

LIFE AS ART
A STUDY OF RHETORICAL AMBIVALENCE IN
THOMAS C. WOLFE'S FICTIONS

By
SIVASISH BISWAS

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NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG 793 014

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I, *Sivasish Biswas*, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis – *Life as Art: A Study of Rhetorical Ambivalence in Thomas C. Wolfe's Fictions*, is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or, to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Sivasish Biswas
(Sivasish Biswas)
Candidate

R.P. Sharma
(Prof. R.P. Sharma)
Professor & Head
Department of English
NEHU, Shillong

K.C. Baral
(Prof. K.C. Baral)
Supervisor
Director
CIEFL Regional Centre, Shillong

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Sivasish Biswas
SIVASISH BISWAS

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Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

The value of a fictional work, according to both Henry James and D.H. Lawrence, becomes profoundly meaningful only in its relation to the 'lived life'. James defines novel as "a personal, a direct impression of life that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of impression" (quoted in Selden, 1988: 503). The manner in which Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900-1938), one of the important modern American novelists sees the relation between fiction and lived life comes very close to the understanding of James and Lawrence. To him, any creative endeavour is nothing but an intense encounter with life. Like art, the strange and bitter miracle of life existed for him as congeries of contradictions. He realized that only through contradictions, both life and art evolve, shape and progress. The meanings and workings of both become clearer only when their negations are brought forth. Sinclair Lewis, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1930, had described Wolfe as a gargantuan creature with great gusto for life. He was as hungry for experience as for food; he wanted, as he said, to explore life "with an

encyclopedic thoroughness” (Moser, 1967: 225). With this conviction, he lived through the variegated experiences of life, attempting to articulate those experiences in his works.

Thomas Wolfe is one of the great writers of the twentieth century. His opulent language and unique literary style have elevated his life to legendary status through his four autobiographical novels. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* was published in 1929 and he burst upon the literary scene with sudden and spectacular force. His second novel, *Of Time and the River*, was published in 1935. This was followed by a collection of short stories, *From Death to Morning*, published that same year. An autobiographical essay on writing, *The Story of a Novel*, was published in 1936. These books, along with many short stories published in magazines, completes the works that appeared during his lifetime. There were three posthumous works – *The Web and the Rock* (1939), *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) and *The Hills Beyond* (1941) – that were gleaned from the huge manuscript Wolfe left behind. All of Wolfe's manuscripts are at Harvard University. Wolfe scholars continue to use these

manuscripts to produce such works as the complete edition of *The Party at Jack's*, published in 1995.

Wolfe grew up in Asheville, North Carolina. During his youth, this was a middle class mountain resort town dazzled by real estate speculation. Wolfe's Mother, Julia E. Wolfe, was ahead of her time as a successful female real estate speculator. Wolfe felt her interest was a disease that interfered with her duties as a wife and mother. William Oliver Wolfe, his father, was a tombstone maker with a great vigour for living and a constant need to hurl himself against the prison bars of his dreary provincial life. While he provided well for his large family, he delighted in all the robust sensual aspects of life. He drank heavily and when in this state often verbally stormed at his family with great torrents of rhetoric and much quoting from Shakespeare. Wolfe portrays both of his parents with great spirit and good humoured satire.

Wolfe was the youngest of eight children, six of whom survived to adulthood. During his childhood the family member closest to him was his brother, Benjamin Wolfe. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Ben is portrayed a loner who hides his love for his youngest brother behind a mask of short

temperedness and sarcastic denial. It is perhaps through Ben's feelings of bitter regret for his own lost opportunities that Thomas Wolfe acquired his drive to escape his provincial life so he could go out into the world to achieve his dream of being a writer. The profoundly eloquent description of Ben's death in *Look Homeward, Angel* is emotionally gripping.

After age eleven Wolfe attended a private school in Asheville where he received personal attention and encouragement. Shortly before he was sixteen, Wolfe entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At the university, he wrote for school magazines and newspapers, and became the editor of the *Tar Heel*, the college newspaper. His early ideas about a career leaned toward the theater, because of his work with the Carolina Playmakers under Professor Frederick Koch.

When Wolfe graduated, at age twenty, he went to Harvard to study playwriting further under Professor George Pierce Baker in his renowned *47_Workshop*. He stayed at Harvard for three years. He completed his Master of Arts Degree in Literature in two years, but he remained an extra year to gain more experience in the *47 Workshop*.

Wolfe later satirized the pretentiousness of Harvard life, and the 47 Workshop in particular, in *Of Time and the River*.

Though Wolfe had a good eye for scene, character, and drama his overall writing style and personal temperament were not well suited to the theater. Unable to get his plays produced, Wolfe took a job as an English instructor at New York University in 1924. He taught off and on at the Washington Square campus from 1924 until 1930.

When his first course of teaching was finished, he took his savings and money his mother was willing to give him and sailed for Europe, where he continued his writing. On his return voyage home in August 1925 he met Aline Bernstein, a successful set and costume designer in the New York Theater, and they began a passionate and turbulent love affair. Though they had much in common in artistic temperament, their lives were really a contrast of opposites. She was almost twenty years older than Wolfe, married, and the mother of two grown children. She had a Jewish heritage and had been born and raised in New York City. Her husband was a successful New York businessman who gave her a secure life of wealth and privilege. However, far from being a socialite, Mrs. Bernstein lived

her life as an artist and a worker. In spite of their differences and the turbulent problems of their love affair, Wolfe showed his admiration for the beautiful qualities of her character that attracted him to her, when he portrays her as the Esther Jack of his posthumous novels. Aline Bernstein recounts their love affair in *Three Blue Suits* and *The Journey Down*.

In June of 1926, while on vacation in England with Mrs. Bernstein, Wolfe began to write what would become *Look Homeward, Angel*. With the aid of Mrs. Bernstein, he was able to continue his writing in New York. It was this artistic, emotional, and financial support Wolfe wanted to recognize when he dedicated the book to her upon its publication by Scribners, in October of 1929.

However, their affair had reached a breaking point. Wolfe felt trapped both by Mrs. Bernstein's love for him and his own emotional response to the many problems of their affair. In March of 1930 Wolfe was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship that allowed him to travel to Europe for almost a year. It provided the opportunity to finally end his relationship with Mrs. Bernstein. When he returned to New York in

February 1931 he rented an apartment in Brooklyn. In these new surroundings he continued to wrestle with his second book.

Wolfe found he could replace the emotional support he had lost when he left Mrs. Bernstein with his editor, the famous Maxwell Perkins. He also edited such authors as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Perkins became very close to Wolfe, being the father of five daughters, Wolfe became the son he never had. Though there has been much debate about Perkins' influence over the construction of *Of Time and the River*, there can be no doubt of his great belief in Wolfe's talent and ability. It was, perhaps, his parental feeling toward Wolfe and their close emotional bond that eventually caused even Wolfe to feel he was too dependent on Perkins.

In 1937, Wolfe broke with Scribners and signed a contract with Harpers. The young Edward Aswell, a great Wolfe admirer, became his editor. While on a trip out West, Wolfe came down with pneumonia. Doctors were perplexed by unusual complications that developed, so in September of 1938 Wolfe was admitted to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Walter Dandy, the foremost brain surgeon in the

country at the time, believed Wolfe had tuberculosis of the brain. On September 12 he operated, in a last ditch effort to save Wolfe's life. He found the entire right side of Wolfe's brain was covered with tubercles. There was nothing that could be done. On September 15, 1938 never having regained consciousness, Thomas Wolfe died. He was buried in Riverside Cemetery, Asheville, North Carolina. Wolfe's frantic rush to do all, see all, and write it all down had proved tragically correct.

Though his life was short, his literary achievements were, indeed, large. His words are torrential explosions of adjectives and adverbs, but through the magic of his words, he breathed life into his vision of the world around him. The lyrical quality of his writing, his robust rhetoric, his vast vocabulary, and his expansive eloquence are found nowhere else in American literature. He communicates his experiences through the shapes, sounds, colours, odours and textures of life, and he proclaims his impressions of the world with total mastery. In addition to the works stated earlier, Wolfe also wrote fifty-eight short stories, but only a few were published during his lifetime. A collection of all his short stories appeared in 1987 as *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe*. Among other

posthumous publications are three plays: *Manner House* (1948), *Welcome to Our City* (1957) and *The Mountains* (1970).

As a creative writer, Wolfe is fascinating, as attested by the superlative comments others have made on his work and for his own claims on art and life. It appears that ambivalence at the level of 'lived life' and artistic endeavour has been the compelling force when we attempt to understand Wolfe the man and Wolfe the artist. Ambivalence has presided without restraint over his creative articulations. There is an unrequited exuberance in his work, manifested in an uncontrolled, fragmented style. His narratives also underline the rhetorical ambivalence. Any attempt to understand Wolfe and his works calls for examining the concept of ambivalence the way it manifests in the rhetorical articulations. Keeping in view the radical nature of his artistic vision, the present study is an attempt to explore the understanding of rhetorical ambivalence in Wolfe's works, while examining the broader vision of "Life as Art".

Ambivalence is the very essence of all literary art. Literature embodies the psychological assumptions of its makers thereby revealing the nature of ambivalence that serves as the origin of their creativity.

Ambivalence is the most poignant and excruciating fundamental feature of human nature. Ambivalence of thought and emotions on the part of an artist in most occasions bear upon his works. *The Encyclopedia of Psychology* (1972: 47-48) defines ambivalence as “the existence of two (possibly contradictory) values, goals or directions ... The simultaneous occurrence of two antagonistic emotions”. It seems that ambivalence has been Thomas Wolfe’s second self, a fact that his works reveal in abundance. Wolfe is a dreamer as well as a realist. The enormity of his uncontrolled creative energy makes him a different writer, lost in contradictions, projecting paradoxical worlds without being able to harmonize them. It might be that that is the stuff of real creativity where the real becomes unreal, fantasy presides over reality and the artistic self becomes multiple selves. In the sense, Wolfe has produced an aesthetics of radical situatedness. This radical situatedness at one level affirms and at another level negates subjectivity.

Traditionally, “Rhetoric” is viewed as a stylistic device, a method of persuasion, starting from Aristotle. In contemporary theoretical perspective, Rhetoric in its metaphorical and metonymic possibility in fact

continues to be central to our understanding of language creating its own reality. Some sense of ambiguity is always involved in the explication of rhetoric as an activity (what people say and do with language) and ways of describing and interpreting that activity.

Walter Pater, in his famous essay on 'style', implies that man is the marker of his style. In a general sense, 'rhetoric' can be described as the study of language in its practical uses, focusing on the effects of language, especially as an act of persuasion, and on the means by which one can achieve these effects in writing. From Aristotle to Post-structuralism, 'rhetoric' as a medium of expression has undergone radical changes in meaning and function. In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined rhetorical discourse as the act of "discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case" and focused his discussion on the means and devices that an orator uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on an audience persuading them to accede to his point of view. Most of the later rhetoricians of classical era concurred in the view that rhetoric concerns the principles of that type of discourse whose chief aim is to persuade an audience to think or act in a particular way.

The romantics, on the other hand, with their natural contempt for anything prescriptive, argue that the orator or his literary counterpart lack sincerity for their discourse is tutored by prescriptions and norms. The romantic poets stake claim to originality abandoning all rhetorical conventions, while speaking out from the heart. Besides the epistemological questions involved in analyzing rhetoric, one must give attention to 'desire' and style. 'Desire' has a deeper implication in creative endeavour and is directly related to the artist's psychic world. Very often an artist attempts to achieve something he possibly cannot because of a tangible incompatibility between his psychic make up or 'desire' and his ability to express that desire in language. The lives of talented men and women abound in episodes of 'filling up' and 'breaking through again'. This disequilibrium has been assumed to be intrinsic to genius. A successful artist is one who manages to camouflage his personal ambivalence in the vigour of stylistic flourish. The communication of one's self can become more inhibited where there is more to communicate; a greater degree of self-revealing is the artist's business in life and art whether or not he writes in the manner of Joyce or Dickens.

In his magisterial observation, Ezra Pound maintains that ‘good writing’ should be ‘perfectly controlled’ in which the writer says “just what he means” (1968: 5-6). Eliot profoundly echoes Pound when he discovers lack of integration between the theme and style in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, stating that the dramatist lacks *objective correlative*. Both Eliot and Pound favour classical order and precision in style. They are critical of and opposed to what Pound calls the “blurry” and “messy” style of the romantics. As Susan Langer puts it: “The primary function of any creative writing is to objectify feeling” (Selden, 1988). So, it all depends on the choice of language that carries the weight of the feeling. If language is used to express and objectify feeling, it also reveals the person’s character whose feelings it expresses or gives shape to. In this sense, the saying that *style is the man* becomes very significant. It points at both the nature of the artist, his psychic make up, and his ability to handle language.

Twentieth century criticism has often abandoned this Romantic faith hoping for a possibility of authentic and original utterance. If language is not only expression but articulated expression, as Ogden and Richards claimed long ago, then links from the observable to the conceptual must be

forged in social transaction, in that it is argued that truth and knowledge are synthetically created – not demonstrated or presented as necessarily causal. The method of verification upon which knowledge rests is derived from one's structuring of reality. Such a position does not diminish the classical notion of rhetoric as persuasion but reveals a deeper structuring of persuasion – an inter subjective choice and construction of how one comes to acquire knowledge and views the world. To create one's rhetorical structure of reality is to make use of a structure to establish a solidarity between accepted judgements and other views which one wishes to promote. One's inter-subjective structuring of the world must be argued rhetorically, thereby allowing reconstruction of the hierarchy of values, rules and mode of rationality. Rhetoric is thus revealed by an act that is sited at a trajectory where intentional discourse provides a theoretical framework for the selection and structuring of 'reasons' to evoke and justify acts and attitudes.

Postmodern critical theory poses a serious challenge to this assumption. The postmodern theory takes note of the fact that any method of articulation is in itself rhetorical for methods themselves are rhetorically

invented entities. Nietzsche's belief that language is essentially figurative and not referential or expressive was taken up by the key Poststructuralist theorists notably Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White and Paul de Man. There is no original unrhetorical language, for discourse is always shaped by *desire* which in turn is communicated in *tropes* and *figures*. Paul de Man develops this argument about rhetoric to its fullest extent. He takes the view that figure of speech (tropes) pervade language exerting a force which destabilizes logic and meaning.

Wolfe's intended structures of discourse is rhetorically articulated taking into account the complex human relationship. One may like to see in his stories and fictional works the projection of himself and his alienated psyche in friction with other people. Works concerning a broader awareness of himself as a member of a larger community mostly deal with social problems. This awareness is further enlarged, when he saw himself as an American writer. The image of the nation was very strong in his consciousness. He struggled to come out of the label that he is only a Southern writer so as to project himself as a national writer of the likes of Whitman, Frost and Lewis, one who writes for and speaks to the American

people. However, it would be limiting to suggest that Wolfe aspired only to be an American writer. His creative impulse was indeed universal.

One of Wolfe's worlds was the very literal, immediate world of the 1920's and 1930's, a world presented in his fiction through objects, actions, persons and events apparently so directly transcribed from life that their originals greeted them with angry recognition. This world is a representation of the social context, described with great accuracy and directness. On the one hand, there was the world of his inner self, a world of consciousness, of inspiration, of impressions, of emotions, of nostalgic memories, brooded over by a sense of the inexorable passage of 'dark time', on the other, he articulates his inner world in ways that proved to be powerfully effective and affective. These two worlds are perpetually in conflict: the self in its insulated 'dream of time', lonely and alienated, while recognizing the fact that it is surrounded by others, not able to identify the door by which to enter the social context that constituted its milieu. In his early works, Wolfe allowed these two worlds to co-exist and contrast. But in some of his later writings, he attempted a reconciliation of both worlds through a democratic dream. Thus, the world of Thomas

Wolfe is actually three worlds: self, society and nation. And the problem of his art was his incapacity to integrate the three into a unity. Even if the desire for unity and synthesis was a growing awareness, a careful study of his works reveals that a sense of ambivalence has been evident in most of his works. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has all the characteristics of a Romantic artist who perceived his own self as a product of the available materials (experiences) and moved with it, never remaining static at a fixed point of time. He thus situates his self in an immanent teleology where mind comes to itself through loss of itself, being in this world. The sense of loss and recovery of the self has been placed in the perspective of time.

There were three time elements inherent in Wolfe's works. The most obvious one was the element of actual present time that represented characters and events manifesting the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was the past time; one which represented the characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of one's experience, informing the collective unconscious that conditions experience. In addition to these two time

elements, there was a third one, which was conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth, a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which was projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day.

A direct extension of the inevitable flow of time is death. Death is another recurrent theme in Wolfe's works. Death seems always to hover over the mutable world. In his childhood, Wolfe experienced the death of a brother that moved him deeply. In "No Door", he recorded his feelings after his father's death:

My father was dead, and now it seemed to me that I had never found him. He was dead, and yet I sought him everywhere, and could not believe that he was dead, and was sure that I would find him ... October has come again ... I have come home again and found my father dead ... and there was time ... time ... time ...where shall I go now? What shall I do? October has come again, but there has gone some richness from the life we knew, and we are lost. (1987: 79-80)

Death has always troubled him deeply even when it did not affect him directly. The lynching of a Negro by a mob; an incident of suicide in a Brooklyn street; a death in the Civil War; a death through a street accident; the death of a beggar from a fall; an accidental death of a high-rise construction worker; a peaceful death where a man's heart just stops

beating as he sits on a bench in a subway station; the death of a Japanese sculptor; the resigned death of a cheated husband in a train; the reported death of an young prostitute, whose grave is to be decorated with the statue of an angel; these are all death-related incidents found in the teeming pages of Wolfe which made him so much emotionally involved that they became subjects of his work.

Although a distinguishable and distinct theme in Wolfe's writing, death cannot be isolated from the totality of psychic experience that he wished to present. Death is connected to the passage of time, it is associated with the sense of isolation and alienation. Death as a theme is often used to expose the callousness and hypocrisy of city dwellers ("Death the Proud Brother"). Sometimes it reflects mankind's potentiality for barbarity ("The Child by Tiger"). Death often occurs as a feeling of the dark mystery of the world, coming quietly, gently, in the guise of a messiah, allowing respite and reprieve, releasing man from his suffering. In Wolfe's words: "Proud Death, wherever we have seen your face, you came with mercy, love and pity, and brought to all of us your compassionate sentences of relief and release" (1987: 64).

One of Wolfe's central themes is alienation. To be an American is to be lonely and isolated and restless, moving beneath vast skies. The barriers that are erected around the individual effectively shut him off from all communication. One of Wolfe's most successful short stories is "No Door" (quoted above) where the characters grow out from home and find that they cannot go back home again. This idea is further developed in his *Look Homeward, Angel*. There was an obsessive search for communication and communion in Wolfe's works. He said: "Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face: from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of the earth" (Prologue to *Look Homeward, Angel*, 1929). For Wolfe, all human experience seeks "the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven" (Holman, 1975: 26). Out of the transcendental glory of childhood, we are gradually hemmed in by the growing prison-house of the world, the lustre and glory of life are tarnished, and we are forced away from communion.

It was inevitable that the centrality of loneliness and separateness, or alienation, in Wolfe's life and in his writing, were coupled with social

problems. Human suffering fostered in him a sense of the evil in the world and had given a tragic quality to his writing. His very method of placing opposites side by side led him to a fragmentary cosmic view. The understanding of the American South as laid up in defeat and suffering, that bore the scars of an unthinkable inevitability coloured Wolfe's world with an existential veneer. He discovered himself in it; his creative Romantic impulse very often gave in to existential brooding. As Jaspers maintains: "We find existence as the unreflecting experience of our life in the world. It is immediate and unquestioning, the reality which everything must enter so as to be real for us ..." (John Macquarrie, 1986: 68). This attitude is part of the heritage of all Southerners, even in the liberal area of the South of America where Wolfe grew up, as C. Vann Woodward observed: "Nothing about its history is conducive to the theory that the South was the darling of divine Providence" (Holman, 1975: 34).

