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Vanishing Footprints: Place and Man's Struggle for Endurance in the Works of Thomas Wolfe

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Place and Man's Struggle for Endurance in the Works of Thomas Wolfe

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by

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For my mother, who jokes with me about burning down libraries due to our Crimean Tatar ancestry. And for my father, because of whom I had to move a mini-library across a continent, and then across an ocean to another one.

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NEW YORK REVIEWERS PICKET PUBLISHERS OF THOMAS WOLFE'S 500,000 WORD NOVEL, "OF TIME AND THE RIVER."

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A cartoonist imagines reviewer reaction to Of Time and the River

Scribner's Book Store on Fifth Avenue, New York, devoted an entire window to Wolfe's *Of Time and the River.* On one side it featured the front-page review in the *New York Times,* on the other the front-page review in the *New York Herald-Tribune.* Above a great stack of copies of the novel was displayed a greatly enlarged copy of this cartoon from the *Saturday Review of Literature.*

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LH	Look Homeward, Angel
TR	Of Time and the River
WR	The Web and the Rock
HA	You Can’t Go Home Again
ND	No Door
DP	Death the Proud Brother
PS	Thomas Wolfe's Purdue Speech "Writing and Living"
WE	The Web of the Earth
TC	The Train and the City

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2000, the University of South Carolina Press published Thomas Wolfe's lengthy novel *O Lost* on the centennial of his birth, over half a century after his death. Seven decades prior, the firm Charles Scribner's Sons had published a version of that same narrative in a novel titled *Look Homeward, Angel*. While the earlier book was the ultimate result of the author Thomas Wolfe's collaboration with his editor, the famous Maxwell Perkins, the more recent book derives from Matthew J. Bruccoli's reconstruction of the original text of the story from the manuscripts written by Thomas Wolfe, prior to its modification. While Perkins found it necessary to shorten the manuscript version by one hundred pages and sixty-six thousand words, Dr. Bruccoli defends Wolfe's style by arguing that "[g]reat literature is great realism, and the most important thing that fiction does is get it right— where it was, how it was…Wolfe combines photographic accuracy with the greatest flow of eloquence and the richest vocabulary any writer ever had."[1] The history of Thomas Wolfe's career and his books is indeed complex as a result of numerous factors, such as Wolfe's writing methods and the role of his editors in the versions of the books which were published.

While Wolfe's fiction covers a variety of topics, it is often based on his own experiences, and the majority of it is in fact autobiographical. Wolfe modeled the recurring protagonists on which he focused after himself, just as their lives and the fictional hometowns reflect his own life story. Thomas Clayton Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900 in Asheville, North Carolina, the

[1] Blumenthal, Ralph. "A House Restored, An Author Revisited; Thomas Wolfe Shrine Returns." *The New York Times*. 5 June 2003. Web. 22 Apr. 2012.

youngest of eight children. His father William Oliver Wolfe was a stone carver who owned a gravestone store in the center of Asheville. Oliver Wolfe had been raised in Pennsylvania before becoming a stone mason's apprentice in Baltimore and eventually moving to the South. While living as a business owner in Asheville, he married Julia Westall, who descended from a family which had inhabited the Blue Ridge Mountains region since prior to the Revolutionary War. Since the time Thomas was six years old, Julia— who strove to advance the family's financial status through investing in real estate— maintained a boarding house named "Old Kentucky Home" in town. Therefore she often lived a block away from her husband, and required her youngest son to reside with her. Wolfe's first two novels, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, derive heavily from his own life story, and the fictional Gant family and its members are indeed fashioned after his own parents and siblings, oftentimes even sharing the same names. The relationships of the protagonist Eugene Gant likewise mirror those of Thomas Wolfe, resulting in the significant roles played by the brothers Grover and Benjamin, the twins whose deaths—over a decade apart—greatly impact the novels. For the following two novels, published posthumously, Wolfe changed the protagonist from Eugene Gant to George Weber. While the latter is still based on Wolfe himself and shares a similar ancestry, the crucial difference lies in the fact that George is orphaned at a young age and has no siblings. Both George Weber and Eugene Gant attend college, move to New York City, and travel through Europe, as Wolfe did. However whereas Eugene's tale ends with his return to the United States of America during his mid-twenties, the tale of George includes Wolfe's later experiences as a writer. Wolfe passed away on September 15, 1938 at the age of thirty-seven. He was unable to complete his work on the books in which George Weber served as the protagonist.

During his brief lifetime, Wolfe witnessed the publication of his first two novels, a collection of short stories, and a novella.[2] On these books, Wolfe collaborated with the editor Maxwell Perkins, who also worked with F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Due to Wolfe's difficult writing style, which is characterized by his lengthy descriptions replete with exhaustive physical details and the spiritual, metaphysical, and rhetorical implications which he associates with them, editing his work proved a challenge which he himself compared to "putting a corset on an elephant."[3] After Wolfe reduced the enormous manuscript by only eight pages, Perkins undertook a very active role in editing the original manuscript for the first novel, resulting in the latter being significantly shorter than the former. Editing the second novel proved just as difficult, and lasted two years with Wolfe constantly writing more while Perkins stressing brevity. While Wolfe initially expressed his gratitude to Perkins, he quit working with him and Scribner's due to some critics' and peoples' notion that Wolfe's literary triumphs were owing to Perkins. Less than a year before his death, he signed a contract with Harper and Row and began working with editor Edward Aswell, who edited Wolfe's other two novels—*The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*—posthumously. It is in these two novels that Wolfe switched the protagonist from Eugene Gant to George Weber. During the time in which Wolfe collaborated with Aswell, he continued working on the narrative of George Weber, expanding it while also making some alterations in his style in an attempt to achieve a more objective voice. By the time Wolfe passed away, the manuscript was far more finished, consisting of separate stories without transitions. Not only were different sections written in different points of view, but even the protagonists name varied depending on the time in which the sections had been

[2]Respectively titled *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), *Of Time and the River* (1935), *From Death to Morning* (1935), and *The Lost Boy* (1936).
[3] Donald, David Herbert. *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002, 201.

written. Due to the unfinished condition of the expansive manuscript, Aswell faced many impediments in trying to form a coherent book from it, but eventually managed to publish it as two separate novels.

While Wolfe comes from a long line of American authors writing about the experiences of American people, it can be difficult to situate him in a definite position in relation to the other famous figures. Though he wrote at the same time as the Lost Generation and was acquainted with some of the renowned figures among them, Wolfe expressed reluctance toward being identified with the cohort. His adverseness was due to several factors, such as his more optimistic view of younger American and his unwillingness to view "the World War as a blighting experience."[4] Furthermore, he expressed his distaste for the American writers who had become expatriates and who he considered as having "made Gertrude Stein's pronouncement… an excuse for loitering in the cafes of Paris… while blaming their impotence on the thinness of American culture."[5] His detachment from them might indicate his dissatisfaction with what he saw as the fashion among American writers at the time to disparage their homeland.[6] In the speech he gave at Purdue University,[7] Wolfe mentions—without naming F. Scott Fitzgerald— a writer friend who identifies himself with the Lost Generation, before proceeding to assert "But he can't have me. If I have been elected, it has been against my will; and I hereby resign. I don't believe that I belong to a lost generation, and I have never felt so. Furthermore, I doubt very

[4] Ibid., 42.
[5] Ibid., 240.
[6] Wolfe distanced himself from other writers not only because of intellectual reasons, as with his purposeful effort to not identify himself as either a communist or a supporter of bourgeoisie values, but also because of his disagreeable behaviors, which were amplified by his drunkenness. His personal and romantic relationships were often tempestuous, and he alienated most of his author acquaintances, prompting Sinclair Lewis to say "You couldn't be a friend of Tom's, any more than you could be a friend of a hurricane." Though he argued often with Maxwell Perkins and ultimately left Scribner's, Perkins remained among his closest friends and Wolfe entrusted his estate to him after his death.
[7] In 1938, Wolfe was asked to give a speech on May 19 at Purdue University, which invited writers to serve as speakers at its annual Literary Awards Banquet.

much the existence of a lost generation, except insofar as every generation, groping, must be lost" (PS, 36). Wolfe considered it as part of man's[8] condition to be lost and restless regarding his position in the world, and he did not view the era after the war as being any more lost than previous ones. Throughout most of his adult life, Wolfe displayed a hesitation in joining any specific movements or groups, partly because during his college years he had affiliated himself with other artistic minded students, and would later come to realize that he had done so out of weakness and self-delusion. In recounting those years, Wolfe explained:

> Now, for the first time, I was provided with a kind of protective armor, a kind of glittering and sophisticated defense which would shield my own self-doubt… I began to talk the jargon as the others did, to prate about "the artist," and to refer scornfully and contemptuously to "the bourgeoisie"—the Babbitts and the Philistines—by which… we meant almost anyone who did not belong to the very small and precious province we had fashioned for ourselves. (44)

These college experiences enabled Wolfe to realize his susceptibility to developing an unfounded arrogance, and garnered in him a distrust of larger artistic and social movements.

Wolfe's unwillingness to classify himself under the category in which other writers of his time were placed in some way mirrors the difficulty which scholars contend with in associating him with a specific movement. While the influence of classical texts and the earlier masters from Europe—such as William Shakespeare, John Donne, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—on his writing is generally acknowledged. Oftentimes when scholars endeavor to connect him with other authors more contemporaneous with him, they compare him to those who strove to render the American experience, especially Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. In explaining Wolfe's

[8] In this project, in order to remain faithful to the vocabulary employed by Wolfe, the terms "man" and "mankind" will be used generally to refer to humans, both male and female. This is owing to the fact Wolfe uses these words when writing about single individuals and people as a collective. Oftentimes when Wolfe writes about the universal situations faced by both male and female individuals, he will use "man" and "mankind" and it is evident from the text that he means individuals of both sexes. In cases which apply only to males or only to females, he makes the distinction in their condition apparent by differentiating between the experiences of males and females, as in the statement "Women love him, but only men can know him" (OC, 187).

focus on America, Kohler writes that "this close survey of a country and its people led him inevitably to the mystic view of a continent; inspired by the heroic images of Melville and Whitman, he attempted the enlargement of his American land."[9] Yet while they draw connections between Wolfe and other authors, the comparison often concludes with a recognition of the limit of the similarities. For instance, Kazin contrasts Wolfe's preoccupation with America to that of Whitman when he claims that "[h]e was not 'celebrating' America, as Whitman had done; he was trying to record it, to assimilate it, to echo it in himself. This, the very quantity and turn of his abundant energy, was the source of his frenzied passion for American details."[10] Despite the influence on Wolfe of both European masters, earlier American writers, it sometimes proves difficult to draw strong extensive comparisons between his writings and his contemporaries.

Wolfe's style, characterized by his exhaustive descriptions, received abundant criticism both during his life and after his death, with some critics—most notably Bernard DeVoto—attacking him for what they consider a lack of discipline and crafting in his technique. The difficulty of his writing partly results from the lack of a very structured plot to his stories, especially in the case of his novels, which were frequently attacked for their deficiency of a sufficiently ordered storyline. Some of the criticism is quite unforgiving, like the claim that Wolfe "achieved probably the utmost intensity of which incoherent writing is capable."[11] Among the harshest assessments of Wolfe's writing was written by DeVoto, who condemned Wolfe's

[9] Kohler, Dayton. "Thomas Wolfe: Prodigal and Lost." *College English* 1.1 (1939): 1-10, 6.
[10] Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Mariner Books: 1995, 370.
[11] Bishop, John Peale. "The Sorrows of Thomas Wolfe." *The Kenyon Review* 1.1 (1939): 7-17, 17.

style by arguing "you cannot represent America by hurling adjectives at it."[12] He then proceeds to assault Wolfe's passionate energy by saying "[s]uch emotion is certainly the material that fiction works with, but until it is embodied in character and scene it is not fiction—it is only logorrhea." Similar to DeVoto's assessment of Wolfe's style, many critics focus on Wolfe's obsession with recording the innumerable specifics of a character's experience which he considered crucial to the narrative. Such can be witnessed from the evaluation that "what his book—for it is all one book—offers is the extraordinary spectacle of the artist as a cannibal. An insatiable hunger, like an insatiable desire, is not the sign of life, but of impotence."[13] The criticisms of Wolfe's style usually emphasize his voracious tendency of including an abundance of details, which seem to be determined by his own tastes rather than a specific order, at the expense of structure and disciplined crafting.

While the deficiency of the structure of Wolfe's plots is often acknowledged as a weakness, the excessive minutiae and energy of his descriptions which he prioritized over the greater form of the works is often commended. The comment from Morris quoted above may be censure Wolfe for his undisciplined overindulgence, but within the same excerpt he admits the "both haunting and appalling" power of his writing. Likewise, DeVoto might have been Wolfe's harshest critic, but the title of his article is "Genius Is Not Enough," which acknowledges Wolfe's ability even if the article does condemn his lack of control. In an article published in *Harper's*, William Styron—like many others who have commented on Wolfe's technique—indicates the "lack of organic form"[14] in Wolfe's works, but then he continues to assert that

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[12] DeVoto, Bernard. "Genius Is Not Enough." *Saturday Review of Literature* 13 (1936) in Rubin, Louis D. *Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, 77.
[13] Morris, Wright. *The Territory Ahead*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1978, 155.
[14] Styron, William. "The Shade of Thomas Wolfe." *Harper's* 236 (1968): 96-104 in Rubin, Louis D. *Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, 103.

Wolfe's novel "is quite extraordinarily *alive*—alive in the vitality of its words (Wolfe wrote many bad sentences but *never* a dead one), in its splendid evocation."[15] Thus while Wolfe's extensive passages may at times be considered excessive, their impact often deserves acknowledgement. This can be seen in the collaboration of Wolfe with Maxwell Perkins while the latter was editing *Of Time and the River*. Perkins was continually stressing that Wolfe keep the novel within a shorter page limit, and repeatedly demanded that he cut excerpts from it. Perkins recounted after Wolfe's death that even after Wolfe finally agreed to shorten the narrative, Wolfe visited him the next night and supplied him with five thousand additional words. The new section captured the Gant family's struggle around the time when Olive Gant was dying while Eugene attended Harvard. Perkins argued against including it in the novel since the overall form of the novel revolved around Eugene's experiences, and these passages rendered events which the protagonists could not have witnessed. Eventually Perkins agreed on the inclusion of the new section, and in his article he states "then I realized I was wrong, even if right in theory. What he was doing was too good to let any rule of form impede him."[16] Although Wolfe's popularity has gone down over the decades, his writings did have a great influence on future writers, with William Faulkner and various figures of the Beat Generation—such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg— admitting his influence. Faulkner in fact referred to Wolfe as the most talented writer of their generation, followed by himself in second place; he granted Wolfe this designation for having "tried hardest to say the most."[1718] Although the overflowing quality of Wolfe's style has been the target of criticism, the energy and complexity which results from

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[15] Ibid., 106.

[16] Perkins, Maxwell. "Thomas Wolfe." *Harvard Library Bulletin* 1 (1947) in Rubin, Louis D. *Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, 84.

[17] But when he was pressured by other writers whom he had ranked lower, such as Ernest Hemingway, Faulkner began to make less flattering statements, like the remark that Wolfe's writing was "like an elephant trying to do the hoochie-coochie"[17] (Donald, 354). The hoochie-coochie is a sexually suggestive belly dance.

[18] Inge, M. Thomas. *Conversations with William Faulkner*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999, 79.

that quality has been considered his strength and has earned him recognition as an influential American author.

Both Wolfe and others who favored his writing style supplied interesting arguments in defense of it. For instance, in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wolfe explained, "Don't forget, Scott, that a great writer is not only a leaver-outer but also a putter-inner, and that Shakespeare and Cervantes and Dostoevsky were great putter-inners—greater putter-inners, in fact than taker-outers and will be remembered for what they put in—remembered, I venture to say."[19] With these words, Wolfe casts his tendency toward inclusion—which some critics viewed as an unruly appetite—as a strength rather than a weakness. Muller, after citing this passage from Wolfe's letter, continues to argue that "[i]f his impulse to write instead of to cut blurred the shape of his novels, it also enriched their substance," suggesting that if Wolfe sacrifices the overall structure of his works, his doing so enhance the elements of which they were composed. Likewise, what many skeptics consider as a lack of discipline in his craft, others judge as Wolfe's dedication to faithfully rendering man's experiences in life, and as his preference for realism over artifice. Edward Aswell, his second editor, writes that "[Wolfe's] characters are never manipulated and molded to his own wishes" and that he "had no specious solutions to offer…He had the curious notion… that it wasn't his responsibility to provide pat answers which life itself has not provided."[20] He also recounts how, for Wolfe, the purpose of his books was to render things in a true to life manner, and it pleased him when he could say "Yes, that is the way life is."[21] Sometimes scholars view Wolfe's artistic style as stemming from a particularly American inclination. Muller asserts that "[t]his is the democratic spirit, careless or scornful of forms; but it

[19] Muller, Herbert Joseph. *Thomas Wolfe*. Norfolk: New Directions Books, 1947, 38.
[20] Editor Edward Aswell's note in Wolfe, Thomas. *The Hills Beyond*. New York: Harper & Row, 1941, 281.
[21] Ibid., 283.

is intensified by the frontier spirit, the folk tradition of tall tale, monologue, rhapsody, declamation and burlesque,"[22] emphasizing Wolfe's familiarity with the popular tradition of his home region, and the influence of such factors as local tales and oral narrations.[23] This is in line with Wolfe's own belief that the American writer must discover "somehow a new tradition for himself," and must undertake the "labor of a complete and whole articulation."[24] Through an inclusion method of presenting the various particulars of the physical world and the impact which they have on the individual, Wolfe sought to develop a style by which to faithfully express the man's experience of his world.

Though Wolfe's attention to the minutest details has been seen as superfluous, it in some ways derives from the cognitive and aesthetic theories about imagination to which he was exposed during his years at Harvard. Particularly, he was heavily influenced by his professor John Livingston Lowes while Lowes was working on a book about Coleridge titled *The Road to Xanadu*. In drawing attention to this influence, Holman writes:

> Lowes's theory greatly encouraged Wolfe's innate epic impulse, for he believed that an artist stored experiences of all kinds—physical, emotion, intellectual, and vicarious—in his "deep well of unconscious cerebration," and that there, in the full-ness of time, "the shaping power of the imagination worked upon it to create an ordered cosmos out of this teeming and fecund chaos."[25]

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[22] Ibid., 30.

[23] In analyzing the oral narrative quality in Wolfe's works—especially the tales provided by the mother and aunt figures—Kohler writes: "And the stories that flowed endlessly from Aunt Maw Joyner's store of family legend, like the magnificent long short story, "Web of Earth," tap the lusty folk literature that rose to its peak in Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain. It is an art of homely anecdote that flourished in the cabins and trading posts and taverns on the frontier-rambling, drawling, exaggerated, shrewd with a realistic knowledge of human character. Even the note of mimicry and derision is not new; it is the voice of the frontier examining itself for its own knowledge and entertainment" (Kohler, 7).

[24] Holman, C. Hugh. *The Loneliness at the Core: Studies in Thomas Wolfe*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1975, 42.

