Resurrecting Thomas Wolfe

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by Terry Roberts

When Thomas Wolfe died of tubercular meningitis on September 15, 1938, his literary reputation was equal in the United States to that of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. In the sixty plus years since, his artistic reputation has been all but destroyed. With the exception of his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, he is read less and less often, and the academics who design anthologies and teach influential college courses routinely dismiss his work. So on the 100th anniversary of his birth, we are compelled to ask, Who killed Thomas Wolfe?

By far the most common image of Wolfe is that of a bloated, self-obsessed Romantic, whose emotions are so intense and whose rhetoric is so inflated that critics assume he must have had almost no artistic or self-control. And indeed, from his earliest success with *Look Homeward, Angel* (published in October 1929), Wolfe was an easy figure to satirize. First, there is the writing itself. As David Donald wrote in introducing his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, "Thomas Wolfe wrote more bad prose than any other major writer I can think of" (xiii).[1] Further, there was the man's life, certainly no more dramatic than that of Hemingway but somehow tainted in the public eye by the "autobiographical controversy" that haunted Wolfe. Wolfe's height (and in later years his girth); his family, straight out of Dickens; his truly gargantuan love for alcohol and food as well as books and art; his tendency toward manic depressive behavior—all worked their way into the novels and contributed to the myth of raw, unpolished genius run amok.

So who, then, murdered his literary reputation? Let us first round up the usual suspects. As early as April 25, 1936, Bernard DeVoto used the excuse of reviewing Wolfe's *The Story of a Novel* to blast Wolfe in a cutting essay entitled "Genius Is Not Enough." DeVoto paid a passing compliment to *The Story of a Novel* (written by Wolfe as an exploration of how *Of Time and the River* was created) and then went on to write that Wolfe "has mastered neither the psychic material out of which a novel is made nor the technique of writing fiction" (4). DeVoto attributed the success of *Look Homeward, Angel* to editor Max Perkins and the Scribner's' "assembly line" (14). DeVoto's essay wounded Wolfe more deeply than he would at first admit and may have contributed to his eventual break with Perkins. Even more significantly, however, it set the tone for critics ever since who wished to establish their own intellectual superiority by attacking Wolfe in print. More recent comments in the same vein include those by no less a cultural heavyweight than Harold Bloom, who wrote in reviewing Donald's biography that "there is no possibility for critical dispute about Wolfe's literary merits; he has none whatsoever. Open him at any page, and that will suffice" (13). Most all of these attacks flow out of the original notion that Wolfe was forever what Wright Morris described as a "raw young giant" who produced literally crates of prose but who had no notion of how to produce a "well-made" book from those crates.

I believe, however, that Wolfe's critics, no matter how strident, could never have so reduced his reputation had not the author himself contributed to the undoing. In fact, the true culprit may well be a creature of Wolfe's own making. Consider for a moment Thomas Wolfe in his late twenties as like another young, ambitious genius in love with his own generative power—Victor Frankenstein. And just as Frankenstein produced his monster, so Wolfe did as well: the autobiographical monster Eugene Gant, the protagonist of *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, the only two novels published during Wolfe's lifetime. In short, Wolfe's reputation was murdered by his own brainchild. Wolfe's readers often fall in love with Eugene when they first encounter him, but he grew into something Wolfe could never have foreseen: not just the prototypical Wolfe character but the only Wolfe character. This confusion has become true to the extent that even now, over seventy years after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene Gant has all but become the author. In Victor Frankenstein's case, the obsessive, young genius made the creature that destroyed the creator. In Thomas Wolfe's case, literary history has very nearly repeated itself.

So powerful was this creation—the character that became the author—that as late as September 1935, when Wolfe wrote to Perkins about his

plans for "The Book of Night" (later *The Hound of Darkness*), he admitted he was locked in combat with the autobiographical monster. In this new book, Wolfe wrote, America would not be seen by a

> definite personality, but haunted throughout by a consciousness of personality. In other words, I want to assert my divine right once and for all to be the God Almighty of a book—to be at once the spirit to move it, the spirit behind it, never to appear, to blast forever the charge of autobiography while being triumphantly and impersonally autobiographical. (*Letters* 489).

