

“*Look Homeward, Angel* is a big book and contains multitudes. Among them is a deep sense of place for the town of Asheville, where Wolfe grew up. I was born in Asheville, though I grew up in a town eighty miles more remote and fifty times smaller, but where a bowl of old blue mountains equally ‘rimmed the heart of the world.’

When my father was a young man, he saw Thomas Wolfe walking down Patton Avenue, towering over the people mobbing him. Not an angry crowd, though I’m quite sure angry and resentful citizens existed, as biographies insist. But what my father saw when Wolfe came home again was adulation. Much later, in the ’60s, my father was a friend of Fred Wolfe—Luke in *Look Homeward, Angel*. When I was seventeen and obsessed with Thomas Wolfe’s writing, my copy of his second novel—*Of Time and the River*—had endpapers filled with Fred’s handwritten recollections of how one scene actually happened. Comparing the two accounts, it seemed to me that what brother Thomas had written was much more real in every way I could understand than mere fidelity to fact.

In 1938, after Thomas Wolfe was buried in Riverside Cemetery, famed Scribner’s editor Maxwell Perkins asked to be driven to a place where he could overlook Asheville before his train left for New York. I live up the mountain from where Perkins stopped, and some days as I pass the likely spot where he admired the vista, I remember the town more like Perkins saw it, as it was when I was a boy, before the construction of hideous modern bank buildings wiped out entire blocks of town and before four-lane roads cut mountains in half leaving raw wounds that will not heal in a thousand lifetimes. I look across Asheville to the western mountains and wonder what books Wolfe might have written in the ’60s when he would have been in his sixties. Whether Asheville might still have meant anything to him or whether he would long since have left it behind.

Thomas Wolfe sometimes wrote ten thousand words a day. Maybe that’s real or maybe it’s legend. Ten thousand words amounts to about forty pages in real money. Imagine ending the day with forty new pages spilled with language as rich and ambitious and intensely American as any of our novelists has ever accomplished. And he was one of us.”

—CHARLES FRAZIER,
author of *Cold Mountain*
and *Thirteen Moons*

“*Look Homeward, Angel* is one of the most important novels of my life. It was the first literary adult novel I ever read; I was fourteen and aching to become a writer, and it set me on fire. It’s a wonderful story for any young person burning with literary ambition, but it also speaks to the longings of our whole lives; I’m still moved by Wolfe’s ability to convey the human appetite for understanding and experience. His hometown of Altamont is my hometown of Asheville, and although Asheville has changed a great deal since he first observed some of my ancestors (among many other characters there, I still catch a whiff of Altamont when I go home again. To even think about Wolfe’s prose is to see the world through its lens for a moment. Read it in spring by an open window.”

—ELIZABETH KOSTOVA

“I have needed to write the American novelist Thomas Wolfe a love letter since I first encountered him in Eugene Norris’s high school English class at the end of 1961. The book’s impact on me was so viscerally powerful that I consider the reading of it as one of the pivotal events of my life. It starts off with the single greatest, knock-your-socks-off first page I have ever come across in my careful reading of world literature, and I consider myself a small-time aficionado of wonderful first and last pages. The book itself took full possession of me in a way no book has before or since with the possible exception of *Of Time and the River*. I read it from cover to cover three straight times, transfixed by the mesmerizing, dazzling hold of the narrator’s voice as I took in and fed on the awesome power of the long line. I realized that breathing and the written word were intimately connected to each other as I stepped into the bracing streams of Thomas Wolfe and could hear the waterfalls forming in the cliffs that lay invisible beyond me. I kept catching myself holding my breath as I read *Look Homeward, Angel*. I had not recognized that the beauty of our language, shaped into sentences as pretty as blue herons, could bring me to my knees with pleasure—did not know that words could pour through me like honey through a burst hive or that gardens seeded in dark secrets could bloom along the borders and porches of my half-ruined boyhood because a writer could touch me in all the broken places with his art.”

—PAT CONROY,
author of *My Losing Season*

“When I was in the seventh grade a teacher noticed I was reading widely but, he judged, not too well. I was reading Zane Grey and Erle Stanley Gardner, Mickey Spillane and Erskine Caldwell. ‘You’re a wide reader, but with no depth,’ he told me. The next day he presented me with the Modern Library edition of *Look Homeward, Angel*. ‘Read this and tell me what you think,’ he said.