[25] Ibid., 163.

This theory explained the amount of importance which Wolfe places on experiences, in that even the most seemingly trivial encounters can have a significant role on an individual's life and his view of the world. Rather than physical encounters being things which man briefly contacts before forgetting, they become forms of stimulation which are stored in the individual. Even though he may not realize their significances at the moment, or confront it often afterwards, it maintains an impact on his existence. In writing his theory, Lowes maintained that "[t]he imagination never operated in a vacuum. Its stuff is always face of some order, somehow experienced…I am not forgetting that facts may swamp imagination, and remain unassimilated and untransformed." The idea that imagination serves as a storage of the stimulation a man has undergone somewhat mirrors Wolfe's notion that a man's identity is the sum of all his experiences (LH, xxix). While Lowes's student, Wolfe completed a paper on Coleridge, and the influence of Lowes's theories can be seen in the degree to which Wolfe prioritizes his characters' involvement with their physical environments and their identification with them.

The deep meanings which Wolfe finds in the minute details which he renders in some ways correspond with his portrayals of his characters, to whom he ascribes a great degree of dignity. Even though his characters are generally small insignificant townspeople, he at time depicts them in a heroic manner, casting their fairly commonplace activities as trials which they undergo, and through which they demonstrate their strength and courage. Despite his sometimes critical presentation of the characters, his appreciation for them can be discerned, even in the case of unnamed insignificant figures, especially when it comes to the issue of their endurance and the resilience with which they continue to struggle during their lives. Even the most insignificant seeming aspects of human existence can deserve some credit, as evident from a letter in which Wolfe provides a list of various images—including a daughter's love for her

father and the landscape of different states—and concludes that "and I know there is nothing so commonplace, so dull, that is not touched with nobility and dignity."[26] Some scholars have compared this tendency in Wolfe to Melville, while Holman reads it as an indicator of Wolfe's position as a Southern writer because of "the degree to which he sees the darkness, pain, and evil in life, and yet does not succumb to the naturalistic answer of despair."[27] Holman argues that, due to the painful history of the South, "southern writers have often used their history to make a tragic fable of man's lot in a hostile world, and to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit when challenged by an idea or a responsibility."[28] He then claims that "this view of man changes defeat into tragic grandeur and touches the spectacle of suffering with the transforming sense of human dignity." Wolfe's admiration of man's struggle is also connected to his view of life as a challenge, as evidenced in a letter to his mother where he wrote:

> 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, generous, stupid, ugly, beautiful, painful, joyous—it is all these and more—and it's all these I want to know.[29]

For Wolfe life itself is a trial which can at times overwhelm man and reveal to him his weaknesses, and living means confronting the challenges with which he is presented and endeavoring to persevere. Thus man's worth stems from his endurance, the meaning of which depends on the existence of a pain which must be endured.

In rendering the value in the more ordinary trials of man's daily existence, Wolfe employs the story of his characters' lives to portray the experiences shared by the American

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[26] Mitchell, Ted. *Thomas Wolfe: An Illustrated Biography*. New York, NY: Pegasus, 2006, 82.
[27] Holman, 1975, 119. In the same book, Holman describes Melville as "a writer to whom Wolfe's debts have not been fully acknowledged" (90).
[28] Ibid., 121.
[29] Aswell's note in *The Hills Beyond*, 283.

people in general. Even though most of his works were based on the events and people he actually encountered in his own life, his characters do not represent simply the specific individuals on which they were based. Rather they represent people in general given that what defines them is the experiences to which they have been exposed, and their struggles with their circumstances—ordeals which are a part of living and are shared by humanity. Thus the Gant family come to exemplify the tale of Americans since Wolfe "came early on what was for him the true national fable, the story of a family that would in six great novels fill in the whole outline of American life and history."[30] By casting the significance of the characters, "Wolfe's characters through their absorption of great ranges of experiences and their merging of myriad persons with themselves become archetypes of the American,[31] and thus man's encounter with the environment around him define his own existence, while reflecting the collective experiences of those exposed to a similar world. Given this idea, Wolfe's precise, even scientific, rendering of different demographic groups and their behavior and speech patterns has a great purpose in his works. Therefore it makes sense that "what he is after are records of American language and American speech patterns."[32] While Wolfe produced a narrative of America and the lives of its people, his emphasis on the trials endured by man also suggests that his purpose was to represent the struggle of mankind in a more universal manner, especially given his frequent allusions to Greek heroes and classical texts. As Muller claims, despite Wolfe focus on American characters, it was also his purpose "[t]o amplify the meaning of his legend, by linking the pilgrimage of a lost American with the universal destiny of lonely man."[33] Thereby due to the ordeals which

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[30] Kohler, 6.

[31] Holman, C. Hugh. *Three Modes of Modern Southern Fiction: Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe*. Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia, 2008, 62.

[32] Kennedy, Richard S. "Thomas Wolfe and the American Experience." *Modern Fiction Studies* 11.3 (1965): 219-33 in Rubin, Louis D. *Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, 155.

[33] Muller, 74.

Wolfe's characters face in the course of their lives, they serve as representatives of man and his endeavor to discover a meaning role in the world.

While the sweeping passages of Wolfe's passionate writing have caused some to criticize him for what they considered his lack of artistic control, in this project I uphold the stance that the abundance of Wolfe's descriptions results from an aesthetic choice through which he captured how man's identity is composed of the entirety of his experiences. By means of his dedicated rendering—and inclusion—of what may seem to be inconsequential details, Wolfe endeavored to exhibit the worth which these particulars—and the history associated with them – held in the lives of the men who came into contact with them. Likewise, in depicting man's interaction with the world around him, and the development of his identity in accordance with it, Wolfe demonstrates the value of man's life and the dignity inherent in his struggles. In developing a style by which to represent his American characters' identification with the world, Wolfe employed some approaches comparable to those of other American writers, such as Herman Melville and William Faulkner. Both Wolfe and his contemporary Faulkner construct complex passages which shift through different time periods, and transition from physical cues to the emotional responses which they stimulate. Holman explains that they "share the quality of intensity, as they also share the verbal pyrotechnics of which each is capable,"[34] a property they utilize to reflect the weighty implications which even the simplest objects have for the characters. Likewise, Wolfe's rendering of ordinary individuals in a heroic manner compares to the writing of Melville, whose Ishmael declares, "[b]ut this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes… Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a

[34] Holman, 1975, 134.

spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God."[35] In both the works of Melville and Wolfe, their appreciation of common man's oftentimes unacknowledged nobleness leads to a questioning of the bias of historical accounts which overlook their valor. For instance, when narrating stories from the past to the Harvard-educated Eugene, the protagonist's mother Eliza challenges historians' claims to the truth against her own such claims, which derive from direct personal experience. Melville too occasionally undermines the records of history with comments like "[o]ften, adventures which Vancouver dedicates three chapters to, these men accounted unworthy of being set down in the ship's common log," which suggests that though the whalers may not be commemorated in history, they are the brave individuals who became accustomed to heroic feats until they were simply a matter of habit and routine. In depicting the strengths of common men, Wolfe followed other American writers who had presented man's confrontation of his hardships in a heroic manner.

While Wolfe's texts do not necessarily deal with undertakings as monumental and menacing as whaling, his emphasis on man's daily existence casts life as a trial man must perpetually endure. Man thus becomes defined by the struggles which he encounters within the world with which he is affiliated. This project will explore Wolfe's portrayal of man's efforts to understand his position in the world by examining how Wolfe depicts man's experiences in the context of the urban landscape of New York City, the rural landscape of the protagonist's hometown, and man's wandering spirit, especially as manifested through train travel. The first chapter analyzes how, even though the city may be structured in a way that confirms man's attempts at advancement, his confidence in the stability of his physical environment and the systematized lifestyle on which he relies is only possible through a delusional denial of his

[35] Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002, 99.

limitations and the destabilizing forces against which he is powerless. Meanwhile the second chapter studies the conflict between man's affiliation with the natural landscape of the countryside, due to his personal and ancestral bonds with the eternal earth, and his estrangement from others, which causes him to be haunted by loneliness. In focusing on the wandering spirit which characterizes Wolfe's protagonists and their obsession with trains, the final chapter evaluates the tension inherent in man's propensity to roam, which results simultaneously from his desire for liberation from the constraints of the predictable life as well as from his deprivation of a secure haven. By means of these chapters, the project seeks to explore how place influences and reflects man's identity and his position in the world.

UNDER THE PAVEMENTS TREMBLING LIKE A PULSE:

MAN'S NEED FOR STABILITY

Thomas Wolfe's portrayals of the city derive heavily from his own experiences in New York City, and the relationships of his protagonists with the urban center reflect his own. Like Wolfe, George Weber begins to reside in New York after his education at Harvard University, and the move marks a drastic change in environment from the small town life with which he was familiar. In Wolfe's works, the city serves as a place of opportunity, promising glory to the optimistic youths who place their faith in it. With its ceaseless activity and innumerable inhabitants and locations, the city lures people by suggesting the fruition of their dreams for glamour and victory.

A thriving urban center such as New York City, with its landscape of soaring monuments, serves as a manifestation of the triumphs of a civilization and the advances it has undergone. The priorities of a society and the routes along which it views its progress as developing determine the shape according to which an urban center is programmed. Urban man's interactions with the city influence both his identity and his consciousness as his existence unfolds amid the urban setting. The paths along which he conducts his daily life are constructed by the rigid and linear patterns of the buildings and streets, and in his routine endeavor toward his objectives, he partakes in the organized motion along which city life is coordinated. Given how the layout of the city serves as a physical representation of man's accomplishment of great feats and his ability to create an order upon which to base his life, it becomes a source of

reassurance for him and the possibility of his potential. But Wolfe's depiction of the city also reveals that this organization results from man's need to constrain the more mysterious aspects of the world around him in a way that can be grasped by his faculties, despite their limitations. Thus his values and ambitions rely on the permanence and sturdiness of the formulas upon which his sense of reality is based. When factors which exceed the limits of man's understanding make their influence apparent, this destroys the security upon which he had to have faith, and in order to continue his pursuits, he struggles to retain the stability provided to him by which his restricted view of the world.

In capturing the life which characterizes the city, buildings serve among the prevalent imagery through which Thomas Wolfe represents the power of the city and its capacities to dominate the men who encounter it. The skyscrapers occupy much of the visual space of a city, and due to their proximity to one another and the great vertical heights to which soar, they seem to contain and regulate the flow of the traffic which moves along their borders on a daily basis. These structures impose a design upon the city, and the crowds which live amidst and according to that design are constantly dwarfed by these staggering structures whose height is emphasized through their proximity to the sky as "great towers blazing in the air" (TC, 13). In his descriptions of the city, Wolfe renders buildings as a domineering— even violent— landscape, whose forms might be considered "inhuman, monstrous, and Assyrian in their insolence" (HA, 143). Given the arrogance and superiority which these buildings seem to effuse, the parallels which Wolfe draws between them and the most daunting sites in nature are quite compatible. He depicts them as "sheer cliffs of solid masonry" and "tiers and summits of soaring structures whose lower depths were still sunk in shadow" (142). These images capture both the vertical

heights to which the buildings soar, as well as the jaggedness of their contours, which together might overwhelm the people around them with their severity and the shade cast down by them.

While the skyscrapers may be daunting due to their dwarfing of man, they also function as a testimony of his faculty and the accomplishments which can be derived from it. The strength and grandeur of may be overwhelming when compared to the short stature and life spans of man, yet they originate from the creative capacities of the men who are able to conceive them and render them into a reality. The "immense and cruel architectures" (HA, 148) may rise into the sky and reign over the city over which they casts their shadow, but these summits are ultimately "man-made peaks" (142) and therefore owe their existence to man whose scale they surpass. Despite their miniscule stature, men are even presented as rising up along the height of the building when they are "shot up in swift elevators to offices in the clouds" (184). Man's advancement along the altitude of these monuments suggests a sort of apotheosis, whereby he assumes an elevated position approaching the heavens as a result of the towers he has constructed or within which he carries out his daily business. The progress of Frederick Jack—the figure who serves as a representation of the successful businessmen who hold proud positions of power in the city—is depicted in terms of vertical movement, as well as momentum and noise, when Wolfe writes that Mr. Jack had "moved on from speed to speed and from height to height, keeping pace with all the magnificent developments in the furious city that roared in constantly increasing crescendo about him" (177-8). Thus the heavenward movement achieved by the might monuments which mark the city landscape also indicates the divine-like ascension achieved by successful individuals.

Alongside the demonstration of the heights reached by certain individuals, the grand buildings also exhibit the power of American business. When Mr. Jack looks out at the city from

his window, he experiences a sense of exultation as he thinks "My City" (143). Wolfe explains that for Mr. Jack, "[e]very cloud-lost spire of masonry was a talisman of power, a monument to the everlasting empire of American business" (148). This reveals how the buildings function as manifestations of the might of the industries which require such structures and continue to provide them with the hustle which occurs daily within the confines of the walls. When Wolfe's first-person narrator looks at an under-construction building which is to house a lavish department store, he notes that "in this raw skeleton, the future elegance and style of the building were legible" (DP, 39) and that "[t]hrough the portals of this temple in the daytimes would move the richest women and the greatest harlots in the country" (40). By portraying this building through the imagery of a temple, he reveals the holy status allotted to fashion and business. Meanwhile, the attention paid to the unfinished framework implies how, even though the structure is incomplete, the potential success and grandeur of the enterprise associated with the building is already apparent. Thus the physical monuments serve as celebrations of the triumphs of the industries which have reached the potential toward which they aspired, and are therefore housed within splendid structures.

The city, whose landscape of tall buildings serve as a symbol of man's ability, is depicted as a place which promises the fulfillment of possibilities. Wolfe's descriptions contain a constant repetition of quantities such as "thousands" and "millions," drawing emphasis to the innumerable factors—such as the individual persons, daily experiences and noises— which compose city life. Its multifariousness culminates in his portrayal of it as a "glorious jewel, blazing with the thousand rich and brilliant facets of a life so good, so bountiful" (TC, 13). Its treasure-like quality captures how the city is associated with ideas about opportunity and the potential for man to realize his dreams and attain the glory for which he strives. Thus Wolfe writes:

> You think that same glorious happiness of fortune, fame, and triumph will be yours at any minute, that you are about to take your place among the great men and lovely women… that it is all here, somehow, waiting for you and only an inch away if you will touch it, only a word away if you will speak it, only a wall, a door, a stride from you if you only knew the place where you may enter. (ND, 69)

People become lured by the city due to the way in which it seems to perpetually beckon to them with assurances of success, which is both available and nearby. Man may feel the expectation that soon his own personal greatness will be achieved, and he will therefore be elevated to the position of those reached an eminent and revered status. The city and the thousands of features which characterize it—the relentless movement, the innumerable people and locations—entice man and draw him in with whispers of his dreams and his future triumph.

The vastness of the city and what it holds in store is especially significant for Wolfe, who grew up in a small North Carolinian town surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. In his fiction, just as dreams of success are connected to the city, they are also connected to the promises of youth. When the protagonist of "No Door" visits the apartment of a wealthy man, Wolfe writes that "everything you felt about the city as a child, before you ever knew about it, now seems not only possible, but about to happen" (69). Distanced from his youth and sobered by how his experiences have not matched his fantasies, the protagonist once again finds himself overcome by the lure of the city and the prospects it holds in store due to his exposure to the realm of a man who has attained the material prosperity which he desired and for which others still strive. Another passage which captures the relationship between youth and the hopeful vision of the city reads "[s]uch was my vision of the city—childish, fleshly, erotic, but drunk with innocence and joy…and yet so strange, impalpable, and enchanted that later it would seem to me to have come from another life" (TC, 14). He portrays his view as being marked by both a great degree of physicality and an attraction toward the sensually gratifying, and also of mystery

which cannot be fully fathomed. Though these two directions which his youthful vision takes may be potentially conflicting, the strong yearning and inscrutability associated with it is what endows it with a sense of excited wonder.

While faith in the opportunities available in the city is depicted as part of the aspirations of youth, Wolfe's presentation of man's need for this sort of belief also conveys the unrealistic childishness which can prompt man's fantasy of greatness. Wolfe's protagonist does re-experience the hope which motivated his youth, but this hope is only infused into him after years of disillusionment—and possibly even after his having forgotten his past dreams—once he is situated in the domicile of the prosperous man who is overcome by ennui due to the extreme ease of his lifestyle. "When you go back into the room again, you feel very far away from Brooklyn, where you live" (ND, 69), meaning that the sense of optimistic anticipation is inexorably tied to a surrounding evocative of success. This suggests that this expectation of the glorious near-future promised by the city works as a kind of atmospheric mood which someone who has yet to realize their ambitions feels when removed from his own environment and its indications of his true status. The dependence of the protagonist's optimism on the prosperous, bored man is made further evident in that "somehow the old wild wordless hope awakes again that you will find it—the door that you can enter—that this man is going to tell you. The very air you breathe now is filled with the thrilling menace of some impossible good fortune." The optimism from childhood becomes dormant for a while, yet rather than disappearing, it awakens amidst environments which cause the individual to enter a somewhat exaggerated state where his obsession with the treasures held by the city once again rekindles. Nonetheless this optimistic drive is what prompts and enables the city people to move toward their goals and the expectations on which they rely, and which they wish to realize.

In Wolfe's descriptions of peoples' interaction with the urban landscape, peoples' daily pursuits of their objectives translate into, and become manifest through, the manner in which they conduct their lives. His detailed renderings of early mornings especially capture the physical form assumed by man's quest. One chapter begins by illustrating how "the cross street lay gulched in steep morning shadow, bluish, barren. Cleanly ready for the day" (HA, 141). While the inanimate landscape of streets and buildings appear inert and abandoned during the early hours of the day, giving off an uneasy quiet, they nonetheless simultaneously maintain the potential for dynamism. They therefore carry the aspect of waiting to fulfill the active purposes for which they were erected. Just as skyscrapers become symbols of man's reach for higher status, peoples' movements indicate their striving toward their aspirations. Among the description of the buildings during morning, the figure of a man appears : "a man, foreshortened from above and covered by its drab cone of grey, bobbed swiftly along, turned the corner into Park Avenue, and was gone, heading southward toward work." Since this passage occurs during the early hours, the man walks in solitude but like most of the figures in Wolfe's descriptions of traffic, he advances toward his workplace. This constant reiteration of the routes taken by people exhibits the organization of city life along linear patterns which direct people in their daily existence. Thus much as the vacant buildings are characterized by their "high office suites ready for their work" (142), man's day is mapped out by the tracks along which he structures and carries out his life.

