Look Homeward, Angel: Great American Novel

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LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL: GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

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LIFE

Richard G. Polakowski, S.J., was born in Hamtramck, Michigan, March 3, 1932. He was graduated from St. Ladislaus Elementary School, Hamtramck, Michigan in June, 1946. Four years later he was graduated from St. Ladislaus High School, Hamtramck. From September, 1950 to June, 1952 he attended the University of Detroit.

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In September of 1968, Thomas Wolfe had been dead for twenty years. During the last ten years of his life he had published two novels,\(^1\) a collection of short stories,\(^2\) and an account of his literary methods and habits.\(^3\) By 1941 his publishers had released two more posthumous novels,\(^4\) and a collection of shorter works which contained ten chapters of another uncompleted novel.\(^5\)

The body of Thomas Wolfe's work was complete by 1941. Later, in 1948, an early play, Mannerhouse, was brought out, and in 1951 his first sketchy notes on the trip he had made through the Far Western national parks immediately before he died were published.\(^6\)

\(^1\)Look Homeward, Angel, 1929; Of Time and the River, 1935.
\(^2\)From Death to Morning, 1935.
\(^3\)The Story of a Novel, 1936.
\(^4\)The Web and the Rock, 1939; You Can't Go Home Again, 1940.
\(^5\)The Hills Beyond, 1941.
\(^6\)A Western Journal, 1951.
Twenty years is not so long a time, but long enough to permit a writer to lose his reputation and appeal. If Wolfe's principal attraction had been that of novelty or topical relevance, if the success of his works had depended solely upon their newness, then a considerable falling off in readership of the novels might have been expected during two decades of wars and other major distractions.

What has happened, however, has been exactly the opposite. Not only are all of Thomas Wolfe's books still in print, but most are available in variously priced editions. Some of the poetic passages in the novels are collected in a volume entitled The Face of a Nation (1939). A number of the more obviously rhythmical passages have been arranged in verse form under the title of A Stone, A Leaf, A Door (1946). The letters written by Wolfe to his mother, Mrs. Julia Wolfe, have been published. His correspondence with his academic superior in the Department of English at the Washington Square College of New York University, where he taught from 1924 to 1930, has recently appeared in book form. A two-volume edition of other letters appeared in 1958. His novels have all appeared in British as well as American edi-


8One may now purchase Look Homeward, Angel, for example, in the original format, in a less expensive illustrated edition, in a Modern Library "Giant" reprint, and in a lower priced reprint.
tions, and have been translated into Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Czechoslovakian, Russian, Swiss, French, Italian, and Spanish. Wolfe's greatest acclaim abroad was in Germany following the publication in Berlin of Schau heimwärts, Engel in 1933. 9

Popularity is not necessarily an indication of an author's literary importance, of course. But Wolfe's appeal is hardly that of the cheap "pot-boiler." The elements usually associated with the typical best-seller are absent from his work. There are few lurid sex scenes, no cheap religiosity. Exciting sensational adventures and tricky plotting are missing entirely. Employing none of the aids of high-powered book-club promotion or showy, suggestive jacket designs, dealing with subjects which are seldom either lascivious or sensational, not even making their appeal with inherently pleasing plot situations, the writings of Wolfe have continued to enjoy a widespread readership. 10

Yet few of the critics who contribute essays to the better literary reviews have had much good to say of Thomas Wolfe. And even among those critics who have praised his writings, Wolfe has


10Rubin, p. 2.
been both glorified and damned. Such adjectives as "enormous," "discerning," "superb," "Gargantuan," and most frequently simply "great" have appeared in the same criticisms and reviews with such condemnations as "bulky," "formless," "fatuous," "sprawling," and "undisciplined." But the critical confusion, if it has entertained the academicians and cognoscenti has had very little influence upon those who read Wolfe's books. In fact, Wolfe's novels have kept in circulation and have increased far more than those of any other American novelist of the thirties.\textsuperscript{11} Enjoying special popularity is his \textit{Look Homeward, Angel}. Why does this particular novel enjoy such widespread popularity? Is it because \textit{Look Homeward, Angel} is a great American novel? It is this writer's opinion that it is. It is the purpose of this thesis to justify this opinion.

For an objective evaluation of \textit{Look Homeward, Angel}, it would seem best to consider the work not merely in itself, but likewise in reference to the circumstances and influences under which it was written. Accordingly, the life of Thomas Wolfe must first be examined, with emphasis on those incidents which were a prelude to the writing of his first novel. Particular consideration will be given to his purpose in its writing, to produce a work of art about and for Americans. After this background ma-\footnote{Walser, p. viii.}
terial has been presented, Look Homeward, Angel will be analysed to determine whether or not Wolfe's intention and accomplishment were one. This analysis will involve a study of the plot, the characters (principally W. O. Gant, Eliza, and Eugene, the hero), and the theme as embodied in the title.

Then, the challenge to Wolfe's claim of having produced a piece of literature about America will be presented. This will entail a history of some of the criticism which Look Homeward, Angel has received. Particular consideration will be given to the line of attack laid down by two of Wolfe's representative critics, Mr. Bernard De Voto and Mr. Robert Penn Warren.

Next will follow an answer to the challenge of De Voto and Warren. This will involve, first, a consideration of criteria for a literature which is distinctively American. These criteria are embodied in an essay by Mr. Christopher Dawson, entitled "The Tradition and Destiny of American Literature." Thus efforts will be made to indicate the distinctive "American" quality of Look Homeward, Angel. Finally, a direct refutation of the major arguments of De Voto and Warren will complete the thesis. Thus efforts will be made to indicate the "greatness" of Wolfe's work.

The thesis falls into three natural parts: (1) Wolfe's purpose in writing Look Homeward, Angel, to produce a piece of literature about America, and its embodiment in the plot, characters, and theme of the book; (2) the challenge to Wolfe's claim as embodied in the book's criticism, particularly that of Bernard
De Voto and Robert Penn Warren; (3) a taking-up of the challenge, by indicating the distinctive "American" quality of the work as well as its "greatness."

To sum up these introductory remarks, this thesis proposes to offer an explanation of the popularity of Look Homeward, Angel among readers, despite the predominantly unfavorable criticism the book has received among literary critics. The explanation is to be found in the fact that Look Homeward, Angel is a great American novel.

In the meantime, he enjoyed a normal collegiate career, edited the student newspaper, began writing stories, and acted with the "Carol in Playschool" under the direction of Professor Fred R. Kent. Finally, through the influence of his mother, young Wolfe was enabled to graduate practically as valedictorian at Harvard University, where he participated in Professor George Pierce Baker's famous "American Life" drama. In an excerpt from a letter written Wolfe
Thomas Wolfe was born in 1900 at Asheville, North Carolina, a mountain town near the Tennessee border. His father, William O. Wolfe, was a stonemason and tombstone sculptor who had come to North Carolina from the East in his youth. His mother, Julia, kept a boarding house called "My Old Kentucky Home." 1 Thomas, precocious and extremely well-read, was sent to the University of North Carolina from 1916 to 1920. He enjoyed a normal collegiate career, edited the student newspaper and magazine, began writing plays, and acted with the "Carolina Playmakers" under the direction of Professor Fred H. Koch. 2

Principally through the efforts of his mother, young Wolfe was enabled to pursue graduate studies at Harvard University, where he participated in Professor George Pierce Baker's famous "47 Workshop" in drama. In an excerpt from a letter which Wolfe wrote to his mother from Harvard in 1923 he disclosed, for the

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first time, what his ambitions in life were: "I know this now: I am inevitable. I sincerely believe that the only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease, or death"; and further: "I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and will write, write, write." 3

Although these words appear to have been written in a frenzy of youthful self-dedication, they epitomize that faith in himself which throughout the course of his life provided Wolfe with that necessary power and energy he needed to carry out his literary endeavors. That faith in himself, however, brought about his downfall as a playwright. At that time, he had written a play in which he tried to portray a cross-section of American town life. Professor Baker warned him that his play of some thirty characters had assumed the scope of a novel. 4 But Wolfe was convinced that his play would prove acceptable to a New York audience. Instead of applying the blue pencil, he restored all the cuts that had been made at Professor Baker's recommendation and, late in the summer of 1923, set off for New York with great hopes. The final outcome of his contacts with theatrical producers was that the play, Welcome to Our City, was never sold.

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3 Quoted by Richard S. Kennedy, in "Wolfe's Harvard Years," The Enigma, p. 31.

4 Ibid., p. 28.
Yet, even though Welcome to Our City was never accepted by the Theatre Guild, it is worthy of note that even here in this, his first artistic endeavor of any significance, Wolfe's intention was, first, to know America and, secondly, to express this knowledge in his art.

If my play goes on I want you to be prepared for executions upon my head. I have stepped on toes right and left -- I spared Boston with its nigger-sentimentalists no more than the South, which I love, but which I am nevertheless pounding. I am not interested in writing what our pot-bellied members of the Rotary and Kiwanis call a "good show" -- I want to know life and understand it and interpret it without fear or favor. This, I feel, is not made up of sugary, sticky, sickening Edgar A. Guest sentimentality, it is not made up of dishonest optimism, God is not always in his Heaven, all is not always right with the world. It is not all bad, but it is not all good, it is not all ugly, but it is not all beautiful, it is life, life, life -- the only thing that matters. It is savage, cruel, kind, noble, passionate, selfish, generous, stupid, ugly, beautiful, painful, joyous, -- it is all these, and more, and it's all these I want to know and, by God, I shall, though they crucify me for it. I will go to the ends of the earth to find it, to understand it, I will know this country when I am through as I know the palm of my hand, and I will put it on paper and make it true and beautiful. 5

Upon receiving his Master of Arts Degree from Harvard, Wolfe joined the English faculty of Washington Square College of New

York University. There he taught intermittently from 1924 to 1930. During those New York University days Wolfe wrote Look Homeward, Angel.

Wolfe's discovery of America in those days, his desire to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper" became for him what he would later refer to as an "almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human experience." This hunger involved a day by day intense exploration of the "whole material domain of his resources as a man and as a writer." While teaching at Washington Square College he would spend whole nights prowling about the streets of New York City. One of his strange hobbies was reading the World Almanac. So fruitful were Wolfe's endeavors during those early years that when he departed for Europe he was forced to leave behind a number of huge wooden packing cases of manuscript notebooks. Those big ledgers contained facts and miscellaneous information on numerous unrelated subjects: lists of towns, descriptive notes about a railroad coach, statistics, and similar details "of every impression of his lived and remembered experience," which were all calculated "to plumb his possibilities as a writer."