All these years later it is still difficult to express what I felt and thought. I was immediately drawn into Old Gant’s far-wandering hunger to carve the angel. Wolfe’s Altamont, rimmed by the mountains of Old Catawba, was a more tangible geography than my own backyard, and the Gants, so caught up in tumultuous life, were as real as the people I saw every day. The book raised the curtain on the world; it articulated some compulsion to write I had no words for. Wolfe made it possible to believe that the stuff of life, with all its awe and mystery and magic, could by some strange alchemy be transmuted to the page. The book was insistent, it wouldn’t leave me alone. Wolfe whispered to me in the night and his soaring incantory rhetoric of trains highballing it through October nights and his search for the stone, the leaf, the unfound door, sang in the blood like a hallucinatory drug.

Everything about Wolfe was larger than life. His talent, his ego, his sensitivity to criticism. His physical self. His books, which were really one novel about a man experiencing the world. He never married, fathered a child, had a permanent home. He died young, and he may never have located the unfound door, but he came closer than anyone else.

When I was growing up magazines used to run essays on American novelists—the old masters were still around, Faulkner and Hemingway and Steinbeck—and the critic used to assess the up and

comers and conjecture who was going to write the great American novel. I was a little demused
this. Even I knew that Thomas Wolfe had already written it."

—WILLIAM GAY,
author of *The Long Home*



Books by Thomas Wolfe

Of Time and the River

The Web and the Rock

You Can't Go Home Again

From Death to Morning

The Story of a Novel



SCRIBNER

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New York, NY 10020

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To A. B.

*“Then, as all my soules bee,
Emparadis’d in you, (in whom alone
I understand, and grow and see,)
The rafters of my body, bone
Being still with you, the Muscle, Sinew, and Veine,
Which tile this house, will come againe.”*

O Lost, and Found

One of the great events of my teen years was the appearance of the Henderson County bookmobile in the parking lot of Green River Baptist Church every first Monday of the month in the late 1950s. The vehicle was an old utility truck outfitted with bookshelves. I had never seen so many books before. From those shelves I picked *Farmer Boy*, Jack London's *White Fang*, James Oliver Curwood's *The Valley of Silent Men*, as well as *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. But one afternoon in 1960 I saw a huge volume in gray cloth with *Look Homeward, Angel* printed on the spine. I'd seen Thomas Wolfe's picture in the Hendersonville newspaper, along with a photograph of a stone angel in the local cemetery that was supposed to have inspired him. I knew that was the book I had to read.

Wolfe was often mentioned in the newspaper in those days. There was still an air of scandal and mystery about him. He was a local legend, having grown up in Asheville just some thirty miles away and having written his famous book about Asheville and about his family.

When I took *Look Homeward, Angel* from the bookmobile and began reading it, and looking at the Gorsline illustrations, I felt this was the book I'd always been looking for. It was a novel about me and it was more than a novel. It was a revelation about how ambitious and thrilled and scared I was, and about how "lost" I felt. Eugene Gant's parents seemed like my own parents, and his anxieties and frustrations and sense of destiny were my own. As so many other American boys had before and have since, I discovered a version of myself in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and I became intoxicated with the elevated, poetic prose. I felt I had discovered a new poetry in the choral sections, in the soliloquies.

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart?
Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

...Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door.

To me this sounded better than Homer and Shakespeare combined. I didn't really know Homer or very much Shakespeare, but I was sure this was what was meant by epic writing, and by tragic poetry. I read passages from the book so many times I had them by heart. "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas".

Imagine my exhilaration when I discovered Thomas Wolfe had been born on October 3, 1900, the same day on which *I* was born forty-four years later in nearby Hendersonville. Our kinship appeared even stronger than I had guessed before. No wonder the language and longings of his book felt so

much my own. It appeared to me that Thomas Wolfe had captured for all time the essence and the rage, the fear and poetry of what it meant to be young and alive in Western North Carolina. After describing the long, slow, painful death of Eugene's brother Ben from consumption, Wolfe says, "We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death—but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben? Like Apollo, who did his penance to the high god in the sad house of King Admetus, he came, a god with broken feet, into the gray hovel of this world. And he lived here a stranger, trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language, the lost faces, the stone, the leaf, the door."

At the end of the novel, as Eugene Gant is about to set out for the world beyond Asheville, or Altamont, as he walks in the Square at sunrise after hallucinating that the stone angels in his father's monument shop have come alive and that Ben has returned as a ghost to talk with him, he exhorts himself to set out on his journey, paraphrasing Stephen Daedalus. "I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded; I shall haunt you, ghost, along the labyrinthine ways..."