In his daily pursuit of his objectives, man coordinates his day along linear paths which impose a regulation to his experiences, a habit which mirrors the firmness of the structures in which he resides and works. Wolfe represents the significance of buildings through the point of

view of Frederick Jack—the figure through which Wolfe shows the perspective of successful city-men—when he writes:

> [Frederick Jack] liked what was solid, rich, and spacious, made to last. He liked the feeling of security and power that great buildings gave him. He liked especially thick walls and floors of this apartment house. The boards neither creaked nor sagged… they were as solid as if they had been hewn in one solid block from the heart of a gigantic oak. (143)

Mr. Jack's preferences in architecture demonstrate his prioritization of large physical masses which impose their bulky forms. Rather than giving off signs of weakness such as flimsiness and fragility, the rigidity of these forms suggest an unswerving orderliness. Such edifices therefore display the accomplishments of man since "[i]n that arrogant boast of steel and stone he saw a permanence surviving every danger, an answer, crushing and conclusive, to every doubt." Here the description transitions from the physical level to the metaphysical one in that the bulk of the objects comes to represent the possibility for man to have confidence in something. The thickness indicates the bold and concrete outlines, which enable objects to maintain a shape according to which can be understood by man's knowledge of them. Meanwhile their solidity and inflexibility serves as a demonstration of their resilience and capacity to endure. These implications of clarity and permanence cause the structures to be entities in which man can have assurance.

The architecture of the city reflects the success which mankind has achieved, and therefore functions as a source of comfort for those exposed to it. The solid horizontal aspects of the landscape suggest stability and a grounded condition, while the verticality implies the elevation man has reached. The earlier passage which mentioned the buildings' roles as symbols of American business is followed by an explanation that they "made [Frederick Jack] feel good.

For that empire was his faith, his fortune, and his life. He had a fixed place in it" (148). The unyielding quality of these monuments serves as an affirmation of the corporations and the system which generate the construction of them. And for Mr. Jack this also has a personal significance since that world is a part of his own life. Therefore in indicating in asserting the position of American business, the architecture also affirms the actuality of Mr. Jack's own identity and reality. He has the ability to relish the scenery when "he stood there and surveyed the scene, for he had bought the privileges of space, silence, light, and steel-walled security out of chaos with the ransom of an emperor, and he exalted in the price he paid for them" (142-3). The mention of space, silence, and light is noteworthy since these are usually disembodied entities, yet Mr. Jack considers them in the context of the physical landscape. The idea that he has "bought the privileges" of them connotes a sort of possession of factors which are generally free and beyond ownership, as though they can be constrained in a way which makes them manageable within human grasp. This inclination toward restricting that which is intangible and beyond human scope is also reflected in the reason behind Jack's comfort in rigid structures: they serve as protection from the chaos over which man can have no control.

Given that the soaring buildings form the landscape of an urban center and maintain a sense of stability, they provide the setting in which urban men can pursue their goals, resulting in the traffic which comes to represent the priorities and lifestyle of the inhabitants of a city. After all, the crowds which surge along the avenues shaped by the vertical buildings and horizontal pavements are essentially composed of numerous individuals moving along the paths of their lives. Wolfe frequently illustrates the crowd in terms of its massive quantity, and depictions such as "the great crowd which swarmed and wove unceasingly" (DP, 38) are commonplace in his texts. The exaggerations found in such statements oftentimes draw attention to the seemingly

unending momentum which characterizes urban traffic. When the multitude of people which composes a crowd is coupled with their determined motion this produces the sense of a force so overwhelming that it is often referred to as an "inevitable flow" (42). Throughout his texts, the imagery of swarms and swarming recur, suggesting an insect-like quality to the crowd. Like a swarm of insects, the traffic consists of many individuals with their own agendas moving toward their own destinations. Despite the separate identities and purposes, these miniscule components join together to form a larger mass which makes its presence felt with a significant impact on, and role in, the city landscape. Such descriptions leave the overall impression of an endless energy which produces unremitting movements which surge throughout the channels of the urban layout.

The pervasive traffic of the urban landscape casts the city as a place where the smaller units which comprise the whole remain relentlessly active in their focus on the current tasks at hand. The perpetual motion is evident not only in the visual imagery, but is likewise evoked by auditory and olfactory cues, as with "the warm odors of the hot machinery, the smells of oils, gasoline, and worn rubber" (39). These smells all relate to objects connected with the energy which is invested in order to take people from one phase to the next toward their desired destination. The machinery and people mirror each other in that both maintain a constantly operating state, and sometimes Wolfe describes them in a similar manner, as when people are illustrated as "work[ing] with speed and power and splendid aptness, furiously, unamiably, with high, exacerbated voices, spurred and goaded by their harsh unrest" (HA, 35-6). Thus urban people become characterized as concentrating on the present moment and undertaking the tasks which they encounter in it. And as they undertake these tasks, they move from one moment to the next, but while always maintaining their focus on the subsequent step in their quest. If one

were to observe city life, one would witness the following: “Day by day, a thronging traffic of life and business passed before him in the street; day by day” (39). While man may only have the capacity to be aware of what lies in the present moment or the very near future, this focus on that nonetheless transports him into the following instant. Wolfe’s paradoxical idea about the city’s “eternal unity of fixity and variousness” (TC, 17) might be applicable to the motion which governs people. Although it may seem various due to the nonstop activity and change, it is nonetheless fixed since that nonstop activity is a constant feature of city life as people transition into the next step. So while people act according to the present state in which they find themselves, and which seems predictable in comparison to the unknown future, they are cast into that future, which in turn becomes a continually newly-generated present wherein they head in the direction of their aim.

Even though it may appear that the perpetual motion of traffic serves as a destabilizing factor by implying the non-stationary qualities of life, this is not the case since traffic actually functions in accordance with the greater patterns which dictate urban life. Wolfe’s portrayals of the crowd moving along the linear routes which organize the city’s layout occasionally indicate that the individuals are headed to two destinations which serve as crucial centers of city life: the work place and the train station. It is around these centers that city life is organized, and the motion which flows throughout the landscape revolves around them. The maze-like crowd exudes “a gigantic and undulant rhythm that was infinitely complex and bewildering but yet seemed to move to some central and inexorable design and energy” (DP, 38). The vastness and clamor of traffic may cause it to appear chaotic, however it is actually governed by an intrinsic pattern. Peoples’ movement toward popular centers convey their focus on the goals toward which they strive, and their endeavors in the present moment to undertake the path which will

lead them in the direction of the objective which they assume awaits them in the future. When Mr. Jack surveys a crowd of people, he experiences a dense of assurance similar to the comfort he feels with sturdy towers:

> The rising tide of traffic which now began to stream below him in the streets was therefore pleasing to him… for he saw order everywhere. It was order that made the millions swarm at morning to their work in little cells, and swarm again at evening from their work to other little cells. It was an order as inevitable as the seasons, and in it Mr. Jack read the same harmony and permanence which he saw in the entire visible universe around him. (HA, 143)

Thus the routes which people take in pursuit of their ambition form part of the greater order which characterizes the city. The traffic is comprised of millions of steps, steps which represent man's exertion of himself in the present in hopes of attaining the object toward which he wills himself to move. It is therefore like the rest of the "visible universe"—such as the skyscrapers—in that it arises from man's assumptions about the permanence of his purpose and world, while simultaneously indicating that permanence so that it becomes a source of reassurance for him.

Given how the persistent motion in a city moves according to a definite design, the various active units within the landscape seem to partake in a common current of activity. Wolfe presents the idea of a principal power invigorating the multitudes which compose an urban setting by illustrating the people as "swarming along forever on the pavements, moving in tune to that vast central energy, filled with the city's life, as with a general and dynamic fluid" (TC, 27). This suggests that there exists a kind of life force which endows the minute parts of the city with an energy that both enables their existence and also determines the direction of their movements. Due to their sharing of and participation in this life force, the various parts seem to form a single larger being. This feature of the urban landscape fascinates the protagonist of one

short story, causing him to exclaim "'Incredible! Oh, incredible! It moves, it pulses like a single living thing!'" (29). While the motion which weaves through the city may appear motorized since it derives from people pursuing the formulas which they assume guarantee their ends, it nonetheless possesses an animating quality which Wolfe depicts through imagery associated with life.

When Wolfe's descriptions of the force which stimulates the motion of the city focus on the microcosmic level of the individual person, this force becomes represented through the imagery of blood. His portrayal of Mr. Jack's chauffeur is one such example since "[i]n his veins there seemed to flow and throb, instead of blood, the crackling electric current by which the whole city moved… the unwholesome chemistry that raced in him was consonant with the great energy that was pulsing through all the arteries of the city" (HA, 178). This comparison of blood to electricity casts human action and inspiration as behaving in accordance to a somewhat motorized energy which prompts them to complete the task at hand in order to fulfill their role. This energy powers the entire city and even unites its units as a whole, so that when a man executes assignment which he faces, he enables the greater structure to maintain its unflawed functioning without disruption. People are receptive to, and influenced by, this current even if they may not realize it, as evinced in how the chauffeur's unruly driving "increase[s] Mr. Jack's anticipation and pleasure in the day's work that lay before him" (178). Simply being in the presence of the chauffeur causes Mr. Jack to be placed in the active world around him and to participate in it. The city dwellers have "had the city's qualities stamped into their flesh and movements, distilled into their tongue and brain and visions…Their pulse beat with the furious rhythm of the city's stroke" (36). Therefore the frenzy of the crowd represents the manner in which each man is stirred by and partakes in the dynamism of the city.

While the perpetual momentum of the city creates a force which prompts man into action, the constant emphasis on the present moment and the reward expected in the near future causes man to carry out his existence in a short-sighted manner. In describing their daily experiences, Wolfe reflects on how their lives consist of having "lived like creatures born full-grown into present time, shedding the whole accumulation of the past with every breath, and all their lives were written in the passing of each actual moment" (36). While this passage shows their disregard and disinterest for the past, it also presents the lives as being defined simply by the very moment in which they find themselves, and by the task with which they then preoccupy themselves. But of course due to the transience of the present, these instances cannot last but rather seem to elapse without contributing any significance to their larger lives. The lack of a larger vision in their lives is likewise mirrored by the limitation to their visual scope in that "their youthful eyes grew hard, unseeing, from being stopped forever by a wall of masonry" (404). Just as their physical sight cannot see farther into the landscape, their consciousness does not consider factors which are not readily apparent, or the acknowledgement of which is not imperative at that precise moment. In restricting their focus to the present and near-future, men are able to restrict their interaction with the world in a way that allows them to understand the temporary needs that will enable them to handle their tasks. Yet in undertaking their lives in a formulaic manner, they ignore what may be the less distinguishable, but greater issues.

Even though man's confinement of his environment into comprehensible and manageable units may allow him to set a plan for himself and act toward its fulfillment, his concentration on such limited ambitions causes his existence to be deprived of a deeper significance. Wolfe renders in great detail how people organize their lives along the linear paths of streets and buildings, descriptions which seem to suggest that man determines his life in a firm manner and

pursues that direction with dedication. However such descriptions occur alongside others which undermine that vies, as when Wolfe refers to the "the blind and brutal stupefaction of the streets" (TC, 11). This forms a contrast to the notion that man can regulate the world and have control over it in that it emphasizes his inadequacy in terms of both his senses and his comprehension, the means by which he is expected to have knowledge. Despite the supposed design according to which the crowd behaves, Wolfe also depicts pedestrians as those "who surged back and forth, unaccountably, innumerably, namelessly" (DP, 33). Rather than stressing the controlled aspect of traffic, this implies the lack of a definite shape and purpose to it. Such passages accentuate the sense of confusion and indefiniteness which threaten the certainty people need to function on their seemingly settled routes.

Although the various aspects of the city may serve as a confirmation of man's ability and potential, various features of urban centers can also remind man of his frailty and limitations. As in the previous excerpt, Wolfe often indicates man's or the crowd's nameless quality. He similarly also refers to man as an atom, drawing attention his minute and unimpressive nature amid the larger urban landscape, as when his narrator deems himself "a helpless, hopeless, penniless, and nameless atom" (39). The repetition exaggerates the lack by which man is confronted when he views himself against the multitude and grandeur of his setting. The relationship which Wolfe displays between the city and man becomes one in which the former disregards the latter instead of elevating him and his aspirations. When dwelling on the death of a street vendor, the narrator is most overwhelmed by "the huge indifference with which the immense and terrible city had in an instant blotted out this little life. Soaking the shining air and all the glory of the day with blood" (34). In his daily pursuits, man places his trust in what he assumes to hold true about the city, depending on that knowledge to strive toward his goals, yet

the city can destroy all that. And what makes such an occurrence even more terrifying is that it was done out of indifference, not malice or any other emotional motivation which might reveal an acknowledgement of man and his ambition. Though the vendor may not hold a high status in the eyes of the thousands of people who pass him each day, the narrator sees in the vendor an individual who struggled resiliently for his survival, and he mourns that all that remains of him is the "memory of a few battered pots and pans" (34). Despite the vendor's efforts to survive and better his existence, his labors prove futile when he is eliminated in a manner which deprives him of any significance. Man finds himself powerless against the city, which can degrade him to the extent that it even disregards both his humanity and the ideas which man assumes to be given and stable facts.

Yet the awareness and fear of the vulnerability of the system upon which man organizes his life can also be provoked by lesser and more familiar incidents than death. One such example was the aforementioned idea of the fear which Mr. Jack undergoes as a result of the desolation which he occasionally sees in the city's streets and buildings. Another such source of dread is the railroad system which runs beneath New York City. Mr. Jack senses a train passing beneath his apartment as "[a]ll at once a trembling, faint and instant, passed in the earth below him. He paused, frowning, and an old unquiet feeling to which he could not give a name stirred in his heart" (HA, 144). The minor vibration has become a fairly familiar aspect of his life, yet rather than becoming easier due to the recurring exposure, it has been transformed into a deep-rooted source of anxiety. The quivering of the building upon which he places so much trust provokes a reciprocal quivering within him, yet the emotion associated with it cannot be named. This undoubtedly adds to the disquiet he experiences since man has difficulty feeling comfortable with factors which cannot be confined into a stable form which he can comprehend. If something

is indefinite, it lies beyond man's scope and his sense of control, and the repercussions of the trains unnerve Mr. Jack by triggering "a tremor so brief and distant that he could not be certain of it… vibration that came from the passing of a train deep in the bowels of the earth." This quivering and indefinite quality which reminds man of the "bowels of the earth" stands in stark opposition to the unyielding, colossal walls which reassure the city man in that it jeopardizes the security he feels about being "anchored upon the solid rock." Thus even the features which bolster man's faith in the solidity of his world and aspirations can be undermined by less definite elements which lie beyond his inflexible understanding of his surroundings and shake his conviction in his dreams of stability.

Despite people's association of the city with the ideas of opportunity and promise, that same setting may ultimately work as a threat to man's vision and the aspirations toward which he strives. Even the most successful figures such as Mr. Jack, who have attained the wealth and high status of which others dream, are not immune from being humbled by the city. Mr. Jack may glorify in the panorama of the city which he sees from his window due to his belief that he has earned and bought an eminent position in it, yet he is simultaneously presented in a degrading light through Wolfe's portrayals of him as "a man-mite poised high in the air upon a shelf of masonry," "a plump atom in triumphant man's flesh, founded upon a rock of luxury," and "the Prince of Atoms" (142). Mr. Jack identifies his status with the grandness of the buildings associated with the urban landscape, but these excerpts cast a stark contrast between him and them by indicating his miniscule position amid the vastness of the city—in which an atom's significance is overpowered and even lost. While they are rocks and masonry, he is ultimately a man of flesh whose vulnerability becomes evident against the durability and rigidity of the monuments. Given that the city can challenge even the most financially and socially

prominent men's stake to greatness, it faces little difficulty in destabilizing the expectations which men in general rely on when pursuing their dreams. Though man may exert himself and dedicate his life to seeking his dream, the brutality of the city stems from its being apathetic to the manner in which it can undermine those ambitions.

The most powerful factor which exposes man to the vulnerability of the regularity upon which he relies is of course death, which can— without man's comprehension—destroy the ambition toward which he strove. When death strikes within the city landscape, it is especially disruptive and stuns the crowd of individuals—strangers with no relation to the deceased— who could not have expected it. In *Death the Proud Brother*,[36] Wolfe's first-person narrator recounts the three deaths he witnessed in the city which left the most lasting impression on him due to their gruesome circumstances. When ruminating on these grisly deaths, the narrator accuses the "corrupt city-life" for having "crushed man's little life beneath its ramified assault and killed and mutilated every living being it fed upon" (DP, 44). Included among death's victims are "not only the heart and spirit of youth, with all the hope and pride and anguish in him, but also the life and body of some obscure worker whose name it did not know, whose death… it would never hear or care about." The death of an anonymous man shows not only man's helplessness, but also his ultimate insignificance. When confronted with the inevitability of his mortality, man may sometimes search for comfort in the optimistic conviction that his values or ideals can endow his life with meaning. A passage which explains mankind's attempts to overcome the susceptibility of its position reads:

[36] The title *Death the Proud Brother* echoes Donne's poem *Death Be Not Proud*. But whereas the speaker of Donne's poem denies death its pride by stating "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soe," Wolfe does assert death's pride. While Wolfe does not present any entity as overpowering death, Donne's poem indicates factors—such as the eternal afterlife— which pose a challenge to death's power. Since Wolfe's portrayals of the city emphasize man's obsession with the moment, and his frenzy to succeed and prove his aptitude, the terrifying quality of death is not surprising.

> because proud death was sitting grandly there and had spoken to them, and had stripped them down into their nakedness; and because they had built great towers against proud death , and had hidden from him in gray tunnels, and had tried to still his voice with all the brutal stupefactions of the street. (58)

Man, despite his physical limitations and lifespan, may demonstrate his greatness through accomplishments which surpass the weaknesses which he finds within himself. Though he may distract himself with these triumphs, they cannot protect him from the end which everyone will face. Despite his desire to consider more powerful structures as extensions of his own being, the issue of death discards any such conceits and casts him as his barest form, bereft of any of the embellishments with which he desperately endeavors to adorn himself. When Wolfe sets death against the symbols of man's pride, the former undermines the latter: "proud death, dark death, proud brother death, was striding in their city now, and he was taller than their tallest towers, and triumphant even when he touched a shabby atom of base clay, and all their streets were silent when he spoke." Not only does death conclude man's lifetime struggle toward greatness, but it also overpowers even the most enduring objects on which man rests his faith, and through which he believes he can make his triumph evident.

Due to the way in which death lies beyond man's grasp, when it makes its presence known, it becomes a force of disruption in the organized system which man has constructed. When death strikes in the public setting in the city, society's reaction to the unsettling occurrence is best demonstrated through the response given by police—the unit whose assignment it is to maintain the prescribed social order. When the city functions normally, the police force's fulfillment of its role is manifest through the following appearance: "the powerful red-faced police stood like towers in the middle of the street stopping, starting, driving them on or halting them with an imperious movement of their mast-like hands" (39). Just as the towers and streets

are illustrated as forming linear paths which control the flow of movement in the city, the police likewise govern the energy, determining the direction of activity. However when death catches the city off guard, the predictable noise and motion cease despite their usually unremitting nature. The sounds of construction— a manifestation of the tendency toward progress and generation— dominate the air of an urban landscape until a worker dies in a workplace accident, and the result is that "all life in that building had ceased—where but a moment before there had been the slamming racket of the riveting machines, the rattling of the winches, and the hammering of the carpenters, there was now the silence of a cataleptic trance" (42). The severance of the busy hum of the city's pulse mirrors the suspension of the bodily flow of traffic, which produces "a disruption of that inevitable flow, because several of the human units in the foremost squadrons of motors who had witnessed the accident refused to now, under the strong drug of horror , to "click" as good machinery ought." Noteworthy is how the humans in the scene become described through military terms and in reference to the inanimate equipment around them. The humans, once shaken by the sight of death, can no longer concentrate on their tasks and partake in the pulse of the city. Thus the machinery and greater system cease to function, causing an overwhelming trauma which disrupts the vital mechanics of the city.

