the wild joy swelling
to a music in our heart, the wild pain
welling to a strong ache in our throat,
the wild cry mounting to a madness in
our brain, the thing, the word, the
joy we know so well, and cannot speak! (p. 34)

Remarkably the very language that Wolfe uses to express the need for language is that which he seeks: lyrics infused with the intense desire of a young man's yearning for self knowledge.

As indicated by the work's title, the element of time is a contributing factor to a sense of loss in Gene's search. Time is the time of youth and river is a current of life flowing constantly under America.⁵ The flowing river is indicative of time unchanging; the river's time is

constant. It sees the changes in man's life, but its own time never alters. Man's youth is spent and more men come to embark upon the same journey of youth, but the river goes on unchanging. This sense of time adds to the feelings of loss and loneliness which Gene has experienced all of his life. As fleeting as youth, the mystery of time must be expressed in significant terms. Wolfe uses the movement of trains, the seasons, and death to describe what time means to man:

That grand, moon-haunted earth stroked calmly past and, through the media of its changeless and unceasing change, the recession and recurrent movement of the enchanted scene, the train made on forever its tremendous monotone that was itself the rhythm of suspended time, the sound of silence and forever. (p. 63)

.

...in these nights of waning summer--more than any other season of the year, the immense and murmurous sound of time was audible...it seemed...to comprise, out of the bitter briefness of man's days, the essence of his own eternity, and to be itself eternal, fixed, and everlasting, no matter what men lived or died. (p. 497)

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Always the rivers run, and always there will be great ships upon the tide, always great horns are baying at the harbor's mouth, and in the night a thousand men have died while the river, always the river, the dark eternal river, full of strange secret time, washing the city's stains away...is flowing by us....(p. 860)

Unfortunately youth which is doomed by time is not appreciated until it has passed. Wolfe has the advantage

of hindsight in so saying, but he does not allow Gene to completely waste his youth:

A young man is so strong, so mad, so certain, and so lost...he wants all, feels the thirst and power for everything, and finally gets nothing...And that is why...every man will look back on that period of his life with... the bitter sorrow and regret of a man who knows that once he had a great talent and wasted it....(p. 454-5)

This is the image of many young men like Frank Starwick, and it is partially true of Eugene Gant. As previously cited, Frank gives up his artistic pursuits, but Gene is driven on to succeed. It is the quality of becoming obsessed with a thing that insures Gene's youth will not be totally misspent. Wolfe feels the error of his own efforts to convey reality in the plays he wrote for Professor Hatcher's writing workshop at Harvard. He wrote about things that seemed important and real to him, but they were not real for him because they were about things he had never experienced. Eventually he discovers that the fury which drives him to create is characteristic of his family, but each Gant directs his fury toward his own pursuits. Wolfe discovers that his family's frenzy for life makes them all worthwhile to examine because they are real and represent the stuff of American life. Wolfe describes the part of Gene's life when he sought distant realities as a time of expected waste, for "there is something in its very nature that makes it so, and that is why all men regret it" (p. 455). Fortunately for Gene, he realizes in time that he must turn inward to find a reality with meaning.

Once Gene succumbs to the direction of the driving fury within him, he embarks upon new experiences searching for his identity. After his break with home and exposure to teaching at the university, he feels compelled to travel through Europe in search of his lost self. In The Story of a Novel, Wolfe explains, "...The way to discover one's own country was to leave it, ...the way to find America was to find it in one's heart, one's memory, and one's spirit, and in a foreign land."⁶ Eugene was eager to face the customs of a new culture in hopes of finding a door which would open for him. Therein he could find a means of expression, a clear image of self, and a model for his America.

Ironically Gene's first separation from America is within its geographical boundaries. He visits the wealthy Pierce family at their Hudson River estate. There he is questioned by the disinterested chatelain about what he finds of note in the city. He wants to explain its wonder in the most expressive way possible:

He thought that he could tell her...[about] the great tide flowing in the hearts of men, as dark and mysterious as the great, unceasing river, the thing that waits and does not speak and is forever silent and that knows forever, and that has no words to say, no tongue to speak, and that unites six million celled and lonely sleepers at the heart of night and silence....(p. 533)

While Gene can think these words, he still has no language through which he can express them to one who is not a part of the American experience.

Thanks to the incredible wealth of the Pierce's and the lack of concern for anyone outside their realm, Gene is forced to view their world as the fantasy it is for most Americans. The super-wealthy do not represent America. Instead of studying a dream world to find the national identity, he must turn to the common man:

It was a desperate and soul-sickening discovery to know that not alone through moonlight, magic, and the radiant images of their heart's desire could men find America, but that somewhere there,... lay the thing they sought...-buried there in the grimy and illimitable jungles of its savage cities. (p. 571)

Gene has long been drawn to cities as places filled with life which he can study and share. With all the people there, sharing in the same experiences, he feels sure he can find his answers in those "million-footed" towns. When he embarks on a journey to a new city or when walking through the streets of one, he is always struck first by the magical quality of hope that persists:

A dozen times a year he made these tormented journeys of desire...What did he expect to find? He did not know: he only knew that at night he would feel again the huge and secret quickening of desire to which all life in the city moved, that he would be drawn again, past hope and past belief, to the huge glare, the swarming avenues of night, with their great tides of livid night-time faces. (p. 468)

He goes to cities in search of a door which will lead him to the freedom he desires, the freedom which will give him his identity, but once he is there, he discovers no door.