Perhaps in the naked fury of that letter, we can sense both the mortal nature of the struggle and, perhaps, why it is so tempting to say that he lost it. Why it is so tempting to say that Wolfe never wrote successfully about any subject other than himself.

If this is true, if Thomas Wolfe and Eugene Gant have become so conflated in the literary consciousness, the consequences are several. First of all, because Eugene is such an unabashed and often unselfconscious Romantic, he and his creator are increasingly vulnerable to the sharp wits and even sharper pens of contemporary intellectuals. Second, because Eugene Gant was a creature of large appetites and even larger emotions, he is often associated with Wolfe's own intense desires, desires too often expressed in an ungovernable flow of words. Thus, Wolfe's books (or do they belong to Eugene?) are stereotypically assumed to be the least "well-made" of the great modernist classics. For this reason, as we come to the end of Wolfe's century, we have to ask whether he will be read at all in the next.

What I have come to believe is that in the years between 1930 and 1938, Wolfe held his own against the autobiographical monster, and it is high time that we as readers finish the job of resurrecting his reputation. When we read the mature Wolfe, we discover that: 1) his best work is most often his short work; 2) his best work tends to be dominated by points of view distant from his own; 3) his short fiction, when it is autobiographical, is rigorously controlled; and 4) his best work often features multiple, even choral, points of view. In other words, in the short fiction he wrote during the nine brief years between the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* and his death, Wolfe managed to turn almost all of the critical stereotypes about his work inside-out.

As proof, we should examine eight separate pieces of evidence: eight works by Thomas Wolfe that should remain in print, that should be anthologized, that should be taught, that should be read through this cen-

tury and into the next. First, however, we should examine the argument that Wolfe's short fiction is in many instances his best fiction. In a typically thoughtful essay, C. Hugh Holman introduced the 1961 *Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe* by arguing that "the intrinsic qualities of the short novel [15,000–40,000 words] were remarkably well adapted to Wolfe's special talents and creative methods" (xvii).[2] This volume contains five novellas (three of which are discussed here), and in justifying their collection and publication Holman says:

> Upon these . . . short novels Wolfe had expended great effort, and in them he had given the clearest demonstrations he ever made of his craftsmanship and his artistic control. Each of these . . . novellas is marked in its unique way by a sharp focus and a controlling unity, and each represents a serious experiment with form. Yet they have been virtually lost from the corpus of Wolfe's work, lost even to most of those who know that work well. (xvi-xvii)

Holman admits that one of the reasons even the short novels are not known is "the nature of Wolfe's work and his attitude toward it" (xvii): in other words, the long, often autobiographical fiction that Wolfe continued to attempt during the 1930s. Even after 1935, when Wolfe was less concerned with his own life and more with the interconnected lives of others, his reputation for artistic excess ruled the public discourse about his work. In 1935, when *Of Time and the River* appeared, *The Saturday Review of Literature* published a wonderful cartoon showing New York's book reviewers picketing the front door of Scribner's, protesting the sheer length of Wolfe's books. And as David Donald notes, Scribner's Book Store on Fifth Avenue turned the tables by enlarging the cartoon to poster size and displaying it over a small mountain of the novels in its storefront window. Thus, Wolfe the man, even Wolfe the artist, was being replaced by Wolfe the myth.

My antidote to this case of cultural mythmaking is to cite those works of Wolfe's that capture his mature craft, especially his sense of authorial distance and editorial control. Even as early as 1929, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, there is evidence that Wolfe was willing and able to look beyond his own experience for the raw material of his work and to express that material in a voice other than his own. In Chapter Seven, "Gant the Far Wanderer," W. O. Gant, Eugene's father, returns home from a cross-country trip. During a trolley ride from the train station into town, the narrative shifts suddenly from third-person omniscient into a Gantian interior monologue:

> There was a warm electric smell and one of hot burnt steel.
>
> But two months dead! But two months dead! Ah, Lord! So it's come to this. Merciful God, this fearful, awful, and damnable climate. Death, death! Is it too late? A land of life, a flower land. How clear the green clear sea was. And all the fishes swimming there. Santa Catalina. Those in the East should always go West. How came I here? Down, down—always down. . . . (71)