7 Ibid., p. 583.

8 Geismar, p. 1.

Amidst such intense striving to satisfy his "thirst for experience," Wolfe began writing the material which he was later to organize into Look Homeward, Angel. His desire to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper" was at last beginning to actualize itself.

The first evidence of the book appeared in a fragment of another one of Wolfe's early plays, entitled The House of Bateson. In this play the characters who later emerged as W. O. Gant, Helen, and Ben appeared in the early stages of their development. Although Wolfe probably began work on the play sometime after the death of his father in June, 1922, he had been considering the story of his family as possible literary material ever since his first summer at Harvard. In his history notebook, there appear preliminary plans for a play about the conflicts of a family sur-

named variously Broody, Groody, and Benton, which begins, "The Broody's were a strange family. They never saw each other's good points till one of their number died."

Actual work on the novel, however, did not begin until 1926, while Wolfe was traveling in Europe. On July 19, 1926, he wrote a letter to Mrs. J. M. Roberts, his beloved prep-school teacher. In this letter he indicates his purpose in writing Look Homeward, Angel:

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I have begun work on a book, a novel, to which I may give the title of The Building of a Wall. . . . All the passion of my heart and of my life I am pouring into this book -- it will swarm with life, be peopled by a city, and if ever read, may seem in places terrible, brutal, Rabelaisian, bawdy; its unity is simply this: I am telling the story of a powerful creative element trying to work its way toward an essential isolation; a creative solitude; a secret life -- its forceful struggles to wall this part of its life away from birth, first against the public and savage glare of an unbalanced, nervous brawling family group; later against school, society, all the barbarous invasions of the world. . . . Just subordinate and leading up to this main theme is as desperate and bitter a story of a contest between two people as you ever knew -- a man and his wife -- the one with an inbred, and also an instinctive, terror and hatred of property; the other with a growing, mounting lust for ownership that finally is tinged with mania -- a struggle that ends in decay, death, desolation.

is a Wolfe's intense desire to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper" was to find expression, then, in a story with the strange theme of "a powerful creative element trying to work its way toward an essential isolation." Four years later he interpreted this theme when he again wrote to Mrs. Roberts that "from beginning to end the theme was that men are alone and strangers on the face of the earth, and never come to know one another."12


That so personal a belief could for Wolfe serve likewise as the theme for a literature representative of America can be understood only in light of the fact that by this time, 1926, he possessed a firm conviction that "the one available truth" is about America was that it was contained in himself. In his personal experiences, Wolfe had discovered "something deep and dark and tortured and twisted in human nature and in the American nation he loved." So when he wrote Look Homeward, Angel, then, he wrote it with a singleness of purpose: to catch in words and fix upon the printed page this "something deep and dark and tortured and twisted." His work was to present America, "the bad of it along with the good of it, the sum of it being -- simply the truth of it."

The story of Look Homeward, Angel, the story which from the beginning was acclaimed as a richer and more powerful story of an American town and its people than Sinclair Lewis' Main Street had been, begins as Eugene Gant, the protagonist, is born into a...

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14Ibid.


16Ibid.

17Jonathan Daniels, "Poet of the Boom," The Enigma, p. 78.
North Carolina mountain community named Altamont. His mother, Eliza, is a native of the region. His father, moody, unstable W. O. Gant, is a stonemason from Pennsylvania. Eugene grows up with two older sisters, Daisy and Helen, and three older brothers, the dissolute Steve, Luke, and "the quiet one," Ben. He absorbs the life of his family and town in relative happiness. One day, however, his mother, driven by an obsession for property and security, purchases a large boardinghouse. The family then sets up under two separate roofs, with Helen staying to cook for Old Man Gant and Eugene going to live with Eliza at the "Dixieland." Now more than ever he remains close to gruff, tender Ben. After a while he is enrolled in a private school run by the Leonards. Eventually he goes off to college at Pulpit Hill, North Carolina. At first he has a difficult time in adjusting to college life, but soon Gene Gant becomes a "big man on campus." Here he is introduced into the world of ideas and he begins to recognize for the first time his vocation as an artist. He spends his first summer's vacation at home, where he has a tender love affair with Laura James. The second summer he goes off to work on the Hampton Roads. Meanwhile W. O. Gant becomes severely ill with cancer, and one winter Ben contracts pneumonia and dies. From that time on Eugene, the artist-playwright, knows that he cannot return to Altamont to live.
W. O. Gant is central to *Look Homeward, Angel*. He is the character whom Wolfe referred to in his letter to Mrs. Roberts as having "an inbred, and also an instinctive, terror and hatred of property."\(^{18}\) Although Gant is an occasional drunkard, the master of invective, something of a hypocrite, and "the wild foiled seeker after the meaning of life,"\(^{19}\) he is likewise the father who builds a rearing fire on cold mornings and wakes his children with that rough affection in which they recognize love. In addition to having these strongly marked simple aspects, Gant has the symbolic significance of nothing less than America itself.

In W. O. Gant the realist and the symbolist in Wolfe have united to reveal the full force of his power of portraiture. The realist has a delightful awareness of the comic quality of his tirades of invective. At first glance such an outburst as this, which has to do with Eliza's setting up the boarding house "Dixieland," appears to be the utterance of a spirit wounded beyond all endurance:

\(^{18}\)See above, note 11.

He would stride through the wide chill hall of Dixieland, bursting in upon Eliza, and two or three negroes, busy preparing the morning meal for the hungry boarders who rocked energetically upon the porch. All of the objections, all of the abuse that had not been uttered when she bought the place, were vented now.

"Woman, you have deserted my bed and board, you have made a laughing stock of me before the world, and left your children to perish. Fiend that you are, there is nothing that you would not do to torture, humiliate and degrade me. You have deserted me in my old age; you have left me to die alone. Ah, Lord! It was a bitter day for us when your gloating eyes first fell upon this damnable, this awful, this murderous and bloody barn. There is no ignominy to which you will not stoop if you think it will put a nickel in your pocket. You have fallen so low not even your own brothers will come near you. "Nor beast, nor man hath fallen so far."

And in the pantries, above the stove, into the dining room, the rich voice of the negroes chuckled with laughter.

"Dat man sho' can talk!" 20

W. O. Gant knows he can talk. When he is launched on such a tirade there is a nervous grin about his mouth. He enjoys delivering it, knows that his audience enjoys, and even expects it, regarding it as ritual, integral to the day's routine as much as breakfast or dinner. In his anger he is always self-conscious.

His tirades, however, are not wholly comic. They are his means of expressing his frustration and his resentments, his acute awareness of his failure as a person. The tragic aspect of his tirades Wolfe's imaginationseizes as a symbol of fury. Fury

is one of the central conceptions in his theory of the universe, and singularly difficult to define. Wolfe does not attempt a definition. Instead he writes page on page of wild whirling words which disengage a strange music and from which emerges a fusion of the abstract idea of fury and the symbol of fury -- W. O. Gant.

Gant was cast in a huge mould, physically, emotionally, and in an elemental sense spiritually. Over the town of Altamont, in which he was forever a stranger, he cast a shadow. His howls and curses, his vast gestures and mercurial movements, his sprees, and his savage moulding of statues, impressed upon his townsmen the idea of someone strange, proud, and glorious. Over his wife he also cast a shadow; when love and hate had both died down between them, what she felt was that beyond his cruelty and his fealty there lay something glorious, in the enormous beating color of his life and the lost and stricken thing in him which he would never find. Even in her dulled and miserly being fear and speechless pity rose when at times she saw the small uneasy eyes grow still and darken with the foiled and groping hunger of old frustration. Frustration in the central quest of his life is the key to Gant's fury which at once set him apart from his fellow Americans and yet at the same time gave them an imperfect awareness of a strange affinity to the man.

By his intense emotionalism, his wild energies, his inarticulate awareness of a meaning in life which he cannot fathom, W.
O. Gan't is raised into a symbol of the American adventure. In Gant's frustrations and resentments, in his acute awareness of his tragic failure as a person, Wolfe presents an America of the 'twenties, frustrated and resentful, and acutely aware of its tragic failure as a nation because of the evil which had so rooted itself in it -- "greed, greed, greed -- deliberate, crafty, motivated." Wolfe recognized it as an ancient evil but also as the special vice of American life, in its strident individualism and blatant materialism.

When near the end of the story Gant is suffering from cancer, his illness is no more malignant than that of Eliza, with her "cancerous spiritual sickness," -- her insensate passion for property. With Eliza's entrance into real-estate speculation, she gains "a freedom she had never known." But this freedom is that of materialist America, of Ring Lardner's U. S. A., the freedom of possession and power which in the end is "only a superior sort of bondage." What does Eliza not offer up as human sacrifice to this insensate freedom? -- her husband, her children, her home, and of course, herself. A Rockefeller is reputed,
in Matthew Josephson's *Robber Barons*, to have stated the classic American dictum of family life: that he cheated his sons every chance he could. "I want to make 'em sharp. I trade with the boys and skin 'em and just beat 'em every time I can. I want to make 'em sharp." But to Thomas Wolfe's Eliza not even this rather primitive parental concern can be attributed. Tending to her property, she could not at the same time tend to her children. Hoarding old string, empty cans, paper, anything she may retail at a profit, as a symbol of the "property-psychology" which Balzac flayed so violently in France, she is the twentieth-century counterpart of William Shakespeare's "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles." Sometimes she attains a comic dignity, grandly ascribing to her tubercular clients "a little bronchial trouble." But lacking at last any warmth and ease of personality, only her increasing sterility can be felt. She is a woman who lusts for one thing — money. One can easily share with Eugene his gradually perceptive hatred, first of Eliza's effect on her husband Gant, and then of its effects on the boy Eugene himself:

'My God, my God, where are we going? What's it all about? He's dying — can't you see it? Don't you know it? Look at his life. Look at yours. No light, no love, no comfort — nothing.' His voice rose frantical-

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ly, he beat on his ribs like a drum. 'Mama, mama, in God's name, what is it? What do you want? Are you going to strangle and drown us all? Don't you own enough? Do you want more string? Do you want more bottles? By God, I'll go around collecting them if you say so.' His voice had risen almost to a scream. 'But tell me what you want. Don't you own enough? Do you want the town? What is it?' 25

On this note Eugene leaves the "rich and mysterious South" -- this barren spiritual wilderness, with its cheap mythology, its swarming superstitions, and its "hostile and murderous entrenchment against all new life."