Alienation was at the core of Wolfe's personal world. He was haunted and anguished by it. This gave him a sense of passage of time and made him feel defeated. His short and restless life and the immensity of his feelings did not move in one desired direction. Obviously, the finer

realizations of art and life, instead of falling into order, were scattered and dispersed. This had created the disjuncture between his critical statements and his creative practice. *The Story of a Novel* (1936) is an important theoretical work in which Wolfe delineates the process of the making of a novelist. However, this work remains an account of a struggling artist caught up in his own ambivalence. As his works have been intensely autobiographical, it may be said that the sense of ambivalence, which has been central to his genius and which moulded his psyche, has been very much a part of his growing up which he was never able to transcend. His attachment to his mother, his adoration for, yet hatred towards his father, his mother's rejection of his father, and the series of broken relationships he went through with other men and women, are psychologically significant in the disruptive and fragmentary totality of his life. Thus, any meaningful study of Thomas Wolfe cannot overlook the psychological dimension of his works.

In Wolfe's work, his vision of time is always associated with the sense of being alienated, or of being isolated. In *Of Time and the River*, he

tries to enumerate concrete memories which, taken together, make up for the remembered past of America:

All of us are driven on forever and we have no home. Therefore, it is not the slow, the punctual sanded drip of the unnumbered days that we remember best, the ash of time; nor is it the huge monotone of the lost years, the unsweltering schedules of the lost life and the well-known faces that we remember best. It is a face seen once and lost forever in a crowd, an eye that looked, a face that smiled and vanished on a passing train. (1935: 155)

He describes the way in which the past almost forcibly enters the present for him: “always when that lost world would come back, it came at once, like a sword thrust through the entrails, in all its panoply of past time, living, whole, and magic as it had always been” (in Holman, 1975: 29). Wolfe describes this emotion of pain very effectively from which comes the sudden hunger for a lost and almost forgotten aspect of life. He succeeds in giving us this sense of the onward rush of time and the death of the morning’s golden joy, an awareness of the price that is paid before the years of philosophic calm can arrive. Since this feeling is very much a part of youth, its pain, and inarticulate melancholy, Wolfe speaks with sardonic authority to the young and to the old chiefly through their memories of having been very young. Realizing that there is no escape

from time, Wolfe muses in *The Web and the Rock*: "Time is a fable and a mystery ... it broods over all the images of earth. Time is collected in great clocks and hung in towers ... and each man has his own, a different time." (1939: 626).

While most of his distinguished contemporaries like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Lewis and others have praised him, the academic critics were critical of his achievements. These opinions proved that the ambivalence in his works has allowed such extreme responses. Holman, however, has offered an objective critique of his genius.

His (Wolfe's), like almost everything about life and his art, had two elements that were in opposition and a third that tended to reconcile the opposites. (1962: 1)

Whether Wolfe is able to reconcile the opposite worlds into a synthesis or into an integrated vision is debatable. But the pulls of opposite poles are too pronounced in his works. Like Whitman, Wolfe attempts to make his self a cosmic one to devour everything. In most cases, it has remained only an attempt not being successful in synergic practice. The disjuncture between the intended objective and the actual realization of it apparently points at the ambivalence at different levels of Wolfe's creative

endeavour. This thesis can be supported by Wolfe's own statement in *The Story of a Novel*:

It may be objected, it has been objected already by certain critics, that ... I have ... an almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human experience to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold ... (1936: 46)

The word has for Wolfe unique, almost divine powers and it fascinated him for its enchanted rhythms and cadences. Language was the magic key he sought to unlock the mysteries of life. To discipline the intemperate excesses and translate the ravenous experiences into art have been a struggle between the man of feeling and the man of reason. And Wolfe could not make up his mind. He could not make a choice. He was torn by ambivalence.

Rhetorical ambivalence in the works of Thomas Wolfe is self-evident. It is a reflection of his worldview which is all-inclusive for he wanted to project a totality of experience, a consciousness and identity of America. But the methods he adopted of juxtaposing opposites, are very much rooted in the projection of a paradoxical, fragmentary self-awareness. His attempt closely resembles what Virginia Woolf advocated:

The novel should not imitate objective life by means of a plot, but should present the “luminous halo” or “semi transparent envelope” of consciousness, the unsequential and perhaps irrational form in which life is really experienced.

(Quoted in Ellman & Fiedelson, Jr. ed., 1965: 12-13)

Wolfe’s style is an example of the struggle to discipline the intemperate excesses. He is at the same time intensely lyrical and objectively realistic. As style represents the man, Wolfe’s style also reflects his own ambivalent self. The stylistic inconsistency reveals the fact that contrary impulses are at work simultaneously. His rhetorical employment not only creates an ambivalent disjuncture between thought and feeling, but also between lyrical and prosaic description in the same piece of writing.

It has also been leveled against Wolfe that there is no sense of proportion in his writing, that the sight of a rusty iron railing evokes as much emotion in him as the death of his father, an absurd and even monstrous lack of discrimination. But if such is the reaction, why not acknowledge it? And from the standpoint of an artist, why not use it? Many respected critics, Yvor Winters among them, seem to believe that there exists a kind of limiting factor that says that one event, one subject,

one involvement must be superior in importance to another, that certain emotions are legitimately the result of certain events and that there is some kind of inflexible criterion that determines this, some standard that we can discover and use. Winters assumes that there is or should be a definite proportion between what is observed and experienced and the emotional reaction it invokes, a kind of law, a totalitarian censor.

It should be obvious that if a limit were to be applied to exuberant spontaneity and inclusiveness it would clamp a mechanical dead hand on true individual responses to real emotions and personal truths. From this it follows that all creativity which pretends to depend on authenticity of reaction, actually lives by the ambivalence of our understanding/misunderstanding.

Much of the criticism of Wolfe's work has centred around his seemingly uncontrolled and formless exuberance. It has become almost a critical truism that he possessed great talent but little control over language with limited awareness of the demands of the plot. There is a sensuous recall that is nearly total having almost a shocking unwillingness to subject his material to critical elision. Although rhetorical ambivalence as a

proposition is, like life, a bright book of contradictions, it speaks to us about the very nature of Wolfe's art, the fact remains that there had been a persistent effort to move beyond, an aspiration reaching out to the infinity.

This thesis titled **Life as Art: A Study of Rhetorical Ambivalence in Thomas C. Wolfe's Fiction** is divided into the following chapters:

In the very first chapter, the '*Introduction*', the conceptual framework of the study is introduced with a short biographical history of Wolfe. The second chapter – '*Life as Art: The Wolfean Ego on Trial*' takes into account Wolfe's own statements on life and art, contextualizing his vision in the aestheticist perspective. The following chapter – '*The Putter-Inner: Time and Existential Alienation*' examines the modernist positions vis-à-vis Wolfe's own views. Both time and alienation are important foundational concepts of modernism. Wolfe's responses to these concepts are very important for relocating him in the proper perspective. The fourth chapter – '*The Democratic Dream: Self, Society and Nation*' sees the constant displacement of the subject in a process of negotiation. Negotiation takes place through the subject's awareness of self, society and nation. The fifth chapter '*Rhetoric of Ambivalence*' explores

ambivalence as the very foundation of creative activity. As there cannot be any complete statement regarding either ambivalence or rhetoric, the study has attempted to examine the issue from different perspectives. Thus in the conclusion it is asserted that Wolfe is both a romantic and a classicist in his sensibility and creative endeavour. The pre-modern, modern and post-modern symptoms are very much present in his work. He, therefore, could be called a proto-postmodernist, having created possibilities of plural reading of his works.

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CHAPTER – II

LIFE AS ART - THE WOLFEAN EGO ON TRIAL

Drawing upon Edward Said's observation that the novel is a discreet analogy of the mechanism of the writer's life, Nadine Gordimer maintains that "Broken up piece meal or not, mechanism or not, the author's life is the 'actual event' of the making of the book. On this premise, not only the writer embalmed in his words, his work is seen as determined by the limits of his own life" (1996: 13). Herself a creative writer, Gordimer's understanding of the intricate and inevitable relation between life and art is true of all creative writers. As an intense writer deeply involved in life, Thomas Clayton Wolfe, makes similar claims.

At Purdue University's annual Literary Awards Banquet in May 1938, Wolfe has said:

... If the artist is not first and foremost a living man - and by this I mean a man of life, a man who belongs to life, who is connected with it, and who draws the sources of his strength from it - then what kind of man is he? (1964: 43)

Wolfe's has been an attempt, in his works, to grapple with the insoluble mystery of life. In case of Wolfe, the fine line between life and art gets blurred. However, the essence of art as dialectical matches

with the contradictions of life. It is in opposition of things as they are that both life and art become meaningful. The self in the act of creativity becomes the central focus.

The word 'self' is sometimes used to mean the whole series of a person's inner mental states and sometimes the spiritual substance to which they belong. The use of the word 'self' has the effect of confining the question to the unity of the mind and of preventing the answer from relying on the temporal persistence of the body. This has made the unity problem seem intractable, especially when the fluidity of mental images, feelings, and the like is contrasted with the temporal persistence their owner needs.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, there are two distinct selves in the book - *what I once was* and *what I now am* - and between these two identities lies the crucial occasion when Augustine's "past sins" (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 84) were "forgiven and covered up, giving me joy in You, changing my life by faith and Your sacrament" (*Ibid.*, 84). Throughout the book, Augustine evokes his life explicitly as the present recollection of the past, in which Augustine as he was is co - present with Augustine as he is.

The devices of the double authorship, the-work-within-the-work, and the paper-bags provide Carlyle with the literary excuse to violate calendar time in the life of Teufelsdröckh by leaps and returns which seem random but in fact bring out its immanent and evolving design. Through the shifting perspectives, the temporal oscillations, and the tenebrous rhetoric, we make out a familiar romantic metaphysic and life history. An I confronts the not - I: "You are alone with the universe, and silently commune with it, as one mysterious Presence with another" (*Ibid.*, 130 - 31). In this subject-object negotiation/transaction, the mind is primary and prepotent, and is sometimes represented as the sole ground of experience.

John Stuart Mill relied largely on Wordsworth's *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* and supported the expression or uttering forth of feeling. Poetry, maintains Mill, anticipating T.E. Hulme and laying the theoretical groundwork for the practice of symbolists from Baudelaire through T.S. Eliot, embodies itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind.

Abrams indicates the degree to which the innovations of the romantics persist in anti-romantic theorists, as in a famous comment by

T.S. Eliot: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (quoted in Abrams, 1966: 25).

Psychoanalysis by its very nature encompasses all human mental and emotional phenomena. The lives of creative writers abound in episodes of inhibition, despair, restlessness, moodiness – alternating with episodes of creativity. This is very much true of Thomas Wolfe. As disequilibria have been assumed to be intrinsic to genius, the artist becomes an enigmatic person. Art, as Freud maintains, lives because of the power of psychologic truth and for its transformed and transcendent beauty. “Since the arts deal with truth and beauty as they portray and stimulate people, it would seem self-evident that the truth about people – about human nature mirrored in and forced by and reacting upon world nature is basic” (Schneider, 1950: 18). Various theories of psychology put the author at the centre of the creative act. Whether he brings into the work slices of his own life to transcend some of his pain and suffering, may or may not be important to critics. But the fact

remains that all works of art are subjective. "Literature primarily registers and arouses conflicts, and no theoretical preparation can spare the critic the necessity of submitting himself to that conflict". (Crews, 1970: 19)

In any period, the theory of mind and the theory of art tend to be integrally related. For the representative eighteenth century critic, the perceiving mind is a reflector of the external world; the inventive process consisted in a reassembly of ideas which are literal images, or replicas of sensations; and the resulting art work is itself comparable to a mirror presenting a selected and ordered image of life. By substituting a projective and creative mind and, consonantly, an expressive and creative theory of art, various Romantic critics reversed the basic orientation of all aesthetic philosophy. Through the allusion to the archetypal plant, Coleridge sees the mind as growing into precepts, conceived of the activity of the poetic imagination as differing from this vital, self-determining, assimilative process in degree rather than kind, and thus is able to envision the product of artistic genius as exhibiting the mode of development and the internal relations of an organic whole. His concept of poetic creativity, the self-organizing process, assimilating disparate materials by an inherent lawfulness into an

integral whole – borrows many of its characteristic features from the conceptual model of organic growth. It is Coleridge's exploitation of this new aesthetics of organicism that he, more than Wordsworth, has contributed significantly to the theory of creativity and aesthetics. Dwelling on a poem as a poem, and on a poem as a process of mind, Coleridge is able to make use of the pregnant concept of a poem as a quasi-natural organism. Coleridge's interest is persistently genetic - in the process as well as in the product, in *becoming* no less than in *being*. That is why Coleridge rarely discusses a finished poem without looking toward the mental process which evolves it; this is what makes all his criticism so characteristically psychological. The plant evolves spontaneously from an internal source of energy – “effectuates its own secret growth and organizes itself into its proper form” (quoted in Abrams, 1966: 172). An artifact needs to be made, but a plant makes itself. “The unity... is produced ‘*ab intra*’, but in mechanism, ‘*ab extra*’” (*Ibid.*, 172). The organic form is innate. It shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. An organism is thus inherently teleological – since its form is endogenous and automotive.

Schiller emphasizes the primary split in the mind's unity with itself, which converts unself-consciousness into self-consciousness – the awareness of the self as a subject distinct from the object it perceives, and the intervention of reflection and choice between instinct and desire. Thus the naïve poet, who is pure nature, composes not by reflection and rule but by an inner necessity, as “an undivided sensuous unity, and as a harmonizing whole” (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 214). The sentimental, or characteristically modern poet, on the other hand, is self-divided because he is self-conscious, and so composes in an awareness of multiple alternatives, and represents not the object in itself, but the object in the subject.

Nietzsche cites Schiller's views on man's self-division and the reintegrative function of art no less often than does Schopenhauer, his immediate predecessor in metaphysics. But Nietzsche is an archetypal myth-critic, and in this one aspect his theory of art is closer in outline to Blake and Shelley than to Schiller. In true Greek tragedy, he says, “Dionysus never once ceased to be the tragic hero” (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 318), for all tragic protagonists are “but masks of this original hero” (*Ibid.*, 318). And the poet in creating the tragedy, the actors in performing it, and the audience in observing it, all lose their own

identities in a participation with the Dionysian – Apollonian synthesis of a “dissolution of the individual and his unification with primordial experience” (*Ibid.*, 318) which is at the same time a redemption of the individual in appearance. But it is the Dionysian intoxication, which is at the heart of the mystery of reintegration in that ultimate state – not, as in Marx, a social state, but a psychic state – in which man is reunited into a higher community, not only with other men, but also with alienated nature.

Critics from Sidney to Leavis have concerned themselves with the subtle connection between literature and life. The aesthetic movement seems to be a deviation from traditional concerns. Kant’s description of aesthetic judgment as an entirely disinterested satisfaction impressed critics during 1890–1920. But moralists agree with aesthetes in rejecting tendentiousness and moralizing. They all consider that literature does not work by directly expressing ideas or attitudes, but by embodying an experience of life in a form and diction necessary and suitable. James insists that the richness of a novel’s representation of life will depend on the writer’s ability to burst the technical conventions of the *genre*. Leavis believes that standards of judgment are intuitive and interpersonal. An important poem *realizes*

human experience more concretely and with a greater degree of actualization than an inferior one.

The term *life* is central to the criticism of Matthew Arnold, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence. Arnold maintains: "A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life" (quoted in Selden, 1988: 493). But to define what is life-enhancing is not easy. James feels that the value of a novel relates to that intensity of the impression of life it gives, but there can be no rule or guide to correctness: there must be freedom to explore *life* in all its bewildering complexity. The dynamic flow of life can be grasped only if fiction gives us life *without rearrangement*. The moral quality of a novel depends on its power to create the illusion of life. Lawrence is even more radical in his demand for immediacy of life. James recognizes that much hidden artistry is required to create the illusion of life, but Lawrence wants poetry to be "direct utterance from the instant, whole man" (*Ibid.*, 493). Life itself has no finality, no finished crystallization, and so free verse should also be "instantaneous like plasm" (*Ibid.*, 493). Lawrence appears to believe that it is possible to find a verbal form which exactly corresponds to the form of life, which is the soul and the mind and body

surging at once, nothing left out, utterance rushing out without artificial form or smoothness.

Henry James, in *The Art of Fiction* (1884) says that a novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.

An approach to the expressive orientation of literature is to be found as early as Longinus' discussion of the sublime style as having its main sources in the thought and emotions of the speaker. Bacon analyses poetry as accommodating the shows of things to the desires of the mind.

A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. "Thus the poetry" Wordsworth writes, "proceeds whence it ought to do, from the soul of Man, communicating its creative energies to the images of the eternal world" (quoted in Abrams, 1966: 22). The paramount cause of poetry is not, as in Aristotle, a formal cause, determined primarily by the human actions and qualities

imitated; nor as in neo-classic criticism, a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause - the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression, or the compulsion of the creative imagination which, like God the Creator, has its internal inertia of motion. The exploitation of literature as an index to personality first manifests itself in the early nineteenth century; it is the inevitable consequence of the expressive point of view.

As a young undergraduate at Harvard, Wolfe is influenced by John Livingstone Lowes. Lowes' view of the nature of Coleridge's imagination remained for Wolfe a truthful picture of the workings of the artist's mind. Inspired by Lowes, he goes on to attempt to fill his well of unconscious cerebration with the materials from which his art is to flow: experiences, sights, sounds, people, books, and all the materials of art, both immediate and vicarious. Like Keats and other romantics, the life of sensory experiences become very crucial to Wolfe as an artist.

Wolfe is steeped in the romantic ethos of the expressive theory of art, and has followed the Coleridgean concept of organicity. But his striking particularity is his tendency to see and to express things in terms of oppositions or binaries. A typical native of the Southern states

of America, he, according to Holman, is fascinated by paradox, enamoured of ambiguity, devoted to the particular and the concrete; and although a dreamer of grandiose dreams, seldom the articulator of effective larger structures.