And Gant is off into a rambling spiel of modified interior monologue that Wolfe wove into the next two pages of dialogue and description. This passage is both a funny and fascinating study of Gant's personality and is so well integrated into the movement of the chapter that most of us never notice that Wolfe has adopted an entirely different voice for an extended period. *Look Homeward, Angel* is neither short nor rigorously controlled, but this one interesting passage does suggest that even in his early work Wolfe has the capacity for adopting points of view removed from his own and for capturing those points of view in dramatic narrative voices.[3] Published in October 2000, *O Lost: A Story of the Buried Life*, the original typescript for *Look Homeward, Angel*, makes it even more apparent that Wolfe was interested in multiple points of view, even in his first novel.

The second piece of evidence is the short novel that first appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* in July 1932 and was later included in *From Death to Morning*. This novella, evocatively titled "The Web of Earth," is narrated by a garrulous old woman who is visiting her son in New York. It captures in the narrative voice of Eliza Gant—Eugene Gant's mother in *Look Homeward, Angel*—all the complex and mysterious interweavings of Wolfe's best work, and yet achieves this complexity in a fundamentally spare narrative. Wolfe's letters from the period repeatedly cite Perkins' praise of the story and in one instance describe his method:

> It is different from anything I have ever done; it's about an old woman, who sits down to tell a little story, but then her octopal memory weaves back and forth across the whole fabric of her life until everything has gone into it. It's all told in her own language. . . . That story about the old woman has got everything in it, murder and cruelty, and hate and love, and greed and enormous unconscious courage, yet the whole thing is told with the stark innocence of a child. (*Letters* 339)

"Web of Earth" is significant here because it represents Wolfe's growing ability to capture a point of view decidedly not his own. Interestingly, this

long story contains a listener as well as a teller. Eliza Gant's long, earthy meditation is delivered in a dramatic context, with her son as audience. And yet, even though Eugene Gant is present during the delivery of his mother's dramatic monologue, Wolfe does not allow Eugene's presence to intrude on the telling of the story. "The Web of Earth" belongs entirely to the voice that tell it. And, as Monica Melloni has pointed out, that is the source of its greatness. The plot, the setting, the characters of Eliza's reminiscence are all an organic part of the web spun by her voice. Compare it to Gant's interior monologue from Chapter Seven of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and immediately one sees how much more complex and compelling is Eliza's voice in "The Web of Earth." This complexity alone suggests that the voice telling the story is significantly different from that of Wolfe's mother and represents all the more significant an artistic achievement.

No less an authority on the narrative arts than Wallace Stegner noticed Wolfe's growing ability to create a compelling voice not his own. In his introduction to several of Wolfe's stories in the 1965 anthology, *American Literary Masters*, Stegner wrote:

> Fiction is a combination of the objective world and the eye that sees it. Though Thomas Wolfe was more powerful and more passionate, as a general rule, when he wrote through a Eugene Gant or a George Webber [a later protagonist], both essentially himself, he did in a handful of stories invent sensibilities not his own, and tell stories through them. "Web of Earth" . . . [and] "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" demonstrate that on occasion he was capable of the objectivity that his critics said he did not possess. (1075)

It may well be, however, that Stegner understated the case and that Wolfe was "more powerful and more passionate" when he did adopt "sensibilities not his own," or at least more successful in creating a similar passion in his reader.

Perhaps none of Wolfe's narrative adoptions was more unlike his native voice than the voice that narrates his 1935 story "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn":

> Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo, (only the dead know Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo) because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh goddam town. . . .
>
> So like I say, I'm waitin' for my train t' come when I sees dis big guy standin' deh—dis is duh foist I eveh see of him. Well, he's lookin' wild, y'know, an' I can see dat he's had plenty, but still he's

> holdin' it; he talks good an' is walkin' straight enough. So den, dis big guy steps up to a little guy dat's standin' deh, an' says, "How d'yuh get t' Eighteent' Avenoo an' Sixty-sevent' Street?" he says.
>
> "Jesus! Yuh got me chief," duh little guy says to him. (260)

What follows is one of the most fascinating stories in the entire Wolfe canon: in part because of the ambiguity around just who is narrating the story and just what part of Wolfe's own half-drunk, map-obsessed personality is represented by "duh big guy." As in "'The Web of Earth," Wolfe's own persona is present in the story, and yet the story finally is not about Eugene Gant or "duh big guy"; rather, it is about the voice that is struggling to make sense out of reality by giving faithful directions —in other words, by telling the tale itself. One idea at the core of Wolfe's work from this period is that all storytelling is in a sense about the desire to "give good directions"—whether to Red Hook (the destination in the story) or to some other destination as profound as understanding itself.