The theme of the lost language, and the lost world to be recovered, haunted me as much as any other motif in the novel. Reading Wolfe I felt I was recovering a lost language of vision and of the self. The impact of *Look Homeward, Angel* was a sense of self-discovery and of doom at once. It was similar to what I felt when reading Poe and Whitman and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, all wrapped up in one book. The intensity, the Byronic sadness, the sense of thrilling grief, and of fallenness from a higher world and a higher language, were the most special elements of the experience.

For years I have argued that the American poetic imagination is divided against itself between Emersonian exuberance and openness and the Gothic, symbolist interiors of Poe. It is as though a great schism runs through American literature and culture from the beginning, like the almost invisible crack in the house of Usher. It is as though the two halves of Coleridge's capacious and troubled brain were projected onto the North American poetic landscape.

Wolfe seems to understand instinctively the paradox at the heart of American culture. He desired to encompass, to unite both sides of himself. He was an odd combination of youthfulness with profound learning and wisdom. He published his most famous book in 1929, and died young, with great unfinished projects in fragments.

Besides Wolfe, the other local writer often in the news when I was young was Carl Sandburg, who lived in the old Memminger house in nearby Flat Rock. Like Wolfe, Sandburg had a vast popular audience. Without knowing it at the time, I think I acquired from both local celebrities the sense that the best writing is poetic and for the larger audience of ordinary readers. Accessibility to the common reader has always been my goal and my challenge, in writing both poetry and prose. I feel fortunate to have had such models when I was so young.

I myself did not reread Thomas Wolfe for almost twenty years. I had gone on to discover the precise understatement of Hemingway, the fury of Faulkner, the tragic romances of Fitzgerald. But when I returned to *Look Homeward, Angel* in the early 1980s, I was pleased to discover that the novel still worked its spell on me. The cadences of the language, the richness of diction, the passion of the narration, the detail of boyhood and small-town life early in the century were just as vivid as they had

been in my teens. But what was different in my rereading was the emphasis. At the age of thirty-six the choral sections, the rhapsodic passages, seemed less interesting than the realism and satire. The satire was extraordinarily entertaining and on the mark. Wolfe is particularly good at finding what is absurd about small-town life, and in the speech of store clerks, local politicians, reporters, blowsy widows, he captures the spirit of an era. The work is alive and moving. But it seemed a very different book from what I had read in 1960. I had grown up to see new facets in the novel.

I know that Thomas Wolfe is very much out of fashion now among academic critics. A few years ago Harold Bloom began a review of Wolfe's letters with the sentence, "One cannot discuss the literary merits of Thomas Wolfe; he has none." My friends from Yale never pass up an opportunity to express their disdain for my fellow Tarheel.

While rereading *Look Homeward, Angel* it occurred to me, however, that Wolfe has suffered a fate among academic critics similar to their treatment of Poe. His great fame and popularity, his legend and notoriety, were held against him. Wolfe was so famous in his own lifetime there has been backlash against him ever since. And like Poe, he is read by the young, and cherished by the young. Scholars are often embarrassed by their own early enthusiasms, feeling that what they cared for so much when young can't be taken seriously later.

But since rereading *Look Homeward, Angel* I have noticed his influence on so many other writers including James Agee, Robert Penn Warren, Jack Kerouac, and Cormac McCarthy, to name a few. Of the novelists of the early twentieth century only Hemingway and Faulkner have had a greater impact on the following generations.

I am often asked why there are so many important writers from North Carolina. There may be more well-known fiction writers and poets per capita from North Carolina than from any other state, unless it's Mississippi. My short answer is: Thomas Wolfe. Once Wolfe achieved such great fame in the 1930s, other young North Carolinians got the idea that writing was an opportunity, a real possibility. The same is probably true of Faulkner and Mississippi. Once a region or a state has an extremely famous writer, other writers are likely to follow. But the recognition and encouragement North Carolina has given its writers is a factor also. When I was a student at NC State and then UNC-Chapel Hill in the 1960s, there was a feature almost every Sunday in the *Raleigh News & Observer* about one North Carolina writer or another: Frances Grey Patton, Guy Owen, Reynolds Price, Doris Betts, Romulus Linney. It was assumed at both UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC-Greensboro that among the students there would be important future writers.