This frustration causes him to continue his search elsewhere:

...he knew only one desire--to escape, to escape instantly from the great well and prison of the city; and he had only one conviction--...that escape, fulfillment, a fortunate and impossibly happy fruition lay somewhere out across the dark and lonely continent....(p. 469)

All of these confused thoughts are caused by the unutterable feelings of loss and loneliness with which Gene is overwhelmed in these vast havens for common men. As always when subjectively viewing experience, Wolfe relates these confused emotions through poetic language:

...he had simply never imagined the number of people that were in it [the world]. And like most people who hug loneliness to them like a lover, the need of occasional companionship, forever tender and forever true... cut through him like a sword. (p. 113)

The loneliness Gene feels in cities is to him a phenomenon common to all inhabitants of American cities and towns. He believes it exists everywhere, thus the fury which drove him to seek an escape first from his home and then from subsequent places he lived or visited is all the more remarkable:

...we are so lost, so naked and so lonely in America. Immense and cruel skies bend over us and all of us are driven on forever and we have no home...For America has a thousand lights and weathers and we walk the streets, we walk the streets forever, we walk the streets of life alone. (p. 155)

The reason we are so lost in America goes back again to the center of Eugene's problem. We have no language with which

to express a meaningful representation of our lives. Until we can find the adequate manner of expression, we are trapped without an evident identity.

Since he finds no solace, no door in America, Gene embarks on the journey which Wolfe sees as essential to finding our own country. He leaves America for Europe. In England, Gene feels closer to his answers, but he is still faced with loneliness: "And everywhere that year there was something secret, lonely, and immense that waited..." (p. 601). The presence of something unnamed gives him a hope that is akin to the hope of America's promise: "...there was something there incredibly near and most familiar...only a door away and never opened, only a door away and never found" (p. 601).

The experiences he faces in England force him to examine the British way of life as opposed to the American way. Gene realizes that the British have no answers for him, because "Their door was one he could not enter. And suddenly the naked empty desolation filled his life again, and he was walking on..." (p. 605). The closest he comes to inner peace is when he realizes that what he sees reminds him of home, the South:

It was a life that seemed so near to Eugene that he could lay his hand on it...He seemed to have returned to a room he had always known...But he never found the door...When he got there he couldn't find it. (p. 608)

Not finding the solace for which he searched in England, Gene moves on to Paris where he is again faced with

futility. Paris offers him renewed friendship with Frank Starwick and two female companions of Frank's but opens no doors. Lonely in Paris, Gene reflects upon home:

One saw...the dark coast of France, the flash of beacons, the gray, fortified harbored walls...and beyond, beyond, one saw the infinite beat and swell of strong seas,... and forever beyond, beyond, one saw the faint, pale coasts of morning and America, and then the spires and ramparts of the enfebled isle...of the terrific city. (p. 771)

This is Gene's version of what Wolfe describes in The Story of a Novel as his dreams of America while in Paris:

"...my life would ache with the whole memory of it; the desire to see it again; somehow to find a word for it; a language that would tell its shape, its color, the way we have all known and felt and seen it. And when I understood this thing, I saw that I must find for myself the tongue to utter what I knew but could not say. And from the moment of that discovery the line and purpose of my life was shaped...to discover that articulation for which I strove. (pp. 17-18)

It is ironic that Wolfe has Gene speak and think in the very language which he is seeking all along. The poetry used to describe his search articulates the American experience. Again, though, Wolfe has the advantage of hindsight. He has experienced the steps through which he puts Eugene. While Wolfe was searching, he was feeling all the things which he relates through Gant's story. However, he was not expressing those feelings at the time. It is through Gene that Wolfe gives his readers the advantage of having a language of expression on hand while they are relating to Gene's feelings and experiences.

The second part of the cycle Wolfe identified for this novel deals with Gene's awareness that America is a wonderful country, more so than any European nation. He realizes this during his stay in Paris in much the same manner that Wolfe explains his own realization in The Story of a Novel.

Gene keeps awakening in a foreign land aware that it is not the special fantasy world his travelling companions make it out to be: "Then he awakes at morning in a foreign land, and thinks of home" (p. 361). His first, stirring realization of this begins a song of celebration in the style of Walt Whitman in which he proclaims all the wonders of America that make it a superior nation. Then he asks why we have come to be part of America and answers:

For a living memory; for ten thousand
memories; for a million nights and sounds
and moments; for something like nothing else
on earth; for something which possesses us...
something that is in us and part of us and pro-
ceeds from us, that beats in all the pulses
of our blood. (p. 866)

He goes on to name famous American battles, states, Indian nations, railroad lines, tramps, and rivers. Then he sums up the greatness of these names as "these are a few of their princely names, these are a few of their great, proud glittering names, fit for the immense and lonely land that they inhabit" (p. 868).

He comes to an important realization at the end of his song which takes him home to America where he belongs:

...we are the sons of our father, whose life
like ours was loved, we are the sons of our

father to whom only can we speak out the
 strange, dark burden of our heart and spirit,
 we are the sons of our father, and we shall
 follow the print of his feet forever. (p. 870)

From this point on, Gene feels a oneness with the American spirit. He actively moves toward the return trip to America and actually has enjoyable reactions to the few remaining European experiences upon which he embarks. His dreams are now peaceful and filled with the hope which exemplifies the American way of life. However, he still has visions of searching which indicate that his realization of America's value does not end his quest. It is an important stepping stone toward his goal but not an end to his journey. What he lacks is first-hand knowledge of America as a willing celebrant in her glories, and a language with which he and all Americans can verbalize those glories.

In his visions of searching, he sees himself as "he walked the streets alone, and heard...whisperings and laughter, and was bathed in the bottomless depths of a wordless shame, and could never find the house he had lost, the door he had forgotten" (p. 886). The awareness of future setbacks is still with him, but he forges ahead with the optimism his driving fury forces upon him.

The novel ends with a note of promise. Gene catches sight of an intriguing woman as passengers prepare to disembark from the ship which has returned them to New York. Wolfe creates a tie between the two characters, who do not actually meet in this novel, through his lyrical language.

As the lady awaits the disembarkation, she looks about her and is struck with the wonder of all she sees. Wolfe has her reaction expressed lyrically:

...how can I longer bear this joy intolerable,
the music of this great song unpronounceable,
the anguish of this glory unimaginable, which
fills my life to bursting and which will not
let me speak! (p. 910)

Like Gene, she feels the need for a unique language which can capture the true essence of her American experience. Also, Wolfe has her, like Gene, speak in the language which he believes provides Americans with the ability to express emotions which are inspired by the great, immense glory of their homeland.