One of the unfortunate characteristics of Wolfe's early work—notably the more autobiographical work associated with Eugene Gant—is that it is tainted by racial stereotype and, on occasion, by outright racial prejudice. This element has precipitated several important essays and one significant book-length study, Paschal Reeves' *Thomas Wolfe's Albatross: Race and Nationality in America*. Those commentators who have read Wolfe most carefully, however, agree that his attitude toward his black and Jewish characters shifted considerably during the 1930s. I would argue that as Wolfe became less interested in his own history during the early 1930s and more interested in the history of others, he naturally grew more sympathetic to the social and cultural plight of others. As his writing became less autobiographical, and so less self-centered, so did his social and cultural point of view. The most remarkable evidence of this change is a story Wolfe wrote after visiting Germany in 1936. The narrative concerned a young Jew who is traveling by train with the narrator but who is removed forcefully at the German border by Nazi guards. Wolfe had long regarded Germany as his spiritual home, and the incident upset him terribly. On the back of a postcard he sent to Elizabeth Nowell from Paris in September, he wrote:

> I've written a wonderful piece—after it gets published I won't be able to go back to the place where I'm liked best and have more friends than anywhere in the world—but I'm going to publish it (or what's a heaven for?)—I'm going to call it (for various reasons) "I

> Have A Thing To Tell You"—which may not be so foolish as it sounds. W. (*Beyond Love and Loyalty* 46)

Wolfe's growing sympathy for the oppressed did exact a personal cost in this instance. When, after vigorous advocacy and equally vigorous editing by Nowell, the story appeared in *The New Republic* (March 10, 17, and 24, 1937), Wolfe's books were banned in Germany, and he was never able to return there. Wolfe did not himself consider "I Have a Thing to Tell You" a political statement but a human one. He later wrote to Nowell that "its greatest value, it seems to me, lies in the fact—that I wrote it as I write all my other stories about a human situation and living characters" (65). It may well be that Wolfe's narrative skills had to mature in order to encompass his growing sensitivity to the emotional and spiritual lives of others. This symbiotic evolution of his sensibility and his craft would soon be seen in other work from the period.

Wolfe finally went back to Asheville in the spring and summer of 1937, having been banned from his hometown for eight years by the public outcry against *Look Homeward, Angel*. Much biographical speculation has resulted from the long summer visit—Wolfe's apparent ability to go home again—but the fact remains that he found it very difficult to work there, even in the isolated Oteen cabin where he stayed, because of the constant interruptions from local fans. Furthermore, Wolfe himself was a changed man, having in some sense outgrown his thirty-year love-hate relationship with the town. This growth can be seen in the material he was working on during his visit home—the complex manuscript he called "Party at Jack's."[4] Esther Jack was the fictional name Wolfe had assigned the character he based on Aline Bernstein, his mistress of some years; the story is about a young author who attends an elegant party at the Park Avenue apartment of the Jacks, Esther and her husband. The autobiographical monster looms. But, in fact, Wolfe again places Eugene (by now renamed Monk Webber) firmly in the background, and as the story unfolds, even Esther Jack becomes only a single figure in a rich social fabric.