When I reread Wolfe in the 1980s I was reminded how much he is the poet of the town, of the city of Asheville, and of the university. The mountains themselves are in the distant background, and the mountain people are in the distant background. The mountain folk are the mother's gaunt and somewhat sinister relations in the hills back of beyond. The mountain coves and peaks are glimpsed from the train and from the city square. Here is a passage describing Gant's arrival in the mountains. "Dusk came. The huge bulk of the hills was foggily emergent. Small smoky lights went up in the hillside shacks. The train crawled dizzily across high trestles spanning ghostly hawsers of water. Far up, far down, plumed with wisps of smoke, toy cabins stuck to bank and gulch and hillside. The train

toiled sinuously up among gouged red cuts with slow labor”.

And once Gant enters the remote beauty of the mountains and settles in the village of Altamont, he meets Eliza Pentland from back in those mysterious hills. They become engaged and he is taken to meet the Pentland family.

...and finally Greeley, the youngest, a boy with lapping idiot grins, full of strange squealing noises at which they laughed. He was eleven, degenerate, weak, scrofulous, but his white moist hands could draw from a violin music that had in it something unearthly and untaught.

And as they sat there in the hot little room with its warm odor of mellowing apples, the vast winds howled down from the hills, there was a roaring in the pines, remote and demented, the bare boughs clashed. And as they peeled, or pared, or whittled, their talk slid from its rude jocularly to death and burial: they drawled monotonously, with evil hunger, their gossip of destiny, and of men but newly lain in the earth.

From the first reading I was struck by the accuracy of Wolfe's portrayal of certain aspects of the mountain people. I had grown up in small, hot rooms listening to my elders tell stories of grief and sickness and death. But I had never thought the habit peculiar to mountain people until Wolfe pointed it out with his satire. Wolfe is particularly good at selecting real traits and characteristics and exaggerating them for effect. The mournfulness, the relish for tales of misery and sickness and death were so much a part of the world I had grown up in that I had never thought them notable. Reading Thomas Wolfe I learned something about myself. But instead of the Byronic observer I thought I was at fifteen, I later saw I was one of those whittling by the fire and telling those stories of mourning and death. Those people were my people and their stories were my stories. I had learned from Wolfe almost the opposite of what I thought I had. It was not Wolfe's "poetry" that inspired me, but the world of the mountain people, so haunted and sinister in his writing, but which I wanted to write about from inside. I did not want to satirize or be ironic. I wanted to let those people tell their own stories in their own idiom. The lost language I wanted to recover was the living language of a culture almost vanished when I was a child. I wanted to capture that lost language with the same artistry and seeming naturalness with which young Greeley played the violin.

Among Wolfe's shorter works is a novella called "The Web of Earth." This story is spoken entirely by a woman narrator talking to her son about their family, about gossip from home, about the late father. Wolfe wrote it after a visit from his mother in New York, and it is different from almost anything else he wrote, for it is without a third person narrator or editorial comment. Reading "The Web of Earth" in the early 1980s helped steer me toward writing in the voice of a woman character, toward letting the character tell her own story. That connection with a living voice is, for me, at the heart of fiction writing. We read novels, and we write them, to know and touch other lives, and to listen to other voices.

"That was the year the locusts came: it seems so long ago since the year the locusts

came, and all the earth was eaten bare, it seems so long ago. But no (I thought) the thing ~~kept puzzlin' me, you know—it can't be that, there hasn't been time enough for that,~~ it was only the year before in January—Lord! Lord! I often think of all that I've been through, and wonder that I'm here to tell it. I reckon for a fact I had the power of Nature in me; why! No more trouble than the earth takes bearing corn, all the children, the eight who lived, and all the others that you never heard about..." ("The Web of Earth")

One of the special things I learned from "The Web of Earth" was that it is the unpredictableness of a narrator that makes the voice most alive. The speaker keeps surprising us, but the sentences seem inevitable once we hear them. I also saw the advantages of a woman narrator. Women are usually closer observers of detail, and they are more willing to talk about their feelings, their relationships, than men are. The novella was a revelation of intimacy, paradox of close characterization, and toughness.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of Thomas Wolfe to the younger generation of North Carolina writers. The soaring energy of the prose, the exuberance of his vision are only part of his significance. Even more important is the sense of place, the bond with place, which his writing dramatizes and fosters. However satiric or ironic his Altamont is, and his mountain folks are, he wrote of life here in the first decades of the twentieth century with remarkable accuracy and understanding. However romantic his prose and his protagonist may seem, Wolfe was willing to portray the greed and absurdities of that world, the corruption of politics, the hypocrisy that tainted and limited our culture then, and now, as well as the intense family loyalties, brotherly affection, and mystery of the mountains themselves.