If one is to judge a character by name and experience only, this novel ends the story of Eugene Gant. For reasons to be discussed in the next chapter, Thomas Wolfe makes an effort to move away from Gene's story. Though his new character proves to be basically the same person, another change that Wolfe essays is largely successful. He moves away from a largely subjective, poetic language toward a more objective narrative.

Because Of Time and the River is so densely packed with poetics as the reader's guide to linking episodes and understanding characters' emotions, one begins to attach this mode of expression to Wolfe's novels. The poetics stress the thematic nature of this novel and Look Homeward, Angel, just as Wolfe hoped his new-found language of America would do.

Fortunately he does not drop poetic language from his later writings; before his death, he develops a blend of objective and subjective writing. The two styles work together, complementing each other's purposes. However, Of Time and the River is the last of Wolfe's novels to rely heavily on poetics as the work's main language of expression.

ENDNOTES

¹Henry Seidel Canby, "The River of Youth," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe: Biographical and Critical Selections, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 135.

²Edward C. Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," The Hills Beyond, by Thomas Wolfe (New York: New American Library, 1941), p. 283.

³Citations from Wolfe in this chapter are to Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935).

⁴Thomas Wolfe, "The Story of a Novel," The World of Thomas Wolfe, ed. C. Hugh Holman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 28.

⁵Canby, "The River of Youth," p. 134.

⁶Wolfe, "The Story of a Novel," p. 16.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WEB AND THE ROCK: A CHANGE IN DIRECTION

The third Wolfe novel is an effort on the author's part to change his style of writing. He becomes obsessed with the notion that critics are right in accusing him of too much dependence on his Scribner's editor, Maxwell Perkins. While Perkins does play a major role in Wolfe's success, he is not the creative artist; he is the editor who advises and encourages a man with deep insecurities yet strong convictions. Wolfe is determined to prove to himself, his readers, and the critics that he can change editors and maintain his level of writing excellence.

Wolfe not only changes editors, he also decides to alter his style from a subjective approach toward life to an objective one. In addition, he discards Eugene Gant in favor of George Webber, who was to be a more objective personality than Gene ever was.

Wolfe feels there are many things he wants to say about his own childhood which he had left out of Look Homeward, Angel.¹ With a new character, he can tell the tale again and fill in those gaps. The first part of the new book is dedicated to that end. However, the second part does not fulfill that intention. One reason is that by the second

half of the novel, the character has grown up. Also, instead of finishing the work with a new story about the young man George has come to be (and who resembles Eugene Gant in many ways), Wolfe completes it by using a manuscript he had written earlier to continue the story of Eugene and the lady he sees on board ship at the end of Of Time and the River. Wolfe simply changes names and some details to make the piece work with The Web and the Rock.

This third novel is the most difficult of Wolfe's works to read. Disturbing elements of the story include the confusion caused by a new character who strongly resembles an old one, a move away from the lyrical expression of the character's emotions, and the incongruity caused by the two separate styles represented in the distinct halves of the novel.

In a letter to Edward Aswell, his new editor, Wolfe voices his intention of making changes in his literary endeavours and declares some high hopes regarding the success of The Web and the Rock:

As the author [Wolfe] has told his editor [Aswell], this book marks not only a turning away from the books he has written in the past, but a genuine spiritual and artistic change. In other words, he feels that he is done with lyrical and identifiable personal autobiography; he is also seeking, and hopes now to obtain, through free creation, a release of his inventive power which the more shackling limitations of identifiable autobiography do not permit.²

One element of autobiography which Wolfe wishes to maintain with George Webber is a visible physical trait which makes

him stand out from the average man. In his own words, Wolfe says he wants to do this in order to "create a figure who would illustrate that (physical) variation and all the great human experiences that attend it."³ This is one emotional factor that Wolfe allows his character to portray: an intense lack of ease about his physical appearance.

While Wolfe intends to avoid poetic language as much as possible in this novel, he does fit it into the work. It is not used in the same manner here as in the two previous works. Whereas before, Wolfe had used poetry to convey the intense inner feelings of Eugene Gant and as a measure of his growth and advancement toward his goal, he deliberately avoids the same technique with George Webber in the first half of the new work. George's experiences are related in the objective narrative which Wolfe intends to use. This move away from expressive poetics is especially noticeable in The Web and the Rock because of the extensive use of this sort of language in the preceding work, Of Time and the River.

In spite of a conscious effort to avoid them, some lyrical passages are present:

First came the old dark memory of time-haunted man and the lost voices in the hills a hundred years ago, the world-lost and hill-haunted sorrow of the time-triumphant Joyners. Then his spirit flamed beyond the hills, beyond lost time and sorrow, to his father and his father's earth; and when he thought of him his heart grew warm..., he leapt all barriers of the here and now,...he saw a vision of the golden future in new lands. (p. 91)⁴

This passage recalls the hope of Eugene Gant as he dreamed of a proud, unified America. While George Webber is himself a dreamer, Wolfe tries to use a realistic approach to his study of the character rather than the dreamy, romantic approach he used with Gant.

Wolfe was very skilled in that lyrical form of utterance which had fulfilled his dream of a national expression more closely than anything else with which he had experimented. It is in descriptive passages of the first half of the novel that the poetry typical of Wolfe most often appears:

This street held for him a universe of joy and magic which seemed abundant for a thousand lives. Its dimensions were noble in their space and limitless surprise...It was a world which he had known and lived with every atom of his blood and brain and spirit, and every one of its thousand images was rooted into the structure of his life forever, as much a part of him as his inmost thoughts. (p. 101)

This lyrical prose and other similar passages are efforts on Wolfe's part to capture the American spirit. While they do encompass thoughts one may have concerning an element of American life, and the reader can say, "That is true,"⁵ they lack the personal impact of Eugene Gant's observations about similar phenomena.