Finding their exposure to death to have drastically unsettling results on both their psyches and the actual physical functioning of city life, people hurriedly set out to reestablish the ruptured order. The police, who hold the duty of maintaining order, are of course the first unit to regain control over themselves and they initiate the process whereby the city recomposes itself. The crowds are "whipped into action after a moment's pause by a ponderous traffic cop , who stood in the center of the street, swinging his mighty arm back and forth like a flail" (42), implying how he forces the other units in the environment back on their tracks. What follows is a

process of invigoration in which "the lights burned green again, the clamors in the street awoke, the hot squadrons of machinery crawled up and down… Then the racket of the riveters began again… a chain with its balanced weight of steel swung in and down" (42-3). Shortly after the pause caused by the trauma, people hasten back to the accustomed momentum, and their doing so may be indicative of their need to escape the disquieting situation and regain their focus on the worldly experience with which they are familiar. After another death in which a vendor is crushed by a truck, people rush to clean the gory mess left at the scene and they pour water and sawdust at the site "until the stain was covered over" (33). Wolfe's emphasis on concealment indicates the people's desperate need to rid themselves of the taint of death by blotting out the physical signs of it. Similarly he describes the handling of the construction worker's corpse by writing "[a]lready the body had been carried inside the building" (43). The body has been removed before the reader's attention is even directed toward it again, showing the hurry with which people try to contain death and lock it away from view. Yet the "already" also reveals that though the body may be screened off, it still draws attention and maintains a presence in the mind of the witnesses which leaves a lasting impression even after it is no longer visually present. A further disturbing aspect of this death is that the corpse is hidden in the luxurious department store which remains under construction, meaning that its early history becomes marked by death both outside and within it, marring its sense of glory from its beginning.

In his obsessive focus on the goals for which he struggles in the present, man strives for an accomplishment which will endow his life with meaning in a world where his toils leave no permanent imprint. The enigmatic and unnamed figure from the distribution company who Wolfe uses to voice mankind's afflictions in his novel expresses man's troubled position as one in which "we know now we are strangers whose footfalls have never left a print upon the endless

streets of life" (HA, 41). Here again the restlessness of man's condition is presented, but not in terms of his energetic drive. Instead the notion of the "endless streets of life" suggests a homeless state in which man's existence is characterized by wandering without finding a connection to a fixed location by which he can identify himself. Therefore he is denied the possibility of maintaining ties to the world through a place he can call home, especially given that this passage portrays all men as strangers following their own paths. Yet what they do share seems to be the restless drifting along these streets, and the inadequacy to stamp a trace into the streets which will verify their presence ever having been a reality. A later excerpt casts the history of mankind's existence as "[m]en came and went, they passed and vanished, and all were moving through the movements of their lives to death, all made the small tickings in the sound of time" (46). As man concentrates on his priorities and actions in the present, his life becomes consumed and his life becomes composed of simply his scurrying about after those temporary tasks. Wolfe's mention of tickings might suggest that each man is merely a tick of the clock. While the sound of time may be infinite, each tick remains anonymous and unnamed, sounding once and vanishing without even an echo or any repercussions.

Not only do the efforts leave no impression on the city, but even man's own memory does not store a record of his life. Man's consciousness of his existence is presented as follows: "Their souls were like the asphalt visages of city streets. Each day the violent colors of a thousand new sensations swept across them, and each day all sound and sight and fury were erased from their unyielding surfaces" (36). The rush and numerous features which define city life may be comparable to a thousand-faceted jewel, however this seems to not have much influence when it comes to enhancing man's life. Instead Wolfe casts man's soul as stagnant, dense, and dry which retains no defining characteristics worthy of note. The figure at the

distribution company summarizes man's lack of memory as connected to "the rush and sweep of chaos in the city, where all things come and go and pass and are so soon forgotten" (HA, 40). As man moves along with the pulse of the city and becomes absorbed in toiling with one seemingly stable task after the next, the episodes of his life are cast off without being integrated into forming a secured meaning to his existence.

As previously mentioned, in *You Can't Go Home Again* the mysterious man watching from the window sill of the distribution company becomes the figure who witnesses the daily trials which man faces. This figure does not seem to function so much as a real person as he does as an observer and a vessel through which Wolfe expresses his own ideas about man's anxious existence. After describing the man's observations through a repetition of "day of day" which chronicles the usual sights, Wolfe explains that "but the man in the window never looked at them, never gave any sign that he heard them, never seemed to be aware of their existence—he just sat there and looked out, his eyes fixed in an abstracted stare" (99). His being unaffected by the scenes before him, coupled with his "abstracted stare," implies a great distance between him and the human drama before him, causing him to seem like an inhuman entity which does not partake in humanity's struggles. These qualities of his are paralleled by the otherworldly setting in which he is stationed: "Without violence or heat, the last rays of the sun fell on the warm brick of the building and painted it with a sad, unearthly light" (40). Rather than transferring any energy onto the structure or forcing its power onto it, the sunlight merely endows it with an aspect which sets it apart from the very worldly scenery around it. The man shows a similarly still expression as the building in that "[h]e never wavered in his gaze, his eyes were calm and sorrowful, and on his face was legible the exile of an imprisoned spirit." So though he may not be a real person, the man at the sill seems to embody the angst experienced by men in their

struggles to attain a stable meaning which will anchor their lives and secure them a defined position in the world.

In watching the people flowing before his upper-story window each day, the man at the sill addresses many of crises which man may face as he tries to ground his life in a purpose. He thinks about man's tragic position in reference to time which flees without preserving a stable recognition of man's efforts. He silently speaks to the crowds before him, telling them "Child, child…have patience and belief, for life is many days, and each present hour will pass," and relates to them due to the idea that "we who have hungered after fame and savored all of life, the tumult, pain, and frenzy, and now sit quietly by our windows watching all that henceforth never shall touch us—we call upon you to take heart, for we can swear to you that these things pass" (41). As in previously cited passages, the man at the sill once again expresses the transience of the present moments in which man preoccupies himself. However, here this concept seems to represent not only the rushed quality of city life or the despair at not being able to maintain something of permanence, but it also carries a comforting tone which was absent from the other segments. It has the additional suggestion that the present and man's aspirations are worries from which man can be relieved once he realizes that relinquishing them is ultimately inevitable. Detached from the frenzy of the city, the man at the sill's face becomes preserved in the protagonist's mind as "[i]mmutable, calm, impassive, it became for him he symbol of a kind of permanence in the rush and sweep of chaos in the city" (40). Due to his immunity from the need for stability, and his not being burdened by the denial of and cowering from instability, the man at the sill comes to represent a rare form of permanence in the city.

Given the relationship between the early morning hours and the city man's confident and refreshed undertaking of his hassled day, it is noteworthy that the presence of the man at the sill

in the text occurs during the evening hours. Wolfe describes his speech as "[i]t never spoke, and yet it had a voice… It was the voice of evening and of night, and in it were the blended tongues of all those men who have passed through the heat and fury of the day, and who now lean quietly upon the sills of evening" (40). Due to the specification of the evening and night, the voice becomes associated with the point in time when the business and activity of the demanding day have concluded, and the constant motion of the city has ceased in its seemingly tireless drive. It indicates a period in which the urban man no longer rushes through the tasks on which he concentrates in order to attain the objectives on which he bases his existence. The protagonist views in the face "the whole vast hush and weariness that comes upon the city at the hour of dusk… when everything—streets, buildings, and eighty million people—breathe slowly, with a tired and sorrowful joy." Therefore it is a period in which the forces which usually control man's action release their grip on him, and he no longer charges toward the end which he assumed as determined. Interesting enough, Wolfe explains that "after that, in later years, whenever he remembered the man's face, the time was fixed at the end of a day in late summer." Late summer, and the images it stirs of languorously chirping crickets and greenery which has reached its prime, connects to the idea of the quiet which accompanies dusk and its stillness, suggesting a removal from the frenzied hurry which face faces in his worldly struggles.

The association of the man at the sill with the hush and stillness of dusk sets him in contrast to the regulated and formulated rush in which city men find a source of comfort. Despite the security and accomplishment which Mr. Jack derives from having a fixed position in society, "[y]et his neck was not stiff, nor his eye hard. Neither was he very proud. For he had seen the men who lean upon their sills at evening" (148). When Mr. Jack views the landscape, he feels reassured by the rigidity of the structures and the determined route of the pedestrians at morning

which imbue a sense of stability and confirm the reality of the world around which he bases his life. However he is unable to feel completely elevated by that world to the point of always feeling the arrogance connoted by those monuments given the lurking knowledge of the men at their sills. Mr. Jack's fears sometimes confront him, as when "[i]n that eerie light, with the cross street still bare of traffic and the office buildings empty, suddenly it seemed all life had been driven or extinguished from the city and as if those soaring obelisks were all that remained of a civilization that had been fabulous and legendary" (142). For Mr. Jack to feel comfortable with the landscape, it must show signs of the swarming and activity which characterize the city's vitality, otherwise he becomes suspicious that the system he relies on has demised. Yet when he faces this doubt, he responds "[w]ith a shrug of impatience [to shake] off the moment's aberration." Man's confidence in the solidity of the city can be threatened by the doubts which suggest the destabilization of the features which demonstrate the order upon which city life is founded.

Due to the urban preoccupation with regulating life into units of which man can confident, references to natural imagery are rare in Wolfe's portrayals of the urban landscape and man's frenzied lifestyle in it. When they do occur, they are oftentimes attributed with having a beautifying effect on the city and their impact is noted. The power of nature in the city becomes especially evident when the spring shows its transformative capacity, as when "[s]pring came that year like magic and like music and like song. One day its breath was in the air… wreaking its sudden and incredible sorcery upon gray streets, gray pavements, and on gray faceless tides of manswarm ciphers" (TC, 10). The comparison to magic and music convey that spring's influence changes the city not only physically, but it also affects the overall atmosphere of the

setting. Overwhelmed by the splendor of spring, Wolfe's protagonist explains that his vision was:

> made strange and wonderful by the magic lights of gold and green and lavish brown in which I saw it, given a strange and trembling quality and tone, which was indefinable but unmistakable, so that I never could forget it later, and yet so strange, impalpable, and enchanted that later it would seem to me to have come from another life. (14)

While the city is illustrated as gray and grave, the spring imbues the environment with other colors, supplying it with a vivacity and wholesomeness which it previously lacked. The light, instead of being the cold blue which reflects from the domineering skyscrapers, becomes a deep gold, casting a much more soothing luster to the landscape. Repetitions of other tones such as "brown, dark lavish brown," amber-brown, and brown-gold also add to the richness and healthy glow of the scene. Yet the power of nature also results from its lying beyond man's grasp. Since man cannot control it and it does not adhere to a logic which he can calculate, nature overwhelms him and the landscape which he has devised, casting a spell-like quality over them.

Elements of nature, due to their ability to transcend the artificial confines upon which man creates the city, are able to free man from the constraints which typically burden him. In capturing the immense influence even a diminutive natural object can have over an observer, Wolfe illustrates "old fenced backyards of a New York house, a minute part in the checkered pattern of a block, there was out of the old and worn earth a patch of tender grass, and a single tree of a slender and piercing green was growing there" (11). The organic imagery of the grass and tree are set aside the linear and rigid layout of the urban neighborhood, and despite the neighborhood overshadowing them in terms of scale, they receive the author's emphasis and captivate the protagonist. When addressing the value of the sea for man, Wolfe refers to the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael glorifies man's relationship to the sea (403), before

expressing despair at the idea that man's access to the sea has been blocked due to the way in which the urban landscape dominates and imprisons man and his perception. Yet the connection between the sea and man seems to once again be renewed when "through the delicate, fragrant, and living air, I would get the smell of the sea, the fresh half-rotten river smell, which would come to me with an instant and intolerable evocation of the harbor, the traffic of its mighty ships" (13). The sea's scent is often not just restricted to itself, but also incorporates or triggers the sensation of other natural olfactory imagery, such as leaves and flowers (13), or even springtime and April air (DP, 31). Wolfe associates these smells with the dynamism and hopeful expectation which man experiences from them. The odor of tides is also characterized by "its exultant and unutterable promise of the voyage" (TC, 13). Nature, in not adhering to the strict code under by the city is organized, enables the urban man to escape the narrow mental boundaries which are typically imposed upon him by his lifestyle and environment.

In capturing the power of nature and its transcendence of the artificial confines of the urban setting, Wolfe places emphasis on its eternal quality, contrasting it to all the other impermanent objects which man encounters. When the man at the sill speaks about the transient nature of human struggle in the city, he also addresses the issue of nature, saying "'[s]ome things will never change. Some things will always be the same. Lean down your ear upon the earth, and listen" (HA, 41). While city life becomes characterized by its process of time inevitably passing each instant, the earth is not subject to that transience. And whereas man's life in the city consists of rushing through tasks, the man at the sill recommends interacting with the earth through prostration, suggesting that man be in a state of stillness and submission. He conveys nature's everlasting quality through numerous images such as sunlight on water, the stars, the morning, and sea smells, indicating "something there that comes and goes and never can be

captured these things will always be the same" (42). Their eternity is thus associated which their never being arrested, setting them in opposition to the aspects of man's life which he contains into a form which he has the capacity to know and control. Nature may be in a constant state of flux, yet its stability lies in how its changes happen according to a recurring cycle. So even though a natural object lacks permanence in that it will die, it will be replaced by another object, thus indicating a cycle which attests to the permanence of nature. The power of nature to override the greatness of which man sees in the city is captured by the passage:

> But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower, something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April.

Despite the pride which man feels about the city and its self-reaffirming features such as the solid ground, skyscrapers, and unwavering traffic, something greater lies beyond and outlasts those. While skyscrapers are supposed to be durable and mighty, the earth beneath the pavements outlives — and is oblivious to— man, who cannot claim the deathless quality of the earth.

Despite nature's supremacy over man, the relationship between them is not presented in the hostile manner similar to the city's dominance over man, but rather nature functions as a necessary part of life which is denied to the urban man. The unwholesome quality of urban life exhibits itself most clearly in the youth, who Wolfe describes as lacking the spiritedness and "spontaneous gayety of youth," and instead being characterized as "[t]hese creatures, millions of them, seem to have been born but half made up, without innocence, born old and stale and dull and empty" (404). Thus these young people lack all the positive and vivacious attributes usually associated with power of youth, and in its place are distinguished by their deficiency of these attributes and the tragic hollowness which accompanies that. While this disheartening deficiency

may seem startling, Wolfe maintains that it is simply what can be predicted given that "[t]hey are suckled on darkness, and weaned on violence and noise. They had to try to draw out moisture from the cobblestones, their true parent was a city street." The unnatural and indifferent qualities of the city may undermine man and expose his weakness, yet it nonetheless serves as a mother-like figure to the youth for whom the city is home. But rather than being gentle and nurturing as a maternal figure ought to, the city in many ways functions in an opposite fashion owing to its brutality and apathy. In fact in a previously quoted passage, Wolfe exhibits the urban setting as devouring the "heart and spirit of youth," suggesting that it drains rather than nourishes the residents.

Along with the lack of a wholesome environment which serves as their home, their deprivation from a connection with the elements of nature causes man's existence to become constrained in the same manner as the urban setting which surrounds him. Due to their being denied contact with nature, they find themselves "in that barren universe [where] no urgent sails swelled out and leaned against the wind, they rarely knew the feel of earth beneath their feet" (404). Given the portrayal of the earth as outlasting and forever underlying the structures which man constructs on it, man's detachment from the earth implies a great loss, whereby he is bereft of a bond with that which is not only organic, but which also functions as one of the only eternal factors which he can access. His existence therefore becomes restricted to the artificial structures erected by him, which likewise share all his weaknesses in their susceptibility to the damages wrought upon them by time and the forces of nature. It is only appropriate that without a connection to that which can enable him to transcend both the literal and metaphorical confines of the city, the men's "youthful eyes grew hard, unseeing, from being stopped forever by a wall of masonry." This previously quoted passage, alongside its representation of man's obsession

with the immediately present environment and tasks at hand, also reveals how the sight and consciousness of city people become limited from a young age, so that they do not have a chance to develop a way of seeing beyond the mechanics of the readily apparent life around them. They therefore grow into urban people without a tie to the earth and its enduring beauty, and become characterized by "faces of the same lifeless hue, out of a common city-substance—the universal grey stuff of pavements, buildings, towers, tunnels, and bridges" (178). In restricting its existence to the formulas according to which city life is constructed, mankind becomes deprived of a wholesome connection to the eternal earth and the natural animation which accompanies it.

Man's being at ease with the world around him relies on his confining it in a manner through which it can be fashioned into formulas which are comprehensible to his faculties. The urban landscape provides this sort of environment in that the organization according to which it is constructed reveals the triumphs of mankind and the fruition of their enterprises. In turn it establishes and facilitates the directions along which the city man pursues his aspirations, while also verifying his faith in the whole structure. Yet the assurance which man feels in the potential of his purpose and the firmness of his setting entails a denial of factors which lie beyond which the scope of his power, the recognition of which would threaten the formulas upon which his life and civilization are based. However, in desperately ignoring the unknowable factors which he dreads, the urban man concentrates on such a limited view of the world that his existence becomes as barren as the organized— but inanimate— landscape surrounding him. This hesitation and fear of acknowledging the elements which transcend the artificial confines constructed by mankind results in man's life becoming marked by an unnatural, and even lifeless, quality.

LOST VOICES IN THE MOUNTAINS LONG AGO:

MAN'S HOME AND HIS ESTRANGEMENT

As in his portrayals of the city, Thomas Wolfe's representations of his recurring protagonists' lives in the rural towns which they consider home borrow heavily from his own experiences growing up in Asheville, North Carolina. In the texts where he renders small-town life, the story often revolves around a fictional large family based on his own family. Though he changed the characters and their story in his two final novels *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, which were published posthumously, his depiction of their relationship with the land of their ancestors and its natural landscape remains consistent, conveying his ideas about man's affiliation to the place he thinks of as home.