Wolfe's stated purpose in writing "The Party at Jack's" was not to revisit through his art a complex time in his life when he was in love with Aline Bernstein. Rather, he used the historical setting of an actual party he attended at the Bernsteins' as an artistic jumping-off place for pointed social commentary. During the period he was in Asheville, he corresponded with his agent, Elizabeth Nowell, about the difficulties he faced in weaving together all the story's elements:

> My plan when I get thru is to have a complete section of the social order, a kind of dense, closely interwoven tapestry made up of the lives and thoughts and destinies of thirty or forty people and all embodied in the structure of the story. It is an elaborate design, it has to be. . . (*Beyond Love and Loyalty* 71)

Thus the Bernsteins' apartment building becomes a symbol of America's stratified society, with the rich and sophisticated partygoers at the top, supported by the working class cooks, maids, and elevator operators working to make the rich tapestry of the party possible. The whole structure is literally hollow at the core, with the subway tunnels deep under the building causing the building to be fundamentally unsound:

> Therefore, it happened sometimes, that dwellers in this imperial tenement would feel a tremor at their feet as something faint and instant passed below them, and perhaps remember that there were trains, far, far below them in these tunneled depths. Then all would fade away into the riddled distances of the tormented rock. The great building would grow solidly to stone again, and people would smile faintly, knowing that it was enduring and unshaken, now and forever, as it had always been. (282–283)

But the structure is, of course, not entirely unshaken. It is no accident that when a fire starts in the building, the subway tunnels far beneath the ground have to be flooded and two elevator operators die from smoke inhalation. And even though the partygoers must evacuate their "imperial tenement" for a time, they treat it as an interesting holiday and remain oblivious to the deaths involved. American society may be spiritually hollow at the core and built on the bodies of the working class, but it remains, or so Wolfe seems to say, defiantly strong, barely shaken by the socialism propounded in the story's early pages by one of the elevator operators who would later die.

This is the mature Wolfe, much less artistically concerned with his autobiographical hero, or even the character based on his beloved Aline, than he is with the entire sweep of American society in all its splendor and injustice. Wolfe's own growing socialism during the period is reflected in his growing impatience with the artistic community in New York. The older author who befriends Eugene at the party is emotionally sterile even when sensitive and sympathetic. And in one brilliant set piece, Wolfe satirized the precious world of the New York art scene with his portrayal of "Piggy" Hartwell and his circus constructed entirely out of wire:[5]

> People were not always able to identify each act, but when they were, they applauded vigorously. There was now an act by the trapeze performers. This occupied a long time, largely because Mr. Hartwell was not able to make it work. . . . Again and again the little wire figure soared through the air, caught at the outstretched hands of the other doll—and missed ingloriously. It became painful: people craned their necks and looked embarrassed—all, indeed, except Mr. Hartwell, who giggled happily with each new failure and tried again. . . . And the gathering, after a brief and puzzled pause, broke into applause. (307)

Wolfe's satire isn't limited to the creator of this "circus"; however, he also found ridiculous the rich and famous partygoers who accepted this bizarre performance as "art" even though it had apparently nothing whatsoever to do with the human drama he saw all around him. The Eugene Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River* had been fascinated with the power and glory of the New York arts scene, a world he ached to join. By 1937, however, when "The Party at Jack's" was being constructed, Wolfe had outgrown both Eugene and his lust for fame.

This use of his own past (but in an entirely different and more mature way) is also reflected in the next piece of evidence: the 1937 story "The Child by Tiger." In part because of the story's length and because it concerns a hideous mid-winter night shooting spree that happened in Asheville in November 1906, the story has become one of Wolfe's most commonly anthologized pieces. There are two aspects of the story that are especially important to our discussion, however. First, the story suggests immediately the mature Wolfe's changing attitude toward his black characters. The mysterious protagonist of the story, Dick Prosser, is a strong and sympathetic character who, under the social pressure of the Jim Crow South, metamorphoses into a monster. Both the young boy who is present at the events in the story and the older narrator who recounts them (two aspects of the same authorial presence) struggle to reconcile Dick Prosser's fundamental humanity with the inhuman society that mauls him. Even though Wolfe was a six-year old boy only a few months removed to his mother's boarding house in November 1906, the story is not about Eugene Gant's memories of these events (indeed, internal evidence suggests Wolfe had to consult the Asheville newspapers from the time to even partially recreate what happened). Rather, it is about the struggle of the narrator to construct a meaningful sense of his society

through the process of storytelling. It is a story about race, about society, about the fundamental question of what it means to be human. And it is a story about storytelling.