As a genius with a difference, Wolfe's opulent language and unique literary style have elevated his fictional works to legendary status. It is difficult to speak of Wolfe but in extreme terms, in superlatives, for his friends, reviewers, and the public have used Hollywood adjectives – stupendous, gigantic, immense. Interestingly, Wolfe started thinking of himself in the same way and, in a sense, these qualifiers are appropriate to explain his genius. He is as hungry for experience as for food, for he is on a mission to explore life “with an encyclopaedic thoroughness” (Moser, 1967: 225). It is often difficult to separate the author from his writing, to distinguish the dancer from the dance:

He was driven by a hunger so literal, cruel and physical that it wanted to devour the earth and all the things and people in it ... He read insanely, by the hundreds, the thousands, the ten thousands.... It would now seem to him that ... at this moment something precious, irrecoverable was happening in the streets, and that if he could only get to it in time and see it, he would somehow get the knowledge of the whole thing in him – the source, the

well, the spring from which all men and words and actions,
and every design upon this earth proceeds. (1935: 91-92)

Few writers have immersed themselves in the turbulent stream of experience more thoroughly than Wolfe; few writers have tried to touch more segments of America and know them with greater sensory surety. However, Wolfe is an exception, for he lives through the variegated experiences of life, attempting to articulate those experiences in his works. Like Whitman, Wolfe's mission is to "celebrate myself, and sing myself" (Whitman, 1975: 63). Wolfe stands witness to this predicament of the author in the story "The Wolfe at the Door" (Fadiman, 1955, quoted in Holman, 1962: 37): the author himself knocking at the door of imagination. This story bears on the truth about Wolfe as an artist. The protagonist Uncle Habbakuk welcomes and asks the youth Beep the following questions:

"Where have you been, youth? Have you touched, tasted, heard, and *seen everything*? Have you *smelt everything*? Have you come out of the wilderness, the buried past ...? Have you embraced *life* and *devoured* it? Tell me! Open the adyts of your soul, Beep. (*Ibid.*, 1962: 37)

The questions asked by Uncle Hebbakuk to Beep were the questions Wolfe the *man* asks Wolfe the *artist*. He knocks at the doors of experience to embrace it in all possible forms and devour it. This

devourer of an artist continues to be an enigma, for he is in a quest to find answers to some fundamental problems of life that converged into art: “What is it that we know so well and cannot speak?” (*Ibid.*, 1962: 39)

Beep, like the artist, is trapped in his own confusion and asks, “What is it that we speak so well and cannot know?” (*Ibid.*, 1962: 39) Beep’s enquiries are those of Wolfe’s, and his knowing mind continues to ponder over the insoluble contradictions that life unfolds before us.

Thus, embracing and devouring all experience becomes the only way to know the truth about the paradoxes of life for which Wolfe the artist knocks at the door. The reader expects the door to open to him. If it does open, seeing becomes problematic because the ways of seeing determine the essence of art.

We may venture to see Wolfe’s writings as a dialectics or discourse of binaries. His vision of himself carries the same pattern of oppositions; in *The Web and the Rock* (1939), Esther Jack sums up the autobiographical protagonist:

He has the face of a demented angel ... and there is madness and darkness and evil in his brain. He is more cruel than death, and more lovely than a flower. His heart was made for love, and it is full of hate and darkness. (1939 : 683)

Torn apart by contradictions, Wolfe develops into a schizophrenic personality, and his articulations bear testimony to that. However, his desire is to typify the American experience, but contradictorily, his theme has become loneliness and alienation of the incommunicable self. His subject matter was himself, his self-discovery and his groping towards self-knowledge. A recurrent twentieth century protagonist has been the novelist-hero engaged in a search for meaning that he finally discovers in the artistic process itself – a kind of aesthetic solipsism.

The nature of Wolfe's works closely resembles the *Bildungsroman* tradition, a vogue begun by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796) and includes Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. *Bildungsroman* and *Erziehungsroman* are German terms signifying "novels of formation" (M.H. Abrams, 1978: 112) or "novels of education" (*Ibid.*, 112). The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences – and usually through a spiritual crisis – into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world. An important subtype of the *Bildungsroman* is the *Kunstler-roman* (artist

novel) which represents the development of the novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity in which he recognizes his artistic destiny and achieves mastery of his artistic craft. Instances of this type include some of the major twentieth century novels: Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Mann's *Tonio Kroger* and *Dr. Faustus* and Gide's *The Counterfeiters*. From Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the tradition of *Bildungsroman* has been followed both in romantic and modernist writings. Wolfe's writings, though, do not follow a typical *Bildungsroman* frame, we understand that most of his novels are part of his life, in a fragmented sense.

Wolfe's artistic method is a combination of realistic representation and romantic declaration. It structures a contradictory or ambivalent view of life and art. While he is committed to the accuracy and exactitude regarding the actual world he is also concerned with that he has not personally experienced. His view of the nature and function of art is essentially rooted in the lived experience of life. The marked romanticism of his aesthetic theory, with a distrust of intellectualism stands at a polar extreme to the view he develops later on as a novelist obligated to represent the social scene.

During Thomas' childhood, his mother bought a boarding house and moved into it, taking him and his brother Ben with her. Wolfe's childhood was thus spent in a divided family, with itinerant boarders as companions. He regarded himself in later life as *God's lonely man*. In 1933, he wrote to his sister: "I think I learned about being alone when I was a child about eight years old and I think that I have known about it ever since". (quoted in Holman, 1975: 9)

This sense of alienation and ambivalence institute his works. Most of the characters in his works are persons familiar to him thinly veiled under modified names. The aesthetic distance between an artist and his fictional characters is mostly lacking in Wolfe's works. The characters evolve not as depersonalized figures, but from Wolfe's own encounters with them. Although he consciously does not use the defamiliarization technique, but he attempts to make the familiar disfamiliar without the dramatic effect achieved by Brecht in his plays. Of central interest to the Wolfe-scholar are the different names and characteristics adopted by the autobiographical protagonist in different works. He thereby facilitates the expression of some particular state of mind through a new protagonist. According to the *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Vol.1, 1972: 47-48), affective ambivalence is a general

characteristic of schizophrenia. Wolfe is such a split personality as evident in his works. It is conjectured that Wolfe's origin in the South of America imbues him with a fascination for contradictions or binaries, as also affords him his exuberance. These qualities carry into his characters, many of whom are historically and geographically located in the South. Among other characters who are located in the North, Esther Jack demands mention for the explosively ambivalent relationship with the autobiographical protagonist under two different names: Eugene Gant in *Of Time and the River* (1935) and George Webber in *The Web and the Rock* (1939).

In 1924, Wolfe accepted an appointment of instructor in New York University. Around this period he visits several European countries. His violent and passionate affair with Mrs. Aline Bernstein, a scene and costume designer eighteen years his senior and a married woman with two grown up children, is dramatized. She is the Esther Jack of his later novels.

Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* (1935) is a mammoth work, continuing the chronicle of Eugene Gant's sensibility from *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929). *Of Time and the River* opens as he leaves Altamont for Harvard, follows him there, to New York where he

teaches in the School of Utility Cultures, to Europe, where he begins the writing of a novel and has a frustrating love affair with a girl called Ann. Although *Look Homeward, Angel* lacks the traditional novelistic structure, it has a certain unity through its concentration on a family, a mountain town, and a way of life. In reading it, one is caught up in the sharp impression of youth and its exuberance. *Of Time and the River* has a thin plot but more introspection, less structural cohesion but more rhetorical flourish. Large segments of the book exist without thematic or plot relevance; some of the best scenes and most effective portraits seem to be dramatic intrusions; and it is only when one knows the rest of the story in *The Web and the Rock* (1939), that one is able to appreciate the climactic significance of the meeting with Esther with which *Of Time and the River* closes.

In 1938, Wolfe selects George Webber as his protagonist and writes: "The protagonist becomes significant not as a tragic victim of circumstances, the romantic hero in conflict and revolt against his environment, but as a kind of polar instrument round which the events of life are grouped, by means of which they are touched, explained, and apprehended, by means of which they are seen and ordered" (quoted in Holman, 1975: 16)

After Wolfe's death, his editor Aswell extracted *The Web and the Rock* (1939) from the mass of manuscripts that Wolfe had left. The new protagonist, Webber, is surprisingly like Eugene Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel*, although his physical characteristics are changed, as also his family life. He proceeds through childhood to college and then to New York. There he meets Esther Jack and the novel becomes the record of a tempestuous love affair. Then, Webber goes to Germany, is badly beaten in the Oktoberfest in Munich, and through a monologue between his body and soul, understands that he must turn from his immersion in himself and his past.

The second book which Aswell assembled is *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). It brings together in a narrative frame large units of material, which Wolfe had completed but only partially arranged at the time of his death. It continues the story of Webber, but in it what Wolfe means when he says that the protagonist is to be a "kind of polar instrument, round which the events of life are grouped" (quoted in Holman, 1975: 16), becomes clear. The work has the very loose narrative structure of Webber's life: he returns from Europe, writes his book, goes to Libya hill for his aunt's funeral, travels to Europe, sees the vacuity of fame in Lloyd Mcharg (Sinclair Lewis), travels in

Germany and comprehends the horror of the Nazi regime, and writes a long letter setting forth his credo.

Yet what gives the book vitality is not Webber and *his* experience, but the *view of life*, which is seen through him. Mr. Katamoto, Mr. Jack and the party at his house, Judge Rumford Bland and his usury, the satiric picture of the moral and material collapse of Libya Hill, Daisy Purvis, Lloyd McHarg, Foxhall Edwards and his family, Mr. C. Green, who jumps from the twelfth storey of a hotel, the frightened little Jew on the train out of Germany – it is in materials such as these that the dramatic strength of the book resides. *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) is freer than his other works of the rhapsodic assertion that so often replaces dramatic statement in Wolfe.

The third volume, which Aswell mines from the manuscripts, is *The Hills Beyond* (1941), a collection of fragments and sketches. In this fragment, Wolfe's efforts at being an objective novelist has more immediate apparent success than they do elsewhere, and he seems to be moving much more toward the realism of the Southern frontier and away from the romanticism of his early career. With the publication of *The Hills Beyond*, most of Wolfe's significant work has been in print, and, incomplete though it is as a record of his vast and ambitious

project, it is all that remains of his efforts to formulate in fiction a vision of himself and his world, which constitutes his life.

On the publication of *Of Time and the River* (1935), Wolfe writes: ...“ I still sweat with anguish – with a sense of irremediable loss - at the thought of what another six months would have done to that book – how much more whole and perfect it would have been. Then there would have been no criticism of its episodic character – for, by God, in purpose and in spirit, that book was not episodic, but a living whole and I could have made it so” (*Letters*, 1956; quoted in Holman, 1975: 21). The fact remains that only as a lyric recorder of his youth is Wolfe truly successful in the longer fictional forms. His great vision of being the critic of his society and the definer of his nation can be seen in fragments, but its large outline is shadowy and incomplete. It is for this reason that the central problems concerning Wolfe as a writer are as intimately tied up in his personality and his career as they are in his works. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., considers *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) as Wolfe’s only successful full length novel, and in his other works one almost has the feeling of an expense of talent in a waste of formlessness. Wolfe does not or may be cannot subject his ego to the discipline of his own creative imagination.

Wolfe always seems to feel that if the opposites are defined, the synthesis will result automatically. He is always stating a thing and its opposite and allowing the *miracle* of their co-existence to stand. In his works, the fact of his great talent and the fact of his ambitious projects are never submitted to the discipline of art which would have made a synthesis of them. They are allowed to co-exist without serious effort at fusion.

This aspect of Wolfe's work points to its essential romanticism, to the extent to which it is embedded in the doctrine of self-expression and self-realization. His total work stands, as do so many other monuments of romantic art, as a group of fragments imperfectly bodying forth a seemingly ineffable cosmic vision in terms of the self of the artist. Although it contains large areas of poor and even bad writing, scenes that do not come off or that bear no relevance to what has gone before, rhapsodies that fail utterly to communicate, it also contains some of the best writing done by an American in the twentieth century, and it merits our examination.

One of Wolfe's worlds is the very literal, immediate world of the 1920's and 1930's, a world presented in his fiction through objects, actions, persons and events apparently so directly drawn from life and

presented critically that their originals greeted them with angry recognition. The structure of his works seems to be the simple chronological pattern of his own life, their incidents reflecting those he participated in or witnessed. Exploring the close relationship of Wolfe's work to his life, scholars have noted the use of direct experience and the representation of actual persons and events. Floyd C. Watkins comments: "There are many more than 300 characters and places mentioned by name or described in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and probably there is not an entirely fictitious person, place, or incident in the whole novel" (quoted in Holman, 1975: 5). The people of Ashville are merely represented under the thinnest and most transparent disguises, and the changes in name are as slight as Chapel Hill to Pulpit Hill, Releigh to Sidney, Woodfin Street to Woodson Street, or Reuben Rawls to Ralph Rolls. His father's name is changed from W.O. Wolfe to W.O. Gant, his mother's from Julia Elizabeth Westall Wolfe to Eliza Pentland Gant, and his brother's from Ben Wolfe to Ben Gant.

This world is a representation of the social context, described with great accuracy and directness. It is the world of his inner self, a world of consciousness, inspiration, impressions, emotions, nostalgic memories, brooded over by a sense of the inexorable passage of *dark*

time. Wolfe articulates his inner world in ways that proves to be powerfully effective and affective. These two worlds are in conflict: the self in its insulated dream of time is surrounded by, but finds no door by which to enter the social context that constitutes its milieu. In his early works, Wolfe seems to be content to let these two worlds co-exist, but in some of his later works he attempts to effect a reconciliation of both worlds through a democratic dream. Thus, the world of Thomas Wolfe is actually three worlds: self, society and nation. And the problem of his art is that of not successfully integrating the three into a unity. Even if the desire for unity and synthesis is a growing awareness, a careful study of his works reveals that a sense of ambivalence is evident in most of his works. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has all the characteristics of a romantic artist, who perceives his own self as a product of the available materials (here – his personal experiences of life), never remaining static at a fixed point of time. Wolfe always refers to his works as *the book* - indicating the intended unity and wholeness of his artistic enterprise. And the changing, developing self corresponds to the Coleridgean concept of organicity of art. Wolfe thus situates his self in an immanent teleology where mind comes to itself

through loss of itself being in this world. The sense of loss and recovery of the self has been placed in the perspective of time.

A sense of alienation is at the core of Wolfe's attitude. He is haunted and anguished by life. He is caught up and finds no route of release, except death, from the crisis of existence. Like Kafka's Joseph K., he finds no answer to why he is arrested in flesh and blood in a flux of irreversible time. This gives him a sense of passage of time and makes him feel defeated. His short and restless life and the immensity of his feelings do not move in one desired direction. Obviously, the finer realizations of art and life become problematic as they go berserk and remain scattered and dispersed. This creates the disjuncture between his critical statements and their practice. *A Story of a Novel* (1936) is an important theoretical work in which Wolfe delineates the process of the making of a novelist. However, this work is not a disciplined, objective treatise, but an account of a struggling artist caught up in his ambivalence. As his works have been intensely autobiographical, it might be said that the sense of ambivalence has been very much a part of his growing up, which he is never able to transcend. His attachment to his mother, his mother's rejection of his father, and his relationship with others both men and women, are

psychologically significant. Thus, any meaningful study of Wolfe cannot overlook the psychological dimension of his works.

While most of his distinguished contemporaries like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Lewis and others have praised him, the academic critics are critical of his achievements. Obviously, the ambivalence in his works has allowed such extreme responses. Among critics, Holman offers an objective critique of his genius:

His (Wolfe's), like almost everything about life and his art, had two elements that were in opposition and a third that tended to reconcile the opposites. (1962: 1)

Whether Wolfe is able to reconcile the opposite worlds into a synthesis or form the opposites into an integrated vision is debatable. But the pulls of opposite poles are too pronounced in his works to be overlooked. Like Whitman, Wolfe attempts to make his self a cosmic one to devour everything. In most cases, however, it has remained only an attempt. The disjuncture between the intended objective and the actual realization of it apparently points at the ambivalence at different levels of Wolfe's creative endeavour. This thesis can be supported by Wolfe's own statement in *The Story of a Novel*:

It may be objected, it has been objected already by certain critics, that ... I have an almost insane hunger to devour

the entire body of human experience to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold. (1936: 46)

To discipline the intemperate excess and translate those ravenous experiences into art have been a struggle between the man of feeling and the man of reason. Very often the man of feeling has overtaken the artist disrupting the intended form, while projecting his ambivalence. Wolfe's style is an example of the struggle operative at various levels. He is at the same time intensely lyrical and objectively realistic. The two strands evidently make the task of critics difficult to objectively assess his works. As style represents the man, Wolfe's style also represents his own ambivalent self.

In many passages of Wolfe's writing, both realistic and highly lyrical modes co-exist. His mixed style bothers a sensitive reader even if the rhetorical passages extend and universalize a particular incident. They are often effectively wedded to their final dramatic context. The stylistic inconsistency reveals the fact that contrary impulses are at work. While one impulse with the exuberance of the imaginative candour moves towards full flow, the other never unbinds itself from the real world. Although a work of art resembles day-to-day world, it is never identical with it. One may look at connections between the world

of our daily experiences (reality) and the artistic world of imagination (unreal, fantasy), but any narrative representation of either of these worlds must be coherent in style. The lack of coherence and consistency indicates a split personality, ambivalent and diasparactive.

On Wolfe, William Faulkner has remarked: "I rated Wolfe first (among modern American writers) because we had all failed but Wolfe had made the best failure because he had tried hardest to say the most" (quoted in Holman, 1975: 20). Faulkner is also a Southerner and he has failed to see in the failure of Wolfe the seemingly uncontrolled and formless exuberance in his work. This aspect has become almost a critical truism that he possesses great talent but little control, a magnificent expertise over language, but a limited awareness of the demands of the plot, a sensuous recall that is nearly total but an almost shocking unwillingness to subject his material to critical elision.

Among the romantics, Keats talks about the artist's self dissolving into multiple selves in order to create works of art in which the ego of the artist as *I* is not most pronounced. In this sense, his concept of *Negative Capability* stands opposed to Wordsworth's concept of *Egotistical Sublime*. To Keats, art is a process of mapping differences and harmonizing them. He maintains: "But the minds of

mortals are so different and bent on such diverse journeys that it may at first appear impossible for any common taste and fellowship to exist between two or three under these suppositions. It is however quite the contrary – minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in Numberless points, and all (for at) last greet each other at the journey's end" (Keats' letter written to J.H. Reynolds on the 19th February, 1818, quoted from *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings, London: OUP, 1970: 66).

To Thomas Clayton Wolfe, any creative endeavour is nothing but an intense personal encounter with life. Such an encounter not only enlarges the creative writer's understanding of *life*, but also helps him to understand the complexities of *writing* itself. Like art, the strange and bitter miracle of life exists for him as congeries of contradictions. He realizes that only through contradictions, both life and the art evolve, shape and progress. The meanings and workings of both become clearer only when their negations are brought forth. Wolfe presents binaries together, for his own life is fraught with binaries. He is intensely pre-occupied with his private self. He is convinced that "all serious work must be at bottom autobiographical, and that a man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create

anything that has substantial value” (1936: 21). Hence, for Wolfe, art seems to bear upon the vision of reality in life.

Creative writers tend to develop independent attitudes towards life and art, and attempt to make them coincide at the site of their works. Thomas Wolfe is unambiguous in his confession that he uses the experience of his life into shaping his art. In this realization, Wolfe echoes Marcel Proust who maintains: “Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life which in consequence can be said to be really lived – is literature” (quoted in Randall Stevenson, 1992: 155). Similar sentiments are experienced by the characters in D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*:

Art and Life, were to them the Reality and the Unreality.
‘Of course’, said Gudrun, ‘Life doesn’t *really* matter – it is
one’s art which is central. (1920: 504)

It is not simply a matter of creative conviction but of pride to Wolfe, who considers himself a great “putter – inner” (Wolfe’s letter to Scott Fitzgerald, quoted in James Dickey’s “Foreword” to *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe*, 1987: XI).

Hegel divides all arts into three stages: symbolic, classic and romantic. According to him, it is only romantic art that “envelops matter in self – consciousness” (quoted in Wimsatt and Brooks,

1957: 369). To Schiller, “all art arises out of two impulses and balances these variously; the finite material impulse and the infinite impulse of idea. The reconciliation of the two is the free ‘play’ of the ‘whole human person’” (*Ibid.*, 1957: 369-70) The English romantic writers imbued in the German ideology take for their goal, the assumption that highest art exists beyond finite human possibility. “Our destiny”, Wordsworth says in a moment of profound insight in the *Prelude*, “our being’s heart and home / Is with Infinitude” (Wordsworth, 1950: 278). Central to the romantic vision is an endeavour to aspire for *one life within and abroad* and to contemplate a universe or society resolved into concord. Bringing the opposites together is a matter of ability in which Wolfe is not successful. However, his creative sensibility is deeply rooted in the romantic ethos. Wolfe fails for the same reason as all romantics fail to achieve organic unity. The obsession of romantics to harp on unity and harmony actually foregrounds their inability to achieve it. Life is undeniably fragmentary and diasparactive. The *desire* for unity may be termed a wish fulfillment dream.