The first two novels—*Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*— and many of the short stories focus on the life of Eugene Gant, whose large nuclear family is based on the real Wolfe family. The Gant family consisting of the two parents and their eight children is indeed a fictionalized version of the Wolfe's own family, and much of the defining features of the former—including the members' names— are derived from the latter. Like William Oliver Wolfe, William Oliver Gant is a stonemason of Pennsylvania German-English- Dutch descent who moved to the North Carolina. Meanwhile like Julia Elizabeth Westall Wolfe, Eliza Pentland Gant is a third-generation North Carolinian of Scots-Irish-English descent who manages a boardinghouse while expanding her wealth through real estate ventures. The Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse in which Thomas Wolfe grew up plays a dominant role in his works as the

"Dixieland" operated by Julia Gant. Benjamin Harrison Gant, the relative toward whom Eugene has the most affection, is fashioned after Benjamin Harrison Wolfe, and the fictionalized death of the former has as profound an impact on Wolfe's fiction as the death of the latter actually had on Thomas. In these texts revolving around Eugene, Wolfe renders the intimate relationships between family members in a way which is absent from the texts[37] in which George Weber—an orphaned only-child— assumes the role of the protagonist. In the case of both of the protagonists, Wolfe places more emphasis on their interactions with their maternal sides, both of which have a history spanning centuries in the area where the protagonists grew up. Therefore despite there being two protagonists, Wolfe presents their connection with the countryside which their ancestors inhabited in a similar manner, and what can be said regarding Eugene and the Pentlands and the fictional town of Altamont, can also be said of George and the Joyners[38] and the fictional town of Libya Hill. However, if Wolfe's ideas about the position of the individual in relation to the parental or fraternal figures are to be studied, then reference must be made to the stories about Eugene and the Gant family.

In the case of both protagonists, Wolfe depicts their identification with their small towns in the fictional state of Catawba. Wolfe based Catawba on the landscape, history, and culture of North Carolina, and it substitutes for the actual state in three of Wolfe's novels and some of his short stories—such as *The Men of Old Catawba*. Whereas Eugene Gant originates from Altamont, North Carolina in *Look Homeward, Angel*, in the sequel— *Of Time and the River*— Eugene claims to be from the state of Catawba. Wolfe continues to use Catawba as a state in the next two novels about George Weber, but changes the town to Libya Hill. While both a county and a town located within it carry the name of Catawba in the actual state of North Carolina, in

[37] *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*
[38] The respective surnames of the maternal sides.

the works of Thomas Wolfe Catawba stands for the state itself. The real town of Catawba is located approximately ninety miles to the east of Asheville, and is therefore further away from the mountain ranges with which Wolfe identifies his characters.

Regardless of who the protagonist may be and what town he may reside in, Wolfe's descriptions of the landscape explore the bonds between man and the rural area which he considers home. Since his protagonists are from rural regions, Wolfe places a large emphasis on man's connection with the earth. Unlike the urban landscape which Wolfe casts as barren, and in which man is exposed to the transience of his aspirations for glory, those surrounded by the natural world encounter something that is truly everlasting and surpasses the limitations to which mankind and its constructions are vulnerable. Due to such exposure, people in the country can feel what it is like to be "naked alone and stripped down to their bare selves, as near to truth as men ever come" (TR, 77). Through his utilization of extensive passages, Wolfe represents not only the characters' knowledge of the natural world which nurtures and sustains them, but also the history of the long line of ancestors who have lived out their lives in the region. Wolfe's lengthy descriptions incorporate details about the physical environment alongside those about the deceased ancestors' history on the land in order to present how those numerous factors impact man's recognition of his status in the world. His protagonist understands his world based on not only the immediately present perceptible world, but also things from "sourceless memory, from places he has never viewed, from scenes that he has never visited—the whole deposit of inheritance" (WR, 85). Thus he identifies with both the natural landscape, and his predecessors' interaction with it, developing a deep affiliation with the land. Yet despite this strong bond and sense of belonging, individuals are also plagued by loneliness, which creates a permanent divide

between them, which—when recognized and acknowledged—can enable the most intimate connection possible between people who must suffer with their positions as strangers.

In his portrayals of the characters' experiences with the natural landscape, Wolfe depicts the latter as oftentimes providing an opportunity for meditation and a source of restfulness. Many of the vivid descriptive passages from the childhoods of his protagonists represent them as spending time outdoors and absorbing the physical sensations supplied by their access to the natural world. For instance, the relationship which George Weber has with his world during his early childhood is characterized by the hours which he spends lying on the grass, being receptive to the tangible details of his environment, whether it be the sunlight or the rich vegetal life and bird calls (28-30, 52-53). While the characters may not always spend hours being captivated by their environment, even briefly dwelling on the details of the natural world creates a source of temporary calm. This can be seen when the father figure—W.O. Gant— lies on his sofa thinking about the springtime and young blossoms, while "[a] restoring peace brooded over his great extended body" (LH, 8). His receptive condition toward nature— exemplified by his lounging position—enables him to attain a moment of tranquility, during which he can feel still and balanced in the world. Thus it can serve as a respite from the insecurity and disturbances of the social realm, as when Eugene Gant and his beloved walk toward the hills, and "[t]he town behind the hill lay in another unthinkable world. They forgot its pain and conflict" (377). Once amid nature, one can become removed from the constraining of the transient social world which is constructed from man's trivialities. When outdoors, Eugene feels as if "[a]ll of that magic world…grew into him, one voice in his heart, one tongue in his brain, harmonious." While the city destabilizes the individual with its multiplicity and impermanence, nature supplies a

wholesome and unified balance which surpasses the trifling disturbances of the world constructed by man.

While Wolfe's portrayals might associate nature with a sense of peacefulness, this does not entail stagnation, as nature maintains a dynamic quality which also has an impact on the individuals exposed to it. Upon finding himself in the mountains near his town, George becomes captivated by the force of the ranges and their climate, "[a]nd that wind would rush upon him with its own wild life and fill him with its spirit" (WR, 184). Thus his contact with nature infuses him with a source of energy, revealing his receptivity to the components of nature. This is comparable to Wolfe's passages about the urban landscape which depict individuals being subjected to the pulse of the city. But whereas that pulse was characterized by its mechanic and artificial quality, the stimulus given by the wind is natural and endows man with its wild spirit, which is not subject to the systematized regularity which dictates the urban pulse. The result is that, rather than causing the individual to act as a synchronized unit of the greater machine, when George "gulped it down into his aching lungs, his whole life seemed to soar, to swoop, to yell with the demonic power." By taking a breath of the air from the wild, man's whole self becomes invigorated with a power beyond his usual capacity, thereby curing the pain from which he previously suffered.

The natural landscape infuses into man not only a source of invigorating energy, but it also functions as the domain through which he begins to connect with the larger world from an early age. While Wolfe represents the urban youths as being reared amid the artificial aspects of city life like its lifeless asphalt pavements, the youths of more rural residents are characterized by their close and frequent relationship with the organic environment around them. Not only do they develop a sense of their world and their place in it while lounging on the grass and soaking in the

physical details of the outdoors, but even their formal education is marked by their cultivation of an understanding of the natural setting. Wolfe presents Eugene Gant's class's expeditions into the woods, through which the child gains knowledge of the rich vegetal life by drawing it, as among the important academic learning of Eugene's schooling. Thus Eugene not only interacts with natural objects through surveying them with his sense faculties, but also processes them in a way which enables him to illustrate them. Likewise, when the mother figure of Eliza tells her son about her childhood connection with the land and its history, she narrates in great detail her tasks and responsibilities, which functioned as a form of education for her. Even though she used to be a schoolteacher, she contrasts this form of learning to her son's academic pursuits when she tells him about "things you never heard of, boy, with all your reading out of books; why yeah, didn't we learn to do everything ourselves and to grow everything we ate and to take the wool and dye it, yes, to go out in the woods and get the sumac and the walnut bark…didn't I learn to do it with my own hands" (WE, 223). By handling objects from the natural environment with their own hands and shaping them into a form through which they composed necessary objects which facilitated their daily survival, people develop a fundamental connection with the earth which sustains them.

In the vivid passages about the landscape, Wolfe draws strong associations between the land and the people upon it so that the existence of the latter becomes defined by their connection to the former. In fact, the wilderness functions as a maternal figure when he explains "[f]or it is the wilderness that is the mother of that nation, it was in the wilderness that [they]… first knew themselves" (OC, 203). While it may be typical to present nature as a mother, his portrayal of it as such is interesting when compared to the passages about the frigid maternal role played by the urban setting, in which the urban men and youths are confronted by the apathy of

the city to their sufferings (HA, 404). On the other hand, in the wilderness, man finds not only a place with which he can associate himself, but also a place through which he can develop a form of self-recognition regarding his position in the world. In depicting the fictional area which represents his homeland, Wolfe writes:

> The real history of Old Catawba is a history of solitude, of the wilderness, and of the eternal earth, it is the history of millions of men living and dying alone in the wilderness, it is the history of a billion unrecorded and forgotten acts and moments in their lives: it is a history of the sun and the moon and the earth. (OC, 204)

While the trials of the men who have inhabited the rural landscape may also not be recorded through permanent, physically manifest means such as monuments, the history of Catawba is derived from the relationship which the inhabitants have had with the land as they carried out their lives through interactions with the earth. These inhabitants are those "who have listened to the earth and known her million tongues, whose lives were given to the earth, whose bones and flesh are recompacted with the earth, the immense and terrible earth that makes no answer." They have acquired and maintain an intense familiarity with the landscape, on which they depend and through which they understand their lives and standing in the world, even though they lack the capacity to know the answers to matters beyond their reach.

While the efforts of man may oftentimes go unrecorded by the earth, that does not entail that man can find no traces of his history in the landscape. Rather it is even possible for nature to reflect the story of the personal lives of the people and families who have made a home there. When Eliza Gant visits her son Eugene at his New York City residence, she remembers her home in the small town and tells him

> "I must be going home again: out in my garden where I work, the early flowers and blossoms will be comin' out, the peach trees and the cherry trees, the dogwood and the laurel and the lilacs. I have an apple tree and it is full of all the birds there are in June: the flower-tree you planted as a child is blooming by the window where you planted it."

When Eliza remembers her home while away, her memories include many details regarding the abundant plant life, such as specifics about the types of trees and flowers and their growth. Among the aspects of the countryside which she prioritizes is the relationship which she has with the natural objects as a result of the effort which she had invested in shaping the landscape she considers her home. Thus for her the landscape signifies her past and that of her family, and she is unable to distance herself from the earth with which she maintains such a strong union. She not only cherishes the memory of the tree Eugene planted, but also reminds him of it, therefore drawing attention to his estrangement from his home. While man is highly receptive to and overpowered by nature, the land on which he has struggled can sometimes manifest his presence and the story of his existence amid the environment.

Given the strong connections between the characters' personal memories and the natural setting in which they find themselves, the latter also plays a major role in their understanding of time and their past. Wolfe's lengthy descriptions serve not only to illustrate the physical environment in which the events in men's lives unfolded but also to represent the timing of the narratives. In *The Web of Earth* Eliza Gant's oral narration tells Eugene primarily about the extraordinary events surrounding the birth of his brothers Ben and Grover, but included alongside that story are many others from her life which she considers related, and to which she therefore must also make reference.[39] When she focuses on the story of Ben and Grover's birth, she contextualizes the tale by explaining that it occurred "in the year the locusts came" (WE, 212). When she does become distracted by a digressive story, she returns to the main event by referring back to the year of the locusts, forming a repetition that recurs throughout Wolfe's novella (300), casting the natural world as the backdrop against which she makes sense of her

[39] Such as her memories from the years following the Civil War, and the story of a murder trial in her town and her interactions with the fugitive.

history. In her narratives of both her first pregnancy and the stress-induced labor of another pregnancy, she elaborately illustrates the natural setting, as when she says "I was carrying my first baby…and it had rained and I could smell the flowers. The roses, and the lilies, and the honeysuckle vines, and all of the grapes a-getting' ripe, and it was growing dark, and I could hear the people talking on their porches, and I had nowhere to go, and I could not leave him" (246). Her hyper awareness of her surroundings focuses mainly on the various constituents of the natural scenery, suggesting how the human lives are lived out in the context of nature, which is accompanied by certain physical details which reflect the place and time of the experiences. Then in turn, these details—when remembered— are communicated and re-experienced through the mentally preserved physical cues from that setting.[40] Due to the overlap between their lives and their organic surroundings, the defining narratives from their lives become inseparable from the landscape to which the characters are rooted, and their lives become identified with the location at which the events occurred.

Besides employing the natural setting to narrate events from their personal lives, the characters also refer to it when speaking about greater historic events. For instance, when Eliza Gant mentions her experiences as a child toward the end of the Civil War, she emphasizes her knowledge of it by distinguishing her subjective witnessing of life during those times from the objective information presented by scholars and historians. She tells the Harvard-educated Eugene, "I reckon that they tried to put it down in books, all of the wars and battles, child, I guess they got that part of it all right, but Lord! —how could these fellers know the way it was…

[40] Eliza's detailed memories tie the organic surroundings to her family's position in the passage: "and smell all of the blossoms—oh! The magnolias and the lilies and the roses, the poinsettias, and all the other flowers they had there and the orange trees and all, and the little children sleepin. In the house, you know, and see the sky full of stars" (WE, 299).

when they weren't here to see it: they made it seem so long ago and like it happened in some strange land" (215). This statement conveys how, for her, these events were not remote occurrences, but an inseparable, defining moment of her life. It also upholds the value of the occurrences in man's daily life which may not be deemed as important as major historical events. In the extensive passage which follows, she emphasizes the worth of her personal experiences by saying "—what could they know, child of the way it was: the way the wind blew and the way the sun was shining, the small of the smoke out in the yard, and Mother singin'… and the sound of all the voices of the people who are dead, and the way the sunlight came and went."[41] In asserting the validity of her memories as accurate indicators of history, Eliza emphasizes certain details from her earlier years. The repetition of "the way" is especially telling since her exposure to "the way" certain things were stresses her familiarity with them to the extent that she understand them in their minute facets. Among the memories upon which she concentrates are those connected with various aspects of the idea of home, including the natural elements, the figure of her own mother, and her ancestry— regarding which she even includes her link to factors beyond her scope, such as the voices of the deceased. The remembrance of one's personal and familial ties to the land serves as a means through which a person establishes their historical connections to it as a result of their knowledge of, and interactions with, the environment.

A specific feature of the landscape of Catawba in Wolfe's works, which impacts the characters and their relationship to nature, is the mountain range near which the town of Altamont is located. The mountain range, with its sturdiness and the elevation to which it soars,

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[41] "—what could they know, child of the way it was: the way the wind blew and the way the sun was shining, the small of the smoke out in the yard, and Mother singin', and the scalded feathers, and the way the river swelled that spring when it rained?... and the sound of all the voices of the people who are dead, and the way the sunlight came and went, and how it made me sad to see it, and the way the men cried as we stood there is Bob Patton's yard, and the men marched by us, and the dust rose, and we knew the war was over…Those are the things that I remember, child, and that's the way things were" (WE, 215)

serves as a symbol of dominance and permanence. The ranges impress the spectator who stares up at them, as when Eugene considers "the mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were the absolute unity in the midst of eternal change" (LH, 158). The mountain range serves as an ideal of strength and resilience since it surpasses the woes to which vulnerable man and his transient aspirations are victim. When compared to man, the mountains are notable for their lasting quality, as they endure and hover over the human realm as silent and still spectators who do not have to participate in the trials which plague man. When Eugene wanders into the mountains, he notes that "the hills were lordly, with a plan" and he begins "staring now with steady beast-eye at this little huddle of wood and mortar which the wilderness must one day repossess, devour, cover over" (LH, 375). Once he removes himself from the sphere of human social life and stares down from the hills, the town which humans have constructed appears insignificant, revealing its vulnerability amid the forces of nature. The wilderness, with its implications of untamable power, threatens the civilization which man builds and the culture he cultivates, since the latter are susceptible to the depredation which comes with time, while the former is more immune to destruction.

The mountains, whose height and mass make them a representation of strength and endurance, leave a lasting impression on those who come into exposure with them, and especially upon those who have resided in their shadow for years. When the young Eugene speculates about his position in the world, he "believed himself thus at the centre of life; he believed the mountains rimmed the heart of the world; he believed that from all the chaos of accident the inevitable event came at the inexorable moment to add to the sum of his life" (160). His musing on his life and the route which it might take occur simultaneously as the image of the

mountain. And rather than surrendering to the unsettling idea that the world is chaotic and that one cannot position oneself in life, he reaches the conclusion that there are values which can provide man's life with an overall purpose and meaning. Even when he escapes from his town or feels trapped by the drawbacks of town life, the protagonist's mind returns to the mountains, and is left in awe of them. This compelling attachment towards the mountain results in the pervasive repetition of "hillborn" and "hill-haunted," emphasizing the reverence of the characters for that landscape. It maintains great power over them, as when "[Eugene's] sick heart lifted in the haunting eternity of the hills. He was hillborn" (343). Thus the ranges can serve as a remedy for the despondency to which people become victim, causing them to instead remember that which is eternal and impervious to the forces which overpower man. In fact, even though the country youth is depicted as dreaming of the city and all its possibilities of success, the vision of the mighty mountains overpowers the glamour of the city since "[h]ill-haunted, whose vision of the earth was mountain-walled, he saw the golden cities sicken in his eye, the opulent dark splendor turn into dingy gray" (520). Though the city may tempt people with its allure of greatness and opulence, it is ultimately composed of artificial luxuries which remain susceptible in comparison to the crude and unadulterated strength and resilience of the mountain ranges.

In Wolfe's protagonists' case, the idea of the mountain evokes not only the power by which any observer can become mesmerized, but also the heritage of having descended from generations of mountain dwellers. While the protagonists identify the Blue Ridge Mountains in particular with their maternal ancestors, the wilderness in general is also oftentimes recognized as a crucial defining aspect of both sides of their families' pasts.[42] When representing Eugene's

[42] In speaking of his own father's family, Wolfe said "I am proud of my people, proud of my pioneer and mountaineer and Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry" (Reeves, 1968, 3).

ancestors, Wolfe writes that "[t]hey are the lives of the lost wilderness, his mother's people; they are the tongues, the faces of the secret land, the dark half of his heart's desire, the fertile golden earth from which his father came" (TR, 58). Not only does he present both parents as having descended from families who had a history enrooted in the countryside, but the lives of the people and the parts of their bodies come to stand for the land upon which they dwelt. The pasts of these ancestors are portrayed through the idea that:

> Two hundred more are buried in the hills of home; these men got land, fenced it, owned it, tilled it; they traded in wood, stone, cotton, corn, tobacco; they built houses, roads, grew trees and orchards. Wherever these men went, they got land and worked it… added to it. These men were hill-born and hill-haunted. (415)

This passage once again brings to the forefront the issue about putting effort into the natural landscape. The interactions with nature become a part of a people's ordinary life, both defining their position in relation to their environment, while the natural objects are also incorporated into their lives and become familiar factors in it. Wolfe places an extra emphasis on the peoples' "adding" to the landscape in this excerpt, revealing how in some ways it begins to acquire features as a result of people casting their own attributes and desires onto the terrain on which they depend for survival. What is noteworthy is that these peoples' bond to the land does not end with the conclusion of their lives, as their dead bodies are placed into the earth and therefore achieve an even more physical union with it. Having come from a family who has worked the land through generations, the protagonists maintain a deeply rooted relationship to the land, and identify themselves with it in terms of both the natural landscape and the family history which spans centuries.