Wolfe desperately tries to control the repetition and verbosity which he and critics considered to be major faults of his earlier works.⁶ He meets with a certain amount of success in his writings which are posthumous publications. With his move toward more objective writing, he was bound

to eliminate repetition of lines (though the story as a whole is a repetition of Eugene Gant's story). The irony about the change is that the discovery of realism as a path to understanding is made by Gant at the end of Of Time and the River when he becomes aware that dreams and fantasies are pathways to false hopes and lost ideals. Gene realizes this in the midst of a lyrical rhapsody and celebrates his new awareness in the same style. Yet in his very next work, the author moves away from these lyrics to a realistic language for the expression of his theme.

Wolfe decides that man must change as he grows. The discoveries he makes about how a man develops his identity are brought about in part by his own understanding of the lyrics he writes. Through his romantic lyrics, Wolfe learns that a world of fantasy is not one in which men learn to cope with real pressures. This paradox results in his trying to quit that style. While it is beneficial to him, he feels it is not befitting his ideal of a national expression. In fact, his concern for a specific language wanes considerably by the time he writes his final novel, You Can't Go Home Again. His new concern for understanding one's role as an individual and as a member of a nation rests on seeing oneself and one's country in as realistic a vein as possible. Before finding didactic meanings in lyrical expressions, Wolfe feels one must examine a straightforward picture of reality.

With Wolfe's striving toward objective writing, it may seem incongruous for any lyric passages to appear. One must

keep in mind, though, that The Web and the Rock was published posthumously. Wolfe did not plan for the work to be published in the form in which he turned it over to Aswell. Because of his death, there was no opportunity for Wolfe to review his editor's opinions about the work. While Aswell credits him with being a tireless rewriter,⁷ there is no way of knowing how many more changes would or would not have been made with the aid of editorial suggestions. Lyrical passages which relate Webber's thoughts may have been deleted by Wolfe's leaving only those which serve as description or perhaps removed altogether.

All this is conjecture, yet the facts of Wolfe's more extensive use of realism and his attempts to break with former writing practices are undeniable. He even manages to produce some powerful characters who are not remnants of his real life in Asheville, North Carolina. One such character is Nebraska Crane. He is one of George's best friends, but upon questioning, no member of the Wolfe family could recall any similar person in Tom's circle of acquaintances. Yet Bras, as George calls him, is one of Wolfe's most vivid, memorable personalities. In the author's note prefacing the novel, Wolfe says,

I have invented characters who are compacted from the whole amalgam and consonance of seeing, feeling, thinking, living, and knowing many people. I have sought, through free creation, a release of my inventive power. (p. v)

Nebraska is a successful result of this effort on Wolfe's part. He is a strong character in whom Wolfe combines

admirable traits which are the stuff of the American hero.

In Chapter 8 of the novel, "The Child by Tiger," George and his friends want to view the bullet-ridden corpse of Dick Prosser, a Black who had worked for a family in Libya Hill and was lynched for shooting several white men. The only one of the boys who will admit wanting to see the body is Nebraska:

Nebraska was the only one of the boys who didn't lie about it. With that forthright honesty that was part of him, so strangely wrought of innocence and of brutality, of heroism, cruelty, and tenderness, he announced at once that he was going, and then waited impatiently, spitting briefly and contemptuously...while the others argued about their own hypocrisy. (p. 146)

After viewing Dick's body, and listening to boasts concerning who is responsible for each of the bullet holes, Nebraska openly reacts with disdain:

...fearless, blunt, outspoken, as he always was, [he] turned abruptly, put two fingers to his lips and spat between them, widely and contemptuously...fearless and unshaken, untouched by any terror or any doubt, he moved away. (p. 148)

Everything about Nebraska reeks of an American hero. Even in You Can't Go Home Again, he is depicted as a successful baseball player and family man. Wolfe used his talents to create a likeable and believable stereotype. Yet he does not use lyrics to project that image. Instead he uses narrative spiced with numerous adjectives to compose the picture.

Even when Wolfe does slip in some lyrics to reveal an emotional reaction of George's, he does so not in the

character's voice but as an obtrusive, omniscient author:

What is it that a young man wants? Where is the central source of that wild fury that boils up in him, that goads and drives and lashes him, that explodes his energies and strews his purpose to the wind of a thousand instant and chaotic impulses? (p. 217)

George is not asking these questions about his life's motivations; Wolfe asks them. Though Webber is ultimately Wolfe, the author attempts to separate himself from the character. Thus there is no empathy created by the expression of the feelings George has, since we do not hear George state them. We are removed from the character, as is Wolfe; and while we can sympathetically watch his sufferings, we do not share in them.

The disjointed nature of the novel becomes evident when lyricism appears in the mode of Wolfe's earlier novels. When George meets his love, Esther Jack, on the cruise home from Europe, the tone of the novel returns to Wolfe's early poetic style. It is not actually a return effected by Wolfe; this latter section of the novel was written earlier to go along with Of Time and the River. It fits almost neatly at the end of that work excepting the meeting on board ship. Of Time and the River ends with the docking of the ship in New York, and at that time the two characters see each other for the first time. Eugene Gant never actually meets the lady with whom he is so taken.

The relationship between George and Esther closely parallels that of Wolfe and his lover, Aline Bernstein. As Wolfe searches for his identity, he seeks an escape from loneliness; he combines the same pursuits in his characters. Just as Mrs. Bernstein fulfills a need for Wolfe, Mrs. Jack facilitates George's search for his identity. Because of his travels and Esther, George steers his search in a new direction which leads him closer to finding himself and his freedom from loss:

...Pegasus no longer seemed to him to be as interesting an animal as Man-O-War--and a railroad roundhouse was more wonderful to him than both of them...as he grew older his efforts to escape were directed in instead of out...and he felt now powerfully, as he stood there in the wings, that here again he was in contact with the incredible, the palpable, the real, the undiscovered world--which was as near to every man alive as a touch of his hand, the beat of his heart, and farther away from most men's finding than the rivers of the moon. (p. 316)

George has been faced with the setbacks about which Ben warned Eugene in Look Homeward, Angel, but he is undaunted by them. He has gone on with his life keeping the direction he intended. Having discarded fantasy in favor of a real world, he is prepared to continue about the business of his life.