Wolfe clearly echoes the creative process elucidated in Coleridge’s poem “*Kubla Khan*”. In his work *The Story of a Novel* (1936), Wolfe maintains that “I actually felt that I had a great river

thrusting for release inside of me and that I had to find a channel into which its floodlike power could pour” (1936: 52). Reflecting upon how *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) came to be, Wolfe asserts: “The book took hold of me and possessed me. In a way, I think it shaped itself.” (1936: 8)

Moved with an intense romantic impulse, Wolfe advocates complete immersion and imaginative surrender to the demands of a situation or a memory - the sense of life submitted to and entered. In his writing, Wolfe tells us that we have settled, we are settling – for too little. We have not lived enough; we are capable of more. Wolfe places us where our lives, with all their million particularities and possibilities, surround us at every second. All we need to do is to feel what we actually feel, and go with it where it takes us, to the lowest depths of despair and hopelessness or to the heights of ecstasy. The risk is great, but as D.H. Lawrence says: “I will show you how not to be a dead man in life” (quoted in Dickey, “Foreword” to *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe*, 1987: XV). Wolfe stands us in good stead here, in his stories and novels, soliciting us in bewildering and heartening plenty to open up entirely to our experiences, to possess it, to keep nothing back, to be cast on the flood. The marked romanticism of his aesthetic

attitude, with its pronounced distrust of almost all forms of intellectualism and its emphasis on the expression of the artist's feelings as the highest objective of a work of art, is at a polar extreme from the view Wolfe later developed of the writer as national prophet *obligated to represent the social scene. His works are caught between the opposing pulls of the representation of the nation and the expression of the self.*

Wolfe's short fictions represent the portion of his self in which he remembers, isolates, organizes and understands the event. Yet when he puts them in large books, there is a subtle but significant decentering of interest from the characters to the perceiving and remembering self. The inclusion of these short fictions in the long novels represent the perceiver's attempt to absorb them into his total experience of the complexity of life and to use them as elements in his search for ultimate meaning. Wolfe's problem is to find a large and flexible form competent enough to unify his explosive, disparate imaginative impulse. The large form that he seeks would not represent a series of dramatic moments in the life of his protagonist (and through him, of America), but an interweaving of these moments in a complex fabric of event, time and feeling, a totality of experienced life.

Wolfe perceives time - *dark time* - as being at the centre of the mystery of experience, and its representation on three complex levels (dealt with at length in Chapter III - "The Putter-Inner: Time and Existential Alienation") is a major concern of his works. The individual scene or person has little value to him for everything has to be placed in relation to time for being meaningful. To portray an incident or individual against the complex pattern of time, that incident or individual must be seen through a perceiving and remembering self. And that self-being psychologically independent, active and generative, acted as a catalyst, transforming actual experiences into the reality, which is true to his self. Hence Wolfe created Eugene Gant, George Webber, or David Hawke, the youth who can read the corrosion of time; Eliza Gant, whose fabric of memories in *The Web of Earth* is a record of the impact of time on her. The individual events of *No Door* assume their importance as portions of a personal history, as they are reflected in the narrator's memory. An event is thus an objective experience, which is perceived and recalled later by the self that first experiences it directly, then as fact and transformed memory, it becomes a part of the totality of experience that creates the web of meaning for that self.

Wolfe's whole career is an endless search for a language and form in which to communicate the web of meaning of life. As he declares in *The Story of a Novel* (1936):

I know the door is not yet open. I know the tongue, the speech, the language that I seek is not yet found, but I believe with all my heart that I have found the way, have made a channel, am started on my first beginning. And I believe with all my heart, also, that each man for himself and in his own way, each man who ever hopes to make a living thing out of the substances of his one life, must find that way, that language, and that door – must find it for himself as I have tried to do. (1936: 49)

The passion to find a mode of expression is coupled, for Wolfe, with a thoroughly organic view of art, that an articulation dictates the form in which it is uttered.

Wolfe's refusal to obey norms seems to be a deconstructionist's attitude to upset paradigms of standard writing norms. It is an attempt at liberty, with constant shifting of centres. Outwardly, Wolfe is a declared romantic. But his repressed unconscious subverts that position.

Steiner Kvale maintains:

The focus on language implies a decentralization of the subject. The self no longer uses language to express itself; rather the language speaks through the person. The individual self becomes a medium for the culture and its language. (Kvale, Steiner in Anderson, W.T., 1996: 22)

This pluralism and heterogeneity, discontinuity and indeterminacy, are manifest in his works where the split personalities of the author become obvious.

Like Coleridge, Wolfe is convinced that everything is related to everything in an organic bond. His fictions acquire a formal excellence that reinforces the romantic position in which the flow of undirected energy creates its own form. The understanding and insight into characters and situations come straight from the inner consciousness. Wolfe once writes to Hamilton Basso that there is no accepted way, "there are as many art forms as there are forms of art, and the artist will continue to create new ones and to enrich life with new creations as long as there is either life or art" (quoted in Holman, 1973: 166). All diverse aspects of his writing are constructed as portions of a great and perpetually fragmented, diasparactive whole. It is an outgrowth of the same basic desire, that of the Whitmanesque attempt to put a person on record and through that person to represent America in its paradox of unity and diversity, while exploring the deep dimensions of the eternal and the intolerable alienation of the individual lost in the complex currents of time; who, like Hamlet, faces an existential crisis: to be or not to be. He who would have written the definition of his nation leaves

the definition of his self. He asserts that though we “are lost here in America ... we shall be found” (quoted in Holman, 1975: 36). He survives as a chronicler of a lost childhood, a vanished glory, the portrayer of an individual American’s experience, which is felt as “a giant web in which I was caught, the product of my huge inheritance – the torrential recollectiveness, derived out of my mother’s stock, which became a living, million - fibered integument that bound me to the past, not only of my own life, but of the very earth from which I came, so that nothing in the end escaped from its inrooted and all-feeling explorativeness” (*Ibid.*, 1975: 36). Like Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Wolfe would say:

Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. (Joyce, 1977: 228)

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Chapter-III

THE PUTTER-INNER: TIME AND EXISTENTIAL ALIENATION

PART-I

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past,
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

(l. 1-5, "Burnt Norton", "Four Quartets", in
The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot,
London: Faber & Faber, 1969: 171)

These lines from Eliot's *Four Quartets* present a view of time that is circular and is in perpetual flux. However, what is invisible and significant in these lines is the concept that time divided or continuous is integral to itself. It is thus self-contained and humanly determined and divided. Although we are not conscious of the dimension of time, it is, however, the most important factor in our understanding of experiential reality. If experience is the touchstone and guide to the understanding of time, it also inspires our longing to go beyond time; to reach out the Eliotian stillpoint. Philosophers over the centuries have speculated on life in time and beyond in explicating the concept of being and exploring the means of becoming. There are meditations on eternity; the lived life in time inevitably comes to

an end in the form of death while living man seeks salvation, and a life beyond.

From Plato to Plotinus, Augustine to Heidegger, time has been the subject of central concern. Not only does Augustine, like Aristotle, look at the aporias and the skepticism on time, but others also have explored its psychological dimension. Augustine has struggled with measurement of time as he maintains that we speak of time that will come, that is past, and that is passing by. The paradox of measuring time is a direct result of the paradox of the being and the non-being of time. Some of the philosophers have felt that time cannot be put into rational understanding. It can only be grasped through intuition. This attitude bears upon the fact that time always mysteriously slips away from us. However, it is an important component of our consciousness as well as our growth that cannot be denied.

Augustine's problem with time is theological. In trying to define what is time, he comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to provide an explicit definition of time. He maintains: "We cannot give an explicit definition, but we can do things that explain how to tell that one thing is

longer than another and how to measure length. In the same way we can give an account of our use of the word 'time,' even though we cannot do so by giving an explicit definition" (*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vols. 7 & 8, 1967: 126). Measuring time was Augustine's problem as he was looking for an analogy between spatial and temporal measurement. If for Augustine, the present time is measured on the count of experience, articulated by language and enlightened by intelligence, the skeptics have considered the present as an instant that cannot be divided.

Among the phenomenologists, Paul Ricoeur, in particular, finds the Augustinian theory unsatisfactory. He argues that Augustine's attempt to measure time is unacceptable, for measurement is not a property of time. The phenomenologists have always privileged understanding of time as a subjective condition of consciousness. Aristotle's thesis that without the being's awareness of itself, time in the form of movement changes, may look meaningless. Aristotle differentiates between our conceptual understanding of being in time and time as an entity. However, the Aristotelian *instant* and the Augustinian *present* remain ambiguous to the extent that the past-future relation is beyond the principle of *Physics*.

Besides the phenomenologists, the existentialists underline the importance of time in its relation to being. To them, man's freedom and his quest for authentic personal being meet with resistance and frustration, for existence results in termination of life, in death. What is centralized in the existentialist philosophy from Kirkegaard to Heidegger to Sartre is the emotional life of man. Man's existential alienation is focused in the perpetual tension and tragic conflict with the cosmos and time.

The physical succession of time that the phenomenologists advocate creates the problem of explaining the emotional life of man. The Freudian unconscious does not recognize time. If we accept the Freudian unconscious as a fact of the human psyche that does not recognize the flow of time, how can we accept time in its physical progression? Therefore, the narrative style of stream of consciousness is an answer in a paradoxical context to the physical progression of time. Bergson draws attention to the continuous and broken character of time as it is known in consciousness, against the broken up series of instants that constitute clock-time. He further exposes the fallacies in the way of thinking of time as if it could be

apprehended spatially: events, he says, are imaginary spatial points in the uninterrupted, indistinguishable flow of time.

For Baudelaire, as indeed for Kant, a sense of discontinuity of time is a break with tradition that characterizes modernity. Baudelaire imagined it, in high Romantic fashion – as the discovery of evermore-inventive variations on the theme of aesthetic self-invention. And Foucault follows Baudelaire, rather than Kant, in equating modernity with the spirit of perpetual transformation, the feeling of novelty, or vertigo in the face of the passing moment that alone enables us to grasp what is authentic in our experience of contemporary art forms and life-styles alike. Foucault's histories typically begin from his perception that something is terribly wrong in the present. His primary goal is not to understand the past but to understand the present. For it is precisely in the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent, that consciousness discovers its true vocation as a register.

In relating time to language one understands such expressions as short time, long time and timelessness. These three categories defined by language bear upon literature in the discursive articulation of life in its contradictions. Although philosophers have speculated upon language and

time, what is important to language is that it also brings into life human experiences in that it is another instrument that brings together time and being. Paul Ricoeur maintains that speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond. A poetical transfiguration alone, not only of the solution but of the question itself, will free the aporia from the meaninglessness it skirts.

Ricoeur considers the worlds of fiction in counterpoint to the historical world relating to the resolution of the aporias of temporality brought to light by phenomenology. The most visible feature in the opposition between fictive time and historical time is the emancipation of the narrator to re-inscribe lived time upon cosmic time. In this sense, the time of fictional narrative has been freed from the constraints of referring back to the time of the universe. Each fictive temporal experience unfolds its world which is singular, incomparable and unique – as are Kant's segments of a unique successive time – limitations belonging to a unique imaginary world.

Fictive experience of time relates in its own way lived temporality and time perceived in the world of fiction, yet often mix historical

characters, dateable events or geographical sites. But interestingly, all references to real events are divested of their referential paradigms and are set on par with the fictional status of other events, as Husserl uses to characterize the imaginary. Thus a segment of world events is incorporated within the temporal experience of the fictional characters. Fiction replies to this, as Ricoeur maintains, by unfolding the range of imaginative variations that respond to the major aporia of phenomenology. At the core of the opposition between the imaginative variations produced by fictions about time, like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1923), Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924) and Proust's *A Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), and the fixed time of the re-inscription by history of lived time upon world time, the major contribution of fiction to philosophy lies in the exploration of the non-linear features of phenomenological time that historical time conceals due to the fact that it is set within the great chronology of the universe.

For the nineteenth century novelist, time is the medium in which people grow, individually and collectively: hopes and ambitions come to fruition or are dismayed. Events mark the critical points of change, in

which cause and effect, character and event move together not as a natural process but by the play of chance. For example, in *War and Peace* (1869), Natasha at the opera is the logical descendant of the girl who teases Boris Drubetskoy in the first chapter; chance may have brought her there, but her response to Kuragin obeys delicate laws of latent possibility in her character.

None of these assumptions is shared by Modernist novelists. Even in the apparently conventional *Buddenbrooks* (1902), Mann treats ironically the consul's gilt-edged notebook in which he chronicles the family's developments with an understanding that an individual's life makes coherent sense with/without the disruptive chance factor. Three decades later, in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), the notion of coherent human growth in time is considered as bourgeois bad faith, a piece of cowardice in the face of the surrounding contingency.

Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), combines a general sense of relevance with an acquaintance with the particular distinctive nature of literature. He takes literary form, especially in the arrangements of beginnings, middles and ends, as a reflector of ideas about

time and history. Because there is something irremediably temporal about literary form, he argues that Modernist writing does not forsake sequential arrangement entirely; rather, it uses our temporal expectations and then frustrates or complicates them. Kermode thus takes up a position contrary to that critical orthodoxy, which sees *spatial form* as the norm of Modernist writing. This idea, most clearly promulgated by Joseph Frank in 1945, depends on the Imagist aesthetic in assuming that novels like *Ulysses* (1922) are designed as single, static images outside time, to be simultaneously apprehended. In its cruder forms the idea tends to suggest that Modernism escaped the tyranny of logical sequence in order to embrace the tyranny of *spatial form*. For Michael Hollington, the keynote of Modernism is liberation, an ironic distrust of all absolutes, including those of temporal or spatial form.

In his preface to *The Awkward Age* (1893), James remarks: “We are shut up wholly to cross-relations all within the action itself, no part of which is related to anything but some other part – save of course by the relation of the total to life” (in Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976: 397). The characters belong less to a world being imitated than to a process, and they

seem to participate in the act of their own creation. They are part of the technical plot; and as in many modern novels they seem to assert against their author the right to greater freedom, to profounder psychological depth, or to life that reaches freely backward and forward in time, as in some of Virginia Woolf's novels. The form is not simply an enabling means of handling the content, but in some sense it *is* the content; experience generates form but form generates experience, and it is in the delicate intersections between the claims of formal wholeness and human contingency that some of the central aesthetics of Modernist fiction is found. The contemporary symbolist wholeness presides over the modern novel; the world beyond the contingent details and haphazard reality acquires that luminosity which Virginia Woolf sought in fiction. One result is a progressive fading of that realism, which has long been associated with the novel; language or rhetoric ceases to be what we see through, and becomes what we see. The novel hangs on the border between the mimetic and the autotelic species of literature, between an art made by imitating things outside itself, and an art that is of an internally coherent making.

It is in the possibility of such an art of fiction that constitutes the aesthetic subject matter of Marcel Proust's multi-volume novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* [(*A Remembrance of Things Past*) (1913-27)]. Proust wrote a few other things, but the novel was his essential life work, a vastly ambitious enterprise, into which went the bulk of his own personal experience and the full depth of his aesthetic perceptions. The book is a voyage into the complexity of consciousness, instinctual and aesthetic as well as a realist document of a life and a society. In the last volume, the narrator, Marcel, returns after many years in sanatoria to the high Parisian circles of which he was once an assiduous member. Among the guests at a reception, he is astonished to find how old his friends appear; and it only gradually dawns on him that this is because he, too, has grown old. Many of his acquaintances are dead; some are dying. The novel extends beyond the world of social or historical time. It is a Symbolist's quest for the lost reality of the past, and a search for the artistic means for its recreation. Man, says Proust, is a giant standing on the living stilts of his years; and it is possible, in rare and therefore joyous moments of illumination, to span the intervening decades and relive, in all its perfectly natural reality, a fragment of our past. For most of us the joy of such isolated instants is

short-lived; but for the artist they have the resonance of symbols or revelations, since they carry the command to preserve and hold the vision in words. Art is thus the central illumination; it alone can give pattern or form which in turn make significance out of what would otherwise be a contingent sequence. *A la recherche du temps perdu*, therefore, primarily is a story of the birth of a literary vocation, of a sense of the relation between reality and art, and of the disciplined and sacramental power it can accrue, as well as a structure devoted to the recapturing the past as a joy. The becoming of the book is also the becoming of the writer as many Modernist novels stand witness to such a happening. Proust maintains: “the true life, life at last discovered and illuminated, the only life really lived, is that of the writer” (quoted in Bradbury & Mcfarlane, 1976: 404).

PART-II

Thomas Clayton Wolfe is troubled by time and baffled by the mystery of life. The irreversible rush of time makes him hysterical, for passage of time and passage of life are synonymous to him. The hunger to see all, know all and express all comes into conflict with the uncontrollable passage of time. He seethed in frustration and alienation. His all-embracing intentions are not humanly feasible. And being human, he is under the regulation of time. While time allows Wolfe some space in attempting to actualize his massive programmes, time suddenly, would irrevocably terminate that space. Time and Death are brothers enjoined by fate to delimit man. Thus Wolfe, in a maddening frenzy, tried to be a *putter-inner*, to experience more, often ignoring the capacity of mere mortal life. In communicating his experiences of life he attempted to defeat time. He suffered the frustrating anxiety of existence – the crisis of being there, and unable to find a route to freedom except through the life-negating process of death. Wolfe's writings are packed in his typical explosive abundance with his anguish over his situation, his sense of tragic incommunicability, of alienation, and his frenzied response to the crisis.

Alienation is a key component in the complex philosophy of existentialism. It originates and manifests in the irony of Sartre's statement that man is condemned to freedom. Alienation as an inevitable factor in the process of becoming, underlines the connection between 'being' and 'time'. A host of philosophers among them, Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre and creative writers, have been obsessed with alienation.

Alienation is a term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology and the social sciences, usually having the emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation or self-estrangement. "Alienation (or estrangement) is the act, or result of the act, through which something, or somebody, becomes (or has become) alien (or strange) to something, or somebody, else" (*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vols.1 & 2, 1967: 76).

In everyday usage alienation often means turning away or keeping away from former friends or associates. In contemporary psychology and sociology it is often used to name an individual's feeling of alienness toward society, nature, other people, or himself. To some philosophers, alienation means self-alienation (self-estrangement): the process, or result

of the process, by which a self (God or man) through itself (through its own action) becomes alien (strange) to itself (to its own nature).

The roots of the idea of alienation can be found in the work of Plotinus and in the theology of St. Augustine and Martin Luther (expressed in the struggle to dissociate – or alienate – oneself from one's own imperfections by identifying with a transcendental perfect Being). The concept of alienation was first philosophically elaborated by Hegel. The Christian doctrine of original sin and redemption can be regarded as the first version of Hegel's doctrine of alienation and de-alienation. Some maintain that the source of Hegel's view of nature as a self-alienated form of Absolute Mind bears upon Plato's view of the natural world as an imperfect picture of the sublime world of ideas. For Hegel, alienation was an ontological fact, rooted in the nature of man's existence in the world. There was an inherent dissociation between man as a subject and man as an object (i.e. between man as a creative subject seeking to be and to realize himself and man as an object influenced and manipulated by others), so that man's own creations (his art, language, science, etc.) stand

outside him as alien objects – as objectifications of what is essential and prior, namely mind and individual consciousness.