Eugene belongs to a type often celebrated in contemporary fiction: the talented youth trying to rise from commonplace circumstances. He is the youngest child who is both the pampered darling and the ugly duckling. He is petted, resented, admired, mocked, and never understood -- except, perhaps by his brother Ben, a lonely stranger like himself. The basic patterns of his youthful experience are typical, including the familiar themes of growing pains, the discovery of the opposite sex, the discovery of the glorious world of books and the desire to escape into a larger, freer world. Yet Eugene transcends the restless type of youth by being its most superb example. 26 The sensitivity of the hero is enormous, but it is never a sickly sensitivity. There

is gusto to all of Eugene's activities; his fighting with the poor whites; his taste for foods; his mooning over the beautiful heroines of American fiction, which, recalls James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, and his boyish meanderings over Mercedes of the Dumas novel; and his relationship with his father, mother, sisters, and brothers, especially Ben.

It is in the person of Eugene that Wolfe's desire to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper" receives artistic expression. For Wolfe this desire became an "almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human experience;" for Eugene it became a gradual, but no less intense, developing awareness of the America around him.

True, Eugene is rebellious and introverted. But it is precisely in his rebellion and introversion that he becomes one of the most acute and entertaining social commentators of the decade -- and a prime chronicler of the American mind, especially the youthful American mind, in the epoch of the "bust and the hangover." In Eugene Wolfe gives voice to American youth who are excited by the life about them, but who see no solution for its manifest evils. This voice expresses itself by a combination of realistic detail and frankness with an insatiable romantic temperament, bespeaking most vehemently the questioning and confusion

27Geismar, p. 5
28Ibid., p. 6.
of American youth in the 'twenties and today.

The Gant family which Wolfe presents is indeed a chaotic one. It is a family united by fierce loyalties and a common heritage of furious vitality and a lust for life. It is a compact family always torn by ugly dissension and a common destiny of loneliness and frustration. Yet in the persons of W. C. Gant, Eliza, Eugene, Ben, and Helen, as strange a combination of personalities as they may appear, the American people "came back into the American novel." 29 At least, for all his hyperbole, Wolfe is the first major novelist of the 'thirties to depict American family life in relatively normal terms -- he may even be, coming on the heels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passes, the first novelist to depict family life at all. To some degree Wolfe marks the return of the "invisible roof" that Sherwood Anderson felt had once extended over the Ohio towns at the turn of the century: a roof that has hardly spread itself over contemporary literature. 30

There was a difference, however, between Wolfe and many of the recent novelists who had portrayed the American family in fiction. Instead of writing dryly or cynically, as if to reduce families to the bores and pests that they were considered to be, Wolfe wrote with magnificence. Because of his "hunger" to "know

29 Ibid., p. 7.
30 Ibid., p. 22.
this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper," the relationship of the writer and his people concerned Wolfe as it had not always concerned the aesthetic rebels of the 1920's and it would not always concern the social revolutionaries of the 1930's. As a consequence, no matter how unpleasant some of the Gants might be, or how appalling, they were never dull. In reproducing what he had come to know the American family to be, Wolfe had not once looked with cold, disinterested eyes; but with that clannish loyalty in which particular or temporary hatred cannot bar a general love. He enjoyed the living reality of the Gants, even if he could not approve their characters.31

In the words and actions of these Gants, whom he at once loves and hates, Wolfe presents his theme: in W. C. Gant and his awareness of his tragic failure as a person; in Eliza with her "cancerous spiritual sickness;" and in Eugene, the rebellious, budding artist. Before deciding upon Look Homeward, Angel as the title for his book, Wolfe had considered the titles The Building of a Wall32 and Alone, Alone. Each of the titles which he had considered suggests isolation as the theme of the novel; but the first implies a voluntary and desirable isolation, while the second implies an inescapable one. The final choice of Look Homeward, Angel, supported by its context in Lycidas, is appropriate

31 Van Deren, p. 344.
32 See letter quoted above, p. 18.
to both of these themes, with the additional implication of the
search consummated. The subtitle, *A Story of the Buried Life*,
is less dramatic but, in suggested parallels to Matthew Arnold's
poem, it is perhaps an even clearer indication of the unity of
the book.

The parallels in *Lycidas* and *The Buried Life* will be more
evident, however, after an examination of the two kinds of iso-
lation in *Look Homeward, Angel*: the inevitable and the creative.

Man's inevitable strangeness and loneliness results not only
from his inability to know others and to be known by them but
from the feeling that he once enjoyed a refuge from isolation and
doubt which in the prison of this life, he can almost but not
quite recover. Eugene's life in *Look Homeward, Angel* is a con-
tinual search for this refuge, apparently the same quest that
Wolfe describes in *The Story of a Novel* as the search for a fa-
ther and a home, "the image of a strength and wisdom external to
his own need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and
power of his own life could be united."33 This refuge, the ghost
of a memory, leads one to believe that it was a part of a pre-
natal existence;34 but rather than a heavenly home, as in Words-
worth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, this prenatal life ap-
pears to be the endless concatenation of cause and effect preced-

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33 *The Story of a Novel*, p. 582.
34 *Look Homeward, Angel*, pp. 37-38; see *ibid.*, pp. 81 ff.
ing and shaping the circumstances of Eugene's birth and life, extending beyond the barren South to the abundance of Gant's Pennsylvania and still farther back beyond the seas. Thus, Eugene's preexistence is linked with the better times of the Gants, with the "great barns of Pennsylvania, the ripe bending of golden grain, the plenty, the order, the clean thrift" of W. O. Gant's boyhood in contrast with "this vast lost earth of rickets." 35 But the inadequacy of the past to supply Wolfe's spiritual father is the inadequacy of Gant himself, who no more than the greedy Eliza can show Eugene "the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door." 36 Gant, like Eugene, also wished to become an artist, "to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone," but the only "stone" he found was the clumsy angel of Carrara marble, bought for $420 and finally -- and regretfully -- sold as a tombstone for a prostitute. Gant never learned to "carve an angel's head." 37 For Gant the past of both Pennsylvania abundance and creative imagination was gone forever -- and with it, its promise of resolving Eugene's loneliness and doubt:

35 Ibid., p. 5.
36 Ibid., p. 2.
37 Ibid., p. 4. See also pp. 264-268.
Unweave the fabric of nights and days [Eugene demands of the stranger within him]; unwind my life back to my birth; subtract me into nakedness again, and build me back with all the sums I have not counted. Or let me look upon the living face of darkness; let me hear the terrible sentence of your voice.

There was nothing but the living silence of the house; no doors were opened.

If his "home" were in the past, Eugene knew that he could not go home again. For freedom, security, and certitude he had to search elsewhere.

In Look Homeward, Angel, therefore, three time elements are suggested:

The first and most obvious was an element of actual present time, an element which carried the narrative forward. . . . The second time element was of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their life was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable . . . a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day.

For Eugene the past is lost as something separate, but it remains partly in the life principle, continually renewing itself in transitory forms, and -- what is more important to the unity

38Ibid., p. 494; p. 296.
39Story of a Novel, pp. 586-589.
40Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 582-583.
of Look Homeward, Angel -- in the accumulation of experience that is Eugene's essential self. "I am," Eugene muses, "a part of all that I have touched and that has touched me, which, having for me no existence save that which I gave it, became other than itself by being mixed with what I then was, and is now still otherwise, having fused with what I now am, which is itself a cumulation of what I have been becoming."\(^{41}\)

In this self Eugene finally discovers the promise of a desirable or creative isolation, but in the meantime he explores a different world of imagination. He becomes Bruce-Eugene of sentimental fiction, the Dixie Ghost of the movies, Ace Gant, the falcon of the skies.\(^{42}\) Beyond the hills of Altamont he creates a world of "golden cities" where there is no confusion, waste, greed, or groaning, where merit is rewarded with its "true deserv- ing".\(^{43}\) He builds up in himself "a vast mythology" which is all the more attractive because he knew it to be untrue; he begins "to feel that it \([14]\) not truth that men must live for -- the creative men -- but for falsehood"\(^{44}\) -- until in the moment of in-

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 192.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., pp. 104-109, 203, 270-275, 533.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 193.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 224.
sight that closes the novel, "the golden cities sicken in his eyes." In Eugene's imagination Ben has returned to life, convincing Eugene that the "world" is not beyond the hills of experience but in himself. "Where, Ben?" Eugene asks. "Where is the world?" "Nowhere," Ben replies. "You are your world." No leaf, Eugene realizes, "hangs for him in the forest." He will "lift no stone upon the hills." He will find "no door in any city," but in "the city of himself" he will find "the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where he may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded. . . ."

This microcosmic self is, apparently, the essential self of fused experience -- especially sense experience -- which Eugene discovered before, sometime in his twelfth year, but had neglected for the golden cities. A pattern of experience originally disparate in time but now fused by the imagination, it is distinguished from the "ghostliness" of the time-space world by brightness and reality. Here is Wolfe's bright world of creation. On February 2, 1930, Wolfe wrote to Mrs. Roberts:

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46 Ibid., p. 624.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., pp. 191-192.
Experience comes into me from all points, is digested, and absorbed into me until it becomes a part of me, and . . . the world I create is always inside me, and never outside me, and . . . what reality I can give to what I create comes only from within. . . . I shaped and created its reality from within; my own world, my own figures, my own events shaped themselves into my own table there on the page before me, and . . . I spent no time in thinking of actual Smiths, Joneses, or Browns; nor do I see yet how such a thing is possible. If anyone thinks it is, let him take notes at street corners, and see if the result is a book.49

Furthermore, in The Story of a Novel Wolfe explicitly names the "door" of his search as the door to creative power,50 and again he represents his creative power as issuing from his cumulative self. In Paris, in the summer of 1930, while Wolfe was working on Of Time and the River, "the million forms and substances" of his life in America swarmed in "blazing pageantry" across his mind, issuing even from the "farthest adytum of his childhood" before conscious memory had begun, yet transformed with the new wonder of discovery; and as he resolved to find words that would bring these forms to life in a final coherent union, the line and purpose of his life was shaped.51 His experiences in France in 1930, like Eugene's final interview with Ben, made Wolfe aware of his source of strength as an artist. This discovery must be dis-

50 The Story of a Novel, p. 587.
51 Ibid., p. 580.
tinguished, of course, from merely "going home" to the past. In this sense, as it has already been pointed out, Wolfe did not go home again finally. He returned again to the actual America he had set out to "know as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper." He returned to his senses; those extraordinary, alert, and acute senses that were the very spring of his art. But he did not simply record sense impressions. He was aware that his remembered experiences, modified by each other and by new experiences, were continually fusing into a new unity. 52

This source of strength bears a remarkably close resemblance to the "genuine self" of Matthew Arnold's _The Buried Life_. 53 This self is the complex of sympathy, understanding, freedom, and articulation ordinarily obscured by timid imitation and selfish competition, and but infrequently realized in moments of love. This aspect of the buried life, the fundamental structure of earth to which all men belong, was for Wolfe a discovery that "filled him with a quiet certitude and joy." 54 This


53 Ibid.

54 From _Of Time and the River_, as quoted by Albrecht, p. 53.
The theme of common humanity is, of course, developed in You Can't Go Home Again. In Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe is more interested in another aspect of the buried life. Whereas the "buried life" of Arnold's poem is the essential self wherein all men are one, a self realized in moments of love which, in turn, make men articulate and give their lives direction, Wolfe stresses its concealment and its creative power. The ending of Look Homeward, Angel, however, stresses Arnold's articulateness and direction rather than his unity and love, although the latter are certainly implied in the final interview with Ben.