This attitude is attached directly to George; it is not spoken by a detached author. It is almost as if the first 277 pages of The Web and the Rock are to be forgotten and the only changes are that Eugene is now called George,

and instead of being six feet, six inches tall, he is a man of average height with appendages resembling a monkey's (thus George's nickname, "Monk"). There is refreshing relief at the recognition of the characteristics which initially made Wolfe a successful writer.

There is a return, also, to the search for an American identity. While an objective Wolfe describes aspects of American life and people, he does not pursue questions concerning loss and loneliness as inherent in the nation's populace. The subjective Wolfe is deeply concerned with the presence of these elements and tries to find a way to cope with them or to eliminate them.

To George Webber, Esther Jack "had become a world for him--a kind of new America--and now he lived in it, explored it all the time" (p. 376). She moves the fury within him, driving him to search constantly for answers. When he watches and listens as she reminisces about her childhood, he is overwhelmed with the same feelings which Eugene Gant feels as he struggles to escape his self-imprisonment, hoping to find a new American identity:

He saw the moments of lost time, he felt the pang of hunger and intolerable regret that all lost time, and the thought of all the life that has been lived upon the earth, and that we have never seen, awakes in us... she stood here now, a child, a woman, a phantom, and a living being--the fleshly unity that bound him suddenly to the ghostly past, a miracle of deathling loveliness of America, where all men wander and are sick for home, where all things change but change itself....(p. 343)

With the image of Esther Jack as America, Wolfe has truly developed a national vision. Wolfe's early works show a self isolated from a social context. All along, he searches for a door leading into that context. Here he combines the two focuses into a national vision.⁸ Thanks to Esther Jack, George can see himself as an individual in his relationship with her and also as a member of a nation. She encourages his desire to write a book through which he intends to tell about the time of his youth, the town in which he was raised, and the people who inhabited it. With Esther's support his project grows "from that small town into the greater world beyond, until in the end, as the strands increased, extended, wove, and crossed, they would take on the denseness and complexity of the whole web of life and of America." (p. 422)⁹

The city is a strand of the web which George develops with the help of Esther. She makes him see the city in a less lonely way than either he or Eugene has ever seen it before. Poetry had adequately described Gene's sense of loss projected by the city, so poetry appropriately celebrates George's feelings of joy as he views the city:

Smoke-blue by morning in the chasmed slant;
 on quickening the tempo of the rapid steps,
 up to the pinnacles of noon; by day, and
 ceaseless, the furious traffics of the
 thronging streets...So soon the dark...
 the great Medusa of the night...dark-
 ness, darkness, and the cool enfolding
 night, and stars and magic on America...
 And everywhere, through the immortal
 dark, something moving in the night,
 and something stirring in the hearts of

The roma
 different from the dreams he imagined

men, and something crying in their wild
unuttered blood, the wild, unuttered
tongues of its hugh prophecies--so soon
the morning: O America. (pp. 440-1)

The problem with combining Esther and America as a unity becomes evident when George begins to have doubts about their relationship. When Esther quits holding special meaning for him, so does everything she represents: his hope for literary success, his direction in the quest to escape loneliness, and the love for America's wonders. To express the doubts George faces, Wolfe puts the troubled man's fears into poetic language:

The whole record [of George's experiences] is streaked and spotted as I never dreamed that it would be. The shining city of my youth and dream is a warren of grimed brick and stone. Nothing shines the way I thought it would--there is no perfection. (p. 483)

Fortunately in the spirit of Ben Gant's prophetic advice, George accepts the taints of his experiences as a part of the total picture he is trying to comprehend. Thus his lament ends with a celebration:

The world is a better place than I thought it was--for all its spots and smudges--for all its ugliness, drabness, cruelty, terror, evil--a far, far better and more shining place. And life is fuller, richer, deeper--with all its dark and tenemented slums--than the empty image of a schoolboy's dream. And Mrs. Jack, and other women, too-poor, leaky, addled, half-demented wenches that most of them are--are greater, stronger, richer people than a Gibson girl....(p. 483)

The romantic world of George Webber proves to be much different from the dreams he imagined. The setbacks he

faces are disheartening, but his acceptance of the world's reality makes him a stronger person with a grip on life which will always allow him to cope with ills and celebrate the good. Even giving up Esther Jack can be a loss which leads to a renewed self confidence and a stronger vision of the future:

And morning would come again, but with no light and singing. He would recover out of madness and see with sane untroubled eyes once more, but out of weary and fathomless depths of the spirit, into the heart of a life which he thought he had lost forever. (p. 506)

As the affair between George and Esther is waning, George's resigned acceptance of his lot in life becomes more pronounced; and the statements which are comforting to him are made lyrically. There is a peaceful resolve generated by those gentle poetics. The joyous celebration of life is here toned down as the total impact of man's insignificance is studied; yet there is enough evidence from previous passages to show that such joy is forthcoming:

...there is a moment when our wandering might end, and all our hunger be appeased, and we could walk into love's heart and care forever. But what man knows that moment when it comes? What man can know the door that he may open?...We are small grope-things crying for the light and love by which we might be saved, and which, like us, is dying in the darkness a hand's breadth off from us if we could touch it. (p. 578)

It is George's optimistic belief that these elements are present for us if we are fortunate enough to find them. We cannot rely on mere chance to have these doors and paths

opened to us; we must avidly seek them. The avenue of our search must begin with the finding of ourselves, then our place in our community, and finally our nation. As we progress in our search, and face some setbacks, we must constantly remind ourselves of the victories we have enjoyed in the past and the presence of more success in the future.