It is precisely because of this element—Wolfe's growing concern with the purpose of storytelling as well as its craft—that we should here recognize one of the most important figures in his life. For decades, critics and scholars alike have written about the personal and professional significance of Max Perkins in Wolfe's history, but a figure who was at least as important as an editor (and perhaps as a friend) was the woman who entered his life in late 1933. Elizabeth Nowell was a clerk at Scribner's who later joined the Maxim Lieber Literary Agency and began to represent Wolfe's work in 1933, replacing Madeline Boyd as his agent. Nowell left Lieber and became an independent in 1934, writing Wolfe a touching letter asking him to remain as her client. From that moment until his death, she became and remained Wolfe's agent, confident, friend, and significantly, his editor. Not in a formal sense the editor of his novels in progress: that lot fell to Edward Aswell at Harper and Brothers after Wolfe left Scribner's in 1937. Elizabeth Nowell become the editor not of Wolfe's long work but of his best work. Witness this letter she wrote to Wolfe in April 1936 describing the process she had gone through with *The Story of a Novel*:

> I know you think cutting like that is easy, but it really is the hardest thing in the world and the one which take[s] most patience, going over and over and taking out just a few words at a time and putting back half of them in an effort to be sure not to slaughter your meaning, and then counting up the whole estimate and finding it STILL much too long and reading the whole thing over in a search for more words to come out and then estimating etc. etc. and with it always too long until at the end of a good week's work you're sure that it's as tight as it can be without butchering. Oh Jesus, I'm not complaining because it's worth it in your case. (*Beyond Love and Loyalty* 37)

By this point in Wolfe's career, he was typically dictating his narrative material in long, often rambling fabrics of words that a secretary then typed into rough drafts. The original draft of "The Child by Tiger," for example, Nowell cut almost by half for *The Saturday Evening Post*, where it appeared on September 11, 1937. It was Elizabeth Nowell's "nasty little brackets" (her description of the penciled marks she used to suggest cuts) that Wolfe came to respect as the most practical editorial guidance he ever had.

It is important to admit that Nowell's original mission was to keep Wolfe financially afloat during the long dry spells between novel publication by carving publishable stories out of his manuscript and then selling them. But this mission immediately went to the very core of Wolfe's life, involving Nowell in his artistic production, his finances, his relations to Perkins (and later Aswell), and even his relations to Aline Bernstein and his family. Of profound significance to Wolfe, however, was that of all of his contemporaries, she came to understand what he was trying to accomplish as a writer and consistently helped him see his dreams into print. Of the seven pieces other than *Look Homeward, Angel* that are here discussed, Elizabeth Nowell had an intimate hand in at least five, including all those written after 1935. It was she who could see most clearly the artistic patterns in Wolfe's fiction and unearth them for readers. And it was she who, in September 1938 when Wolfe lay dying in a Baltimore hospital room, was present to comfort his wildly grieving mother and sister. If Wolfe is read for another 100 years, it is Elizabeth Nowell whom we have to thank.[6]

During 1937 Nowell struggled to place the seventh piece of evidence in Wolfe's favor, his Civil War short story "Chickamauga." On July 13, 1937, Wolfe wrote friend and novelist Hamilton Basso from Oteen (this the same summer he was working on "The Party at Jack's") that he had written:

> a story called "Chickamauga" and if I do say so, it is one of the best stories I ever wrote. I got the idea for it from an old, old man, my great-uncle, John Westall, who lives over in Yancy [sic] County and who is ninety-five years old. When I saw him this spring, he began to tell me about the Civil War and about the battle of Chickamauga, which was, as he said , the bloodiest, most savage battle he was ever in. *He told me about it so wonderfully and in such pungent and poetic language, such as so many of the old country people around here use, that I couldn't wait to . . . begin on it.* My idea was simply to tell the story of a great battle in the language of a common soldier—the kind of country mountain boy who did so much of the fighting in the war. (*Letters* 625; emphasis added)

Wolfe the mature artist was captured and motivated not by the plot of the story or (as Eugene Gant would have been) by the fact that his blood relative had experienced the events, but by the voice in which he heard the story told. Once again, the mature Wolfe takes on a narrative stance quite alien from his own autobiographical persona to tell a compelling story.