In the Buried Life, as in Look Homeward, Angel, "disguises" render men "alien to the rest / Of men, and alien to themselves. . . ." Furthermore, both Eugene and the "we" of Arnold's poem are searching for truth and articulateness; and even though the source of knowledge and power is within Eugene and the "ourselves" of the poem, it is made use of only with difficulty. Frequently, Arnold points out, we long to discover in "our buried life" the direction of our lives -- "to know / Whence our lives come and where they go." But truth and knowledge remain elusive when we assume other selves -- like Eugene of the golden cities -- which, supplying only a "stupefying," "benumbing" power, do not let us "say or do" the truth. Meanwhile, just as Eugene sickened in his search for the golden cities, we are made "melancholy" by "airs" and "floating echoes" from the "soul's subterranean depth unborn / As from an infinitely distant land. . . ." Only in rare
moments of insight achieved through love, did articulateness, knowledge, and direction come. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, as well, strong feeling for a loved one precedes moments of insight and the resulting awareness of direction in life. After the death of Ben, Eugene first fully realizes the irrevocability of the past and the continuity of the life-principle, eternal and unchanging, behind the progression of evanescent forms. The last chapter, in which the answer to Eugene's search is made most explicit, follows a moment of inarticulate feeling between Elisa and Eugene. And, of course, it is Ben once more through whom the final revelation of self is made to Eugene. In this moment of vision, the direction of Eugene's life becomes very plain. His path lies always ahead, never back toward the irrecoverable past, but into the future of the essential, creative self, which can never be the same as it has been. He was "like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say 'the town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges."  

55 Albrecht, p. 54.  
56 *Look Homeward, Angel*, pp. 582-583.  
57 Ibid., p. 615.  
58 Ibid., pp. 625-626.
These parallels, of course, are not drawn to suggest that *Look Homeward, Angel* is merely a dramatization of *The Buried Life* or that Wolfe borrowed a system of thought from Arnold. The essential self as a spiritual being obscured by imitation, devitalized by conformity in earthly life, as the one, real enduring self beyond or above the many, apparent, and passing selves, and as the source of truth and creative power realized in moments of deep emotion, is a familiar concept in Neo-Platonic and Transcendental thought. To mention only a few writers, who also influenced Wolfe's novels, it is central to the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Emerson, and Whitman. But because Wolfe's thought and imagery had formed a pattern strikingly similar to Arnold's in *The Buried Life*, he found in this poem an accurate and suggestive subtitle for his novel.

In view of Eugene's question and Ben's answer, "Look Homeward" appears to be Ben's admonition to Eugene to find refuge in himself. "Home" also suggests Eugene's home in Altamont, the prenatal complex of cause and effect, and perhaps the inextinguishable life-principle reflected in the passing forms of life. But the essential self of Eugene's accumulated experience compromises all three of these "homes" transmuted into material for

59 Albrecht, pp. 54-55.
artistic creation. Self-reliance at least promises to open the door to creative solitude.

There remains the examination of Wolfe's use of the word "angel." In Milton's *Lycidas* the "Angel" is evidently that "of the guarded Mount," who is asked to look nearer home rather than off to "Namancos and Bayona's hold" and to have pity on the drifting corpse of Lycidas. "Angel" suggests a spirit secure in eternal life; "ghost" a spirit lost in death. The opposition of these terms occurs at the beginning of *Look Homeward, Angel*, where the passages prefacing Chapter One conclude with the words, "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost come back again," and where as though in direct response to this cry, the next page begins with the words of the title "Look Homeward, Angel!" Again, in the concluding chapter Ben repeats that he is "not dead," that he is "not a ghost," so that Eugene wonders whether he himself is not the ghost. ⑩ Ben is not explicitly named "angel," it is true, but the identification is further implied by the stone angels' coming to life when Ben returns, and by their freezing again into immobility when he departs. ⑩

Among the frequent allusions to the title are Ben's bitter asides to his "dark" angel; whereas Eugene finds an angel and

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⑩*Look Homeward, Angel*, pp. 618-620.

⑩Albrecht, p. 56.
guardian in Ben himself. This is a dark angel, too—dark even when Ben returns from the dead, his face obscured by the "shadow of his gray felt hat..." 62 But as the conversation with Eugene continues, Ben becomes "bright," for he is alive not only in the universal life-principle—in "flower and leaf," in the "majestic processions" of the seasons 63—but also in Eugene's cumulative self. This "deathless" and "unchanging Ben" like other experiences integral with Eugene's true self, is the timeless cumulation of all the Bens that Eugene knew, the "one" compounded of "many." Also in this second aspect of his aliveness, Ben is linked with the stone angels in W. O. Gant's shop. A stone angel in a Baltimore street first incited Gant to carve in stone; 64 the angels in his shop stand for his creative impulse and, in their marble deadness, for its frustration. But with Ben's return the angels suddenly come alive and with them the creative power within Eugene. As the angels melt from their stone rigidity, so does the "angel" Ben "melt with ruth," and the "hapless" Eugene is wafted "homeward." From the "shores and sounding seas" where his "bones are hurled" Lycidas is "mounted

62 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 617.
63 Ibid., pp. 682-583, 623.
64 Ibid., p. 622.
high" in heaven. He is recalled from death to life, from the darkness of the sinking daystar to its brilliance in the morning sky, from being lost to being found, from imprisonment and impotence to freedom and power. 65 Although limited to life in this world, this is the metamorphosis sought for, and partly consummated, by Eugene in Look Homeward, Angel. In this sense, Lycidas- Eugene is at least on his way to becoming an "angel." Thus the title is appropriately addressed to Eugene as well as Ben.

Despite Eugene's intense preoccupation with himself and with the artist he had created in his own image, he ever remained close to the "oldest, deepest simplicities: the good earth, the life of the common man, the common destiny of mortality, the flow of time and the river" 66 in the America he had set out to "know as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper." Once Eugene realizes that his path lies always ahead, never back toward the irrecoverable past, which can never be the same as it has been, once he is "like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say 'the town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant searing ranges," 67 he bespeaks the re-

65 Albrecht, p. 57.
67 Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 625-626.
alisation which America has acquired. Just as Eugene could never return to his home town, neither could America return to the good old days of "greed, greed, greed -- deliberate, crafty, motivated," the days of blind and brutal grab, to a complacent faith in "progress" as defined by industrialists, and to any easy, comfortable solution to its strident materialism and crude individualism.

Thus Thomas Wolfe presents his image of America. It is an image inspired by the natural and spiritual potentialities of a nation. As a political creed, this image is embodied in the life and work of Franklin, Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln. As a religious ideal, this same image appears in the writings of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendalists.

68"Writing Is My Life," p. 68.
69Muller, pp. 11-12.
If the greatness of nothing less than the American nation was to be a predominant theme in Thomas Wolfe's first novel, it is no wonder that American literary critics took an immediate interest in Look Homeward, Angel. In The Story of a Novel Wolfe comments that the book "got some wonderful reviews in some places; it got some unfavorable reviews in others, but it unquestionably did have a good reception for a first book." An investigation of some of these reviews, both "wonderful" and "unfavorable," will give a clear indication of the extent to which their authors challenged Wolfe, his book, and its theme.

Immediately upon the book's publication, Basil Davenport in the Saturday Review of Literature, Geoffrey Hellman in the New Republic, and John Chamberlain in The Bookman, three of the "more

1The Story of a Novel, p. 568.
outspoken and brilliant critics"\(^2\) of the day, gave the book "appreciative"\(^3\) reviews.

Mr. Chamberlain cited Wolfe as a "distinct anomaly."\(^4\) He considered the work as hardly that of a "frayed spirit who is trying to escape through elegiac writing, but a rich, positive"\(^5\) grappling with life, a remembrance of things past, unhinged by the shadow of regret, of one who has found his youthful experience full of savor."\(^6\) Chamberlain's comment on Wolfe's power of observation is especially noteworthy. He remarked that Wolfe's "observance is so inclusive, his antennae so sensitive to the world about him, that one can hardly regard *Look Homeward, Angel* as a flash in the pan."\(^6\) Strangely enough, Chamberlain must have foreseen the controversy which the book was about to raise in literary circles for a number of years to come. He referred to the book as hardly a "novelist's novel," but a work which, for


\(^5\)Ibid.

\(^6\)Ibid.
intelligent devotees of fiction, would be full of a "rough and fluid pattern too easy for their tastes." 7

In his speech of acceptance for the Nobel Prize in the summer of 1930, Sinclair Lewis cited Wolfe as "one of the greatest American writers," 8 and said of Look Homeward, Angel that it was worthy of comparison with the best literature American writers had as yet produced. 9

Upton Sinclair found Wolfe's work "full of excellent stuff, full-bodied, vigorous and a wonderful portent of future fine work." But he considered the work as "overwritten and burdened by unnecessary utilization of devices which contributed nothing to its worth." 10

The most famous appraisal by a fellow novelist, however, came from William Faulkner. When asked for his opinion of Wolfe's abilities, Faulkner remarked that "among his and my contemporaries, 11 I rated Wolfe first because we had all failed but Wolfe..."

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7Ibid., p. 450.
8Daniels, p. 77.
9Thompson, p. 303.
11Among the authors compared were Wolfe, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Faulkner himself.
had made the best failure because he had tried hardest to say the most. . . . Man has but one short life to write in, and there is so much to be said, and of course he wants to say it all before he dies. My admiration for Wolfe is that he tried his best to get it all said; he was willing to throw away style, coherence, all the rules of preciseness, to try to put all the experience of the human heart on the head of a pin, as it were. He may have had the best talent of us all, he may have been 'the greatest American writer' if he had lived longer. . . . "12 In many ways this statement of Faulkner's that Wolfe "was willing to throw away style, coherence, all the rules of preciseness, to try to put all the experiences of the human heart on the head of a pin" epitomizes very much or all of the criticism aimed at Wolfe. In it is always to be found such an admixture of chastisement and praise.

Among the critics, however, who have been regarded as more interested in chastising Wolfe rather than praising him are Robert Penn Warren and Bernard De Voto. Because the lines of critical attack of these two critics are representative of Wolfean criticism,13 their attacks on Wolfe and his claim to "know

12 Walser, p. vii.

America as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper" in Look. Homeward, Angel warrant close consideration.