This view rooted in German idealism and in a metaphysical perspective, became the basis for a radical critique of society and its institutions by those philosophers who received Hegel's ideas. Feuerbach accepted Hegel's view that man can be alienated from himself, but he rejected the views that nature is a self-alienated form of Absolute Mind and man is Absolute Mind in the process of delineation. Man is not self-alienated God. On the contrary, God is self-alienated man: he is man's essence absolutized and estranged from man. And man is not alienated from himself when he refuses to recognize nature as a self-alienated form of God; man is alienated from himself when he creates and puts above himself an imagined, alien higher being and bows before that being as a slave. The de-alienation of man consists in the abolition of that estranged picture of man, which is God.

Like Kant, Kierkegaard argued that existence is not a property and that no concept of a given object entails the existence of that object. Also, Kierkegaard anticipated some modern writers in arguing that action and

choice can be understood only if viewed from the standpoint of the agent rather than from that of the spectator.

Existentialists may be regarded as disappointed rationalists. When they announce that reality cannot be comprehended within a conceptual system, or, that individual existence cannot be so comprehended, they identify the role of a conceptual system with the notion of an all-embracing set of necessary truths derived by deduction from some axiomatic starting point.

Heidegger took up Leibniz' question: why are there things that are rather than nothing? For Heidegger, the question itself is misleading, because the posing of it relies upon an inadequate analysis of the notions of being and nothingness.

In Sartre, too, there is an implicit relation to metaphysical rationalism. The thesis that existence is absurd, which is especially important in French existentialism, turns out to be a denial of the principles of sufficient reason. There is no ultimate explanation of why things are as they are and not otherwise. It is curious, on the one hand, that this is so is seen as a flaw in the nature of things. It belongs to what

Heidegger calls their fallenness; the experience of it arouses in us anxiety and perplexity. Yet on the other hand, it is so is the guarantee of human freedom. For existentialism, all the important possibilities of human life are bound up with the fact of human freedom, so that to lament the absurdity of existence is in a way odd. But what this lament does reflect is the ambiguous attitude of existentialists to human freedom.

If any single thesis could be said to constitute the doctrine of existentialism, it would be that the possibility of choice is central to human nature. Even the thesis that existence precedes essence often means no more than that men do not have fixed natures that limit or determine their choices, but rather it is their choices that bring whatever nature they have into being.

Kierkegaard argued that in certain psychologically defined moments truths about human nature are grasped. One such moment would be when we realize that we do not just fear specific objects but experience a generalized dread. Heidegger sees it as an ontological constituent of the universe; Sartre sees it as a confrontation with the fact of freedom, of our unmade future. Heidegger gives a very special place to the continuous

awareness of one's own future death. Jaspers lays a more generalized stress on a range of situations in which the fragility of our existence is brought home to us.

To Jean-Paul Sartre, the concept of choice, which for Kierkegaard was a decision between fundamentally different ways of life has become an ubiquitous presence behind every human action, and the being of people, which Heidegger has distinguished from the being of things, is now defined essentially in terms of such choices.

Sartre employs psychological analyses similar to Kierkegaard's analysis of dread but sets them out in terms borrowed from phenomenology. Of parallel psychological interest are the novels of Albert Camus, but the atheism that for Sartre is a consequence of his view of human nature and the world was basic to the thought of Camus. Human life is represented in the myth of Sisyphos, who was doomed eternally to roll up a hill a vast stone that would always falls back just as he was about to reach the top. The dignity of life derives from mankind's continual perseverance in projects for which the universe affords no encouragement.

Marx took from Hegel the word alienation and placed the idea behind it in a secular context. For him, alienation of man from his true being was grasped by neither Hegel's existential duality nor Feuerbach's religious projection. It was man's nature, Marx held, to realize himself in work, but the possibility of doing so was denied to him by the economic system.

Though Sartre is the point of confluence of three post-Hegelian streams of thought – the Marxist, the Existentialist and the Phenomenological – and a product of traditional European thinking on aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics and politics, he is profoundly and self-consciously individualistic in his interpretation of the human situation. The central experience of Kafka's life was manifold alienation. The compelling gnostic vision of the world which is fashioned from Kafka's works has become one of the major literary influences of our age. In Kafka's work the existentialists' conception of absurdity and dread are explored.

John Macquarrie maintains: "The existentialist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems to be aware of a crisis, a threat, a fragmentation and alienation that are new in their chilling intensity" (Macquarrie, 1986:

263). Writing of this sense of crisis, William Barrett has remarked: “The image of modern man lies in T.S. Eliot’s line – ‘Men are bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind’” (*Ibid.*, 263).

Existence is contingent and absurd, and all human beings are supernumerary and superfluous, dispensable and replaceable. The individual alone is the measure of all things, particularly of all values. Life is a continuous process of making choices, and all choices are personal and individual. Man has freedom, total freedom, even dreadful freedom. In this contingent universe, there is absence of certainty. Anything can happen to anybody. Random chance is all.

In an existential world, man makes his commitments and initiates his projects in full awareness that he is imprisoned by a universe which is infinite in time, space, and indifference to his existence. This imprisonment pricks him – being trapped in time, and having nothing to relate. Man is alienated from himself also. The coherence or wholeness and meaningfulness of life breaks down due to the threat of immutable time. An awareness of time, far from giving a solution, is the source of

frustration. When Thomas Wolfe wants to embrace all experience, he is frustrated because time is fleeting. He would not have time to integrate all.

This is the modernist dilemma: how to master time. One proposed solution is through art. Aesthetic time appears to be eternal. But since alienation is part of life, then with Sartre we are condemned to freedom. To Kafka, freedom is an imprisonment, and he sees the inevitability of living which does not grant choice of living. That the universe does not make sense, that there are no rational patterns discernible in it, is a theme central, for example, to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864). Dostoyevsky is often cited as a forerunner of existentialism precisely because in his disillusionment with rational humanism he stressed the unpredictable character of the universe, for his characters appear face to face with pure contingency. Any established connection between things may break down at any moment. Order is a deceptive mask that the universe, especially the social universe, wears. The individual thus confronts the universe with no rational scheme by means of which he can hope to master it. Reason will lead him to generalizations, if he relies upon them, they may let him down. The problems Wolfe faces are those of

Dostoyevsky for whose characters there are no options, no route to escape . compulsions and no way to escape time. One's aloneness is one's truth.

In *The Story of a Novel* (1936), Thomas Wolfe brings the concepts of alienation and time into sharp focus. He maintains:

... I was being baffled by a certain time element in the book, by a time relation which could not be escaped, and for which I was now desperately seeking some structural channel. There were three time elements inherent in the material. The first and most obvious was an element of actual present time, an element which carried the narrative forward, which represented characters and events as living in the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced upto that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day. It was the tremendous problem of these three time elements that almost defeated me and that cost me countless hours of anguish in the years that were to follow. (1936: 51-52)

The Wolfean protagonist is a victim of time and alienation. He struggles in vain to communicate from the prison of circumstances, of being, of existence and Wolfe's philosophical concern seems to veer

around time. He attempts to explore it as past and present, and as time immutable. In his fictional works, he mingles the past into the present through memory and both time present and past are set against the backdrop of eternity. Time as an entity is for Wolfe a great factor in life and art. Attempting to understand life as conditioned by time, Wolfe has struggled throughout his career to give an adequate understanding of time and alienation.

The first and most obvious element of time, according to Wolfe, is that of simple chronology, the element that carries a narrative forward. This may be called clock-time. The second element is past time, the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of his life is conditioned not only by what he experiences in that moment, but by all that he has experienced upto that moment. The past time exists in the present principally through the action of memory being triggered by a concrete sensory impression which in some ways recalls the past. However, as Margaret Church points out, "memory in Wolfe merely recalls the past, it does not recreate it or actually asserts its continued

existence, as Bergson's and Proust's theories of time tend to do" (in Holman, 1975: 27).

Of Time and the River (1935), is arguably Wolfe's epic excursion into time. This work abounds in examples that elucidate the point. Eugene, the protagonist, is travelling by train when some fellow-passengers enquire after Eugene's brother Ben, who is already dead. The dead brother's memory comes to the protagonist as a reverie contrapunctally alienating him from others. In the second reference time in the form of memory does the act. Diverse responses occur in the consciousness of the protagonist following the conversation. The watch on Eugene's wrist, gifted by Ben on Eugene's twelfth birthday, triggers a flood of remembrance, and Ben appear in a hallucination. We visualize in dramatic actuality what had happened eight years ago. Ben was the brother most loved by Wolfe, and his untimely death had left an indelible scar on Wolfe's mind. The heartlessness and unreasonableness of death strikes Wolfe with the force or existential inevitability. Like in a Kafkan world, life, to Wolfe, seemed to be a cage, and man is imprisoned in it without his consent. Wolfe always refers to the chance meeting of his father and mother in a dusty hill

town as central to his concept of *bitter mystery* of his life. No one gets the choice to be or not to be, an existential dilemma for one desperately tries to find ways to escape the stranglehold of time in vain. Instead, like Kafka's Joseph K. in *The Trial* (1925), Wolfe's man is arrested – by random chance – in a flux of time. This inexorability of fate, this desperate struggle to live life to its full but being frustrated in every step, colours Wolfe's robust love for life with an existential veneer. Thus the disparate emotions of love of life, hatred of death, the uncontrollable flow of time ... all combined make Wolfe's fictional outpourings an intensely ambivalent orchestra blaring all disparate notes at the same time. This interferes with readers trying to understand the writings of Wolfe, and this is exactly why Wolfe has proved to be a daunting literary exercise for decades.

In *Of Time and the River* (1935), the narrative action of the present, through a recollection of the past takes place against “time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day” (1936: 52). It is

this inexorable forward flow of time, pictured as a river or more often as a moving train, constantly carrying man away from his golden youth which is lost and can exist only in memory. Memory becomes the instrument for reactivating the past. Employing memory, Wolfe's protagonist accounts for the narrator reporting present emotions as he remembers the past in sensuous detail.

Like Eliot, Wolfe is concerned and to a large measure, obsessed with time. Elaborating his concept of time, he observes that in a given situation, a man caught in a particular instant of time, has it enriched and rendered more meaningfully as the past impinges on him through memory. He receives through it a sense of the absolute time within which his days are painfully brief. Wolfe's four-part story, "The Lost Boy", is a fictional expression of this concept. Home is a symbol of the past that has been lost. For a believer in the Romantic view of childhood, this story, in particular, is an effective and revealing symbol. None of us, it says, can return to the lost childhood, the lost community, the fading glory of the pre-Lapsarian state of innocence, as in the case of Proust's *A Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27). Time carries away us all, for we cannot go home again.

In Wolfe's works this vision of time is always associated with the sense of being alienated, or of being isolated, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* (1916). In *Of Time and the River* (1935), Wolfe tries to enumerate concrete memories which, taken together, make up for the remembered past of America.

All of us are driven on forever and we have no home. Therefore, it is not the slow, the punctual sanded drip of the unnumbered days that we remember best, the ash of time; nor is it the huge monotone of the lost years, the unsweltering schedules of the lost life and the well-known faces that we remember best. It is a face seen once and lost forever in a crowd, an eye that looked, a face that smiled and vanished on a passing train. (1935: 155)

He describes the way in which the past almost forcibly enters the present: "When that lost world would come back, it came at once, like a sword thrust through the entrails, in all its panoply of past time, living, whole, and magic as it had always been" (in Holman, 1975: 29). Wolfe describes this emotion of pain very effectively from which comes the sudden hunger for a lost and almost forgotten aspect of life. He succeeds in giving us this sense of the onward rush of time and the death of the morning's golden joy, an awareness of the price that is paid before the years of philosophic calm can arrive. Since this feeling is very much a part of youth, its pain,

and inarticulate melancholy, it comes alive in Wolfe's writing. Realising that there is no escape from time, he muses in *The Web and the Rock* :

Time is a fable and a mystery ... it broods over all the images of earth. Time is collected in great clocks and hung in towers ... and each man has his own, a different time. (1939: 626)

Wolfe uses the river and ocean as large symbols of time immutable, yet his clearest figure for the ceaseless motion and the inexorable passage of time is the train. In *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) George Webber feels this experience as he journeys by train. No American but Wolfe in the last century has been more a poet of trains. The train becomes an important symbol representing time. Their 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 in the night to Wolfe is the very sound of time itself. He associates all these characteristics with alienation and isolation, and the sad but irreversible passage of time. It is a journey that is repeated like Sisyphos' rolling of the stone, untiring and incessant. The classical myth underpins a modern life in which the 'train' comes to mean a repetition of the tedium of life, while reminding us of the passage of time.

Alienation is a central theme in Wolfe. Though he thinks in terms of the American experience, it is not difficult to relocate his concept of alienation in the universal context. Wolfe feels that to be an American is to be lonely and isolated and restless, moving beneath vast skies. The barriers that are erected around the individual effectively shut him off from all communication.

One of Wolfe's most successful short stories is *No Door*, where the characters grow out from home and find that they cannot go home again. There is an obsessive search for communication that he repeatedly asserts is central to the American experience:

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face: from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of the earth. (Prologue to *Look Homeward, Angel*, 1929)

For Wolfe, all human experience seeks "the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven" (in Holman, 1975: 26). Out of the transcendental glory of childhood, we are gradually hemmed in by the growing prison house of the existential world, the lustre and glory of life are gradually tarnished, and we are forced further away from communion.

Wolfe's alienation is apparent from the series of broken relationships in his life. His broken family life in childhood had left a deep scar on his psyche. On the return trip from Europe in 1926, he met Aline Bernstein, a Jewish lady, and this is a momentous event in Wolfe's life. He would later dedicate *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) to her, who becomes the central human force in his life during the composition of the work. She was fifteen years older to Wolfe; she mothered him, fed him superbly, kept him in funds including money for a trip to Europe, listened to him, encouraged him, brought him into the New York literary circle, loved him and quarreled with him.

From the beginning to the end, it was a tempestuous affair, with idyllic moments and violent ruptures. Aline Bernstein brought to the surface some of Wolfe's most compulsive contradictions – his stupendous need for love and his remarkable capacity to bestow tenderness; his irrepressible cruelty; his need for direction and smouldering hatred of anyone who supplied the direction, his ambivalence towards Jews.

The explosion of contradictory feelings, however devastating for Aline Bernstein, seems to have been the source of the immense effort

which, by mid-1927, had produced more than 250,000 words of a novel called *O Lost*. When the progress faltered the following year and Wolfe suffered a period of literary stasis, he took out his frustrations on Mrs. Bernstein. Early in 1929, he came into the orbit of Maxwell Perkins, editor of *Scribners*, and as he worked under Perkins' assuring guidance, the relationship with Aline once more became relatively calm and happy. It was only after the novel was published to no small acclaim that Wolfe turned against his mistress, and the relationship was fraught with existential ambivalence.

In the wake of Wolfe's subsequent violent break with Perkins, Aline Bernstein would reflect upon his "advancement from one thing to another in himself, the mighty stride of his changes, and his cruel and relentless disentanglement from all that bound him." (In Brooks, Lewis, Penwarren ed., *American Literature*, Vol.II, "Thomas Wolfe", 1973: 1983).

The publication of *Of Time and the River* (1935) brings to the fore not only the contradictions of life and its existential dilemma, but a measure of self-reflection. The self-reflection is a challenge not only to the man who writes but also the man who suffers:

Someday someone will write a book about a man who was too tall – who lived forever in a dimension that he did not fit, and for whom the proportion of everything – chairs, beds, doors, rooms, shoes, clothes, shirts, and socks, the berths of Pullman cars, and the bunks of transatlantic liners, together with the rations of food, drink, love and women, which most men on this earth have found sufficient to their measure – were too small. (1987: 241)

In that “strangest and most lonely world” (*Ibid.*, 241) of six feet six, a curious wisdom of alienation could be achieved: “In an extraordinary way”, he wrote, “a tall man comes to know things about the world as other people do not, cannot, know them” (*Ibid.*, 243).

Wolfe’s childhood experiences of fragmented family life and public jeer gave him a “lonely wisdom” (*Ibid.*, 245) and he saw himself as “God’s lonely man” (in Holman, 1975: 9), and the spokesperson of all the alienated souls of the world:

If my experience of loneliness has not been different in kind from that of other men, I suspect it has been sharper in intensity. This gives me the best authority in the world to write about this, our general complaint (in Brooks, Lewis, Penwarren, 1973: 1987).

Wolfe felt a terrible shame and self-abasement, a feeling of personal inferiority “that made him bitterly regret the accident of birth and nature

that had imprisoned a spirit fierce and proud and swift as flight and burning as a flame in such a grotesque tenement” (1987: 244). “It is a strange adventure, a hard but precious education, that a tall man knows” (*Ibid.*, 245) ... “A tall man could not escape from life, or flee the world, even if he desired it: he is at once life’s exile and life’s prisoner; wherever he goes, life reaches out and pulls him to it, will not let him go” (1987: 245). He feels caught in an existential web of alienation from which there is no escape, except death.

The French philosopher Diderot once remarked how contrary to common sense it seems, in a world where time is always at work and transience is the rule, to base marriage on the assumption that love is eternal. Years later, Musset picked up the theme in a famous poem, “Le Souvenir”, in which he added how sad and how poignant that the eternity of the love we swear is, of necessity, an illusion. Diderot’s reflection was prompted merely by the fact that he was having a certain amount of trouble with his wife, whereas Musset, frustrated in his various attempts to realize a completely satisfactory love, generalizes his predicament into an essential aspect of man’s fate. This mood is echoed by Wolfe, leaving out

love or substituting for it the whole body of man's complex emotions. It puts him in the tradition of Proust, and of Dos Passos, a very central and important tradition since it reflects in literature the great discovery of the relativity of all things which is our inescapable inheritance and existence.

When Eugene, Wolfe's alter ego, goes to the state university, the bitterness of alienation grows. The goat-foot that always belongs to the followers of Joyce is shown. Eugene becomes morbidly conscious of his physique, and yet unnaturally neglectful of it. He does not have his teeth filled or his haircut; he does not bathe. He is naturally not popular, and he resents his want of popularity, in a way that is not far short of megalomania; he revolts against sanitation and cleanliness, declaring that health is for fools, and great men have always shown signs in their lined faces of the disease of genius. There are possible reasons for Eugene's cult of dirt, ranging from a sub-conscious fear of impotence and a confused desire to be like the Horatian he-goat, to a rankling sense of social inferiority, perverted by a fierce pride into a resolve to emulate the fraternity row aristocracy in nothing, not even in cleanliness.

Just as *Ulysses* (1922) is the exploration of consciousness through the single day of Leopold Bloom, a moment in time, the novels of Wolfe begin with a dating in the action or a statement of the historicity of the theme. The beginning of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) is the clearest announcement of Wolfe's intentions. Each person, each event, each affair is a compressed cipher for which Wolfe's art is hermeneutic. The world of each man is a microcosm in which is pressured the totality of all that ever was, implied in an almost Hegelian trail of connections that return the moment to time, the event to process, the individual to the absolute. Wolfe's world is a world of moments, highly structured and individuated, yet caught up in the themes of a mutual destiny, a single attraction that gives them valence and defines their signification. The placement of meaning and insight in the moment is inescapable to any reader of his novels: the stranger seen in the street, on the train, from afar, glimpsed for that instant of recognition and then forever vanished back into the web of anonymity; the face at the window, the brief look at the bank teller, the sight of the salesman, the suddenly caught movement of the labourer, the craftsman, the stitch of the tailor, the trucker shifting heavy gears, the frosty face of the trainsman signalling in an early hour of winter, the soft

cry of a child – all these are familiar moments in the pages of the novels, and Wolfe is unimaginable without them. But these moments are usually described as far and lost, as instantly gone, as forever lost. They are instantaneous irruptions in consciousness which fill the hero with sadness and longing and despair and wonder; they are always sudden, always intense, and always remembered and thus externalised against the flux of time.