It is also hard to overstate the significance of seeing in a famous book people and places that you recognize. When I was a boy we went to Asheville about once a year to buy Christmas presents or school clothes. To me it was the great city on a hill. Asheville was the promise of the great world beyond the mountains. I had seen the Square, the Battery Park Hotel, the train station, and Beaucatcher Mountain. To see those places live again in Wolfe's prose was an inspiration and exhortation, whispering in my ear *write, write, write*.

It is a pleasure to have this new edition of *Look Homeward, Angel* as an occasion to celebrate the high water mark of his achievement in American fiction, the heritage of greatness he has given us. It is also a pleasure to look forward, to the future, to the writers of the new century who will be the heirs and beneficiaries of Wolfe's legacy. We can look backward to the height and scale of Wolfe's masterwork, but also forward. As Wolfe says on the final page of his classic book: "Yet, as he stood for the last time by the angels of his father's porch, it seemed as if the Square already were far and lost; or, I should say, he was like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say 'The town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges".

Almost eight decades after *Look Homeward, Angel's* first publication, it is an honor to salute Wolfe's courage and honesty, his great artistry and largeness of vision. It is still painful that he died so young and that his best work might have been ahead of him. But the wonder is what he did accomplish in his short life. He belonged to a great era of American writing. It is a privilege to pass his work on to a new generation of readers.

When in the spring of 1947 William B. Wisdom, of New Orleans, presented to the Harvard College Library his distinguished collection of Thomas Wolfe, it was at once apparent that the person above all others to provide an introduction to it was Maxwell E. Perkins, '07, of Charles Scribner's Sons, editor of Wolfe's first novels, and allied to Wolfe by the closest ties of profession and of friendship. Mr. Perkins gladly consented to prepare an article; he was engaged upon it at his sudden death on 17 June 1947. Although the article was to have been expanded by another three thousand words, with a more detailed discussion of Wolfe as a person, as it stands it has the effect of a self-contained statement. It is published as the last writing of Maxwell Perkins and as an expression of the memorial which he planned to compose to Thomas Wolfe.

I think that there is not in any one place so nearly complete a collection of an author's writings and records as that of Thomas Wolfe's now in the Harvard Library. When he died on that sad day in September 1938, when war was impending, or soon after that, I learned that I was his executor and that he had actually left little—as he would have thought, and as it seemed then—besides his manuscripts. It was my obligation to dispose of them to the advantage of his beneficiaries and his memory, and though the times were bad, and Wolfe had not then been recognized as what he now is, could have sold them commercially, piecemeal, through dealers, for more money than they ever brought. I was determined that this literary estate should remain a unit, available to writers and students, and I tried to sell it as such; but at that time, with war clouds gathering and soon bursting, I could find no adequate buyer.

Then Aline Bernstein, to whom Wolfe had given the manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel*, sold it by auction for the relief of her people in misfortune, on the understanding that it would be given to Harvard. Not long after that William B. Wisdom, who had recognized Wolfe as a writer of genius on the publication of the *Angel*, and whose faith in him had never wavered, offered to purchase all of his manuscripts and records. He had already accumulated a notable collection of Wolfiana. His correspondence showed me that he thought as I did—that the point of supreme importance was that these records and writings should not be scattered to the four winds, that they be kept intact. And so the whole great packing case of material—letters, bills, documents, notebooks and manuscripts—went to him on the stipulation, which I never need have asked for, that he would will it all to one institution. Since *Look Homeward, Angel* was already in Harvard, since Tom Wolfe had loved the reading room of the Library where, as he so often told me, he devoured his hundreds of books and spent most of his Harvard years, Mr. Wisdom made a gift of all this to Harvard. And there it now is.

Though I had worked as an editor with Thomas Wolfe on two huge manuscripts, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, I was astonished on that Spring evening of 1935 when Tom, about t

sail for England, brought to our house on East 49th Street, because Scribner's was closed, the huge packing case containing all his literary material. Tom and I and the taxi man carried it in and set it down. Then Tom said to the man, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Lucky.' 'Lucky!' said Tom—I think it was perhaps an Americanization of some Italian name—and grasped his hand. It seemed a good omen. We three had done something together. We were together for that moment. We all shook hands. But for days, that huge packing case blocked our hall, until I got it removed to Scribner's.