Bernard De Voto, teacher, critic, novelist, and historian is the present occupant of the Easy Chair for Harper's Magazine. On April 25, 1936, he published a review of Wolfe's The Story of a Novel in the Saturday Review of Literature entitled "Genius Is Not Enough." This article has been the banner beneath which anti-Wolfeans have rallied ever since. Pro-Wolfeans, as well as academicians, have, as a result of it, continually pointed to Bernard De Voto as Wolfe's archenemy, the leader of those whom Wolfe as early as 1929 had foreseen would "cry out" against his work.

Obsessed by the "psychological jargon of the period," Mr. De Voto discovered in Wolfe instances of manic-depression, infantile regression, and compulsion neurosis, as well as a serious case of psychic disintegration. At the real root of Wolfe's difficulty, however, was the simple fact that he was "astonishingly immature," and that he had mastered neither the psychic

14Walser, p. 141.
16Thompson, p. 304.
17Ibid.
material out of which a novel is made nor the "technique of writing fiction."  

What principally disturbed Mr. De Voto about Wolfe were the long lyrical passages of flowing rhetoric, "long, whirling discharges of words, unabsorbed in the novel, unrelated to the proper business of fiction, badly if not altogether unacceptably written, raw gobs of emotion, aimless and quite meaningless jabber, claptrap, belches, grunts, and Tarzan-like screams."  

The proper business of fiction, says De Voto, is dramatic narrative, undiluted by any of this rhetorical nonesense. "Is America lost, lonely, nameless and unknown? Maybe, and maybe not. But if it is, the conditions of the novelist's medium require him to make it lost and lonely in the lives of his characters, not in blank verse bombast and apocalyptic delirium. You cannot represent America by hurling adjectives at it. De 'the rats of death and age and dark oblivion feed forever as the roots of sleep!' It sounds like a high school valedictory, but if in fact they do, then the novelist is constrained to show them feeding so by means of what his characters do and say and feel in relation to one another. . . ."  

Then De Voto reprimands Wolfe for chasing the

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19 Ibid., p. 143.
20 Ibid., p. 145.
ghost of Walt Whitman and Ezekiel through pages of disembodied emotion. Such emotion, De Voto admits, is certainly the material that great fiction is made up of, but until it has embodied itself in character and scene it is not fiction -- it is only logorrhea.21

Later Mr. De Voto quotes from Archibald MacLeish, "A poem should not mean but be," and then goes on to observe, "a novel is"22-- it cannot be asserted, ranted, or even detonated as Wolfe has done in his work.

De Voto continues: "A novelist represents life. When he does anything else, no matter how beautiful or furious or ecstatic the way in which he does it, he is not writing fiction."23 After admitting that Wolfe has written some of the finest fiction of contemporary times, he remarks that a great part of what Wolfe has written is not fiction at all, but "it is only material with which the novelist has struggled but which has defeated him."24

The other major issue which De Voto brings to light is the problem of artistic integrity as manifested in a feeling for form. It is generally known that Thomas Wolfe wrote too much, was ever-

\[21\text{Ibid.} \]
\[22\text{Ibid.}, p. 146.\]
\[23\text{Ibid.} \]
\[24\text{Ibid.} \]
whelmed by the welter of words which he poured out into his stacks of ledgers, and that the editorial genius of Maxwell Perkins was mainly responsible for getting Wolfe's novels into publishable shape. This is precisely De Voto's point:

Such organizing faculty and such critical intelligence as have been applied to the book have come not from inside the artist, not from the artist's feeling for form and esthetic integrity, but from the office of Charles Scribner's Sons. ... The artist writes a hundred thousand words about a train: Mr. Perkins decides that the train is worth only five thousand words. But such a decision as this is properly not within Mr. Perkins's power; it must be made by the highly conscious self-criticism of the artist in relation to the pulse of the book itself. Worse still, the artist goes on writing till Mr. Perkins tells him that the novel is finished. But the end of the novel is, properly dictated by the internal pressure, osmosis, metabolism -- what you will -- of the novel itself, of which only the novelist can have a first-hand knowledge. There comes a point where the necessities of the book are satisfied, where its organic processes have reached completion. It is hard to see how awareness of that point can manifest itself at an editor's desk -- and harder still to trust the integrity of a work of art in which not the artist but the publisher has determined where the true ends and false begins.25

Then Mr. De Voto's final, but most biting, accusation is that Wolfe should have learned to "put a corset on his prose."26

Mr. Robert Penn Warren, the other critic who attacked Wolfe and his claim to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper," is a poet, novelist, and teacher. In 1947

25 Ibid., pp. 144-145.
26 Ibid., p. 148.
Warren won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *All the King's Men*. The book was later made into an Academy Award-winning motion picture. In May, 1958 he received a second Pulitzer Prize. This time the award was for his book of poems entitled *Promises: Poems 1954–56*. It is extremely interesting to note that at this same awarding of Pulitzer Prizes when Warren was honored for his poetry, the man and the work which he so severely criticized in 1935 likewise received one, at least indirectly. For the Pulitzer Prize in the field of drama at this forty-fourth annual awarding of prizes was presented to Ketti Frings for her adaptation of Thomas Wolfe's first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. It is not surprising that the play received the Pulitzer Prize, for from its opening performance on Thanksgiving, 1957, it never failed to enjoy the "unanimous critical approval from the boys on the aisles." Among these "boys on the aisles," none of them paid higher compliments to Miss Frings -- or to Thomas Wolfe -- than Mr. John Chapman of the New York City *Daily News* and Mr. Robert Coleman of the New York City *Daily Mirror*. The highly critical Mr. Chapman cited the drama as of "a purely splendid and

28 Ibid.
stirring beauty." He ranked the play "with, and perhaps above, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in strength and compassion." Mr. Robert Coleman considered the play a "gripping, superb drama." No finer compliment could have been paid to Thomas Wolfe than when Mr. Coleman concluded that "it's too bad the master did not live to see it, it would have delighted his sensitive soul."32

In March, 1935, Robert Penn Warren, already associated with the group of critics who were later to call themselves the "New Critics," published an article entitled "A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," in *The American Review*. In this article Warren more or less follows the critical line laid down by De Voe. He worries, first of all, about Wolfe's straining to make his characters seem significant. He admits that at the root of Wolfe's talent is his ability of portraiture. The figures of W. O. Gant, Eliza, Helen, Ben, and Eugene are "permanent properties of the reader's imagination." Gant especially has a quality which is


31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

"perpetually heroic, mythical, and symbolic."34 It is the same with Eliza, Warren continues, with "her flair for business, her almost animal stupidity, her great, but sometimes aimless, energies, her almost sardonic and defensive love for her son, whom she does not understand, her avarice and her sporadic squandering of money."35 Despite these penetrating observations, Warren later writes that the reader of a novel "demands something more realistic, less lyrical; he demands an interplay of characters on another and more specific level, a method less dependent on the direct intrusion of the novelist's personal sensibility."36

Another fault which Warren finds with Wolfe is his constant repetition of his own clichés. It is, Warren observes, as if ... Wolfe realized the bulk of the novel and the difficulties a reader might experience in recognising a character on reappearance, and so determined to prevent this, if possible, by "repetition and insistence."37

In addition, Warren raises a new problem -- that of objectivity in the autobiographical novel. Wolfe himself protested vehemently against any consideration of Look Homeward, Angel as

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., pp. 122-123.
37 Ibid., p. 125.
autobiographical. Warren, however, insists that the pretense of fiction in the book is so thin and slovenly that Wolfe in referring to the hero writes indifferently "Eugene Gant" or "I" and "me." Despite the numerous minor modifications, omissions, and additions in character and event, the "impulses and material are fundamentally personal." Warren summarizes his criticism of Wolfe's lack of objectivity by his parting shot, undoubtedly the most famous criticism ever made of Wolfe, "And meanwhile it may be well to recollect that Shakespeare merely wrote Hamlet; he was not Hamlet." Warren's objection is, of course, that Wolfe not only wrote about Eugene Gant, but that his own personality and feelings became identical with those of that character.

The critical dictum by which Warren makes this accusation is this: there must be no confusion between the sensibility that produces a dramatic narrative and the sensibility of the hero of that narrative.

Finally, Warren comments on Wolfe's efforts to continue writing his prose epic of America in Of Time and the River -- but actually begun in Look Homeward, Angel. He states that American

38 The Story of a Novel, p. 572.
39 Warren, p. 121.
40 Ibid., p. 132.
41 Collins, p. 168.
literature has already produced one such significant epic, Moby Dick. Melville, however, had a powerful fable, a myth of human destiny, which saved his work from the centrifugal impulses of his genius, and which gave it structure and climax. Its dignity is inherent in the fable itself. "No such dignity is inherent in Mr. Wolfe's scheme," Warren observes, "if it can be termed a scheme."42 The nearest approach to it is in the character of W. O. Gant, but that is scarcely adequate. "And," Warren concludes, "Mr. Wolfe has not been able to compensate for the lack of a fable by all his well-directed and misdirected attempts to endow his subject with a proper dignity, by all his rhetorical insistence, all the clarity and justice of his incidental poetic perceptions, all the hysteria or magnificent hypnosis."43

Thomas Wolfe's first critic, Mr. John Chamberlain was certainly correct in his observation that Look Homeward, Angel would hardly prove to be a "novelist's novel."44 Mr. Bernard De Voto and Mr. Robert Penn Warren hardly agreed with Wolfe that Look Homeward, Angel was the beginning of the realisation of his intense desire to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper."

42Warren, p. 132.
43Ibid.
44Chamberlain, p. 450.
Only by refuting the challenge presented by these two men, Wolfe's principal critics, can the validity of his claim be sufficiently substantiated.

In her purpose in writing *Jack Roseward*, tuning to "made this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper," precisely what was his committing himself to in his was to be a novel which was to be distinctively "American," these standards would it have to observe?

In an essay entitled "The Tradition and Destiny of American Literature," Mr. Christopher Dawson makes an interesting and extremely informative study of the precise nature of literature which is distinctively "American." Mr. Dawson cites "preoccupation with the American way of life" as the distinctive and essential characteristic of American literature.* A peculiarly

CHAPTER IV

If Thomas Wolfe's purpose in writing Look Homeward, Angel was to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper," precisely what was he committing himself to? If his was to be a novel which was to be distinctively "American," what standards would it have to observe?