The catalyst which conveys this chain of action is Wolfe's use of language. Though The Web and the Rock begins with a more objective style of writing, Wolfe does include more poetry as the work progresses. George Webber eventually becomes a character representative of the national identity Wolfe wishes to create. He goes through some changes, both in personality and characterization, but we finally come to grips with all the parts which make up his whole. Wolfe sums up the final acceptance of reality over any other option at the end of the novel when George comes to terms with his own grotesquely proportioned body:

They had discovered it alone, in secrecy, in evil, and in wandering, and far more than most men living they knew what they knew for themselves. Alone, by their hard labor, they got the cup into their hands and drank it. They learned the things most other men were lucky to have given to them. And now, for all their sweat and agony, what did they know? This: that they loved life and their fellow men and hated the death-in-life, and that it was better to live than die. (p. 638)

The same sentiment is true for the reader and George Webber. Together they can learn by searching, which leads to life,

instead of accepting on blind faith whatever drifts by, which leads to death-in-life.

ENDNOTES

¹Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p. 290.

²Ibid., p. 279.

³Ibid., p. 296.

⁴Citations from Wolfe in this chapter are to The Web and the Rock (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1937).

⁵It was a major desire of Wolfe's to have his readers react to his work with this sentiment.

⁶Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p. 282.

⁷Ibid., p. 275. Aswell limits his comments to the work Wolfe did while working with Harper and Row. He points out that he cannot say if the same working habits applied to Wolfe while he worked with Scribner's Sons.

⁸C. Hugh Holman, "Introduction," The World of Thomas Wolfe, ed. C. Hugh Holman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 1.

⁹Aswell filled in this section because of gaps in the material left uncompleted by Wolfe because of his death.

CHAPTER FIVE

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN: THE SEARCH ENDS

You Can't Go Home Again is an appropriate ending to the story Thomas Wolfe weaves throughout his three previous works. It is a continuation of the idea of a need for escape in order to search for oneself, but it includes the resolutions of questions which constantly gnaw at Wolfe's characters.

The form of this novel shows a resolution, too. Wolfe wanted to escape subjective, poetic language to deal with objective writing. Efforts in that direction were unsatisfactory in The Web and the Rock. The experimental writing in that novel paid off in the later effort, You Can't Go Home Again. The narrative prose of this last work is highly descriptive and occasionally touched with poetic passages which serve as comments upon incidents in the novel.

Each episode in this work is a period in George Webber's search for his national identity. Through George, Wolfe gives an honest picture of what a sordid state America was in during the 1920's and 1930's. He has George react to the age's decadence in a courageous way. George gives up false comforts to share truth with the common man. But now these truths are related in a more realistic prose instead of the constant fanciful, yet beautiful, poetry. The truths Wolfe

wishes to expose must be faced, he believes, in a simple, straightforward language. Once truth is seen, a flowing emotional reaction can be lyrically expressed. Stated in this manner, it sounds as if this work is no different from the other novels of Wolfe's. However, the proportion of prose to poetry is very different.

Stylistically this novel most resembles Of Time and the River because of the many episodes covered in the search, but there is more continuity in the later work. Of Time and the River depends on the lyrically expressed emotional responses for its unity; You Can't Go Home Again has a flowing story which is enhanced by lyrics, not dependent upon them.

The novel picks up the story where The Web and the Rock ends. George returns from Europe to New York after discovering he can best find himself in his native land, where he truly belongs. Since his feeling of loss is a phenomenon of America, he should search there for an end to that loss. When he sees that countless Americans accept their losses, he is angry and frustrated. First, Wolfe describes what George sees:

In the street the children played. They were dark and strong and violent, aping talk and toughness from their elders. They leaped on one another and hurled the weakest to the pavement. The policemen herded the noisy little tailors along before them, and they went away. (p. 17)

Then George reacts to the sight in a somewhat different tone:

He wanted to say to her [Esther Jack] 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..."There's forever," he said. (p. 17-18)

While the first passage is highly descriptive, it falls short of the poetics of the latter. However, there is no question that the description of the children and their activities is an accurate appraisal of what existed in American cities and contributed to feelings of loss within those children.

The death of Aunt Maw, who raised George, brings him closer to the core of America which George must study in order to find a means of escape from his soul's imprisonment. Libya Hill is the place where George is first aware of a sense of loss and loneliness. Consequently it is the place he must examine to find the source of his own feelings.

The train journey which he makes home for Maw's funeral is of vital importance in George's life. It combines a feeling of excitement about returning to Libya Hill and the final phase of his quest which leads him to answers he has been seeking for many years.

Trains are symbols of America to Wolfe. They embody the "vastness and loneliness of America, and the nothingness of all those little lives" (p. 48) which are transported by them. Perhaps because trains connect alien parts of the country which are otherwise separate, he feels Americans are most unified when travelling by train. Then the sense of loss

is temporarily abated; "...one becomes a member of the whole huge family of earth" (p. 49). George Webber describes this feeling in paradoxical terms: "...he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began" (p. 49).

While basking in the joys of going home and visiting with locals on the train, including his old friend Nebraska Crane, George encounters Judge Bland. This blind man is also from Libya Hill. He is hated and feared by townspeople because of his blunt manner of speaking and living. When George reveals to Bland the reason for the trip, Bland reflects and then bursts out, "And do you think you can go home again?" (p. 69). A flustered George insists to the Judge that there is no reason for not being able to return, but Bland calmly tells George to remember the warning. In future recollections of this incident, George develops insight about situations which he encounters in his search for an escape from loneliness.