The theme of all the novels and stories of Thomas Wolfe is man caught up in time, the manifestation of time in the world which is transient and changeable. Everything in Wolfe's works keep changing: the narrator himself, his friends, the life going on around him, the towns and cities in which that life takes place in time; and man's alienation comes to sharp focus.

From the beginning, Wolfe was pre-occupied with transience and change. In *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), the members of the Gant family are shown in contrast with time, fighting against it. We see them as they are born, as they live, and as they die, and their finite careers and

time-circumscribed consciousness are contrasted with the earth around them, with the history of man, and with the eternity of time-space.

In both Eugene and his creator Thomas Wolfe, this takes the form of an intense awareness of and pre-occupation with time. Time, its various facets, its apparent contradictions, its limitations, its dimensions is one central motif in the Wolfe novels. Not only is it implicit in the fictional characters, it is frequently explicit in the writer. In *The Story of a Novel* (1936), Wolfe finds a contrast between past and present times, which exist chronologically and move into each other, and a kind of “time immutable” (1936:52), which does not change and which exists in a wry commentary on the changeability of the mortal. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe declares that “dreams of guilt and time” (*Ibid.*, 62) tormented his sleeping hours as well as plagued his waking days. He tells of one such dream in which the sum total of all his experience – “my daily conflict with Amount and Number, the huge accumulation of my years of struggle with the forms of life” (*Ibid.*, 62) – would present itself before him. It shows clearly how Wolfe thinks of chronological time as existing in ironic contrast to a much

greater kind of duration, which did not change and seemed to mock all of mortal existence, limited as that existence was by change and death.

In the final analysis, it is time and nature that provide a semblance of permanence to Thomas Wolfe's world, where man who lives in it is the victim of impermanence. The old Catawban living and dying in the wilderness is made and unmade briefly and quickly for "the immense and terrible American earth that makes no answer" (1987: 221). The earth is triumphant – over all of human history. Races come and go, and the seasons of the earth outlast them all. "Where now? Where after? Where then?" (1929: 223). It is the change that is so startling to Wolfe. The sudden look backward involves the momentary rediscovery of elapsed time, and thus a momentary respite from the inexorable wearing away of time.

In a very real sense, then, Wolfe's fiction constitutes a search for lost time, very much as did the work of Marcel Proust. Whereas Proust worked out a detailed theory of time and wrote his great novel according to the theory, consciously structured by it, Wolfe more or less stumbled into the time experience, and got entangled in the web, and never worked

out his ideas very precisely. His novels, reflecting this imprecision, thus assume the form which Edwin Muir calls chronicle novel. In *The Structure of the Novel* (1928), Muir discusses the chronicle novel in which time is not relative but absolute, and the characters and events are presented against a background of steadily elapsing time. Using *War and Peace* (1869) as an example of this kind of novel, Muir declares that the speed of time is not determined by the intensity of the action, but rather has a deadly regularity which is external to and unaffected by the characters and situations. The emphasis is on the ageing of the characters, on the fact that they are twenty now, that they will be thirty, then forty, then fifty, and that in essential respects they will then be like anybody else at twenty, thirty, forty and fifty. Muir reflects that change in *War and Peace* is inevitable and general, regular, arithmetical, and in a sense inhuman and featureless:

... everything may happen and everything does happen. The action on the human plane does not unfold inevitably; we do not see a drama contained within itself and building itself up on its own consequences; we see life in all its variety of accidents and inventions, marked off here and there by certain very important milestones, inscribed with different figures which designate the march of an eternal and universal process ...” (Muir, 1928: 98-100).

The novels of Thomas Wolfe, like *War and Peace*, are constructed in accordance with this scheme. Eugene and the other Gants change. The earth does go on unheeding. The difference, however, apart from questions of technique, seems to be that Tolstoy's characters are seldom very much perturbed by the externality and deadly regularity of the time process. They proceed onward, as the present becomes the past, and the future becomes the present. Tolstoy's characters exist inside the process, and they view time from within, whereas Wolfe's novel centre around Eugene Gant/George Webber, who are not only aware of the corrosion of time but frequently stand outside of it and are horrified by its ravages.

Wolfe describes the process of recapturing the past in *The Web and the Rock* (1939). The coming of spring to New York seems to make him bitterly conscious of the contrast between mortal life and the time of the seasons, to touch off all his feelings of futility and failure. He also tells us something else of that time:

The first green of the year, and particularly the first green in the city, had a power not only of drawing all the swarming chaos and confusion of the city into one great lyrical harmony of life, it had also such a magical power over all his memories that the life that moved and passed around him became an instant part of all the moments of his life. So, too, the past

became as real as the present, and he lived in the events of twenty years ago with as much intensity and as great a sense of actuality as if they had just occurred. He felt that there was no temporal past or present, no *now* more living than any reality of *then*; the fiction of temporal continuity was destroyed, and his whole life became one piece with the indestructible unity of time and destiny. (1939: 541)

This supplanting of the present by the past, and the resultant erasure of the bounds of chronology, occurred at a time when George Webber was feeling thoroughly depressed and miserable, and we find that his woes increased rather than decreased. Relief, then, seemed to come only when this process of remembering the events of the past was taking place. To escape from the harsh and painful contemplation of the nature of present time and of his own place in it, Webber summoned up memory to remember his experience twenty years back, when he was a child in Libya Hill. "The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe," Wolfe wrote in *The Story of a Novel* , "in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness" (1936: 31). The power of total recall of the past seems to permit Wolfe to subvert,

momentarily at least, the swift flowing passage of time, and to overcome mortal change.

Whether Wolfe was familiar with Proust's theories of time is questionable, but at one point in *Of Time and the River* (1935), he mentions Proust, but the chances are that if he really had appreciated Proust, it would have occasioned an excited rhapsody from Eugene.

The remembrance of a minute released from the chronological order of time recreates for Proust the human being similarly released to enjoy the minute. For such a person, Proust declares, the word death would have no meaning: "situated outside the scope of time, what could he fear from the future?" (Vol.II, 1932: 996).

Being outside time is a strategy to overcome time in case of Wolfe. However, it is always problematic to overcome time whether one is inside or outside of it. This results in alienation in which time plays an important role. It was inevitable that the centrality of loneliness and separateness, or alienation, in Wolfe's experience and his writing, coupled with the social problems and the human suffering of the years of his active career, should have fostered in him a sense of all-pervading evil and gloom, and lent a

tragic quality to his writing. However, his very method of juxtaposing binaries led him to a diasparactive, fragmentary cosmic view. As Jaspars maintains:

We find existence as the unreflecting experience of our life in the world. It is immediate and unquestioning, the reality which everything must enter so as to be real for us ... (Macquarrie, 1986: 68)

Alienation and suffering, pain and death are the things man, frail, weak, mortal, can expect. Yet man, for Wolfe, is also a noble creature. The despair of the literary artist took a philosophic turn and Wolfe attempted to answer the question – What is man? – in his work *You Can't Go Home Again*. To him, man is:

A foul, wretched, abominable creature ... It is impossible to say the worst of him ... this travesty of waste and sterile breath. (1940: 338-39)

Like the young, restless and philosophic Hamlet, Wolfe did visualize some goodness in man. Like evil, its opposite goodness is innate and they together constitute the sum total of 'man'. The frail and petty physical animal that he is, man is also magnificent, for he is propelled by the aspiration of immortality, in a bid to outwit time. In the teeming, uneven pages of Wolfe's works, this vision of man, possessed of tragic grandeur,

essentially a vision of the nineteenth century romantic creed, is presented with great intensity. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has sought in the varieties and complexities of his experiences, an understanding of life as well as of temporality that dominates this world. He realized that his own life is a product of the available materials and experiences, never an archaeological discovery at any fixed point of time. Wolfe writes of the city:

I heard, far-off, the deep and bee like murmur of its million-footed life, and all the mystery of the earth and time was in that sound ... I saw its thousand streets peopled with a flashing, beautiful, infinitely varied life. (1987: 13)

A direct extension of the inevitable flow of time is death, and it is another recurrent theme in Wolfe's works. Death seems always to hover over the mutable world from which there is no possibility of escape. In *Death the Proud Brother* (1987: 30-66), Wolfe affords us a share of his experiences of death in the city. The first incident is the death of a poor Italian Street Vendor, who is caught in an accident between two trucks. The second is the death of a vagabond, dying as a result of a fall on the icy pavement of Brooklyn, while a well-to-do pair joke about inviting him along to their party. Thirdly, a construction worker, working nine floors

above the ground, is hit and over balanced by a flaming rivet. His clothes burst into fire as he hurtles down to death. It is the fourth death, however, the least violent, which is climactic. As a man sits quietly on a bench in a subway station, his heart stops beating:

The man just sat there quietly at one end of the bench, leaned over slightly to his right with his elbow resting on the arm of the bench, his hat pulled down a little, and his face half lowered. At this moment, there was a slow, tranquil, hardly perceptible movement of his breath – a flutter, a faint sigh – and the man was dead. (1987: 46)

It is notable that all the deaths foreground lonely people, nameless atoms as Wolfe would say, who face the stark alienation of the existential world.

Death has always troubled Wolfe deeply even when it did not affect him directly. The lynching of a Negro by a predominantly white mob (*The Child by Tiger*, 1987); an incident of suicide in a Brooklyn street (*The Hollow Men*, 1987); a death in the Civil War (*Chickamauga*, 1987); the death of a Japanese sculptor (*Katamoto*, 1987); the death of an alienated husband on a train (*Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time*, 1987); the reported death of a young prostitute (*An Angel on the Porch*, 1987) – these are all death-related incidents which made him so much emotionally involved that they became dominant motifs in his work. Particularly, the

death of Ben in *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and the death of W.O. Gant in *Of Time and the River* (1935) are memorable for the appalling grief, and the pervasive feel of doom of existence which are suggested with extraordinary nakedness and raw force. Wolfe knows how to transform death in the family into art. His pre-occupation with death led Wolfe into contemplating his own death as well. *You Can't Go Home Again* that appeared posthumously in 1940, ends with a startling premonition of approaching death:

Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the tapers
of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and
told me I shall die, I know not where, Saying:

‘To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to
lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you
loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home,
more large than earth

– ‘whereon the pillars of this earth are founded,
toward which the conscience of the world is tending – a wind
is rising, and the rivers flow. (1940: 576)

Though a distinguishable and distinct theme in Wolfe's writing, death cannot be isolated from the totality of experience that he wanted to project, and the ambivalence in that experience. Death is inextricably entwined with the passage of time; it is closely associated with the sense of

alienation. Death as a theme is often used to expose the callousness and hypocrisy of city dwellers as in *Death the Proud Brother* (1987); sometimes reflects mankind's potentiality for barbarity (*Child by Tiger*, 1987); sometimes occurs as a result of a feeling of alienation leading to suicide (*The Hollow Men*, 1987); and reinforces a feeling of the dark mystery of the world, coming gently, quietly, in the guise of a messiah, allowing respite and reprieve, releasing alienated man from his existential suffering:

Proud Death, proud Death, whom I have seen by darkness, at so many times, and always when you came to nameless men, what have you ever touched that you have not touched with love and pity, Death? Proud Death, wherever we have seen your face, you came with mercy, love, and pity, Death, and brought to all of us your compassionate sentences of pardon and release. For have you not retrieved from exile the desperate lives of men who never found their home? Have you not opened your dark door for us who never yet found doors to enter and given us a room, who, roomless, doorless, unassuaged, were driven on forever through the streets of life? (1987: 64)

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Chapter-IV

THE DEMOCRATIC DREAM – SELF, SOCIETY AND NATION

In a process of constant development, the authorial self negotiates with the society and the nation in an attempt to concretize his democratic dream. On one hand, there is the world of Wolfe's inner self, a world structured of consciousness, of emotions, of impressions, of nostalgic memories, brooded over by a sense of the irreversible onrush of *dark time*. The inner self, groping for meanings, attempts to understand itself while struggling to establish meaningful relations with others, a private world that Wolfe calls *the buried life*. On the other hand is the literal, social context represented with great accuracy but often with satiric exaggeration. The self in its insulated dream of time is unable to find the door by which to enter its social context, and early in his career, Wolfe felt contented in allowing these two worlds to exist in contradictory opposition. As he matured and developed he began attempting reconciliation between the inner world and the outer world, holding them together in a national vision. This is the world of the artist where he attempts to fuse the two into a permanent expression of something

significant about life. His intention is that in this larger world, the self and the social world will be merged in an expression of the national ideal, as in case of Whitman: "One's self I sing, a simple separate person/Yet utter the word Democratic, the world En Masse" (Whitman, 1975: 37). Thus, Wolfe's quest is to successfully integrate the three worlds of self, society and nation.

For Wolfe art is the only means that could integrate contraries. He always discovers things in patterns of opposites or binaries. Being a declared believer in romanticism, Wolfe's subjectivity is unquestionable. Inseparable with it is his flair for dramatic presentation of situations and scenes galore in society. The social "man-swarm" attracted him to rapt fascination. He is fascinated even by mankind's propensity to and capability of evil. This simultaneous proneness to attraction and the vehement criticism of that fascination is his typical characteristic. It is this duality that had mostly guided his writing. It would probably be of significance to treat Wolfe as a split personality. He had attempted to discover his own identity and through it make meaning of the social milieu and the nation, uncontrollably adrift on the river of time, while nature

remained unmoved and static passively observing humanity drawn inexorably towards fate.

The works under the first section – “self” – deal with discordant relationships with Wolfe as the central character. But Wolfe does not confine himself only to personal themes. He also feels that as a writer, he is responsible to his society. The works discussed under the section “Society” discover Wolfe deeply troubled by social problems. The feeling of responsibility is carried further when he visualized himself as a representative writer of the American people. As a Southerner, Wolfe desired and attempted to project himself as a writer of the likes of Walt Whitman and Sinclair Lewis. The image of the ‘nation’ he had and his obligation to project it was supreme in his consciousness. He thus struggled to emerge out of the petty label of a Southern writer and establish his identity as an American writer.

SELF

Most of Wolfe’s writing emerge from intense personal experience. The process of self-actualization is narrativised in dramatizing those

experiences where the authorial self occupies the center. Not only is the 'self' recognized in its various manifestations, but it also expands in the network of relationships.

Wolfe asserted that no man could know his brother. His sense of alienation and isolation informed his consciousness. But the paradox is worth noting – Wolfe described his fellowmen with deep understanding. Wolfe, whose subject seemed always to be himself, has drawn characters in large measure from real life rather than from imagination, and has portrayed his world chiefly through the consciousness of his autobiographical self or alter-ego. Through the process of interaction and friction with the self, Wolfe has created a mass of characters so fully realized and vibrant that they live with great vigour.

Look Homeward, Angel, assuredly Wolfe's autobiographical novel, has Eugene Gant as the sentient center through which we experience the Wolfean world. Yet, the protagonist is a much less vivid person than the members of his family. It is W.O. Gant (Eugene's father), Eliza (his mother), his sister Helen and brother Ben apart from innumerable minor

characters who glow with life and absorb our imagination. Eugene himself is more a web of sensibility, a communicating medium than a person. He seems to us more nearly ourselves rather than someone whom we are observing.

The consciousness of the protagonist, as he grew up during childhood, is adrift on time, and observes its surroundings with awe:

The mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change. Old haunt-eyed faces glimmered in his memory. He thought of Swain's cow, St. Louis, death, himself in the cradle. He was the haunter of himself, trying for a moment to recover what he had been part of. He did not understand change, he did not understand growth. He stared at his framed baby picture in the parlour, and turned away sick with fear and the effort to touch, retain, grasp himself for only a moment ... And it was this that awed him – the weird combination of fixity and change, the terrible moment of immobility stamped with eternity in which passing life at great speed, both the observer and the observed seem frozen in time. There was one moment of timeless suspension when the land did not move, the train did not move, the slattern in the doorway did not move, he did not move. It was as if God had lifted his baton sharply above the endless orchestration of the seas, and the eternal movement had stopped, suspended in the timeless architecture of the absolute. (1929: 158-9)

Eugene continues his daydream:

He believed himself thus at the center 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. (1929: 160)

Eugene's consciousness presents his childhood memories, memories of family life with its happiness and fissures. The image of his father stands out in true animation, a person of immense egotism, with a burning desire to assert himself against the drab world. He is a person of vast appetites and ambivalent needs, and one of them is indulgence in rhetorical abuse of his wife Eliza, with whom he could never establish any harmony:

His turbulent and undisciplined rhetoric had acquired, by the regular convention of its usage, something of the movement and directness of classical epithet: his similes were preposterous, created really in a spirit of vulgar mirth, and the great comic intelligence that was in the family – down to the youngest – was shaken daily by it. The children grew to await his return in the evening with a kind of exhilaration. Indeed, Eliza herself, healing slowly and painfully her great hurt, got a certain stimulation from it; but there was still in her a fear of the periods of drunkenness and latently, a stubborn and unforbearing recollection of the past ...

Gant was a great man, and not a singular one, because singularity does not hold life in unyielding devotion to it.

As he stormed through the house, unleashing his gathered bolts, the children followed him joyously, shrieking

exultantly as he told Eliza he had first seen her “wriggling around the corner like a snake on her belly”, or, as coming in from freezing weather he had charged her and all the Pentlands with malevolent domination of the elements. (1929: 51-52)

Eliza suffered from hyper acquisitiveness – a property mania that gripped her and engrossed her. She neglected her family, moved out of Gant’s house to run a boarding house, and lived a life of miserliness:

Eliza saw Altamont not as so many hills, buildings, people: she saw it in the pattern of a gigantic blueprint. She knew the history of every piece of valuable property ... (1929: 104)

Eliza’s miserliness is evident when she forced Eugene to wear shoes much too small for him just because “It would be a pity to throw away a good pair of shoes.” (1929: 188)

But she had strange fits of generosity. She not only gave money to an unknown Mrs. Morgan but allowed her accommodation in her boarding house as she awaited the birth of her presumably illegitimate child. Eliza liked men who were house-broken, kind and tame, and could be dominated upon. She was good to a little man with a moustache who was out of job. Eliza never bothered him about money.

Childhood memories of the relationship between his father and mother gave Wolfe no sense of security and harmony. His father, represented as W.O. Gant, is a man of overt animality. He would frequent the pubs regularly, and thereafter the brothels of town from where he had to be retrieved by his sons to the relief of the group of trembling, exhausted prostitutes. He leered lecherously at the attractive female boarders of Eliza's Dixieland, and he found a faithful loyal in his daughter Helen, who condoned, encouraged and promoted the old man's indecencies.

We see Gant in conversation with "Queen" Elizabeth, the elegant, well-to-do brothel keeper. He enquires after her girls: "'How are all the girls, Elizabeth?' he asks kindly". Elizabeth had come to buy a statue to decorate the grave of a young prostitute, and she chooses the statue of an angel. The meeting stirs old memories: "'It's been a long time, Elizabeth,' he said" (1929: 222). The poignant tenderness of the emotion between Gant and Elizabeth, howsoever illegitimate, is true. There existed nothing akin to this sentiment between Gant and Eliza. Gant relapses into a reverie

of time past, events past, and the onrush of time which will relentlessly catch up with the temporareity of human life: “where now? where after? where then?” (1929: 223)

Throughout *Look Homeward, Angel*, the self of the writer is present as it traces a process of maturing from childhood to youth. He has to suffer the ignominy and exhaustion of being a newspaper route-boy, delivering papers much before dawn in the Negro quarters of town. He harried his defaulter subscribers for payment with wild tenacity. On such a mission, he came into contact with Ella Corpening, a mulatto girl of twenty-six:

“You come roun’ in de mawnin’,” she said hopefully. “I’ll have somethin’ fo’ yuh, sho. I’s’e waitin’ fo’ a white gent’man now. He’s goin’ gib me a dollah.” She moved her great limbs slowly, and smiled at him. Forked pulses beat against his eyes. He gulped dryly: his legs were rotten with excitement. “what’s — what’s he going to give you a dollar for?” he muttered, barely audible.