The first time I heard of Thomas Wolfe I had a sense of foreboding. I who love the man say this. Every good thing that comes is accompanied by trouble. It was in 1928 when Madeleine Boyd, a literary agent, came in. She talked of several manuscripts which did not much interest me, but frequently interrupted herself to tell of a wonderful novel about an American boy. I several times said to her, 'Why don't you bring it in here, Madeleine?' and she seemed to evade the question. But finally she said, 'I will bring it, if you promise to read every word of it.' I did promise, but she told me other things that made me realize that Wolfe was a turbulent spirit, and that we were in for turbulence. When the manuscript came, I was fascinated by the first scene where Eugene's father, Oliver W. Gant, with his brother, two little boys, stood by a roadside in Pennsylvania and saw a division of Lee's Army on the march to Gettysburg.

But then there came some ninety-odd pages about Oliver Gant's life in Newport News, and Baltimore, and elsewhere. All this was what Wolfe had heard, and had no actual association with which to reconcile it, and it was inferior to the first episode, and in fact to all the rest of the book. I was turned off to other work and gave the manuscript to Wallace Meyer, thinking, 'Here is another promising novel that probably will come to nothing.' Then Meyer showed me that wonderful night scene in the cafe where Ben was with the Doctors, and Horse Hines, the undertaker, came in. I dropped everything and began to read again, and all of us were reading the book simultaneously, you might say, including John Hall Wheelock, and there never was the slightest disagreement among us as to its importance.

After some correspondence between me and Wolfe, and between him and Madeleine Boyd, from which we learned how at the October Fair in Germany he had been almost beaten to death—when I realized again that we had a Moby Dick to deal with—Wolfe arrived in New York and stood in the doorway of my boxstall of an office leaning against the door jamb. When I looked up and saw his wild hair and bright countenance—although he was so altogether different physically—I thought of Shelley. *He* was fair, but his hair was wild, and his face was bright and his head disproportionately small.

We then began to work upon the book and the first thing we did, to give it unity, was to cut out that wonderful scene it began with and the ninety-odd pages that followed, because it seemed to me, and he agreed, that the whole tale should be unfolded through the memories and senses of the boy, Eugene, who was born in Asheville. We both thought that the story was compassed by that child's realization; that it was life and the world as he came to realize them. When he had tried to go back into the life of his father before he arrived in Asheville, without the inherent memory of events, the reality and the poignance were diminished—but for years it was on my conscience that I had persuaded Tom to cut out that first scene of the two little boys on the roadside with Gettysburg impending.

And then what happened? In *Of Time and the River* he brought the scene back to greater effect when old Gant was dying on the gallery of the hospital in Baltimore and in memory recalled his older days. After that occurred I felt much less anxiety in suggesting cuts: I began then to realize that nothing Wolfe wrote was ever lost, that omissions from one book were restored in a later one. An extreme example of this is the fact that the whole second half of *The Web and the Rock* was originally intended to be the concluding episode in *Of Time and the River*. But most, and perhaps almost all, of those early incidents of Gant's life were worked into *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*.

I had realized, for Tom had prefaced his manuscript with a statement to that effect, that *Look Homeward, Angel* was autobiographical, but I had come to think of it as being so in the sense that *David Copperfield* is, or *War and Peace*, or *Pendennis*. But when we were working together, I suddenly saw that it was often almost literally autobiographical—that these people in it were his people. I am sure my face took on a look of alarm, and Tom saw it and he said, 'But Mr. Perkins, you don't understand. I think these people are *great* people and that they should be told about.' He was right. He had written a great book, and it had to be taken substantially as it was. And in truth, the extent of cutting in that book has somehow come to be greatly exaggerated. Really, it was more a matter of reorganization. For instance, Tom had that wonderful episode when Gant came back from his far-wandering and rode in early morning on the trolley car through the town and heard about who had died and who had been born and saw all the scenes that were so familiar to Tom or Eugene, as the old trolley rumbled along. This was immediately followed by an episode of a similar kind where Eugene, with his friends, walked home from school through the town of Asheville. That was presented in a Joycean way, but it was the same sort of thing—someone going through the town and through his perceptions revealing it to the reader. By putting these episodes next to each other the effect of each was diminished, and I think we gave both much greater value by separating them. We did a great deal of detailed cutting, but it was such things as that I speak of that constituted perhaps the greater part of the work.

Of Time and the River was a much greater struggle for Tom. Eventually, I think it was on Thanksgiving Day 1933, he brought me in desperation about two feet of typescript. The first scene in this was the platform of the railroad station in Asheville when Eugene was about to set out for Harvard, and his family had come to see him off. It must have run to about 30,000 words and I cut it perhaps 10,000 and showed it to Tom. He approved it. When you are waiting for a train to come in, there is suspense. Something is going to happen. You must, it seemed to me, maintain that sense of suspense and you can't to the extent of 30,000 words. There never was any cutting that Tom did not agree to. He knew that cutting was necessary. His whole impulse was to utter what he felt and he had no time to revise and compress.