In the case of the fictional state of Catawba—referred to by the natives as "Old Catawba"— which Wolfe creates in his stories, the nature of the relationship between the land

and the people can be understood from the name of the region. According to Wolfe, the appellation of "Catawba" is characterized by the "strong, rugged, and homely quality that the earth has" (OC, 186), while the addition of "Old" "describes exactly the feeling that the earth of that State inspires—the land has a brooding presence that is immensely old and masculine, its spirit is rugged and rather desolate, yet it broods over its people with stern benevolence" (187). The people had to label the environment around them in a way which they could recognize, and the name which they adopted derived from the qualities which they discerned about the land. Thus the name which they recognized it by stemmed from their understanding of their surroundings, and their interactions with it. Wolfe further explains that the "name undoubtedly grew out of the spirit of the people who had dwelt there over a century, and the name did not come from a sentimental affection, it grew imperatively from a conviction of the spirit." Old Catawba is the "inevitable name that has flowered secretly within them, and that must now be spoken," revealing that the choosing of the name was an organic process whereby the inhabitants where infused with the spirit of the land and developed an intimate bond with it. When that bond assumed a vocal form, which manifested the inhabitants' experiences upon the land, that became the name by which they referred to their familiar environment.

Through their involvement with the land, the generations which dwell upon it develop certain characteristics as a result of their labors. When describing the personality traits of various characters. Wolfe often connects those individuals' traits and the ancestral past from which they come. On the most apparent level, this shared experience translates into certain common physical features, so that Wolfe often shows the family members as sharing specific defining features, which he attributes not only to the genetics of a family, but also to their history. When he describes Eliza's appearance, he often notes that certain traits reveal the presence of "the tribal

look" in them (TR, 4). Therefore while Eliza is described as having a feminine physique, something masculine can be discerned in her features because she comes from people who had to struggle to survive in trying circumstances. On their maternal sides, the protagonists descend from people who "were a sharp-distinguished and strong-fibered…They were a race that lived upon the mountain slopes and river bottoms of old wild and rugged Zebulon; a kind that mined mica in the hills, and hewed funtan-bark on the mountains" (WR, 84). Living in such conditions, their kind became "hard-bitten in its pride, and hard-assured in its complacence, scornful in its own superiority, conceited, individual, strongly marked." [43] Furthermore, the Catawban "has taken on the sinew and color of that earth" (OC, 202). Thus history on land shapes the people who establish a home on it, yielding certain personalities, potentially the result of the types of efforts which had to be practiced through generations.

Due to the numerous generations which have endured on the land, the history of the protagonists' people is cast as being deeply entwined in, and defined by, the landscape, so they are inseparable in the minds of the descendants. Of Old Catawba's past Wolfe writes that "it is a magnificent history, full of heroism, endurance, and the immortal silence of the earth. It lives in the [Catawban's] heart, it lives in his brain, it lives in his unrecorded actions; and with this knowledge he is content, nor does he feel the need of ballads or Armadas to trick him into glory" (203). Not only is the history characterized by the earth itself, but this passage presents how it continues to have a strong relationship to the "Catawban of today," who succeeded his forebears.

[43] Such portrayals reflect the North Carolinians of Wolfe's time in that "The South which Wolfe knew was… strongly egalitarian and individualistic in its view of man, characterized by rough, coarse, crude, and graceless manners and conventions, and grimly Calvinistic in its religious orientation" (Holman, 2008, 54). But these renderings are not entirely limited to the maternal side. In the few passages where the father figure's family is referred to, they are also depicted in terms of the ruggedness resulting from their connection to the natural landscape. When the wife of Oliver Gant's nephew visits from Pennsylvania, her description is: "She was of mountain stock: she was coarse, hard, and vulgar" (LH, 452).

Though there is no homage to permanently mark the glory of the people who have resided in Old Catawba, the descendent remains hyperaware of the past, which has somehow been infused into his own being. Therefore no homage is required since the unrecorded history remains present within the continuing generations. Wolfe explains that while the Catawban may remain anonymous in history, at times he may be glimpsed fighting in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Yet this is not where his true glory lies, given that "his real history is much longer and much more extraordinary than could be indicated by these flares of war: it is a history that runs back three centuries into primitive America… and that goes back through poverty, and hardship." The defining features of the Catawban's history are the trials with which he has endeavored upon the land throughout centuries of bodily involvement with it, and which future generations are able to detect and uphold even though such acts have not been recorded by objective history.

As a result of the struggles which generations have had to undergo on the land, the descendants come to identify with that history, and develop a sense of belonging toward the landscape. While presenting the unrecorded history of the humble ancestors and their successors, Wolfe often refers to the latters' inheritance of the land. One case of his use of the term "inheritance" is followed by a passage about ancestors:

> letting their blood soak down like silence in the earth again, letting their flesh rot quietly away into the stern, the beautiful, the limitless substance of the everlasting earth from which they came, from which they were compacted, on which they worked and wrought and moved, and in whose immense and lonely breast their bones were buried and now lay. (TR, 414)

While these ancestors may not have handed down valuable heirlooms or prestigious names to their successors, they sustained a modest life connected with the land, which they continue to

maintain even after death. In analyzing Wolfe's ideas about the land, Frohock explains that "he has some of the naturalistic pantheism, the feeling that man and the soil are intimately bound together in essence."[44] Thus even though the inhabitants' lives may not have been renowned and venerated, they are associated with the earth, which ultimately is everlasting, while the physical monuments through which man projects his glory are transient and vulnerable to more enduring forces. The protagonist's relationship to the landscape becomes captured when Eugene thinks "all of it was his, as his father's blood and earth was his, the lives and deaths and destinies of all his people. He had been a nameless atom in the great family of earth" (TR, 82). This excerpt not only shows that he connects to his family and the past, but it also forms an interesting contrast to Wolfe's use of the term "nameless atom" in his descriptions of the city. In the latter, the term often carries a dejected connotation of the individual's insignificance and the vainness of his impermanent efforts. However, here it occurs within "the great family of earth," possibly suggesting that, though man may not be impervious, he still has significance derived from his relationship to other forces which surpass the weaknesses to which he is susceptible. For instance, when the voices speak from "the everlasting earth," they tell their "son" Eugene "[t]hese men were full of juice, you'll grown good corn here, golden wheat…They may be dead, but you'll grow trees here'" (413). Despite the ancestors' past being a humble one, their humble and demanding existences linked them to the eternal earth which continues to nurture, and provide for the survival of those who succeed them.

While physical landmarks have not been erected to commemorate the ancestors, the voices which occasionally pervade the landscape serve as a link between the past and the present. The role of these voices becomes especially more prevalent in passages regarding train travel, as

[44] Frohock, Wilbur Merrill. *The Novel of Violence in America*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1971, 63.

well as oral narrations. When George Weber's Aunt Maw recites the long stories from her immense store of memory, the young George becomes overwhelmed by the strong presence of the past which he senses. George feels burdened by his mountain inheritance since:

> When Aunt Maw spoke, at times the air would be filled with unseen voices, and the boy knew that he was listening to the voices of hundreds of people he had never seen, and he knew instantly what these people were like and what their lives had been. Only a word, a phrase, an intonation of that fathomless Joyner voice falling quietly at night with an immense and tranquil loneliness before a dying fire, and the unknown dead were moving all around him. (WR, 91)

Aunt Maw's narratives carry within them spirits from the past, so that her speech in the present is accompanied by the disembodied voices of unnamed ancestors whom they have never met and could not have known. They maintain a powerful presence to the degree that the protagonist feels a familiarity toward them and their lives, and it emits the impression of their continued activity in the present world. Given that Wolfe "consistently identified himself with rural and pioneer America,"[45] the voices of the ancestors serve as a means through which Wolfe's protagonist senses his bond with the earth, even though the people of his generation may not connect with it through laboring to the extent that their predecessors had. A representation of storytelling similar to that of Aunt Maw can be found when Eugene meets a relative who had moved to the Northeast decades ago. Though the relative seems to carry little traces of his homeland on him, he strikes Eugene's curiosity because "he had breathed the air of vanished summers… and he had heard the desolate and stricken voices in the South long, long ago, the quiet and casual voices of lost men, a million vanished footsteps in the streets of life" (TR, 149).This suggests that the environment to which the relative was exposed and which served as a home for his family for generations infused into his being. Furthermore, he has picked up on parts of the past which may have been wiped out or eradicated, yet they still maintain a form of existence in the

[45] Reeves, 3.

present through some traces they left behind. For instance, the specific footstep may have pounded and died away but Eugene feels the impression that "he could rekindle memory like a living flame in him, he could animate for an hour that ancient heart… he could make the old man speak." Even though the traces of the past may be ghostly ones, they preserve a hold on the consciousness of future generations as a result of the family's prolonged exposure to a certain environment.

The characters' bond to their home continues even once they move beyond its confines, causing them to constantly dwell on their estranged status. The young Eugene excitedly embarks on his journey to Europe, but despite his initial enthusiasm, he eventually becomes haunted by the memories of home. This occurrence mirrors Wolfe's own life since he "asserts that [certain experiences], all of which also took place, paradoxically, in Europe—enabled him to discover his America."[46] Eugene undergoes a similar process when he becomes disturbed even in his "diseased and unforgetful sleep" (TR, 860), and Wolfe casts the pain as an internal ache which even sleeping cannot relinquish. His travels are frequently burdened when "suddenly, he thinks he has heard there the sounds of America and the wilderness, the things that are in his blood, his heart, his brain, in every atom of his flesh and tissue, the things for which he draws his breath in labor, the things that madden him with an intolerable and nameless pain" (859). Once again his relationship to the land of his childhood and ancestors asserts itself in his consciousness through auditory imagery which is strongly associated with the natural landscape[47] by which the

[46] Beja, Morris. "You Can't Go Home Again: Thomas Wolfe and "The Escapes of Time and Memory.'" *Modern Fiction Review* 2.3 (1965): 297-314 in Rubin, Louis D. *Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, 131.

[47] Among the recurring images from childhood and memory are turnip-greens, which show the earth's nurturing of the people who use the land: "the time-enchanted spell and magic of full June, the solid, lonely, liquid shuffle of men in shirt-sleeves coming home, the leafy fragrance of the cooling turnip-greens, and screens that slammed" (898).

protagonist identifies his home. And by mentioning body organs and blood, Wolfe again places an emphasis on the inseparability of the character's individual being from the land and his family's history on it. This is especially interesting given that when Eugene remembers home, he does not remember it in its current condition, but rather he remembers the "lost America" which "had long since died, been drowned beneath the brutal tidal-flood, the edict stupefaction of that roaring surge and mechanic life which had succeeded it." The image of home which Eugene preserves is that of the times when people had more contact with the organic features of the landscape, and were actually involved with the land and defined their existence according to that relationship.

Yet despite the sense of belonging which the characters might feel toward a landscape on which their family has lived for generations, Wolfe's protagonists also experience a feeling of their position as strangers. Even more striking is that this uneasy sentiment creeps up on them when they find themselves amidst individuals who also identify themselves with the same homeland, whether it be the protagonists' neighbors or family members. For instance, after Eugene has an intimate moment with his mother, the chapter ends with both sensing the disconcerting distance between them because "[Eliza] had said her say, she had come as close as she could, but suddenly she felt speechless, shut out, barred from the bitter and lonely secrecy of his life" (LH, 399). Despite having approached her son as much as possible, the end result is that both realize their remoteness from one another. Their solitude is irremediable and thereby severs communication at the moment when they approach even other to the utmost extent. With no further communication possible, Eliza is left without words through which to explain the tension, and can simply conclude "'Nobody ever knew you.'" In fact, the mother noticed this distance soon after the child's birth:

> the hour after his birth she had looked in his dark eyes and had seen something that would brood there eternally, she knew, unfathomable wells of remote and intangible loneliness: she knew that in her dark and sorrowful womb a stranger had come to life. (66)

Despite the womb being the symbol of the proximity between the child and mother, in this passage the womb functions as the initial place at which the character's estrangement is realized, rendering even the closest relationship as incredibly distanced. Furthermore, the nature of this eternal loneliness is something inscrutable, which is referred to as "something" due to its lack of definite features by which people can recognize and comprehend it.

However this mysterious status of man is not only experienced in terms of an individual's relationship to others, but rather Wolfe presents man as sometimes confronting his own self as a stranger. When Eugene thinks to himself, he acknowledges the idea that "[t]here lay in him something that could not be seen and could not be touched, which was above and beyond him—an eye within an eye, a brain above a brain, the Stranger that dwelt in him and regarded him and was him, and that he did not know" (412). Even within himself, man at times encounters a being which remains unknown to him and beyond the senses and faculties through which man may attempt to learn about the mysterious being. The odd sensation of being an alien to one's surroundings occurs when man is situated within the home, the most familiar place. Eugene dwells on the issue that "[t]his is the house in which I have been an exile. There is a stranger in the house, and there's a stranger in me." Eugene's realization of his condition of stranger-hood occurs alongside the image of the abode by which he usually identifies himself and the people among whom he belongs, therefore amplifying the unease he feels. When Eugene notices this oftentimes unacknowledged part of himself, he undergoes "a moment of great wonder—the magnificent wonder with which we discover the simple and unspeakable things that lie buried and known, but unconfessed in us." While a prior excerpt claimed the unknown quality of man's

mysterious aspect, this passage suggests that— rather than being truly unknowable— the stranger within man remains hidden and possibly unconsciously recognized, yet nonetheless a secret concealed even from himself. Here Wolfe once again uses his tendency of switching from writing about "he" to writing about "us," implying that mankind in general shares the condition of not confessing the hidden side within each individual. The stranger role of man entails a divide not only between himself and others, but it also means that within himself there exist facets which he may often be unaware of in terms of his identity.

While man's position as a stranger might seem to suggest his isolation from others and the insurmountable separation between even the closest people, Wolfe presents this condition as a collective experience which mankind must endure. Initially Wolfe writes about it as the status of men from the Gant family, casting it as a form of inheritance in his rendition of the Gant men as those "who would always know hunger, the strangers on the land" (242). The idea of hunger and being a stranger occur alongside one another due to their implications of not being stabilized in a conclusive manner, but rather being burdened by restlessness and an unfixed position. Eugene realizes that "upon [the earth's] plain he walked, alone, a stranger" (352), portraying his unrooted status through the imagery of his solitary motion across the landscape. Wolfe proceeds by shifting again to the first-person plural when he explains that "[o]ur senses have been fed by our terrific land; our blood has learned to run to the imperial pulse of America…And the old hunger returned—the terrible and obscure hunger that haunts and hurts Americans, and that makes us exiles at home and strangers wherever we go" (352). Here Wolfe brings up the issue of hunger to explain that it affects Americans wherever they may be, and causes the protagonist to feel homeless and to be unable to station himself within whichever location he finds himself in. Thus he cannot view himself as fulfilling a crucial role within the environment around him in the

sense of being irrevocably bonded to it. However while the protagonist may not feel completely affiliated to his surroundings in a manner which affixes his entire being to it, this does not mean that no strong connections exist between him and the land. He may be an exile at home, but the natural landscape has impacted him in an irreversible manner by nurturing the development of his very senses, and by even infusing his blood with the pulse according to which his existence is directed. Therefore although the individual's awareness of the world and himself results from his interactions with the landscape around him, the members of humanity are nonetheless mutually subjected to the trials of being strangers to their surroundings.

Even though Wolfe's emphasis on each man's stranger-hood may seem to suggest the insurmountable distance between individuals, certain passages reveal that the acknowledgement of man's loneliness facilitates true understanding and a genuine connection. For instance, after spending a year at college isolated from other youths and without much contact with them, Eugene eventually begins to partake in social activities, such as the school paper. His new found engagements produce the result that "[h]e was closer to a feeling of brotherhood than he had ever been, and more alone" (407). This statement appears to be paradoxical in its claim that Eugene began to feel his loneliness more acutely as he approached a sense of brotherhood with others. Yet it is not surprising since the most relationship in Wolfe's texts is that between Eugene and his older brother Ben, whom Wolfe characterizes as the most inscrutable among the figures. Ben's disposition is captured by the following defining habit:

> answer[ing] [others'] pretensions with soft mocking laughter, and a brief nod upwards and to the side to the companion to whom he communicated all his contemptuous observation—his dark satiric angel… There was behind his scowling quiet eyes, something strange and fierce and unequivocal that frightened them. (102)

Wolfe often depicts Ben being a mysterious youth who distances himself from others, rather than associating with them and developing a fixed social role based on such relationships. His

correspondences are with his "angel," and consist of scornful comments which he communicates to himself instead of engaging in a dialogue with others. In rendering the fraternal relationship between Ben and Eugene, Wolfe presents the former as "guarding… with scowling eyes, and surly speech, the secret life. Ben was a stranger: some deep instinct drew him to his child-brother" (67). Despite the divide separating Ben from most people, Ben's stranger-like qualities actually function to draw the two brothers together in a very powerful bond. By recognizing each other's status as strangers who suffer with loneliness, they acknowledge the secret life which man must endure, and thereby attain the most profound understanding of one another possible.

Through his elaborate descriptive passages about the characters' relationship with the land on which they grew up, Wolfe presents the bond which people from the countryside feel toward the landscape around them. Unlike the city with its emphasis on the current moment and the mechanical, rural inhabitants develop a deep connection to the everlasting earth as a result of interacting with it from early childhood. Yet the sense of belonging to the landscape derives not only from their involvement with the various parts of nature, but also from the ancestors who had to struggle upon the land in order to survive. While the ancestors and their history may not have been recorded, due to their affiliation with the land, they maintain a presence which the descendants can detect, and with which they identify themselves and their heritage. However the strong sense of home which man feels because of his experiences in the land of his predecessors is at times challenged by his recognition of his ultimate loneliness. While man's position as a stranger causes him to remain a secret to others, and possibly even himself, it is only through an understanding of that secret stranger status that a true connection can be fostered between individuals.

THE LONELINESS OF THE WHISTLE WAIL:

THE WANDERING SPIRIT AS LIBERATION AND RESTLESSNESS

While Wolfe's works are composed of passages which capture his characters' experiences of the city and the countryside, Wolfe was also dedicated to rendering scenes of his characters travelling. In addition to his interest in depicting how the place in which man is located impacts his recognition of himself, Wolfe was also fascinated by voyaging and what it had to reveal about man's identity, especially given his protagonists' obsession with wandering. His characters ride in various forms of transportation, such as ships and automobiles, however Wolfe was most passionate about trains and man's experience aboard them. In his pamphlet on the career of Thomas Wolfe, English professor C. Hugh Holman designates Wolfe as among the prominent writers on trains by claiming that "[n]o other American in the past fifty years has been more the poet of trains."[48] He then proceeds to defend that claim by mentioning Wolfe's elaborate renderings of "[t]heir rushing across the face of the earth, the glimpses of life to be seen flashing past their speeding windows, the nostalgic and lonely wail of their whistles at night." Wolfe's preoccupation with trains is indeed evident from the crucial role which they play in the lives of the protagonists of his novels, and also from the many short stories which center around train travel and its impact on peoples' understanding of their world.