“Jelly Roll”, said Ella Corpening. (1929: 252)

Eugene’s contact with the murky world of easy women had originated in the retrieving missions to bring back his father from the brothels. Now he comes into personal contact with Ella, but desperately struggles to escape

from her drowning naked embrace. The pending subscription for newspapers is never paid.

His earliest and most beastly experience of sex consciousness happens when he surprises his degenerate brother Steve with one of Eliza's woman boarders. Steve, a character almost intolerably repellent and unlit by any spark of the charity so pervasive elsewhere in Wolfe's writing, symbolizes the horror that Wolfe found in closer family relationships. Eugene is fifteen when he has a sexual experience with a pleasant and discreet little waitress at a hotel. The Eugene-Saga continues in *Of Time and the River*, where he is enamoured of a waitress who "was no longer young" – "but that woman became the central figure of one of those glittering and impossible fantasies young men have" (1935: 153). In another involvement with Eliza's boarder Miss Brown, Eugene has to part with all the medals he had won at school because he has nothing else to pay Miss Brown with. "It was, she said, not the money: it was the principle of the thing" (1929: 392). So, in lieu of money, he gave her his medals as pledges. "If you don't redeem them", said Miss Brown, "I'll give them to my own son when I go home ... He's eighteen years old. He's almost as

tall as you are and twice as broad” (1929: 393). Eugene turned his head away, whitening with a sense of nausea and horror, feeling in him an incestuous pollution.

At the university, his friend Jim Trivett, a self-appointed corruptor of chastity, takes Eugene along on a bawdy adventure which results in Eugene retching violently and contracting venereal disease: “No more of him, he felt, could be lost” (1929: 343). It is the lapse, the loss of innocence and bliss.

But the most memorable teenage involvement of Eugene was with Laura James, which caused him an enormous psychic upheaval. Laura was another of Eliza’s boarders, twenty-one years of age, while Eugene was sixteen. One of the W.O. Gant’s explosive alcoholic serenades had Eugene badly wounded and bleeding. Laura tenderly nursed him and bandaged the wound. This brought them close, and Eugene blurted out his confession of love at Laura’s sweet provocation. Laura and Eugene get entangled in an intense relationship. Laura mildly protests that she is a grown up woman who might get married, occasioning a frenzied outburst of passion and

jealous hysteria from Eugene. It is noteworthy that almost all of Eugene's involvements were with much older women and later when Wolfe replaces Webber and his alter-ego, we find the culminating involvement with Esther Jack, a lady of thirty-five when George Webber is twenty-five. In real life, Mrs. Aline Bernstein was eighteen years senior to Wolfe. Some deep psychic fixation made Wolfe respect the story of Oedipus as "one of the greatest plays in the world" (1929: 351), and his attraction for older women seemed inevitable, which "wreaked upon him the nightmare coincidence of Destiny" (1929: 351). Inevitable Destiny drew away Laura, who went away with a promise of early return, but instead sent a letter of devastating truth:

Richard came yesterday. He is twenty-five, works in Norfolk. I've been engaged to him almost a year. We're going off quietly to Norfolk tomorrow and get married. My dear! My dear! I couldn't tell you! I tried to, but couldn't. I didn't want to lie. Everything else was true. I meant all I said. If you hadn't been so young, but what's the use of saying that? Try to forgive me, but please don't forget me. Good-by and God bless you. Oh, my darling, it was heaven! I shall never forget you. (1929: 383)

After the break with Laura, Eugene sought refuge in Irene Mallard who was teaching him to dance: again, a lady elder to him. She was the

anodyne against the wound named Laura, but whenever Randolph Gudger, the bank president, came by, the boy went sulkily away until the rich man should leave.

The separation with Laura oppresses Eugene, and he gets very drunk for the first time in his life, and faces the first major crisis of his adult experience. When his family start nagging him, Eugene, driven beyond endurance, falls physically upon Ben and Luke, and there follows a crazy fight. He charges his brothers with having shut him out of their lives:

Have you ever told me anything of yourself? Have you ever tried to be a friend or companion to me?

For his mother, he has the ancient cry of every child badgered by the awful demand of gratitude: Did I ask to be born?

“Yes, I have a great deal to give thanks for,” said Eugene. “I give thanks for every dirty lust and hunger that crawled through the polluted blood of my noble ancestors. I give thanks for every scrofulous token that may ever come upon me. I give thanks for the love and mercy that kneaded me over the wash tub the day before my birth. I give thanks for the country slut who nursed me and let my dirty bandage fester across my navel. I give thanks for every blow and curse I had from any of you during my childhood, for every dirty cell you ever gave me to sleep in, for the ten million hours of

cruelty or indifference, and the thirty minutes of cheap advice.” (1929: 421)

He tells them that at last he is free of them all, at last he owes them nothing. As discussed in Chapter III, Eugene is the alienated self trapped in an existential world of being. He is attempting to exercise his choice, but all attempts for release must necessarily be through death.

The relation of Eugene and Ben was so intimate that they loved each other, fought each other, and still loved each other. Ben was like a guardian angel to Eugene. It is understandable why Ben's death was so momentous to Eugene, and his hysterical comment is cathartic:

“By God!” he said. “That's one thing Ben's out of. He won't have to drink mama's coffee any more.” (1929: 467)

Still obsessed by the memory of Laura James, Eugene goes in search of her. When money runs out he takes a job as a “checker” at Newport News. He gambles his wages, starves, falls ill, and has a brush with death until one of the checkers befriends him and pulls him together. At last he feels free of Laura, and abandons the search.

Death and time are woven into one fibre, and dealt with at length in Chapter III. Death is a part of the consciousness of the self of the protagonist, as it grows from childhood. Grover, the twin of Ben, dies of typhoid in St. Louis, and Eugene, aged four, was deep asleep at midnight.

He was awakened by Helen:

“Do you want to see Grover?” she whispered. “He’s on the cooling board.” He wondered what a cooling board was. (1929: 47)

At the university, his room-mate, Bob Sterling, suffered from heart disease. He was fated – “Nothing could be done about it” (1929: 401), and his mother took him home. Then one day, he died quietly.

“Two weeks later the widow returned to gather together the boy’s belongings. Silently, she collected the clothing that no one would ever wear. She was a stout woman in her forties. Eugene took all the pennants from the wall and folded them. She packed them in a valise and turned to go.

“Here’s another,’ said Eugene.

She burst suddenly into tears and seized his hand.

‘He was so brave’, she said, ‘so brave. Those last days – I had not meant to – Your letters made him so happy.

She’s alone now, Eugene thought.” (1929: 401)

This quiet incident allows us to see Eugene as he was to Bob Sterling, and after his death, Eugene’s sensitivity makes him look beyond the

immediacy of Bob's death to the permanency of loneliness that awaited Bob's mother.

Death is such an inevitable experience, approaching steadily closer every minute of human life, yet uncertain of the hour of visitation. This relentless approach is overlooked in healthy young people, but an incurable malady makes death a palpable reality which inflicts mental anguish as well as physical torture. The diagnosis of W.O. Gant's prostate cancer, his howling suffering, the death-in-life existence, all together remain etched in the memory of Eugene:

All day, with fear-stark eyes, Gant had sat, like a broken statue, among his marbles, drinking. It was a cancer. (1929: 360)

Eugene's self – the product of the fusion of his father's and mother's, had grown up within the schism of family disharmony. Gant and Eliza could never live in bliss, and Eliza had moved out to her boarding house to the wrath of Gant:

Woman, you have deserted my bed and board, you have made a laughing stock of me before the world, and left your children to perish. Fiend that you are ... You have deserted me in my old age; you have left me to die alone. (1929: 108)

But, on his death-bed, Gant reaches across the chasm of misunderstanding to pay tribute to Eliza's culinary expertise:

'Ah-h! Your mother is a good cook, Helen. You're a good cook, too – but there's no one else can cook a chicken like your mother!'

And stretching out his great right hand, he patted Eliza's worn fingers with his own. (1935: 256)

Eugene silently participates in this moment of beauty, which was unusually complex with the presence of Helen, who had wielded greater authority over Gant all her life, the only one who could control Gant during his alcoholic sprees. Eliza runs away, blind with tears, and keeps on repeating the words of her dying husband's praise which had put her on a pedestal and demolished her daughter Helen. And Helen, following her mother, feels a deep well of sympathy for Eliza. This is Wolfe at his complex, ambivalent best:

... her own eyes were also wet, the bitter possessiveness that had dominated all her relations with her father, and that had thrust Eliza away from him, was suddenly vanquished.

'Well', she thought, 'I guess it's all she's had, but I'm glad she's got that much to remember. I'm glad he said it: she'll always have that now to hang on to. (1935: 257)

Gant's death is a definite possibility which is kept in abeyance in *Look Homeward, Angel* and actualized in *Of Time and the River*. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, we see Eugene shattered by the experience of Ben's death. As Ben lies like a rotting corpse, the ugliness and discomfort of death choked Eugene.

... the swarming family, whispering outside the door, pottering uselessly around, feeding, with its terrible hunger for death on Ben's strangulation made him mad with alternate fits of rage and pity. (1929: 453)

The family members all indulge in posturings and blaming each other. Eliza vents her ire on Mrs. Pert, the only person who had taken care of Ben and nursed him. For her love of Ben, Mrs. Pert is turned out of Dixieland. And Eugene, witness to the drama, gives words to his thoughts:

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. (1929: 465)

Growing up has its multifarious problems, and no one is as acutely conscious of it as Eugene, whose mother tried to keep her control over him and refused to accept him as anything but her baby. Well into his eighteenth year, Eugene asked Eliza to let him learn to drive the car she had bought. “Wha-a-at! Why, you’re my ba-a-a-by!” (1935: 351) was her response. This throttling hold of his mother or his father’s example might have encouraged Eugene to seek release through drinking. Eugene’s exultation after being wonderfully drunk reminds us of the drunken duo in

The Tempest:

In all the earth there was no other like him, no other fitted to be so sublimely and magnificently drunken. It was greater than all the music he had ever heard; it was as great as the highest poetry ... why, when it was possible to buy a god in a bottle, and drink him off, and become a god oneself, were men not forever drunken? (1929: 411)

However, drink is not godhead – and Eugene learnt this the hard way, through arrest and imprisonment because he was drunk with friends driving in a car. He faces the derision of his family because he had grown up, wasted time and money in Harvard, and is ultimately put in jail. Helen

snickered, and ceremoniously presented Eugene to Eliza: “Here’s your Harvard boy ... What do you think of your baby now.” (1935: 399)

Locked in a cell with a Negro, a submerged and unsuspected colour-feeling roars up in a flood of shame and degradation. And that drives home the weight of his lapse. Eugene is sick with horror at the stranger who controls him from within.

Eugene has to suffer the criticality of his family because he wanted to be a playwright, and they thought him to be queer. He had sent some plays to publishers, and as he eagerly awaited their response,

... his family looked at him with troubled question in their eyes. His enthusiastic hopes and assurances of the great success that he would have from writing plays seemed visionary and remote to them. (1935: 353)

And when finally a letter arrived expressing regret at rejecting the play,

Eugene feels crushed:

It seemed to him that all was lost, that he had been living in a fool’s dream for years, and that now he had been brutally wakened and saw himself as he was – a naked fool – who had never had an ounce of talent, and who no longer had an ounce of hope – a madman who had wasted his money and lost precious years when he might have learned some work consonant with his ability and the lives of average

men. And it now seemed to him, that his family had been terribly and mercilessly right in everything they had said and felt, and that he had been too great a fool to understand it. His sense of ruin and failure was abysmal, crushing and complete. (1935: 361)

When Eugene obtains a teaching post in the School of Utility Cultures, his class-room experiences alienate him further. Here, in fear and contempt, his own dread of the crowd making him shake and tremble, he tries to drum a love of literature into thick and ugly and derisive heads, Jewish heads for the most part – as his deep-lying anti-Semitism assures him – and one of them is Abe Jones, who felt that Eugene’s teaching was deficient, and he was not getting his money’s worth:

... that gray-faced Yiddish inquisitor hung doggedly to his heels, the more he gave, the more Abe wanted; he fed on Eugene’s life, enriching his grayness with an insatiate and vampiric gluttony, and yet he never had a word of praise, a sentence of thanks, a syllable of commendation. (1935: 444)

Another class-room observation of Eugene reveals his deep-rooted ambivalent attraction cum repulsion towards Jewesses:

Their dark flesh had in it the quality of merciless tide which not only overwhelmed and devoured but withdrew with a powerful sucking glut of all rich deposits of the earth it fed upon: they had the absorptive quality of a sponge, the power of a magnet, the end of each class left him sapped, gutted,

drained, and with a sense of sterility, loss and defeat ...
(1935: 478)

The mixed feelings would later be apparent in the turbulent relationship between the protagonist and Esther Jack, which started at the end of *Of Time and the River* (1935) and continued through *The Web and the Rock* (1939).

Eugene has a unique experience while living as paying guest in a house in England. The family who owned the house had some mysterious antecedent, which was known by all in town, but Eugene could never manage to learn the secret. This secret made the Coulsons the butt of silent jeer, but Eugene as a tenant found them to be wonderful people. It is the Coulsons' daughter Edith, who makes certain approaches which suggest that she has certain shady activities, but Eugene's gentlemanly behaviour and unbiased approach create a weakness in her heart: "One night ... he came upon her suddenly standing in the shadow of a tree" (1935: 644). Later, when Edith expresses her unrealizable desire to leave England and migrate to America, Eugene blurts out a frenzied proposal for Edith to

come along with him to America. Although she is steeped in failure and defeat, she however, feels grateful:

“You opened a door that I thought had been closed forever”, she said, “a door that let me look in on a world I thought I should never see again – a new bright world, a new life and a new beginning – for us all. And I thought that was something which would never happen to any one in this house again.” (1935: 651)

The barrier seems unsurmountable, and Edith tells him that “For some of us there’s no return” (1935: 652). Eugene does not reciprocate her sentiments towards him, or cannot articulate his own. She bids him farewell, with a plea for remembrance. Later on he reflects:

Although he had never passed beyond the armour of their hard bright eyes, or breached the wall of their crisp, friendly, and impersonal speech, or found out anything about them, he always thought of them with warmth, with a deep and tender affection, as if he had always known them – as if, somehow, he could have lived with them or made their lives his own had he only said a word, or turned the handle of a door – a word he never knew, a door he never found. (1935: 652)

It is the incommunicability of experience that haunted Wolfe like the feeling of alienation. The girl cannot cross the barrier because she has suffered some loss, which has closed the door of life forever on her.

It is interesting to note that Wolfe feels some urgency to change his alter-ego from Eugene to George Webber in *The Web and the Rock*. From the tall and handsome Eugene, we get a simian, gorilla-like, darkish, slant-eyed and shorter in height George, whose nickname is Monk. Critics have commented variously on the possible reason behind this change. Some have felt that Wolfe had grown tired of Eugene, and after the bitter reception of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) in his hometown Altamont, he felt the need to change the protagonist. Pamela Hansford Johnson has commented that various episodes in the childhood of Wolfe had not been accommodated in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and Wolfe needed a fresh beginning. But no critic has noticed the nature of experiences that Wolfe went through in *The Web and the Rock* that underlined the change in the protagonist. *The Web and the Rock* describes the violently passionate, sensuous relationship between Wolfe and Aline Bernstein. The relationship with Mrs. Bernstein, eighteen years senior to Wolfe, and the mother of two grown up children is more of an incestuous relationship than a regular one. Earlier, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe had felt guilty in a relation with Miss Brown, who had a son of his age. Mrs. Aline

Bernstein had come into Wolfe's life at a critical moment when he was groping for a foothold in literary circles. Mrs. Aline Bernstein was a Jew, and exercised a terrible attraction in conjunction with a strong repulsion on Wolfe. Her contribution to Wolfe's success is undeniable.

Also undeniable is Wolfe's egotism as a white American having strong colour consciousness and repulsion towards Jews. The sensuality described in *The Web and the Rock*, howsoever true, could not be ascribed to the white angelic (fallen angel, no doubt) Eugene. Hence, the substitution of Eugene with George Webber is a natural outcome. Webber, Simian, slant-eyed, with gorilla-like arms, is a protagonist with Afro-Oriental appearance which matches the violent passion to be described in *The Web and the Rock*.

Upon Webber's return to New York, his longing to see Esther prompts him to write a long, pompous, self-deceiving letter, in which he offers to renew the acquaintance so long as she realizes that he has no intention of "trukling" (1939: 318) to the rich.

Webber is seen searching for some ideal love, some final sexual homecoming. He is rejected by Laura in *Look Homeward, Angel* and by Ann in *Of Time and the River*. Now Esther reciprocates and returns his love, and a period of violent passion erupts. She offers her whole life to the bombastic, verbose and frequently detestable young man because she loves him and believes he has genius. He *howls, bellows, yells, breathes stertoriously*. His mania for food gives a cannibalistic slant to his love-making:

Deliberately he would step forward again, bending over her; then, tentatively, he would take her arm and pull it gently like a wing.

‘Shall it be a wing?’ he would say. ‘A tender wing done nicely with a little parsley and a butter sauce? Or shall it be the sweet meat of a haunch done to a juicy turn?’

‘Or shall it be the lean meat of the rib?’ he continued in a moment, ‘Or the ripe melons that go ding-dong in April?’ he cried exultingly, ‘Or shall it be a delicate morsel now of women’s fingers? ... O you damned, delectable, little plum-skinned trollop! ... I will eat you like honey, you sweet little hussy!’ (1938: 445)

Wolfe’s short story “April, late April” presents these same lovers steeped in sensuousness. The young man is full of violent energy and a giant appetite. He is madly in love with his mistress, whom he likens to

food and wishes to devour – so that they become truly united and inseparable and can overcome alienation:

I will eat you, devour you, entomb you in me! I will make you a part of me and carry you with me wherever I go. (1987: 327)

The experiences of the protagonist's intimate life with Esther holds a sadistic, adolescent pleasure. George gets tired, however, of Esther's mothering. It has enabled him to complete his novel in comfort, and his debt to it is limitless. But with shocking utilitarianism, after the purpose is served, George wants to cut the apron strings. It is a parable of the literacy break with Maxwell Perkins, and offers a psychological insight upon Wolfe's mental resistance where any form of guidance or supervision is imposed. Also, his egotism suffered from an inferiority complex, to turn away from successful people until he could meet them on equal terms. And at last he separated from Esther because it was not possible for their worlds to coalesce. It was an actualization of Wolfe's vision of the diasparactive condition of life.

The Lost Boy (1987) takes up the thread of irreversible loss. The meaning of the statement “You Can’t Go Home Again” – which Wolfe used over and over again in the last year of his life, found an echo in the story. ‘Home’ is a symbol of the past, of what has been lost forever, as Wordsworth would say, of childhood. None of us can return to the lost community, the fading glory, for time carries us inexorably away. One cannot go home again, one cannot recover the pre-Lapsarian state of innocence and bliss.