So then we began a year of nights of work, including Sundays, and every cut, and change, and interpolation, was argued about and about. The principle that I was working on was that this book, too, got its unity and its form through the senses of Eugene, and I remember how, if I had had my way, we should, by sticking to that principle, have lost one of the most wonderful episodes Wolfe ever wrote—the death of Gant. One night we agreed that certain transitions should be written in, but instead of doing them Wolfe brought on the next night some five thousand words about Eugene's sister in Asheville when her father was ill, and a doctor there and a nurse. I said, 'Tom, this is all outside the story, and you know it. Eugene was not there, he was in Cambridge; all of this was outside his

perception and knowledge at the time.’ Tom agreed with me, but the next night, he brought me another five thousand words or so which got up into the death of Gant. And 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.

It is said that Tolstoy never willingly parted with the manuscript of *War and Peace*. One could imagine him working on it all through his life. Certainly Thomas Wolfe never willingly parted from the proofs of *Of Time and the River*. He sat brooding over them for weeks in the Scribner library and not reading. John Wheelock read them and we sent them to the printer and told Tom it had been done. I could believe that otherwise he might have clung to them to the end.

He dedicated that book to me in most extravagant terms. I never saw the dedication until the book was published and though I was most grateful for it, I had forebodings when I heard of his intention. I think it was that dedication that threw him off his stride and broke his magnificent scheme. It gave shallow people the impression that Wolfe could not function as a writer without collaboration, and one critic even used some such phrases as, ‘Wolfe and Perkins—Perkins and Wolfe—what way is that to write a novel.’ Nobody with the slightest comprehension of the nature of a writer could accept such an assumption. No writer could possibly tolerate the assumption, which perhaps Tom almost himself did, that he was dependent as a writer upon anyone else. He had to prove to himself and to the world that this was not so.

And that was the fundamental reason that he turned to another publisher. If he had not—but by the time he did it was plain that he had to tell, in the medium of fiction and through the transmutation of his amazing imagination, the story of his own life—he never would have broken his own great plan by distorting Eugene Gant into George Webber. That was a horrible mistake. I think Edward Aswell, of Harper & Brothers, agrees with me in this, but when the manuscript that came to form *The Webber* and *the Rock and You Can’t Go Home Again* got to him to work on, and in some degree to me, as Wolfe’s executor, Tom was dead, and things had to be taken as they were.

The trouble began after the publication of *Of Time and the River*, which the reviewers enormously praised—but many of them asserted that Wolfe could only write about himself, that he could not see the world or anything objectively, with detachment—that he was always autobiographical. Wolfe was extremely sensitive to criticism, for all his tremendous faith in his genius as an obligation put upon him to fulfill. One day when I lived on East 49th Street near Second Avenue, and he on First Avenue, just off the corner of 49th, I met him as I was going home. He said he wanted to talk to me, as we did talk every evening about that time, and we went into the Waldorf. He referred to the criticisms against him, and said that he wanted to write a completely objective, unautobiographical book, and that it would show how strangely different everything is from what a person expects it to be. One might say that he was thinking of the theme that has run through so many great books, such as *Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*, where a man, young or old, goes hopefully out into the world slap into the face of outrageous reality. He was going to put on the title page what was said by Prince Andrei, in *War and Peace*, after his first battle, when the praise fell upon those who had done nothing and blame almost fell upon one who had done everything. Prince Andrei, who saved the battery commander who most of all had held back the French from the blame that Little Tushin would have accepted, walked out with him into the night. Then as Tushin left, Tolstoy said, ‘Prince Andrei looked up at the stars and sighed; everything was so different from what he thought it was going to be.’

~~Tom was in a desperate state. It was not only what the critics said that made him wish to write objectively, but that he knew that what he had written had given great pain even to those he loved the most. The conclusion of our talk was that if he could write such an objective book on this theme within a year, say, to the extent of perhaps a hundred thousand words, it might be well to do it. It was this that turned him to George Webber, but once he began on that he really and irresistibly resumed the one story he was destined to write, which was that of himself, or Eugene Gant.~~

And so, the first half of *The Web and the Rock*, of which there is only a typescript, is a re-telling in different terms of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Wolfe was diverted from his natural purpose—and even had he lived, what could have been done? Some of his finest writing is that first half of *The Web and the Rock*. Could anybody have just tossed it out?