As Wolfe's narrative craft outgrew the autobiographical, he became fascinated not only with other voices but also with multiple, even choral, points of view.[7] The complete version of "The Lost Boy" that Wolfe scholar James Clark discovered and edited for publication several years ago consists of four sections, all of which focus on Grover, the boy who is lost in death. The first is narrated in third-person omniscience by a wistful and poetic, but carefully controlled, voice; the second in first person by Grover's mother reminiscing about her lost son (and as in "The Web of Earth," she is speaking to her son, Grover's brother); the third section in first person by Grover's sister retelling the events leading to Grover's death; the fourth in first person by Grover's brother as an adult, who only barely remembers the dead boy but who is looking for the house in St. Louis where he died. All four sections are in and of themselves complete. And all four sections are united in various ways. Significantly, the narrator of the last section is probably also the implied audience of the second part (the mother's story) and the third part (the sister's). He is probably also the omniscient "spirit behind" the telling of the first section. Thus the four sections are a chorus of voices and the whole a choral symphony. Even though the sections must, by necessity, be read one at a time (so you can only "hear" one voice at a time), the four voices are, to the very limit of Wolfe's mature craft, intertwined. And, finally, even though Part One is the first section, it begins with an ellipsis, suggesting that it follows after something else. What it follows is Part Four, because the whole novella is circular in design. The troubled, searching narrator of the last section would not have been capable of imagining or telling the first section if he had not found that haunted house in St. Louis where his brother died.

Many of the eight fictions cited here are, in some sense or other, "autobiographical." The protagonists, and often the first-person narrators, are based on people that Wolfe knew, often family members. What is important to our understanding of his growth as an artist is that he triumphed over the autobiographical nature of his materials to create what Holman called clear "demonstrations . . . of his craftsmanship and . . . artistic control." In other words, as he turned away from himself as a subject, Wolfe learned how to paint beautifully on a smaller canvas.

There is also a further reason to believe that these eight works not only should but will be read in the twenty-first century. As his artistic control grew, he remained interested in the power of storytelling to create meaning in an otherwise chaotic world. "The Web of Earth," "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," "The Child by Tiger," and "The Lost Boy" are all "about" the individual voice busily, even desperately, striving to construct

meaning out of a complex world. For this reason, post-modernist critics like Igina Tattoni are seeing in Wolfe a type of metafiction: literature that examines its own power and structure even as the story unfolds. But before large numbers of readers can appreciate this new aspect of Wolfe, they will have to return to his mature work: the short stories and short novels written after 1930. If, indeed, that autobiographical monster Eugene Gant has almost undone Thomas Wolfe, then it is time to declare a moratorium on *Look Homeward, Angel* and take up the more mature fiction that came later. Therein we may find Wolfe's true artistic angels.

NOTES

1. Countless critics have discussed Wolfe's intense desire to create large, all-encompassing "books," part of the reason for so much "bad prose" being driven into publication. Fewer have investigated the artistic vision and creative habits that produced such overwrought first drafts.

2. Holman's argument was echoed both by Donald in the closing reflections of his biography and by James Clark in introducing his edition of "The Lost Boy."

3. This passage is one of several in the novel that clearly reflect Wolfe's reading of Joyce during the years he worked on *Look Homeward, Angel*.

4. I refer throughout to the version of the story edited by Elizabeth Nowell and published in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1939. My page references are to that same version as it appeared in the 1961 *Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe*. I use this version rather than the complete manuscript edited for the University of North Carolina Press in 1995 by Suzanne Stutman and John L. Idol because the earlier version is much tighter and more obviously focused on the social issues that fascinated Wolfe. It is also the version edited for publication by Nowell.

5. Piggy Hartwell was based on the young artist Alexander "Sandy" Calder, who actually "performed" his tiny circus at the Bernsteins' party on January 3, 1930.

6. After Wolfe's death, Nowell edited his letters for publication and wrote the first valuable biography of Wolfe, typically downplaying her own importance in his life. Her own modesty in this and other memoirs may well have led later commentators to underestimate both her personal as well as professional significance in Wolfe's life.

7. For a discussion of the democratic implications of Wolfe's multiple voices, see Anne Zahlan, "'The Song of the Whole Land': Thomas Wolfe's Multi-Voiced Discourse in Narratives of *The Web and the Rock*." *Thomas Wolfe Review* 23:2 (1999): 4–12.

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