Though the death of Aunt Maw brings George back to Libya Hill, it indirectly drives him away once again. It moves him on to the last leg of his journey by breaking the final tangible bond he has to Libya Hill. The lyrical response to Maw's death embodies the loss which George had been trying to escape, yet he feels it now as painfully as ever:

...for a moment he had an acute sense of
terror and despair like that of a lost
child, for he felt now that the last tie
that had bound him to his native earth was
severed, and he saw himself as a creature

homeless, uprooted, and alone, with no door to enter, no place to call his own, in all the vast desolation of the planet. (p. 85)

The broken ties with Libya Hill serve to intensify George's feelings of disgust over the frantic real estate dealings which occupy the town's mind. Wolfe uses Libya Hill to show how easily the American people can become caught up in a fever of get-rich-quick schemes that feed upon the optimistic hope of success which has always been at the base of the American spirit. The people's vision turns toward a fantasy of what can be instead of what really is. Such visions result in great tragedies, because not only do individual dreams fail, but so can a whole town or the entire nation suffer a huge loss.

Wolfe weaves this idea through the novel on several levels. First the people of Libya Hill buy on credit, then sell immediately for huge profits, but there proves to be no real money involved. Everyone's wealth exists on paper but not in the banks. Eventually the stock market crashes and small banks like those in Libya Hill are forced to close. Wolfe shows clearly how the sense of loss and lack of identity in America leads to belief in false dreams which result in frightful ruin for the dreamers. Having no grasp on reality of either one's own self or life in general leads to self destruction when the crash occurs.

When George sees the madness that has overwhelmed Libya Hill, he realizes he must leave. He sees that greed

for success caused the craze and does not want to fall victim himself:

--some desperate, finished, lonely man who hoped past hope and past belief for some haven of comfort, warmth, and love...for the sudden opening of a magic door into some secret, rich, and more abundant life. There had been many such, but they had never found what they were searching for. They had been dying in the darkness--without a goal, a certain purpose, or a door. (p. 115)

George realizes that Judge Bland is one of these lost men. Try as he might to change it, Bland is a victim because the whole town is lost. He, too, had sought a better way of life and fell into greed's trap. Thus George realizes he cannot go home and exist as he believed he could. The town has changed in an inevitable way, and George can not be part of it because he has not changed with it.

With George back in New York, Wolfe begins to emphasize elements of superfluity reminiscent of the false image of life seen in Libya Hill. The upper-class lifestyle of Esther and Fritz Jack is described in detail by Wolfe. Through Mr. Jack, he points out the obsession with power and position found in fortune seekers. In addition, Esther typifies the desire to maintain a certain image among social peers once one is established in upper-class circles.

Through the Jacks' lifestyle, Wolfe depicts attitudes of the times in America. The Jacks are wealthy socialites who entertain regularly, maintain servants who they know steal from them, live in elaborate surroundings, are oblivious to their

neighbors, and are totally unconcerned about anything that requires the plebian act of thinking: "Life was simply too short for the perusal of any book longer than two hundred pages" (p. 177). The decadence which this social class embodied is described by Wolfe:

They tilled the waste land, and erosion had grown fashionable. They were bored with love, and...hate,...with men who worked, and with men who loafed...with marriage and with single blessedness...with chastity, and...with adultery...with the great poets of the world, whose great poems they had never read...with living [and]...with dying....(p. 177).

What the wealthy do enjoy is a spectacle such as Mr. Piggy Logan's Circus at a party hosted by the Jacks. Logan takes wire figures and, by hand, moves them through the motions of a circus performance. He begins with a promenade of each figure and ends with a sword swallowing act in which he forces a hat pin down the throat of a rag doll which eventually rips open.

The description of the Jack's party, including the circus, is related in narrative prose except for the one insert cited above where Wolfe himself reacts to the meaningless existence of the upper class.

George views the Jacks' party with horror as if he is a detached observer. The transparent falseness which abounds sickens him, especially when he realizes that it is the common man's toil and suffering that make life easy for the Jacks and their friends.

He begins to question his role as a speaker of truth while belonging to a class of people who do not see truth. It is the falseness of that life which colors truth until it becomes nearly unrecognizable:

...each one of them had accepted some part of life for the whole, some fragmentary truth or half-truth for truth itself, some little personal interest for the large and all-embracing interest of mankind. If that happened to him, how, then, could he sing America? (p. 206)

George decides he must give up Esther Jack. In so doing, he finds himself, but he faces yet another loss:

...To find truth false...good evil...and the whole web of life so changing...It was all so different from the way he had once thought it would be--and suddenly, convulsively...he threw out his arms in an instinctive gesture of agony and loss. (p. 207)

The true Americans with whom he wishes to share his renewed realization of a true identity are people George observes who are in the employ of the Jacks. Nora, the Irish maid, steals from the Jacks and gets drunk while on duty. John, the elevator man, is worried that the Jacks and their kind might be bothered by panhandlers around the apartment building. These are the people about whom George worries because, just as he once did, they think the Jacks represent what is good and true about America. George wants to show them it is not so.

Because of the stock market crash which occurs later in the month during which the Jacks have their party, George's desire to educate Americans about their country is helped. The false image which has shrouded America gives way. Though

a floundering country is left over, it needs only time and direction to become true and strong. Those who have no inner strength or resources are lost, hoping for a return, unknowing that they can not go home again.

George Webber's second novel was published the month following the market crash. He is greeted with derision and more falseness to which he relates with a series of brief vignettes, each of which is followed by a refrain revealing his utter frustration at his plight.

A millionaire courts George until a prestigious literary prize is awarded to another writer. George never hears from him again:

So much for his good friend, the millionaire.
George never saw him again after that. And
yet, let no-one say that he was ever bitter.
(p. 268)

Dorothy, a socialite well-known for myriad affairs, seeks George's friendship for its intellectual rewards and the secure feeling she has when he is around her. He finds she even wants him nearby when her lovers are present:

But George did not go with her that night,
nor any night thereafter. This was the
last he saw of Dorothy. But surely none
can say that he was ever bitter. (p. 270)

Then there is the widow who crawls into bed with George, calling him by her husband's name. She asks George to understand that she shows love for her husband through George:

...he went away, and never saw this lovely
and sorrowful widow any more...And yet, not
for a moment should you think that he was
ever bitter. (p. 271)

George feels shame at having taken part in such lowly pursuits as becoming involved with shallow, false people:

And this shame was so great in him that he wondered if all his life thereafter would be long enough to wash out of his brain and blood the last pollution of its loathsome taint.