But if Tom had held to his scheme and completed the whole story of his life as transmuted into fiction through his imagination, I think the accusation that he had no sense of form could not have stood. He wrote one long story, 'The Web of Earth,' which had perfect form, for all its intricacy. I remember saying to him, 'Not one word of this should be changed.' One might say that as his own physical dimensions were huge so was his conception of a book. He had one book to write about a vast, sprawling, turbulent land—America—as perceived by Eugene Gant. Even when he was in Europe, it was of America he thought. If he had not been diverted and had lived to complete it, I think it would have had the form that was suited to the subject.

His detractors say he could only write about himself, but all that he wrote of was transformed by his imagination. For instance, in *You Can't Go Home Again* he shows the character Foxhall Edwards breakfast. Edwards's young daughter enters 'as swiftly and silently as a ray of light.' She is very shy and in a hurry to get to school. She tells of a theme she has written on Walt Whitman and what the teacher said of Whitman. When Edwards urges her not to hurry and makes various observations, she says, 'Oh, Daddy, you're so funny!' What Tom did was to make one unforgettable little character out of three daughters of Foxhall Edwards.

He got the ray of light many years ago when he was with me in my house in New Canaan, Connecticut, and one daughter, at the age of about eight or ten, came in and met this gigantic stranger. After she was introduced she fluttered all about the room in her embarrassment, but radiant, like a sunbeam. Then Tom was present when another daughter, in Radcliffe, consulted me about a paper she was writing on Whitman, but he put this back into her school days. The third, of which he composed single character, was the youngest, who often did say, partly perhaps, because she was not at ease when Tom was there, 'Oh, Daddy, you're so silly.' That is how Tom worked. He created something new and something meaningful through a transmutation of what he saw, heard, and realized.

I think no one could understand Thomas Wolfe who had not seen or properly imagined the place in which he was born and grew up. Asheville, North Carolina, is encircled by mountains. The trains wind in and out through labyrinths of passes. A boy of Wolfe's imagination imprisoned there could think that what was beyond was all wonderful—different from what it was where there was not for him enough of anything. Whatever happened, Wolfe would have been what he was. I remember on the day of his death saying to his sister Mabel that I thought it amazing in an American family that one of the sons who wanted to be a writer should have been given the support that was given Tom, and that

they all deserved great credit for that. She said it didn't matter, that nothing could have prevented Tom from doing what he did.

That is true, but I think that those mountainous walls which his imagination vaulted gave him the vision of an America with which his books are fundamentally concerned. He often spoke of the artist in America—how the whole color and character of the country was completely new—never interpreted; how in England, for instance, the writer inherited a long accretion of accepted expressions from which he could start. But Tom would say—and he had seen the world—‘who has ever made you know the color of an American box car?’ Wolfe was in those mountains—he tells of the train whistle at night—the trains were winding their way out into the great world where it seemed to the boy there was everything desirable, and vast, and wonderful.

It was partly that which made him want to see everything, and read everything, and experience everything, and say everything. There was a night when he lived on First Avenue that Nancy Hale, who lived on East 49th Street near Third Avenue, heard a kind of chant, which grew louder. She got up and looked out of the window at two or three in the morning and there was the great figure of Thomas Wolfe, advancing in his long countryman's stride, with his swaying black raincoat, and what he was chanting was, ‘I wrote ten thousand words today—I wrote ten thousand words today.’

Tom must have lived in eight or nine different parts of New York and Brooklyn for a year or more. He knew in the end every aspect of the City—he walked the streets endlessly—but he was not a city man. The city fascinated him but he did not really belong in it and was never satisfied to live in it. He was always thinking of America as a whole and planning trips to some part that he had not yet seen, and in the end taking them. His 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 possessions of any kind, but it was also because he was in his very nature a Far Wanderer, bent upon seeing all places, and his rooms were just necessities into which he never settled. Even when he was there his mind was not. He needed a continent to range over, actually and in imagination. And his place was all America. It was with America he was most deeply concerned and I believe he opened it up as no other writer ever did for the people of his time and for the writers and artists and poets of tomorrow. Surely he had a thing to tell us.

MAXWELL E. PERKINS

1. The article is printed in the form received from Mr. Perkins's secretary two days after his death, with some slight modifications in punctuation and with the addition of a title. [Note by the Editor of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*.]

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