After finishing his collection of short stories titled *From Death to Morning*, Wolfe began working on a novel he planned on titling *The Hound of Darkness*, which would focus on the

[48] Holman, C. Hugh. *Thomas Wolfe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pamphlets of American Writers, 1960, 37.

nighttime voyage of the transcontinental train, the Pacific Nine, across the United States. Although this novel was never completed, trains have an important position in much of Wolfe's writing. In each text where trains have a significant role, Wolfe renders in painstaking detail the physicality of the machinery of trains and the various mechanical aspects of their functioning—from the billowing steam to the sound of the wheels on the rail. And given that "the trains rushing through America are [to Wolfe] symbols of America itself—violent, splendid, powerful,"[49] he also depicts them in the greater context of the American landscape through which their tracks run.

Throughout his works Wolfe describes the powerful influence which trains have on the people who are exposed to them, whether the people be waiting at the train station or hearing the unseen train's whistle in the distance. Because they move across space, trains inspire a range of emotions and thoughts in those who witness the trains, realize their power, and become infused with their dynamism. From their childhoods, Eugene Gant and George Weber are extremely sensitive to the promise of escape and future glory which the whistles of the distant trains provide. They supply youths with a source of motivation, as evident given that "throughout the novels, the train remains Eugene's secret weapon against disillusionment, frustration, and discord."[50] Trains function as the main form of transportation through which Wolfe presents the exultation which people experience once they come into contact with the wandering life, and become overwhelmed by its seductive lure. In the case of Wolfe's protagonists, the tendency for roaming is so intense as to be a form of inheritance shared with one's predecessors. Yet man's wandering also serves as a manifestation of his restless condition, and stems from his groping in search of a need which remains absent from his life. Thus while man may exult in the liberty

[49] Walser, Richard. "Thomas Wolfe's Train as Symbol." *The Southern Literary Journal* 21.1 (1988): 3-14, 11.
[50] Ibid., 6.

provided by a roaming lifestyle, he must also endure the forlorn roving which results from his being deprived of a secure haven.

Wolfe's depictions of voyaging often revolve around trains and emphasize the force of their physicality as they make their way through the landscape. As the crowd waiting for the train's arrival watches it approach the station, they "see, on the tracks, the blunt black snout, the short hard blasts of steam from its squat funnel, the imminent presence, the enormous bigness of the train" (TR 25). In this passage, the diction of the first half consists of short, mostly monosyllabic words which depict the train through its metal and the steam it produces, thereby conveying the brawn and intensity imparted by the unembellished parts of the machine as it rapidly nears the station. Wolfe renders a more encompassing image of trains when he depicts the departure from a town by writing "[a]nd now there was a vast and distant flare, incredible in loveliness, the enormous train yards of the night, great dings and knelling on the tracks, the flare and sweep of mighty rails, the huge and sudden stirrings of the terrific locomotives" (474). The concept of a train does not carry only the image of the locomotive, but also all the other features necessary for transportation. This includes the mechanical pieces like the rails, along with the noise produced as a result of the wheels' scraping along them, as well as the steam by-product, all of which work alongside one another to produce the effect associated with trains. In his 1999 book *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression*, Errol Lincoln Uys writes about the experiences of the quarter of a million youths whose lives revolved around hopping onto trains during the Great Depression. In his interviews with some of these now-elderly individuals, many of them remember the dangerous aspects of the lifestyle along with the

"mystical quality"[51] which Wolfe rendered in his descriptions. Don Snyder, for instance, recollects "[t]he sound and moan of a whistle in the silent darkness echoing through the hills. The smell of the cars and the clicking of the rails. The ding, ding, ding at the crossings," pointing out the details of train travel which recur in Wolfe's writing. The image of the train, however, is not complete onto itself, given that it cannot be separated from the physical context in through which it moves. Wolfe presents how the "[t]rains cross the continent in a swirl of dust and thunder, the leaves fly down the rocks behind them; the great trains cleave through gulch and gulley, they rumble with spoked thunder on the bridges" (331). In presenting both the various parts of the train and the context of the landscape through which the trains tear, Wolfe depicts the might of the machines through their powerful capacity and the vitality of their movement.

Along with the physical force which characterizes trains and their massive bulk and rapid movement comes the awe which it inspires in the spectators within its presence. In the passage where the people at the station "see, on the tracks, the blunt black snout, the short hard blasts of steam from its squat funnel, the imminent presence, the enormous bigness of the train" (25) the difference in the diction in both halves of the passage is revealing of the impact which the train has on those watching it. While the first part consists of monosyllabic words, the second half is composed of multisyllabic words which describe not only the physical mechanical pieces which make up the machine, but also the aura which it casts off, and by which the observers feel the might of its presence as it imposes itself upon the surroundings. Likewise, when Wolfe focuses on the people awaiting the train's arrival at the station, he notes that "from their words and gestures, a quietly suppressed excitement that somehow seemed to infuse the drowsy mid-October afternoon with an electric vitality, it was possible to feel the menace of the coming

[51] Uys, Errol Lincoln. *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression.* New York: Routledge, 2003. 245.

train" (3). While the people may stand in what appears to be a status of stagnation, their behaviors are marked by—and betray—the pending status which they are actually in. Their expectation of the train has endowed them with an anticipation so stimulating that it in turn transmits the influence which the train has had on them onto the environment around them. Wolfe renders this influence as "electric" and therefore comparable to the mechanic force of the active train under whose effect they find themselves. Thus the vigor of a train is so overwhelming that it can transform the static and stationary environment into which it enters through the dynamism it exudes.

Trains not only infuse man with the striking vigor which characterizes them, but they also overwhelm his consciousness with the extensive physical sensations which he experiences as a result of their motion. When the young Eugene Gant and his adolescent friends undertake their first independent voyage, they become awed by the "clumped woodlands, the bending seep of the fields, the huge flowing lift of the earth-waves, cyclic intersections bewildering—the American earth—rude, immeasurable, formless, mighty (LH, 297). As their transportation speeds through space, the youths absorb the physical details of the continually changing landscape, which becomes a landscape characterized by the motion in which they witness it. Eugene's experiences on board are captured in the passage:

> waking suddenly, to see cool lakes in Florida at dawn, standing quietly as if they had waited from eternity for this meeting; or hearing, as the train in the dark hours of morning slid into Savannah, the strange quiet voices of the men upon the platform, the boding faint echoes of the station, or seeing, in pale dawn, the phantom woods, a rutted lane, a cow, a boy, a drab dull-eyed against a cottage door, glimpsed at this moment of rushing time, for which all life had been a plot, to flash upon the window and be gone. (134)

Wolfe places a strong emphasis in this excerpt replete with visual and auditory imagery, through which he depicts how the Eugene's senses become flooded by the stimuli which he encounters as

he speeds through vast distances. He witnesses innumerable scenes as new lands unfold, yet each one is contained as an image within the window for a fleeting instant before it vanishes and is replaced by another, which will likewise disappear. As he travels, his relationship with the landscape is one in which "[t]he whole earth reeled about him in a kaleidoscopic blur of shining rail, massed heavy greens, and white empetalled faces of the staring people" (TR, 25). In his writings, the idea of kaleidoscopes recur when he addresses the issue of travel, stressing the excess of stimulation which man's sensual faculties undergo as they move through exposure to countless phenomena and situations.

However, the anticipation and excitement associated with trains occur not only during travels, but rather are feelings which Wolfe's protagonists experience throughout their childhoods. Along with Eugene and George's exhaustive early memories relating to their families and natural surroundings are their recurring memories of the train whistle of the train in the distance which they cannot see. The train whistle fascinates both the protagonists and maintains a powerful influence on their comprehension of themselves and their dreams. One such instance occurs when "[s]heeted in his thin nightgown, [Eugene] stood in darkness by the orchard window of the back room of Gant's, drinking the sweet air down, exulting in his isolation in darkness, hearing the strange wail of the whistle going west (LH, 167). Wolfe renders the encounter between the young Eugene and the train whistle as a personal connection which he undergoes when he removes himself from his family and their domestic surroundings. Alone in the dark with only a thin covering, he is not burdened by the social environment when he hears the whistle, which carries his thoughts with it. While oftentimes the characters muse on such sounds when isolated from other people, there are cases where the thought of trains motivates a group of people, such as at stations or aboard a train. On the vacation with his

friends, there is an instance where Eugene and they "looked at each other with clumsy tenderness. They thought of the lost years at Woodson Street. They saw with decent wonder their awkward bulk of puberty. The proud gates of the years swung open for them. They felt a lonely glory. They said farewell" (298). In such a scenario, the youths' rumination on the idea of trains serves as a collective experience shared among multiple people. Even though it may seem as though the excerpt suggests the distance between the friends and their separation from one another, it demonstrates how the journey enables them to realize their approaching manhood simultaneously and to develop a defining memory from this instant. In this case, the friends share this memory at a certain moment in their lives where it has additional significance. Therefore exposures to details relating to trains serve as brief instances in the characters' childhoods where they have an opportunity to search within themselves and discover something genuine which may not often come to their attention.

The motivation which trains stir in people becomes a defining characteristic of man's youth in Wolfe's works. When Eugene moves to New York City as a young independent man, he finds himself riding on the same train route constantly, because "[t]he urge held and drew him with a magnetic power. Eight times that spring he made that wild journey of impulse and desire up the river" (TR, 475). A repetition of "eight times" occurs around the passage, reflecting the persistence of the yearning for travel which maintains power over Eugene. He repeatedly undertakes the voyage without a definite end in mind, but rather due to a drive which prevents him from remaining static in the area within which he has established a home. When Wolfe describes this urge, it appears as something beyond the control of the characters, which even they cannot always completely be conscious of, or control. Instead it seems to happen without their consciousness of it, and overtake them both physically and mentally. Before Oliver Gant marries

Eliza, he settles down in a small town, but despite setting up residence there, he faces difficulty in staying rooted within the location which he makes home. Wolfe depicts the challenge Oliver faces through a portrayal of the change in the character's physical aspect by explaining that "[t]he eyes of the gaunt spectre darkened again, as they had in his youth" (LH, 4). This passage occurs around the time when Oliver has been suffering with a severe illness and becomes temporarily relieved by the idea of a voyage and escape from his current surroundings. While he has been worn by his illness, the thought of travel rouses some of the vitality of his youth, and his eye darken, suggesting the mysterious quality of man's urge for journeys. Once the urge occurs, it overcomes man, causing him to retract within him and become blocked off from others. Wolfe's characters also recognize it in strangers, as in the case of the unnamed youth at a station who becomes entranced by the energetic presence of the train as he sells newspapers. This desire is depicted as a force "that prowls forever past the shuttered facades of the night, and furious, famished, unassuaged and driven as it is, lives alone in darkness and will not die" (TR, 475). Thus the expression which the protagonist sees on the youth for a split second demonstrates the deep stirrings, which Wolfe portrays as a monstrous vitality, as they rouse man and draw him toward the mysterious wandering which tempts him. Youths, with the vitality which characterizes them, seem especially susceptible to the seductive lure of trains and their implications of undiscovered mysteries and freedom from the stagnant aspects of existence.

At times the urge for travel felt by the characters seems to result from their need to escape the boundaries of the places which they consider their homes. In the case of Eugene, Wolfe explains that "his whole conviction was that the world was full of pleasant places, enchanted places, if he could only go and find them. The life around him was beginning to fetter and annoy him: he wanted to escape from it (LH 491). The protagonists grow up in small towns

with close-knit communities where everyone recognizes one another. Furthermore, their maternal families have lived in the region for centuries, and therefore the protagonists feel that the land is burdened by the history of their families. Thus it is not surprising that they wish to detach themselves from the place which maintains such a strong hold on them, and to venture in pursuit of places which remain new and unknown. When the adolescent Eugene sees the lights of his town, "their warm message of the hived life of men brought to him a numb hunger for all the words and the faces. He heard far voices and laughter" (485). The lights reveal the layout according to which his town is organized, and Eugene feels inhibited by the contained and limited space in which his life unfolds. Oliver Gant suffers from a similar sensation when he returns to Altamont from a trip, and Wolfe describes that he "felt suddenly the cramped fixity of the square" and "he felt a sick green fear, a frozen constriction about his heart because the center of his life now looked so shrunken" (62). Though he may love his home, the place by which he identifies his position in the world, upon his return to it, Oliver suffers a form of shock and feels trapped by the structure of the town. In contrast to the unhindered motion of trains, the static and perceptibly organized qualities of one's familiar lifestyle can cause man to feel suffocated.

Given how the characters feel trapped by the confines imposed by the places they call home, wandering beyond those familiar spaces has a liberating effect on them. When portraying Eugene's journeys during his college years, Wolfe explains that those months "belong to a story of escape and wandering…They are a prelude to exile, and into their nightmare chaos no other purpose may be read than the blind groping of a soul toward freedom and isolation" (431). Once again, the voyaging seems to not originate from any specific goal towards which Eugene strives. What motivates him is a wish to flee from the current condition, in search of a "freedom and isolation" which is not depicted in a definite manner. Instead he sets out in pursuit of what

remains beyond his knowledge and his power. Eugene is haunted by a temptation which causes him to become "wild with the hunger for release: the vast campaign of earth stretched out for him its limitless seduction" (504). He is overcome by a longing to break away from the fixity of his regular life in order to seek that which remains a mystery to him, and which appears to be the solution to his ensnared status. Likewise, trains serve as a source of comfort:

> And again he heard, as he had heard a thousand times in childhood, far, faint, and broken by the wind, the wailing whistle of a distant train. It brought to him, as it had brought to him so many times, the old immortal promises of flight and darkness, the golden promises of morning, new lands and a shining city. And to his sick and desperate soul, the cry of the great train now came with a sterner and more desperate hope than he had ever known as a boy. (TR, 401)

The train whistle soothes the young man by representing the possibility of new opportunities and adventures different from the ones to which he has grown accustomed. Thus the promise of train travel serves as a respite from man's static habitat and the routine existence associated with it.

While the protagonists' yearning for adventure and new opportunities assumes various shapes mattering on their hopes for the future, the idea of travelling westward holds a special place due to its representation of the wandering spirit. For instance, the youths in Wolfe's texts often dream of the city and its glamour, and they aspire to flee their small towns and the limited lifestyle which they afford. However, in these cases the travelling has a final goal, which is settling in the city and possibly finding a place for oneself there. In Wolfe's descriptions of voyages to the West, the West is not cast as a definite place in which man can station himself. It is not depicted as transfixed in the same manner which the city and rural home are. Instead Wolfe refers to it as "[a] land of life, a flower land" (LH, 58), a depiction which he follows up with the conviction that "[t]hose in the East should always go West." Wolfe does not provide a concrete definition for what constitutes the West, but rather presents it in terms of its natural and dynamic quality. And the relationship with it which he suggests is that it is the place towards

which one embarks on a journey. The fictional homes of Wolfe's protagonists are surrounded by mountains to the west, so voyaging westward entails moving beyond the ranges whose height creates a physical boundary locking man in. In contrasting home to the West, Wolfe writes: "the hills climbed sunward to the sun. There was width to the eye, a smoking sun-hazed amplitude, the world convoluting and opening into the world, hill and plain, into the west. The West for desire, the East for home" (60). The ranges may block an extended view of the land behind them across which man can travel, but despite that a vast world lies beyond them, and it is a world designated for man's attempts to fulfill the drive which urges him toward wandering. Whereas the East may bring to mind the settled aspects of man's life, and the restraints which accompany them, the West comes to stand for the limitless possibilities which man can experience by unbinding himself from the familiar. When man considers the West, "[h]is thought soars westward with a vision of far distances and splendid ranges; his heart turns west with thoughts of unknown men and places and wandering" (WR, 52). For Wolfe's characters, the West represents a place of new experiences and sensations, and a limitless expanse on which man can voyage.

In spite of how the urgency with which man pursues unknown phenomena might seem to imply man's reluctance to connect himself with other people or places, Wolfe's works also present how travel sometimes facilitates a strong relationship between people. A striking instance of this is his depiction of two trains, headed in the same direction, as one speeds past the other in a race, and the excited, competitive riders stare at one another. The first-person narrator explains that "our mouths smiled and our eyes were friendly," but "there was some sorrow and regret in what we felt" (TC, 21), expressing the emotional reaction provoked in the riders. Even though they had "lived as strangers in the immense and swarming city" and remained indifferent to other people's presence as is characteristic of city life, once they observe each other passing

aboard trains they express both affable signs of recognition, as well as sadness due to their rapid detachment from one another. In fact, the affection which they feel does not extend to those aboard the same train, but only to those aboard the competing train. Of the latter, the narrator states:

> yet it seemed to me that I had known these people, that I knew them better than the people in my own train, and that, having met them for an instant under immense and timeless skies as we were hurled across the continent to a thousand destinations, we had met, passed, vanished, yet would remember this forever.

Although their encounter is very instantaneous and they do not know details of each other's lives, the brief train race supplies them with a shared experience. The unexpected intensity of this relationship is possibly a result of the energy and excitement which they shared as they witnessed the same event. Thus such a connection—despite its fleeting quality— is based on genuine feelings stirred by an exhilarating occurrence, rather than any of the artifices which usually characterize human relationships.[52]

Even though man's preoccupation with traveling might seem to suggest his status as a wanderer without roots or bonds to a specific place, it is interesting that in the case of his protagonists, Wolfe casts the tendency toward wandering as a hereditary inclination. Among Eugene's first memories of an adventurous trip is the one which he undertakes with his father to visit his sister in Georgia. During their train ride, "[t]he inner excitement of both was intense; the hot wait at the sleepy junction of Spartanburg...the hot baked autumnal land, rolling piedmont

[52] The tendency which Wolfe's protagonists display of forming temporary bonds with strangers, while damaging their more intimate relationships—such as romantic ones— has led some readers to speculate on the mental health of Wolfe himself. For instance, Kennedy writes about Wolfe's "crowd neurosis" (Kennedy in Rubin, 163), while psychologist David Rosenthal—in his article *Was Thomas Wolfe a Borderline?*— indicates how Wolfe matches certain criteria for Schizotypal and Borderline Personality disorders, such as: Social isolation, "Undue social anxiety," and "Unstable and intense interpersonal relationships, e.g., marked shifts of attitude" (Rosenthal, David. "Was Thomas Wolfe a Borderline?" *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 5.1 (1979): 87-94. 94).

and pine woods, every detail of the landscape they drank in with thirsty adventurous eyes. Gant's roving spirit was parched for lack of travel" (LH, 125). The trip becomes an opportunity for the father and son to undergo a shared experience of train travel as they absorb the stimulation provided by it, and satisfy their craving for voyages. Not only is the "roving spirit" something which father and son share while traveling together, but it also functions as a trait passed down through generations. While Eugene attributes his roaming tendencies to his father Oliver Gant, such propensity exists in the family prior to Oliver since, when the latter's father passed away, he left behind "[h]e left five children, a mortgage and – in his strange dark eyes which now stared bright and open—something that had not died: a passionate and obscure hunger for voyages" (4). Thus this common desire is cast as an inheritance bestowed onto future generations. After the deathbed scene, the narrator states "with this legacy, we leave the Englishman and are concerned here after with the heir to whom he bequeathed it, his second son, a boy named Oliver. How this boy stood by the roadside near his mother's farm, and saw the dusty Rebels."[53] There is an immediate shift from the mention of the legacy to the manifestation of travel in Oliver's life story as he stands by the road leading to unknown possibilities, and watches the Rebels from the state to which he will move— and where he will establish his home— as an adult. Even if the idea of wandering may seem detrimental to family in that it threatens the settled condition connected to home, in the protagonists' cases, the obsession with journeys is one passed on from the predecessors with which they identify themselves.