And yet he would not have it thought that he was ever bitter. (p. 272)

Once again in this work, Wolfe has emphasized the impact of incidents common to certain people in America by first relating typical events and then having George react in an emotional way to those events.

It seems that Wolfe focuses on a lot of negative aspects of American life in a work proclaiming the wonder of this country. Yet it is not the events themselves that Wolfe means to emphasize. Most important is how they lead George Webber to an understanding of how he relates to them in his search for a more meaningful identity. His friend, Randy Shepparton, points out in a comment concerning George's book that "...every good thing in it came, not because you withdrew from life, but because you get into it--because you managed to understand and use the life you knew" (p. 297). This book also relates things George knew and, with the use of poetic language, the coming of an understanding of their roles in his life.

George faces another in his series of set-backs when he realizes America is ugly because of the direction toward which it veered after the Civil War--away from the original ideals of the country:

America has...corroded at the heart of its power with easy wealth and graft and special privilege...And the worst of it is the intellectual dishonesty which all this corruption has bred...We've become like a nation of advertising men, all hiding behind catch phrases like "rugged individualism" and "the American way". And the real things like freedom, and equal opportunity, and the integrity and worth of the individuals--things that have belonged to the American dream since the beginning--they have become just words, too. The substance has gone out of them--they're not real anymore...(p. 304)

George is frustrated, yet strikes out again at this condition. He seeks America once more in the city and, as always, finds loneliness and desolation. In the height of his despair, he touches on a spark of salvation in the form of an old American belief:

It is so cool and sweet tonight, a million feet are walking here across the jungle web of Brooklyn in the dark, and it's so hard now to remember that it ever was the month of March in Brooklyn and that we couldn't find a door. There are so many million doors tonight. There's a door for everyone tonight...
(p. 335)

Sometimes hope seems in vain; thus it is lost. Yet as long as it continues, and men believe in it, there will be those who ask questions to escape loneliness and believe that somewhere there is a door for them to find. Had George Webber not possessed this same hope, he would not have searched so far for answers. He finally understands that the very things he seeks have been within his grasp on each step of the way. His fury is fed by hope.

Wolfe contrasts George's fury with the character of Foxhall Edwards, George's editor and close friend. Fox studies the morning newspaper and sees facts but no hope for improving the miseries they relate:

He reads the paper with...hopelessness. Fox has no hope, really,...that man will change, that life will ever get much better. He knows that forms will change: perhaps new changes will bring better forms...Fox would give his life to keep or increase virtue--to save the savable, to grow the growable, to cure the curable, to keep the good. But for the thing unsavable, for life ungrowable, for the ill uncurable, he had no care. Things lost in nature hold no interest for him. (p. 380-381)

In contrast, George believes,

...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. (p. 393)

The two characters are in opposition concerning their basic beliefs. Edwards believes men are constant; George believes they are duty-bound not to be.

While Edwards views life, especially through the news, very frankly, objectively considering different sides to a story, George digs into all sides of it subjectively. He looks for whys and hows in a situation, and if it can be improved, he is compelled to say so. If he thinks man can grow by studying the situation, George studies it.

George has learned through experiencing and questioning that he has been searching for a perfection like that in the

womb: protected, safe, and whole. But this is a perfection that cannot be attained. You cannot go back to anything: not to home, to your lost father, to lyricism, to old forms that worked once, or to places you once thought held happiness.²

Instead of trying to go back, you have to change, to grow, to work together as a unit with hope toward improving things which exist in the present. George fears that Americans will not catch on to this need soon enough to stop destructions similar to that which he witnesses in Germany:

It was desperate, and would become more desperate still if in America,...men became 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. (p. 565)

Through George Webber, Wolfe finally finds a door. It leads to a self image that encompasses all people of America. George was lost but had a direction which somewhat alleviated that loss. Living in a land of paradoxes, a man who is sometimes lost and sometimes found, occasionally both at once, does not seem so strange since he is not afraid to admit it:

I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. And this belief, which mounts now to the catharsis of knowledge and conviction, is for me--and I think for all of us--not only our own hope, but America's everlasting, living dream. (p. 574)

He sees injustice and declares it. He searches for a language to declare it and discovers that the language is not yet of great importance for all men. First man must admit the need for a special language. However, the language of lyrical

self-examination and expression led the way for Wolfe. Once he discovered the answers for himself, he began his story over again, using examples from American life spiced with some of the same lyrical style which worked for him in his search.

Wolfe's death ends the epic quest which his novels explore. However, the fourth novel is a fitting end to the search for self. Wolfe has an answer to the question of his identity which plagued him much of his life. He also completes the development of a sophisticated language needed to convey his message.

Beginning with a young dreamer, Wolfe relates through lyrics the need for finding a way out of the self imprisonment which all Americans suffer. The romantic Gant comes to realize that the existence he seeks is not the false world that surrounds him. With his purely subjective view of life, depicted through poetry, he will maintain an existence which is founded on tenuous grounds. Thus he begins to seek an objective view of self and life.

The developing maturity of Wolfe's character is reflected in the change from lyrical expression to a dominant, objective narrative. Wolfe reflects this change of attitude by establishing a new character, George Webber. Since the search for self is Wolfe's search and not just his characters', George does not differ from Gant in his ambitions and feelings. His manner of attaining and expressing these things does differ. The dreamer, Eugene, becomes the realist, George.

The lost self of Wolfe and each American is found by carefully examining all the elements that make up life in this country. Once a realistic grip of life has been established, one can turn again to a subjective appreciation of all that it offers. This new appreciation is tempered with the underlying objective reality that supplies a solid foothold on truth. The result is a celebration of self and country for which America and her writers have been seeking because of the disillusionment prevalent since the mid-nineteenth century.

ENDNOTES

¹Citations from Wolfe in this chapter are to You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1934).

²Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p. 546.

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