In an essay entitled "The Tradition and Destiny of American Literature," Mr. Christopher Dawson makes an interesting and extremely informative study of the precise nature of literature which is distinctively "American." Mr. Dawson cites "preoccupation with the American way of life"¹ as the distinctive and essential characteristic of American literature. "An American writer," he remarks, "is highly conscious of his Americanism and he feels, as George Santayana has observed, that 'to be an Amer-

ican is of itself almost a moral condition, an education and a career.\(^2\) This "preoccupation with the American way of life," Dawson continues, involves American writer's deeply in the "American situation."\(^3\) And, what is most significant, this "preoccupation" charges these writers with a distinctively "charismatic mission to the American people as its teachers, prophets, or interpreters."\(^4\) This sense of "mission" is that quality which sets American writers apart from the writers of other nations, and it has always been a predominant characteristic of the American literary tradition. But this mission has expressed itself in two different ways. On the one hand there are writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman who consciously accepted the prophetic role; and on the other there the critics and questioners, like Henry Thoreau and Herman Melville and likewise Henry James and Henry Adams who were disturbed by the prevailing trends in American society and who tried to maintain or restore standards of moral or civilized values.\(^5\) These tendencies, Dawson insists, are not to be explained entirely by the spirit of the age which produced writers such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin

\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)Ibid.
\(^5\)Ibid., p. 8.
and Matthew Arnold in England. Emerson and Whitman have their followers in the United States today, even though, for the most part, like Robinson Jeffers, their prophetic message may be one of unrelieved denunciation and doom. But in the other direction, the critical examination of the American conscience "has never been so stringent and far reaching as it has been during the last thirty years."  

In the light of Mr. Dawson's study, the question to be answered now is: Are the characteristics of a literature which is distinctively "American" found in Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel? Mr. Dawson cites "preoccupation with the American way of life" as the distinctive and essential note of American literature. As has been repeatedly stated in this thesis, Wolfe's principal preoccupation in Look Homeward, Angel, as well as in his later writings, was to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper." In doing this, as Herbert Muller remarks, Wolfe remained ever close to the "oldest, deepest simplicities; the good earth, the life of the common man, the common destiny of mortality, the flow of time and the river" -- the American way of

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 7.
8 Muller, p. 8.
life -- in the America he loved. And this preoccupation was no mere passing fancy with Wolfe. Even during his travels in Europe it remained constantly his chief concern. "No one has ever written any book about America," he wrote from Strasbourg in 1930, "I mean the real America -- I think they bring out 10 or 20,000 books a year, but no one has ever written about America..."

Secondly, Mr. Dawson states that this "preoccupation with the American way of life" frequently charges American writers with a charismatic mission to the American people as its teachers, prophets, or interpreters. As has been already indicated, in W. O. Gant's frustrations and resentments, in his acute awareness of his tragic failure as a person, Wolfe, like Thoreau, Melville, James, and Adams, disturbed "by the prevailing trends in American society... tried to maintain or restore certain standards of moral or civilized values." This he accomplished by raising Gant to the symbol of America in the 1920's. Wolfe presents a frustrated and resentful America, an America acutely aware of its tragic failure

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10Dawson, p. 7.

11Ibid., p. 8.
as a nation because of the evil which has so rooted itself in it -- "greed, greed, greed -- deliberate, crafty, motivated," the cause of strident individualism and blatant materialism. Eliza, too, is symbolic. By gratifying her insensate passion for property she gains a freedom she had never imagined. But this freedom is that of an entire nation too -- that of a materialistic America, a freedom of possession and power which in the end is "only a superior sort of bondage." Finally, Eugene in his rebellion and introversion, is presented by Wolfe as one of the most acute and entertaining social commentators of the decade, a prime chronicler of the American mind, especially the youthful American mind, in the epoch of the "bust and the hangover." Once Eugene realizes that his path lies always ahead, never back toward the irrecoverable past, which can never be the same as it had been, once he is "like the man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say 'the town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges," then he utters the realization which America has attained. At this point of the book Wolfe's role of a teacher hoping to restore certain lost

13"Diary of a Provincial," p. 115.
14Geismar, p. 5.
15Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 625-626.
standards of "moral or civilized values" is complete. For just as Eugene could never return to his home town, neither could America return to the good old days of "greed, greed, greed -- deliberate, crafty, motivated," the days of blind and brutal grab, to a complacent faith in Progress as defined by industrialists, and to any easy, comfortable solution to its individualism and materialism.

Thirdly, Dawson insists that the role of the American literary artist as prophet, teacher, or interpreter is different from that of Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold. When Wolfe desired to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper," he was acutely conscious of the fact that "American literature is part of our national personality." In his years at Harvard University he attended Professor Chester Greenough's lectures in American literature. In the reading connected with this course he must have agreed entirely with William Ellery Channing's famous observations on national literature. In 1830 Channing, the great Unitarian and friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, published an essay entitled "The Importance and Means of


18 Kennedy, p. 19.
a National Literature." In this still eminently readable little work, Channing canvassed the literary situation here in the United States and remarked that "a foreign literature will always, in a measure, be foreign. It has sprung from the soul of another people, which, however like, is still not our own soul. Every people has much in its own character and feelings which can only be embodied by its own writers, and which, when transfused through literature, makes it touching and true, like the voice of our earliest friend."19 He further pointed out the peculiar advantages which Americans enjoy for the writing and understanding of their own literature. "Man is the great subject of literature," Channing wrote, "and juster and profounder views of man may be expected here than elsewhere, since we have no artificial class distinctions to observe, nor do these obscure our common nature, as they have in Europe, nor are we weighed down by antiquated institutions and abuses."20

That Wolfe agreed with Channing in regarding American literature as a literature distinct from anything produced in England or Europe is attested to by his first editor, Maxwell Perkins, who at his death in 1947 was regarded as the greatest creative editor of his time.21 Perkins visualized Wolfe as a writer who

19 Hamm, p. 536.

20 Ibid.

21 Walser, p. 57.
"was wrestling as no artist in Europe would have to do, with the material of literature -- a great country not yet revealed to its own people. It was not as with English artists who revealed England to Englishmen through generations, each one accepting what was true from his predecessors, in a gradual accretion, through centuries. Tom knew to the uttermost meaning the literatures of other lands and that they were not the literature of America. He knew that the light and color of America were different; that the smells and sounds, its peoples, and all the structure and dimensions of our continent were unlike anything before. It was with this that he was struggling, and it was that struggle alone that, in a large sense, governed all he did."

Wolfe's intense preoccupation with the American way of life, however, was not a quality peculiar to him alone. In 1924, critic Henry L. Mencken explained the literary pattern which Wolfe was to manifest two years later in _Look Homeward, Angel_:

What all the younger American writers have in common is a sort of new-found elasticity or goatishness, a somewhat exaggerated sense of aliveness, a glowing delight in the spectacle before them, a vigorous and naive self-consciousness. The schoolmaster critics belabor them for it, and call it a disrespect for tradition, and try to put it down by denouncing it as due to corrupt foreign influences. But it is really a proof of the rise of a nationalism -- perhaps of the first genuine sense of nationality. No longer imitative and timorous, as most of their predecessors

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were, these youngsters are attempting a first-hand examination of the national scene, and making an effort to represent it in terms that are wholly American. They are the pioneers of a literature that, whatever its defects in the abstract, will at least be a faithful reflection of the national life, that will be more faithful, indeed, in its defects than in its merits. In England the novel subsides into formulae, the drama is submerged into artificialities, and even poetry, despite occasional revolts, moves toward scholarliness and emptiness. But in America, since the war, all three show the artless and superabundant energy of little children. They lack, only too often, manner and urbanity; it is no wonder that they are often shocking to pedants. But there is the breath of life in them, and that life is far nearer to its beginning than its end.  

The "schoolmaster critics," that Mencken wrote of, certainly did "belabor" Wolfe for his "somewhat exaggerated sense of aliveness, his glowing delight in the spectacle before him, and his vigorous and naive self-consciousness" once he published Look Homeward, Angel. The arguments of Wolfe's representative critics, Mr. De Voto and Mr. Robert Penn Warren, have already been seen. Is Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe's first effort to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper" -- his first literary preoccupation with the American way of life -- capable of withstanding their challenge?  

What chiefly troubled Mr. De Voto about Wolfe were the long lyrical passages of flowing rhetoric -- some dark substance "unrelated to the proper business of fiction." The proper business  

of fiction, says De Voto, is dramatic narrative, undiluted by any of this new rhetorical nonsense. "Is America lost, lonely, nameless and unknown? Maybe, and maybe not. But if it is, the condition of the novelist's medium requires him to make it lost and lonely in the lives of his characters, not in blank verse, bombast, and apocalyptic delirium."

Mr. De Voto here makes a great show of being hard-headed and commonsensical, but better critics than he have failed to survive beyond their times because they adhered to a critical dogmatism which attempts to keep poetry and fiction and comedies and tragedies and ballet and opera set completely apart from each other in neat little compartments.24 One wonders what Mr. De Voto would have to say about the chapters of exposition in The Grapes of Wrath, the internal monologue in such novels as Mrs. Dolloway, or the peculiarities of U.S.A.? Now if Wolfe merely told his readers that Americans are lost and lonely, there might be a basis for De Voto's criticism. If Wolfe's "dark substance" had no dramatic backbone, it would be a bore. But it must not be forgotten that Wolfe keeps and carefully develops his part of an "unwritten bargain"25 that he has made with his readers: he always shows them everything he tells them, each element of the plot complementing the other. De Voto

24Collins, p. 164.
25Ibid., p. 165.
asks for lost and lonely characters. Who of the readers of Look Homeward, Angel will ever forget the pathetic scene of Ben's death, especially the part where the lost, lonely, unloved Eliza begins to realize the utter malice of her insane passion for possessions.

Helen made a sign to Gant and Luke. They rose and went quietly out. At the door she paused, and beckoned to Eugene. He went to her.

'You stay here with her,' she said. 'You're her youngest. When it's over come and tell us.'

He nodded and closed the door behind her. When they had gone, he waited, listening for a moment. Then he went to where Eliza was sitting. He bent over her.

'Mama!' he whispered. 'Mama!' He touched her. She made no response.

'Mama! Mama!' She sat there stiffly and primly like a little child.

Swarming pity rose in him. Gently, desperately, he tried to detach her fingers from Ben's hand. Her rough clasp on the cold hand tightened. Then, slowly, stonily, from right to left, without expression, she shook her head.