Even as Wolfe presents the urge for voyaging as an inheritance, it is worth noting that this legacy is often associated with the characters' paternal relatives. The fathers of the protagonists, who—in some works—are outsiders who settle down in the towns which their sons

[53]The Englishman is Oliver's father.

regard as home, are characterized by their desire to travel beyond the town and their habits of roaming around the town, oftentimes when intoxicated. On the other hand, the maternal sides of the protagonists have become native to the land through centuries of inhabiting it, and Wolfe reveals the strong bond which attaches them to the region. Therefore, both Eugene Gant and George Weber grow up conscious of how their relationships to their mothers and fathers pull them in different directions in terms of their recognition of their position within the town and beyond it. George grapples with this conflict when he thinks: "Just as his father's life spoke to him of all things wild and new, of exultant prophecies of escape and victory, of triumph, flight, new lands, the golden cities…so did the life of his mother's people return him instantly to some dark, unfathomed place in nature" (WR, 90). The thought of the father brings to George's mind positive ideas relating to motivation and liberation, while the mother's family seems to trap him in place in comparison. Eugene encounters the same disparity, to which Eliza calls attention when she visits Eugene in the city, and hears the ships in the harbor:

> 'Lord God! You're all alike: your daddy was the same—forever wantin' to be up and gone. If I'd let him he'd have been nothing but a wanderer across the face of the earth…Child, child, you mustn't be a wanderer all your days… You ought to come back where your people are from' (WE, 214)

Here Eliza recognizes the "roving spirit" and her son's inheritance of it, while distinguishing it from her own nature. Furthermore when she speaks of her family, she reminds Eugene of his belonging with his relatives and his home, emphasizing the aspects of identity which are connected to stationary locations. And when she addresses the roaming ways of Eugene and his father, she does so in a language reminiscent of Cain's punishment in the Bible,[54] thereby casting it as a curse or affliction which the father would have continued to suffer from if he had not

[54] When God tells Cain a "fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth" (Genesis 4:12), Cain echoes that statement by saying "thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth… and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth" (Genesis 4:14).

settled down. However despite her endorsement of the settled lifestyle rather than the mobile one, Eliza too becomes tempted by the possibility of voyages. For instance, upon hearing the whistle of a ship, she proclaims "'I tell you what—it makes me want to pick right up and light out with it'" (214), demonstrating the seductive lure of spontaneous wandering. Although Wolfe depicts the appeal of traveling as applying to every man, he also represents the tension in man between his desire for a stable home where he belongs and can rest, and his desire to satisfy his appetite for wandering.

Despite how the wandering spirit may sometimes be part of legacy which is bequeathed to future generations, it is also associated with a craving which stirs the characters toward traveling and causes them to wander without rooting themselves to a certain place. When Eugene embarks on his first train expedition independent of his parents at age fifteen, his mother senses his removal from her: "As he stood by his valise, washed, brushed, excited, she wept a little. He was again, she felt, a little farther off. The hunger for voyages was in his face" (LH, 296). Evident from his face is the expression which Wolfe mentions other wanderers as also displaying, whether they be adventurous youths or deceased fathers, as wearing. This expression reveals his excitement for pursuing his desires while causing his mother to cry due to her realization of his estrangement from her. As Eugene matures "the great hunger for voyages [rises] up in him" (425) frequently, resulting in his venturing "into strange cities, striding in among them, and sitting with them unknown, like a god in exile, stored with the enormous vision of the earth" (426). Thus he craves experience with different places and indulges in the sensations the journeys provide, but the locations and the people remain mysteries which do not bind him, and to which he likewise remains anonymous. This practice enables him to be "thrilled to the glory of the secret life," the definition of the secret life being "[t]o go alone, as he had

gone, into strange cities; to meet strange people and to pass again before they could know him; to wander, like his own legend, across the earth" (440). By means of Eugene's travelling, Wolfe exhibits the glory in common man's undertakings in that Eugene assumes the role of a legendary figure once his journey reflects the meaning which mankind finds in voyages. In pursuing the lure of travel, the life of Eugene's preference is characterized by movement through innumerable encounters which one absorbs as experiences, without their becoming fully integrated as fixed factors in his existence.

Even though such a lifestyle motivated by the hunger for travel may seem adventurous and liberating, it can also simultaneously entail— and possibly originate from— a man's struggling in search of something. Wolfe depicts the pain men endure in their desperate pursuits frequently, yet he does not provide a definite explanation of what it is that men are pursuing. Even prior to the story of the protagonist Eugene, Wolfe depicts the suffering of Oliver Gant and how it prompts his restless disposition. Prior to his marriage to Eliza, the young Oliver would "[stride] muttering through the streets, with rapid gestures of the enormous talking hands" (4). Of this habit Wolfe writes " these are the blind steps and gropings of our exile, the painting of our hunger," exhibiting Oliver as a representative for the rest of mankind as he physically roam around without a determined destination as a result of the torment he is undergoing— both because of concrete reasons he can identify and because of unnamed longings he cannot fulfill. The outcome of his anguish is that "[h]e never found it, and he reeled across the continent into the Reconstruction South—a strange wild form of six feet four,"[55] suggesting the ultimate hopelessness of man's search. When Eugene attends Harvard, he too is overtaken by the same sense of seeking as his father, and he begins "to have the old feeling return with overwhelming

[55]The meaning of "it" is not exactly specified, but based on the list of symbols it refers to from the earlier paragraph, and other symbols in similar passages, it can be assumed that the symbols/it refer to a respite from roaming— as discussed in the following paragraph.

force that he is about to find the thing for which his life obscurely and desperately is groping—for which all men on this earth have sought" (TR, 90). Thus Wolfe presents this mysterious seeking which sometimes overtakes Eugene and Oliver as a collective experience shared among the individuals of humanity without their fully comprehending the specifics of the needed object for which they long and suffer.

In Wolfe's works, the painful groping which burdens man is associated with the hunger which at times goads man and his wandering. In describing hunger, Wolfe writes that "[i]t is as if [man] fears the brutal revelation of his loss and loneliness, the furious, irremediable confusion of his huge unrest, his desperate and unceasing flight from the immense and timeless skies that bend above him, the huge, doorless and unmeasured vacancies of distance" (33). This passage suggests that man's lost and lonely status is a horrifying reality which will overcome man once he confronts it. Likewise man finds himself in a vulnerable position where the forces of the world overpower him, a limited being whose existence is defined by his confusion and incessant hopeless movement amid the world, in which he is destabilized due to his lack of comprehension and true agency. In fact, Wolfe compares man to a frail leaf through the simile "as hopeless as a leaf upon a hurricance, he is driven on forever," implying the turmoil sometimes connected with man's ceaseless journey which may stem from his helplessness. Therefore life becomes cast as time in where "we hurtle onward driven by our hunger down the blind and brutal tunnel of ten thousand furious and kaleidoscopic days...without a wall at which to thrust the shoulder of our strength, a roof to hide us in our nakedness, a place to build on, or a door" (35). The hunger which haunts man is thus associated with the trials man encounters during his exhaustive existence, and is contrasted to the shelter of which he is deprived. Like the passage above in which Eugene's mother regards his wandering as an affliction, Wolfe's rendering of hunger is

sometimes suggestive of Biblical verses which convey mankind's toils in this life, as in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air [have] nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay [his] head."[56] Whereas Christ's invitation "Come unto me, all *ye* that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"[57] offers man the promise of a peaceful end, Wolfe's writings supply no solution to man's painful situation. Rather than discovering a stabilizing force which can protect him, man must confront the terror of his susceptibility. Despite the various trials which man might have to undergo during his daily life, the crucial crisis he faces is his pursuit of a haven from the relentless roaming and restlessness he must endure while alive.

While Wolfe— depending on the context— presents the restless soul as an affliction which certain characters or the entirety of mankind must grapple with, in some passages he underscores the way in which Americans especially deal with the hunger that disturbs man. When Eugene moves away from home for a few weeks and begins working at the docks, which are crowded with marines and sailors during World War I, he discovers that "[i]n this camp of vagrant floaters he lost himself; he came home into this world from loneliness" (LH, 428). Here Wolfe emphasizes the "hunger for voyages, the hunger that haunts Americans, who are a nomad race," suggesting that the tendency toward travelling which Eugene and others possess is actually a trait shared by, and characteristic of, Americans in general. While previously Eugene felt isolated from others, once he is surrounded by the movement of sailors and marines, and partakes in their vitality, he feels a connection with the "vagrant floaters" despite how none of them are tied to that place. While the shared hunger may seem mostly positive in this passage, sometimes Wolfe has a more disheartening outlook on it, as when he writes of the "sons of the

[56] Matthew 8:20.
[57] Matthew 11:28.

lost and lonely fathers, sons of the wanderers, children of hardy loins, the savage earth, the pioneers…Bother, for what? For what? To kill the giant of loneliness and fear, to slay the hunger that would not rest, that would not give us rest" (TR, 866). Here he once again stresses that the hunger which finds an outlet in wandering is a struggle passed down through generations of ancestors who likewise spent their energies roaming, both literally and metaphorically. Furthermore, the object for which man's hunger seeks is a respite that will rid him of that which pains him and drives him on ceaselessly.

Not only does Wolfe sometimes address the issue of hunger specifically in terms of Americans, but he also draws connections between it and the American landscape. In one such passage, he writes:

> Our senses have been fed by our terrific land; our blood has learned to run to the imperial pulse of America which, leaving, we can never lose and never forget…And the old hunger returned—the terrible and obscure hunger that haunts and hurts Americans, and that makes us exiles at home and strangers wherever we go. (LH, 352)

This suggests that the Americans' sensual perception of, and experiences on, the land have caused their own bodies to become so integrated with the land that their identities cannot be separated. Even more interesting is that one of the main things which they have incorporated from their exposure if the "imperial pulse of America," which might indicate that a characterizing feature of Americans has become a similar form of energy which they have derived from, and therefore share with, the landscape. Yet despite this sense of belonging, they nonetheless are tormented by the mysterious hunger which results in their solitary and estranged status as wanderers. While the train whistle represents the excitement and vitality which his protagonists derive from it, it also represents this agitated condition. Though Wolfe does not explicitly designate the train whistle as such, this idea can be assumed based on the emphasis he places on it, especially within the context of man's suffering and the landscape. For instance,

without defining what "the things" refers to, Wolfe notes "the things that are in [Eugene's] blood, his heart, his brain, in every atom of his flesh and tissue, the things for which he draws his breath in labor, the things that madden him with an intolerable and nameless pain" (TR, 859), before writing: "And what are they? They are the whistle-wail of one of the great American engines as it thunders through the continent at night." Thus the train's sound is cast as the sole object which epitomizes Eugene's existence and experiences, and it is depicted in its powerful motion through the landscape.

Thomas Wolfe's passionate outlook on voyages and wandering is evident from his elaborate depictions of his characters' travels, and the exhilaration and fervor associated with them. Like his protagonists, Wolfe had a powerful inclination toward roaming and a desire to experience as much as possible. In the article which his first editor Maxwell Perkins wrote after Wolfe's death, Perkins remembers how "[h]is various quarters in town always looked as if he had just moved in, to camp for awhile. This was partly because he really had no interest in possession of any kind, but it was also because he was in his very nature a Far Wanderer, bent upon seeing all places"[5859] His works reveal his obsession with train travel in particular, and Rubin has explained that in Wolfe's writing "the powerful bulk of the locomotive—so much sound and fury, harnessed for full utilization of the energy while retaining its explosive glamor" has "symbolism that is at once spiritual and materialistic, aesthetic and practical, selfless and highly sexual."[60] Trains, characterized by their vigor, evoke in men both a sense of liberation and homelessness. While this may be a fairly universal sensation shared by the individuals exposed to them, in his writings, Wolfe places special emphasis on his protagonists' experiences with

[58] Wolfe employs the term "Far-Wanderer" to refer to Oliver Gant (LH, 58).
[59] Perkins in Rubin, 88.
[60] Rubin, 6.

trains moving through the landscape of America. When describing his first novel to the Guggenheim Foundation, he stated that "It tries to find out why Americans are a nomad race… why they are touched with a powerful and obscure homesickness wherever they go, both home and abroad."[61] Wolfe's view of the significant role of trains in America might result from his association of America with the wilderness, and from his idea that only the earth of America endure with "no ghosts to haunt it" (LH, 352). Through trains his protagonists encounter this earth, and they do so in accordance with their relationship with their parents and the legacy of both the maternal and paternal predecessors. This relationship serves to represent the tension between man's yearning for a stable homeland by which he identifies himself and his desire to pursue the roving spirit within him. Likewise while man's roving spirit may become satisfied and thrilled by the vitality and freedom which voyages provide, it also stems from his restless status of pursuing the stable respite of which he finds himself deprived.

[61] Holman, 1960, 25.

CONCLUSION

In his lengthy works, Thomas Wolfe presents the narratives of his characters' lives through his profuse and energetic descriptive style, by means of which he captures the significance of the experiences which define their lives. By writing semi-autobiographical texts, Wolfe strove to convey the common trials to which men in general are exposed. While many of the ordeals with which his characters grapple are universal, his ideas about the strong impact of physical stimulation on man's cognition— both conscious and unconscious— led him to describe specifically the experience of Americans. His renderings of the environment in which the characters find themselves express the relationship between man and a given location and how the latter both influences and reflects man's status, identity, and values. Thus both the city and the countryside reveal certain aspects of man's struggle, much like the wandering spirit with which Wolfe is fascinated.

Wolfe's descriptions of the city—replete with details of the man-made structures, the inhabitants, and their movements— portray the urban landscape as a manifestation of mankind's efforts to construct a stable world on which people can rely. At first glance, the city appears to serve as a symbol for the achievements of man and the promise of his potential advancement. The various features of the city which testify to mankind's triumphs include the architectural monuments, as well as the regulated flow of movement according to which city life is ordered. While man's trust in the sturdiness and permanence of the city may reassure him of his secure status, such a belief can only be preserved so long as man maintains a restricted view of the world and does not confront his vulnerability to death, time, and even the limitations of his own

faculties. If he were to confront his status as a nameless atom whose labors leave no lasting imprints, and see himself—as the figure of the man at the window sill does— in his bare form bereft of the equally fragile adornments with which he strives to embellish himself, he would have to acknowledge the angst which he tries to suppress. Thus man's sense of stability relies on his denial of the powerful factors which surpass his knowledge and his control and pose a challenge to the mechanical formulas upon which his understanding of reality is based.

Whereas the city man's existence becomes restricted to the artificial structures erected by him, the people in the countryside—due to their access to the eternal earth— have a chance to connect with something which transcends the susceptibility to which man is victim. From an early age, man begins to recognize himself through the urban landscape of his home, incorporating it into his existence through forms of education by which he cultivates an understanding for his surroundings. The connection which Wolfe's protagonists have with their homes reflects his own relationship to North Carolina. Despite the ambivalence he sometimes displayed toward his home, he continued to identify himself with it. He proclaimed in a letter to novelist James Boyd, for example, "I'm a Long Hunter from Bear Creek, and a rootin', tootin', shootin' son-of-a-gun from North Carolina."[62] The country man's bond with the land involves a relationship not only with the physical aspects of the natural landscape, but also with the history of its inhabitants' struggles upon it. As in his portrayals of the city, Wolfe mentions man's "million vanished footsteps" and his role as a "nameless atom" when writing about the countryside. In the context of the countryside, however, such a depiction is less dismal due to the enduring ties with the land which are passed down through generations as an inheritance. The ancestors' trials have tied them to the everlasting earth on which they toiled so that they maintain

[62] Holman, 1975, 108.

a presence as disembodied voices which the descendants who identify with the land can detect. Thus in his depictions of the landscape, Wolfe often writes about certain body organs—the heart, blood, and brain— of the inhabitants, conveying how they become infused with the spirit of the land and recognize themselves according to it so that man cannot be separated from the land on which both he and his ancestors have history. But despite the identification with one's home, man maintains his secret position as a stranger, a position which usually remains unacknowledged even by himself. Although man's estrangement may seem to entail his isolation from others, Wolfe's narratives suggest that the most intimate form of relationship becomes possible once two familiar people recognize the stranger status of one another.

While the landscapes of the city and countryside influence man's consciousness, Wolfe also depicts the way in which man is stirred toward roving as a result of his wandering spirit. In Wolfe's works, the excitement of voyages is often represented through train travel, and suggested through the physicality of the noise, momentum, and force of trains as they tear through the American landscape. The urge for travel is especially associated with youths, who are motivated by the sound of the train whistle with its tempting suggestions of liberation from the confines of the familiar and adventures into the unknown. Although man's impulse towards roaming may seem to imply his homeless condition, in the case of Wolfe's protagonists it is actually associated with their fathers as a form of inheritance passed down through the generations. The conflict between the desire for travel and the longing for a home is exemplified through the paternal side's inclination toward the former and the maternal side's bond to the land of the ancestors. But even though the wandering spirit serves as an expression of man's release from confines, it also reflects his restlessness as he is goaded on by his deprivation of a stable haven into which he can settle.

In writing semi-autobiographical works, Wolfe sought to capture the shared struggles which characterize man's existence. Through rendering even the common aspects of man's life with extensive descriptions, he sought to convey the inherent meaning in experiences which might often pass unacknowledged despite their role in defining man's life. While his writing does at times expose the flaws of humanity and the "corrupt and shoddy counterfeits of man" (PS, 72), he ultimately maintained faith in the underlying dignity of man. Wolfe did not attain this hopeful belief in man from witnessing people amid secure and harmonious circumstances, but rather from noticing the perseverance with which men endeavored to face the challenges which confronted them, despite the lack of any discernible relief. Thus Wolfe's new-found trust in man and his nobleness arose "[f]rom this grim loss, and from the desolation," from the dismal view of the world which was no doubt exaggerated by his association with the South and the experience of the Great Depression. In the speech which he delivered at Purdue University, he explains how man's refusal to be crushed by adversity led him to "feel the common heart of man" and to "see that this, no matter how much it gets betrayed, is the thing that can never be betrayed." He continues to expound:

> no matter how much [the common heart of man] gets corrupted, [it] is the thing that finally can never be corrupted; no matter how much it gets defeated, is the thing that can never be defeated—the thing that is at rock bottom at the end—the thing that will remain, that changes and is yet unchangeable—that endures and must endure.

In his vivid portrayals of man in various places, Wolfe renders the inherent dignity of man's internal struggles as he strives to understand the meaning of his position in his world.

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