He fell back, beaten, weeping, before that implacable gesture. Suddenly, with horror, he saw that she was watching her own death, that the unloosening grip of her hand on Ben's hand was an act of union with her own flesh, that, for her, Ben was not dying — but that a part of her, of her life, her body, was dying. Part of her, the younger, the lovelier, the better part, coined in her flesh, borne and nourished and begun with so much pain there twenty-six years before, and forgotten since, was dying.26

26Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 555-556.
Later Mr. De Voto quotes from Archibald MacLeish, "A poem should not mean but be," and then goes on to say, "A novel is -- it cannot be asserted, ranted, or even detonated." But if De Voto had read Ars Poetica more carefully, he would have encountered these lines --

A poem should be equal to:
Not true
For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf . . . 27

What Wolfe had done is fill in both sides of MacLeish's equation. He has presented his readers with both "the history of grief" and "an empty doorway and a maple leaf."28 In this manner Wolfe has achieved an effective synthesis of the prosaic and the poetic. To say that poetry has no business in the novel, as De Voto does, is just as absurd as to say that poetry has no business in the drama, nor narrative in poetry.

De Voto continues: "A novelist represents life. When he does anything else, no matter how beautiful or furious or ecstatic the way in which he does it, he is not writing fiction."

In answer to this objection Thomas Lyle Collins writes:

Even if we should grant this highly questionable limitation of the term fiction, we still have recourse to the vulgar retort, 'So what?' For what could chiefly

27Quoted by Collins, p. 166.
28Collins, p. 166.
concern us is not whether Wolfe's writing does or does not fit into the technical category of fiction, but rather whether Wolfe's writing is great or not. If, as many critics agree, it is true that the figures in his novels are blazing triumphs of characterization, if, as even Mr. De Voto admits may be the case, his writing is 'beautiful . . . furious . . . ecstatic,' the problem of genre is of secondary importance. After we have decided how good or how great Wolfe's writing is, there will be enough time to decide what it is. 29

The other major issue which De Voto brings to light is the problem of artistic integrity as manifested in a feeling for form. It is generally known that Wolfe wrote too much, was overwhelmed by the welter of words which he poured out into his stacks of ledgers, and the editorial genius of Perkins was principally responsible for getting Wolfe's novels into publishable shape. There is a measure of truth in this which cannot be denied. But there is a fallacy in Mr. De Voto's critical reasoning which lies in his confusion of structural emphasis and form. Mr. Perkins' working with Wolfe was, without a doubt, responsible for a tightening up of the structure of Wolfe's novels; and this indicates a defect in Wolfe's artistic powers. But no editor can, by the wielding of a blue pencil, impart form to a work of art. He can only lay bare the form which is somewhat obscured by surplus material -- and that is what Mr. Perkins has done. 30 "If the nov-

29 Ibid.
el had not been there in the first place," writes Collins, "no editor’s pencil could have brought it to light."31 Form is an integral part of the work of art; every dramatic scene, every colorful characterization in Look Homeward, Angel was formed by Thomas Wolfe, not by Maxwell Perkins.

The word "form" is an abused word, and one which is most frequently employed to castigate Wolfe’s writings: "he has no sense of form." When critics like De Voto say this about Wolfe, they usually mean that in his novels there is evident no carefully developed design in which everything happens for a single end, and nothing happens except for that end, and the end is always carefully limited, bounded, and concise. Similarly, those who want to praise Wolfe without submitting their own critical principles to any kind of analytical discipline say that Wolfe had "too much to say" to submit himself to any rigid form, as if to maintain that discipline of any sort would have tragically emasculated Wolfe’s artistic abilities.

In both instances, "form" is being used in the special meaning of "pattern." A "pattern" in this sense, suggests Louis D. Rubin, is "a thematic device."32 The artist bends all his ef-

31 Collins, p. 167.
32 Rubin, p. 6.
forts toward the creation of a pattern in his work, in which the artistic effect will depend upon how intricate the pattern is on the one hand, and how balanced on the other. The balance and the intricacy provide the meaning of the work of art. There are many excellent "pattern" novels. Henry James, of course, was intensely interested in patterns, and in most of his novels his intention was primarily to show how various themes and attitudes would work out in a particular situation among given groups of individuals.

In this kind of novel the pattern can have "form." Certainly much of James' work has "form" in almost any sense of the word. But so can a novel have "form" which is not by intent a "pattern" -- is not created for the sake of effects of balance and intricacy -- if by "form" is meant only the principle which, working with and through the component parts of the novel, gives direction and meaning to the novel as a whole.33 If Look Homeward, Angel is subjected to this notion of "form," rather than to one which requires the conscious working out of a pattern, the conclusions about whether or not Wolfe "has no sense of form" are likely to be considerably different.

Wolfe's announced intention was to put in his art "the unique and single substance of this land and life," or more fa-
miliarly, "to know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper." He wanted to put the "essence" of America into an art form. The question one must now ask is, how much of the "essence" of America is in Look Homeward, Angel? The novel has as its locale a North Carolina mountain town called Altamont. What there is of the "essence" of America in the book, then, must be discovered in Wolfe's preoccupation with life in this place. Perhaps the best example of Wolfe's method comes in the second half of the twenty-fourth chapter of the book which describes a walk through the town taken by Eugene and his friend George on an April day in 1915.34

From the outset of the walk through the town, Wolfe uses a lyrical, richly colorful prose style to describe the doings of downtown Altamont. He makes frequent use of sensory adjectives and verbs, and he is careful to begin by first creating for his readers something of the mood of a spring day in the Carolina mountains.

A light wind of April fanned over the hill. There was a smell of burning leaves and rubble around the

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34 As Rubin suggests, the inspiration for this famous passage is very likely in part from Father Conmee's walk through Dublin in the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of James Joyce's Ulysses, in which the Very Reverend Don John Conmee, S.J. saunters through the streets of Dublin and sees the city about him. It is interesting to point out that Wolfe indicates in The Story of a Novel that Joyce was his favorite author.
school. In the field on the hill flank behind the house a plowman drove his big horse with loose clanking traces around a lessening square of dry fallow earth. "Gee, woah. His strong feet followed after. The big share bit cleanly down, cleaving a deep, sperm-y furrow of moist young earth along its track."

From the first sentence on, Wolfe has begun his texturing of the scene. The description of the "light wind" of April "fanning" over the hill immediately calls up associations common to most readers -- of the streaming, pleasant quality of a not-too-gusty yet definitely active breeze in spring when it has already become too warm for such a breeze to be chilly. In the lines that follow, he utilizes all of the five senses to set his meaning: "moist," "dry" -- touch and taste; "loose clanking" -- sound; "burning leaves" -- smell; and the entire passage is extremely visual. Observing, then, the psychological fact that it is the sensory images which most surely evoke associations of memory, Wolfe has given his readers every opportunity to grasp the sensory connotations of his subject-matter as well as the bare idea.

Eugene and George leave the school for the downtown area, bantering with friends as they move along. They pass, among other things, a church: "From the top of the hill to the left, the swelling sound of the Methodist organ welled up remotely from the choir, accompanied by a fruity contralto voice, much in de-

35 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 324.
mand at funerals. Abide with me. Most musical of mourners, weep again!"36 Here, as all during the walk through the town, Wolfe frequently concludes the individual descriptive paragraphs with a line of poetry, in this instance from Shelley. By the use of such a device the reader is made to feel that the Altamont scene is common to many times and places, and that the humdrum day-by-day pursuits are remarkable in themselves.

The walk through the town, however, is not merely a collection of descriptive bits; it is much more than that. The scenes are assimilated into the consciousness of Eugene, the observer, and the incidents as they occur often set off "lightning reactions of associational patterns."37 Unlike an earlier and almost equally successful chapter in the book describing W. O. Gant's return from his last Western journey, the walk through the town is not told in the "stream-of-consciousness." Instead, the explorations into Eugene's thought patterns are only occasional and momentary; and Wolfe relies strongly upon the more usual external technique to portray Eugene. Thus, after Eugene and George pass an undertaking establishment, they discuss their chances of being buried alive:

36 Ibid., p. 328.
37 Rubin, p. 9.
Eugene shuddered. 'I think,' he suggested painfully, 'they're supposed to take out your insides when they embalm you.'

'Yes,' said George Graves more hopefully, 'and that stuff they use would kill you anyway. They pump you full of it.'

With shrunken heart, Eugene considered. The ghost of old fear, that had been laid for years, walked forth to haunt him.

In his old fantasies of death he had watched his living burial, had foreseen his waking life-in-death, his slow, frustrated efforts to push away the smothering flood of earth until, as a drowning swimmer claws the air, his mute and stiffened fingers thrust from the ground a call for hands. 38

In swift procession persons and places pass before the eager eyes of Eugene Gant and George Graves as they continue their walk downtown. They near a millinery shop, observe the waxen dummy in the window ("O that those lips had language!"); the Rogers-Malone hearse wheels by ("Come, delicate death, serenely arriving, arriving"); a telegraph messenger boy coasts along on his bicycle ("And post o'er land and ocean without rest. Milton, thou shouldest be living at this hour"); an old lecher watches a young woman cross the street ("Even in their ashes live their wonted fires"); Eugene and George meet an old palsied bore, who holds them a moment, then after almost choking to death before their eyes, totters on down the street ("Grow old along with me"). William Jennings Bryan, the Commoner, is encountered, and observed first as he banter pleasantries with the Reverend John Smallwood,

38 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 331.
pastor of the First Baptist Church, and then is interviewed by Richard Gorman, twenty-six, city reporter of the Citizen. Then the reader encounters a burlesque newspaper story, complete with sub-headlines and all the journalistic clichés, again strikingly reminiscent of Joyce's Ulysses. After this come more persons and places, each described and categorized, and finally the boys turn into Wood's Pharmacy, where they purchase chocolate milk: "O for a draught of vintage that hath been cooled a long time in the deep-delved earth!"39

So the walk through the town ends. Altamont is there, in a multitude of particulars. There is almost no abstract description in the episode; Wolfe devotes the entire sequence to depicting scenes and people that he obviously knew well. William Jennings Bryan, for example, spent considerable time in Asheville during the 1910's, talked to its citizens, considered settling down there, and was familiar to not a small number of its townspeople.40

If Thomas Wolfe's proposed function was to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper," this scene illustrates that not only has he shown his readers a slice of daily

39Ibid., p. 348.
40Rubin, p. 11.
life in a particular town, but the chances are also that unless the reader of the passage has never lived in a small town he will immediately recognize in Wolfe's portrait of downtown Altamont numerous similarities to his own town or city anywhere else in America. But this is not the only function that the scene serves. For it manifests a definite point of progress in Eugene's experience as well. At the time it occurs, Eugene is fourteen years of age. In a very few chapters (and years) he will leave Altamont, first tentatively and only partly, for college at Pulpit Hill, and then into complete exile. This walk through the city represents Eugene's last look at the town through the young eyes of a child. In the next two chapters events occur that will transform his perspective entirely. The First World War breaks out, his brother Ben finds out that he is seriously ill, Eugene goes on a trip to Charleston where he first experiences love, and after that he learns that his father has cancer. The walk through town, then, is an important milestone in the progression toward the conclusion of the story, in which Eugene will leave his family, his town, and the blinding greed which has become so intrinsic a part of their lives.

In answer to Mr. De Voto's request for "form" in Look Homeward, Angel, then, scenes like the one just cited can be presented to show that the book does possess a definite form. It is a form which, as Mr. Rubin states so well, "working with and through
the component parts of the novel, gives direction and meaning to
the novel as a whole."41

Mr. De Voto's most biting accusation is that Wolfe should
have learned to "put a corset on his prose." This is possibly
ture, although certainly not to the extent that De Voto would
have his readers believe. A corset is often a useful device; it
keeps the human body looking trim and neat. But it also re-
stricts free movements and respiration, and is often detrimental
to the health of the body. It can never be more than idle spec-
ulation to try to determine whether or not Wolfe's prose would
have been better had it been "corseted"; but "corseted or not,"
writes Collins, "there is a certain statuesque quality about his
style which, by comparison, makes the pale prose of the lesser
American novelists seem to be suffering from malnutrition."42
Fred B. Millett agrees with this observation of Collins. Millett
finds Wolfe's work "inexhaustibly expressive,"43 and the reason
for this quality is "Wolfe's strong sense of the epic."44 Be-
cause of this, Wolfe had the remarkable ability of "moving easi-
ly on the plane of the grand and grandiose," and what is rarer in

41Ibid., p. 7.
42Collins, p. 167.
43Millett, p. 34.
44Ibid.
American fiction -- "the combination of great vitality and a strong lyrical impulse."\(^45\)

As has already been seen, Robert Penn Warren, the second of Wolfe's principal critics, more or less follows the critical line of De Voto. The principal problem raised by Warren, of course, is that of objectivity in an autobiographical novel. This is best expressed by his parting remark: "And meanwhile it may be well to recollect that Shakespeare merely wrote Hamlet; he was not Hamlet." Mr. Warren's critical dictum on this point seems to be that there must be no confusion between the sensibility that produces a dramatic narrative and the sensibility of the hero in that narrative. This would be a valid criticism except that one suspects that Mr. Warren's sequence of thought is from the novelist to the novel, rather than vice versa. That is to say, he is not keeping his eye on the critical object, which is the work of art. Hamlet, as a play, would be no less great if Shakespeare actually had been a prince of Denmark whose father had been murdered by his uncle. As Thomas Lyle Collins remarks, "We must look to the art, not to the artist."\(^46\)

It appears, however, that there are two circumstances in a novel in which a charge of lack of objectivity might be justi-

\(^{45}\)Ibid.

\(^{46}\)Collins, p. 168.
fied; when the author places his own sentiments in the mouth of the character incapable of such sentiments; and when the author places himself in his novel without first objectifying his own sentiments to the extent that he can see and present himself clearly and vividly. As to the first charge, it is true that many of Wolfe's characters are "Wolfean," but this is, and must be, true in varying degrees for all novelists. All characters by any novelist have something of the same quality, because all are given life by the same "moving spirit."47

As to the second charge, Wolfe has objectified his own character with commendable vividness and clarity. For this reason Look Homeward, Angel has been acclaimed as an immortal "Song of the Self,"48 and its hero remains one of the outstanding autobiographical characters of fiction. Certainly it requires an exercise of his powers of objectification for Wolfe to laugh at himself in the way he often did, as in the scene where the Acting Dean of Pulpit Hill College advises Eugene not to go Over There to Stay Here and Do His Bit;

47Ibid.
'Yes,' said Eugene, with a pale tortured face, 'I know. I know it's wrong. But oh, sir, -- when I think of those murderous beasts, when I think of how they have menaced All That We Hold Dear, when I think of Little Belgium, and then of My Own Mother, My Own Sister --' He turned away, clenching his hands, madly in love with himself.

'Yes, yes,' said the Acting Dean gently, 'for the boys with a spirit like yours it's not easy.'

'Oh sir, it's hard!' cried Eugene passionately.

'I tell you it's hard.'

'We must endure,' said the Dean quietly. 'We must be tempered with fire. The Future of Mankind hangs in the balance.'

Deeply stirred they stood together for a moment, drenched in the radiant beauty of their heroic souls.\textsuperscript{49}

On this point of the need of objectivity in the autobiographical novel, Mr. Christopher Dawson comments that even though "the present predicament of the individual in a mass society"\textsuperscript{50} is frequently explored by the American writer, it is, and has to be, through the eyes of the artist himself as "spokesman of the inarticulate."\textsuperscript{51} This Wolfe did. For the "one available truth"\textsuperscript{52} about America was that it was contained in himself.\textsuperscript{53} In his

\textsuperscript{49}Look Homeward, Angel, p. 534.

\textsuperscript{50}Dawson, p. 71.

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52}Bishop, p. 362.

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid.
personal experiences Wolfe had discovered "something deep and
dark and tortured and twisted in human nature and in the American
nation he loved." Consequently, when he wrote *Look Homeward,
Angel* he wrote of this "something deep and dark and tortured and
twisted." In showing the effects of greed in the lives of W. O.
Gant, Eliza, and Eugene, he was showing what similar effects it
was having upon all the W. O. Gants, Elizas, and Eugenes every­
where in America. By reflecting the deep confusions and discords
in his own life, Wolfe reflected the deep confusions and discords
in the American nation. By resolving these difficulties in his
own life, Wolfe was teaching the American people how to resolve
them in their own lives. Eugene learns in the end that his path
lies always ahead, never back toward the irrecoverable past,
which can never be the same as it has been. He bespeaks the re­
alization which America must arrive at. Just as Eugene could
never return to his home town, neither could America return to
the good old days of "Greed, greed, greed, -- deliberate, crafty,
motivated," the days of blind and brutal grab, and to any easy
solution to its strident materialism and blatant individualism.

54 *Aswell*, p. 104.

The real objectivity of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* as a lesson to America is this: evils in society cannot be ascribed to institutions; man's faults lie not outside but inside, "homeward," deep within his very heart.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

One of the finer editorials to appear in Life magazine in the 1950's is entitled "Wanted: An American Novel." The editorial makes an appeal for an American fiction which will faithfully mirror the "incredible accomplishments of our day" that are "surely the raw stuff of saga."\(^1\) Citing Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit and Herman Wouk's Marjorie Morningstar as possible exceptions, it bemoans the fact that much of what American writers have produced in recent years sounds "sometimes as if it were written by an unemployed homosexual living in a packing-box shanty on the city dump while awaiting admission to the county poorhouse."\(^2\)

What Life's editors are searching for is an American novel to "faithfully mirror the present time." Past American eras, the


\(^2\) Ibid.
editorial asserts, have been successfully interpreted in such novels as: The Great Gatsby, which still speaks "eloquently" of Prohibition's frauds and deceits; Main Street, which portrays the "high tide of provincial self-satisfaction;" and The Grapes of Wrath, which portrays the unnecessary humiliations of the Depression "with a just anger." At the end of this select catalogue of novels, Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel is cited, but the distinct contribution of this book is that it "may well speak for a timeless America." This remark concerning Look Homeward, Angel appears to epitomize the role which Wolfe's book has assumed on the scene of American fiction ever since the work was published in 1929 -- "it speaks for a timeless America."

Is the personal realization which Eugene Gant so laboriously arrives at in Look Homeward, Angel -- the realization which Thomas Wolfe likewise presents as the only solution to American materialism, that every man must "look homeward," must look to himself to overcome freely the evils he has brought upon himself through his own greed -- the source of the book's timelessness, or, as this thesis asserts, its greatness? Yes, it is. To discover whether this is true, it might be profitable to consider what a reader finds attractive in the writer whom he admires. This attraction appears to be a dual one. First, a writer at-
tracts because he gives his readers' lives a direction, a motive, and a power to assimilate knowledge. Secondly, and this is perhaps a writer's basic source of attraction, he heartens his readers and reinforces their belief that life is rich, curious, and inexhaustible.

In not merely acknowledging but vividly portraying greed as a fundamental source of the loveless relationship of W. O. Gant, Eliza, and of Eugene -- of all Americans of the 1920's -- and then insisting that this greed can and must be overcome by individual effort, Thomas Wolfe gives extremely sound direction, motivation, and power to assimilate knowledge. He energetically avoids the sentimental fallacy indulged in by a number of his contemporaries, that of ascribing evils to institutions. For with a dim but none the less perceptible certainly Eugene sees -- and all Americans see -- that the fault lies not outside but inside, deep within the heart of man.4 Thus Wolfe, "preoccupied," as Mr. Dawson observes, "with the American way of life," in no small measure fulfills his "charismatic mission of teacher and interpreter" to the American people about whom and for whom he continually wrote. Herein, in part, lies his true greatness.

A complete explanation of Wolfe's greatness, however, is understood by seeing how Look Homeward, Angel embodies a good writer's basic source of attraction, his ability to "hearten his readers and reinforce their belief that life is rich, curious, and inexhaustible." In Look Homeward, Angel Wolfe says to his readers, and especially to the young men among them, both American and European, whom he has never failed to attract as a reading audience, that "it is good to eat, to drink, to sleep, to fish, to swim, to run, to ride on land, sea, and in the air, to travel to strange cities, to love a woman, to try to make a beautiful thing."5 And precisely because of this strong reaffirmation of life's "richness, curiosity, and inexhaustibility," today, after thirty years, while most books written at the time that Wolfe wrote Look Homeward, Angel are dead and forgotten, this book is still being reprinted and its total sales far exceed those of most American works of fiction. Each new generation of readers rediscovers it and claims this book for its own. For Wolfe wrote about youth, and he spoke to youth more convincingly than any American writer has ever done. Thousands, reading Look Homeward, Angel for the first time, have found something of themselves and of their lives suddenly become amazingly articulate and universal, and with the secret joy of recognition, which, perhaps, comes too seldom in the

5As quoted in "Books," Time, LXVIII (October 8, 1956), 113.
reading of fiction, have remarked: "Ah, yes, that's just the way life is!"

Thomas Wolfe had but one ambition in his brief but productive twelve years as a writer. It was ever to "know this country as the palm of his hand and to put it on paper." This he accomplished in Look Homeward, Angel, a book which is certainly distinctively American and perennially great. Because of these two qualities the book is a significant contribution to American fiction. For it proves that the American novel is not only not dead, but capable of a powerful recovery if it seeks its strength again, as Look Homeward, Angel has done, in the great fullness of American life and in the legitimate hungers of the human heart.
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C. UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Richard G. Polakowski, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 1, 1959
Date

Signature of Adviser