An extreme situation of alienation is presented in *Arnold Pentland* (1987), where a mentally retarded cousin of Wolfe leaves his family forever. He changes his identity and erases all connections. Met by the speaker one day, Arnold uttered a long wailing cry of terror, and wrenching free, ran blindly into the rain:

Eugene watched him go with a feeling of nameless pity, loneliness, and loss – the feeling of a man who for a moment in the huge unnumbered wilderness of life, the roaring jungle of America, sees a face he knows, a kinsman of his blood, and says farewell to him forever. (1987: 228)

In *The Bell Remembered*, the speaker remembers his childhood – the courthouse bell, his father the judge going the court, a cripple sitting in front, loathed by his father. The father told the son, quietly, and with conviction, that “a wooden leg is no excuse for anything!” (1987: 287). Long after, the son comes across an account of a famous battle where his father is described in military action having his right leg blown off. Now he realizes that his father, too, is a cripple; not only that his father did conquer the disability, but his pride never allowed him to disclose it to his son.

Katamoto (1987) seems to be a social and political satire in the beginning, but there is an abrupt deviation into the past, triggered by the inscription of a sculptor’s name. There follows reflections and recollections of an association with the Japanese sculptor, Katamoto, which was pleasant yet rather strange. It had terminated suddenly in the death of the sculptor. After ten long years, the inscription of Katamoto’s name tolls a bell, and the protagonist reflects on loss and alienation.

Wolfe uses Civil War material in *Chickamauga* (1987), where the narrator and his friend Jim had gone to war in 1861, while at camp enroute, Jim met Martha and fell in love. He started hating the war, yet fierce fighting continued and Jim got killed. The narrator retrieved Jim's possessions. Later on, as he recounts the events, he says: "And I would go all through the war and go back home and marry Martha later on, and fellers like poor Jim were layin' thar at Chickamauga creek." (1987: 396)

Nebraska Crane (1987) records the pathetic anticipation of retirement of a famous but ageing Cherokee baseball player, who meets his childhood friend in a train, and reminisces of the past achievements and ovations, while musing over the bleakness and vacuity of the future. The train – a powerful symbol of continuity of time in Wolfe's writing, links the past to the present and the future.

So This is Man (1987) attempts to philosophize on the problem – "what is Man?" Wolfe traces the process of growth from childhood to maturity through the innocence of childhood, the vanity of youth, the busy life of the adult. But to Wolfe, these are meaningless activities which point

towards the nihilism of the existential world. Man is helpless – gripped by irreversible destiny, and his activities can afford no peace – for there is neither purpose nor fulfillment.

In *The Anatomy of Loneliness* (1987) Wolfe continues his reflection on loneliness which he considers to be the primary condition of man's life. Love is merely temporary, however precious. So "the constant, everlasting weather of man's life" (1987: 498) is not love, but loneliness.

The Return of the Prodigal (1987) presents in two parts an imagined and an actual return to his hometown by Eugene. In the imagined return, the unrecognized Eugene takes a room at his mother's boarding house, and wakes up in the middle of the night to hear the voice of his dead brother: "Brother! Brother! What did you come home for? ... You know now that you can't go home again!" (1987: 549). The irreversible loss of childhood innocence was a dominant theme in Wolfe.

In the second part of the story, Eugene stops off at Zebulon, where his mother's people welcome him heartily, and where by chance he is witness to a fatal gun-fight. Back home, everyone is cordial, but something

is lacking, something is lost. The existence of the past has given way to celebrity status. And his new found status takes his mother six pages just to explain all the telephone calls that have come for him.

Wolfe's extraordinary sensitivity allowed him to feel and absorb various dimensions of human life and human relations. The romantic notion of childhood as a definite but irrecoverable loss, the loss of the world of innocence upon the altar of experience recur again and again in Wolfe's writing. Another dominant theme allied to loss is time, the agent of change. Life fascinated Wolfe in its entirety, but his problem was that of the radical romantic who, not being able to harmonize the fragments into a whole, represented them only in fragments. The pulls towards ambivalent emotions is there. However, the ever-present consciousness of the mutability of human life casts its shadow on all human relationships, whether casual or deep. Thus Death emerges as the next theme of significance in Wolfe's writings. The ever present sensitive "self" of Wolfe is present in the center of the action, sensing, feeling, wondering, being hurt, being afraid, moving forward and mapping out experiences in a very human way.

SOCIETY

Although alienation is to some extent central to Wolfe's consciousness, he has tried his best to belong to his milieu. From the self to the family, the author looked at the larger society and attempted to find himself in the societal set up among the "man swarm." The writer's pre-occupation with the authorial self and its sensibility were at striking variance with his fascination for the social milieu. The experiences of the individual, his/her responses and feelings to events on the one hand, and on the other, society's attitude to individuals provide a valuable insight into Wolfe's art. Wolfe felt that he had a responsibility towards society, to present the condition and the point of view of the poor and the down-trodden in an attempt to ameliorate it. He was a master in presenting independent vignettes of authentic social life in exacting detail. He could reproduce snatches of conversation heard in passing in its original form. These provide not only a dramatic element, but a living quality to his expressions evoking the social milieu.

Sinclair Lewis, a noted critic and writer, who condemned a materialistic society devoted to bulk, glitter and a conscious disregard of beauty, had a powerful influence on Wolfe. Influence of Lewis' social criticism in Wolfe's writing is evident as early as 1923, when he wrote to his mother contemptuously of "those people who shout 'Progress, Progress, Progress, Progress, Progress', when what they mean is more Ford Automobiles, more Rotary Clubs, more Baptist Ladies Social Unions" (in Holman, 1975: 32). Years spent in Brooklyn during the depths of depression were full of social lessons for Wolfe. "Everywhere around me," he wrote later, "I saw the evidence of an incalculable ruin and suffering ... universal calamity had somehow struck the life of almost everyone I knew" (in Holman, 1975: 32). In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Webber's close friend Randy Shepperton says that he "got the sack just a week after the bank closed" (1940: 303). Randy worked in a business concern and failed to promote business. Wolfe presents a harsh picture of social reality. He was highly critical of Yankee materialism and the inordinate greed for progress and material gain. The heartlessness of this capitalist system easily expels anybody from any position if he fails to deliver. Wolfe

became convinced that something was basically wrong with such a social order. His letters show that he had wanted to make what he regarded as a Marxist interpretation of the social scene in *Of Time and the River* (1935), although his editor Perkins dissuaded him from doing it. The egalitarianism and essentially middle-class economic radicalism of his native region affected his thinking during the period and found expression in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). A sense of primary social injustice in the world is an operative force in *The World that Jack Built*. Mr. Frederick Jack and his wife Esther are beautifully presented in the comfort of their wealth: "They had long since agreed to live their individual lives, but they had joined together in a common effort to maintain the unity of their family" (1940: 156). Esther was violently entangled with Webber, but Mr. Jack did not object to it. And in the lavish party given by Mrs. Jack, Webber is an invitee. And Webber finds the upper class society one of glitter and meaninglessness, symbolized by Piggy Logan and his puppet circus of wire dolls. People put up appearances and make a show of interest to impress others:

The choicest stories which these men told each other had to do with some facet of human chicanery, treachery and dishonesty. They delighted to match anecdotes concerning the delightful knaveries of their chauffeurs, maids, cooks, and boot leggers, telling of the way these people cheated them as one would describe the antics of a household pet.

Such stories also had a great success at the dinner table. The ladies would listen with mirth which they made an impressive show of trying to control, and at the conclusion of the tale they would say: "I – think – that – is – simply – priceless!" (uttered slowly and deliberately, as if the humour of the story was almost beyond belief), or: "Isn't it incredible!" (spoken with a faint rising scream of laughter), or "Stop! You know he didn't!" (delivered with a ladylike shriek). They used all the fashionable and stereo-typed phrases of people "responding" to an "amusing" anecdote, for their lives had become so sterile and savorless that laughter had gone out of them. (1940: 154-55)

Juxtaposed to this world of fashion and glitter and affluence is the world of starvation, rags as clothes and no shelter. Webber found them in the streets at night:

Thus, on his nocturnal ramblings about New York, he would observe the homeless men who prowled in the vicinity of restaurants, lifting the lids of garbage cans and searching around inside for morsels of rotten food ... (1940: 321)

Webber found such homeless men huddled together on the cold concrete in a corridor of the subway station, "wrapped up in sheathings of old newspaper":

... “he used to go to the public latrine or ‘comfort station’ which was directly in front of the New York City Hall. ... and on bitter nights he would find the place crowded with homeless men who had sought refuge there ... old men, all rags and bags and long white hair and bushy beards stained dirty yellow, wearing tattered overcoats in the cavernous pockets of which they carefully stored away all the little rubbish they lived on and spent their days collecting in the streets – crusts of bread, old bones with rancid shreds of meat still clinging to them, and dozens of cigarette butts ... They drifted across the land and gathered in the big cities when winter came, hungry, defeated, empty, hopeless, restless, driven by they knew not what, always on the move, looking for work, for the bare crumbs to support their miserable lives, and finding neither work nor crumbs. Here in New York, to this obscene meeting place, these derelicts came, drawn into a common stew of rest and warmth and a little surcease from their desperation.

George had never before witnessed anything to equal the indignity and sheer animal horror of the scene. There was even a kind of devil’s comedy in the sight of all these filthy men squatting upon those open, doorless stools. Arguments and savage disputes and fights would sometimes break out among them over the possession of these stools, which all of them wanted more for rest than for necessity. The sight was revolting, disgusting, enough to render a man forever speechless with very pity.

... The blind injustice of this contrast seemed the most brutal part of the whole experience, for there, all around him in the cold moonlight, only a few blocks away from this abyss of human wretchedness and misery, blazed the pinnacles of power where a large portion of the entire world’s wealth was locked in mighty vaults. (1940: 322-23)

Such a social order contrasts the world of the very wealthy with that of the labour classes who serve them. The only ones to die in the fire at Mr. Jack's apartment are the liftmen who ferried the rich up and down. And nobody of the upper classes even notice that they are dead, attempting to rescue the tenants from fire. Esther felt that "It was terribly exciting" because "No one got hurt". (1940: 248)

In *Of Time and the River*, Eugene has an opportunity of entering the world of the fabulously rich Joel Pierce's family, who go to Broadway shows because "The revue was one of those productions which people were beginning to 'wear' as they 'wore' books or plays or a dress: people went to the revue more because it was 'the thing to do'" (1935: 503). Their conversation concerned itself with scandals: "And she really *lived* with him – with this – this *stable-boy*?" (1935: 516); or about going to "Copenhagen and Stockholm and Bucharest and Madrid" (1935: 524) or "the guests discussing politics, ambassadorships, using the names of the great and celebrated people of the earth with the casual and familiar

intimacy of people talking about life-long friends whom they had last seen at dinner Tuesday evening.” (1935: 564)

In this world of the economically powerful, Mrs. Joel sent all her maidservants to the barber and had their hair “bobbed”. She beamingly explains:

“– You see, I had the whole house done over this spring – redecorated – I told the decorator the *effect* I wanted,” she said gushingly – “I told him everything must be done for – for – *lightness!*” she said triumphantly, “– *coolness!* ... to do everything in light cool colors ... get *that* effect ... So last week,” she went on happily, “when we had that spell of *frightful* hot weather, I noticed suddenly how – how *hot* – and disagreeable all the girls looked with their long hair – how – how *out of place,*” she said triumphantly, “they looked in this new scheme of things ... Ugh,” she shuddered with a little gesture of discomfort and distaste, “– the very *sight* of them made me uncomfortable – I couldn’t *bear* them! So all of a sudden it occurred to me how nice it would be – how much it would improve the – the – the general *atmosphere* of the whole house if I made them bob their hair ...” (1935: 565-66)

Wolfe was disturbed by the racial divide between whites and blacks. In his fiction, there is a note of protest against maltreatment of the Negro. In *You Can't Go Home Again*, there is a scathing denunciation of Judge Bland's ‘business’ – a condition in the South which had kept the Negro in

economic bondage. He excoriates Judge Bland for his business, all of which was derived from the Negro population of the town, and of this business the principal item was usury. Judge Bland is a blind lawyer whose legal skills and knowledge had been used more for the purpose of circumventing the law and defeating justice than in maintaining them. He operated a second-hand furniture store with a “mountainous heap of ill-smelling junk ... taken as brutal tribute from some Negro” (1940: 61). This store was “nothing but a blind for his illegal transactions with the Negroes” (1940: 61). Judge Bland would lend them money and thereafter extract exorbitant interest for the loan. He did not want the principal repaid, but only that the Negroes keep up the interest out of their small wages.

Judge Bland had on his books the names of Negroes who had paid him fifty cents or a dollar a week over a period of years, on an original loan of ten or twenty dollars. Many of these poor and ignorant people were unable to comprehend what had happened to them. They could only feel mournfully, dumbly, with the slavlike submissiveness of their whole training and conditioning, that at some time in the distant past they had got their money, spent it, and had their fling, and that now they must pay perpetual tribute for that privilege. (1940: 62)

Wolfe continues to attack this practice:

... by which unscrupulous white men all over the South feathered their own nests at the expense of an oppressed and ignorant people. The fact that such usury was practiced chiefly against 'a bunch of niggers' to a large degree condoned and pardoned it in the eyes of the law. (1940: 63-64)

It is the loan shark who devours the meagre resources of the Negro that aroused Wolfe to utter his strongest denunciation against the maltreatment of the Negro. In "The Child by Tiger" (1987), Wolfe is scathing in his criticism of Ben Pounders, who was boasting of his heroism in shooting a Negro:

It was Ben Pounders of the ferret face, the furtive and uneasy eye, Ben Pounders of the mongrel mouth, the wiry muscles of the jaw, Ben Pounders, the collector of usurious lendings to the blacks, the nigger hunter. (1987: 346)

Wolfe's protest on behalf of the Negro against financial exploitation is evident in *The Web and the Rock*, where George reasons that Aunt Maw's cook had quit because she failed to pay the poor wench on Saturday night the three dollars which was her princely emolument for fourteen hours a day of sweaty drudgery seven days a week. This

underpayment for such long hours rankles in George's mind when he objects to being sent to find a replacement.

In the vehemence of this attack he approaches the intensity of his slashing comments on other social ills in America not so directly related to the Negro. Here the Negro is treated with a sympathy and an understanding he does not often receive from Wolfe.

In *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, the Negro is part of Altamont and a portion of Eugene's experience. His status in society is of the underdog and his community is tolerated as a necessary evil. The status of Negroes is delineated to be second grade citizens, with separate seats assigned to them in street cars: "One of the seats reserved for his race at the back" (1929: 62). A negro drinks: "sensual Negroid rum" (1929: 64) and has "a hot kitchen negress" (1929: 70); these indicate that sensuality and the Negro race were synonymous. For Wolfe, attraction and repulsion go hand in hand. Eugene dreams that "The copper legs of negresses in their dark dens stir" (1929: 138); the sensuality of desire is offset by the animality ascribed to negresses. As the newspaper route boys

deliver newspaper in the dark of early morning, Niggertown is asleep: “Within, May Corpening stirred nakedly, muttering as if doped and moving her heavy copper legs, in the fetid bed-warmth, with the slow noise of silk” (1929: 139). The society looked upon a negress as a sex-symbol, and W.O. Gant’s lewd advances towards the cook, Annie, “a plump, comely negress of thirty-five” (1929: 238) face unexpected stiff opposition: “I ain’t used to no such goins – on. I’s e a married woman, I is. I ain’t goin’ to stay in dis house anothah minnit” (1929: 239). Gant accused God for exposing him; he wept because he had been caught. This rare exception excepted, Wolfe’s references to Negroes abound with “all the illicit loves, the casual and innumerable adulteries of Niggertown” (1929: 247). The out-going newspaper route-boy, Jennings, informs Eugene that negresses are par excellence: “There ain’t nothing better” (1929: 248) and this would later culminate in Eugene’s experience with Ella Corpening. In an escapade during University life, Jim Trivett and Eugene find a “black bawd” (1929: 339) playing pimp.

Wolfe’s attitude is usually ambivalent. In Virginia, Eugene comes to witness a group of Negroes who desperately want to go to war: “all Texas

darkies, had come away from camp without a clean bill of health: they were venereals and had not been cured" (1929: 438). But their whoop of joy when their white officer influenced the doctor to give them a clean bill is arresting.

The Negro's place in society is strongly emphasized in Wolfe's description of Negro community which is invariably "Niggertown", that is constantly set forth as a reeking slum of shabby dwellings, glutted with disease, strewn with filth, hot with lust and infested with evil – over which hangs an aura of witch-magic and mystery. Further, the Negro is the ex-slave living in the land of his former owners. In Negro-White relationships the place of the Negro in society is that of an inferior race. He is the object of prejudice and is subjected to scorn, indignity and sometimes even a patronizing affection. His behaviour is judged by the white neighbours in accordance with his conformity to customs and traditions developed for him and imposed on him.

In "The Face of the War" (1987), a Negro at Langley Field is "beaten to a bloody pulp" (1987: 229) by a slouchy, shambling figure of a

Southern White – a gang boss or an overseer. In this “nausea of horror” (1987: 230), Wolfe’s sympathies are with the victim. His handling of the incident in the context of this piece transcends that effort merely to show the brutality and sordidness resulting from war. Here Wolfe is on the black man’s side in the continual struggle between the races.

Early in *The Web and the Rock*, Wolfe depicts the treatment of the Negro as the suffering innocent. This is occasioned by the dogfight between the Potterham’s bulldog and the mastiff belonging to Simpson Simms. The Negro’s dog is the object of an unprovoked attack by the Potterham’s bulldog. Thus, not only is Simms innocent but his dog is innocent too. When the mastiff reacts, and kills the bulldog, a white-man’s dog has been killed by a Negro’s. Society encroaches into the world of animal justice. The big dog is abused. Potterham denounces the Negro’s dog to the policeman, who serves Simms a court notice.

The Child by Tiger (in *The Web and the Rock*, 1939), the story of Dick Prosser is undeniably the most memorable and the sole instance in his novels where Wolfe devotes an entire chapter to a Negro. Completed in

the spring of 1937, just about a year before his death – it is one of his most mature writings on the Negro and merits special scrutiny.

The narrator recalls the harrowing experiences of Dick Prosser, the faithful, meek and amiable family retainer who ran amuck and committed multiple murders before he was hunted down by a posse and killed. Dick becomes the symbol of his race. He was a model of the conduct expected of Negro servants by the White citizenry of Ashville of that day. He was deeply religious and went to Church three times a week. He read his Bible every night, believed “de Armageddon day’s a-comin’” (1939: 135), and sang hymns while he worked.

The presentation of the Negro in *The Child by Tiger* is in keeping with the traditional Southern attitude of the time. Niggertown has its typical connotations of evil. Standards of social and personal morality among Negroes were supposedly lower and more open than among Whites. Liaisons without legal sanction were common and were accepted. The term “wench” is used to describe a Negro woman with loose morals. The typical Southern belief that the Negro was less of a human being and

more of an animal than the White man is subtly insinuated in reference to Dick Prosser's "great black paw" (1939: 132).

Dick's death by lynching is an example not of the White man's power but of barbarity. The white men visiting their fury on the Negro *after* his ammunition has run out, and thereafter riddling the dead body with almost three hundred bullets, the triumphal return, the display of the mutilated carcass are all elements of lynching that Wolfe chooses to describe, for he wants to protest. In *The Web and the Rock*, Wolfe describes the way they go out to lynch a nigger in South Carolina. His description indicates strong distaste. In the death of Dick Prosser, by his very handling of the narrative, leaving the cause of Dick's fury unknown, in spite of Dick's guilt and mad-dog tactics, Wolfe seems, like Nebraska Crane, to spit contemptuously at the whole bloody business of lynching. Dick the Negro emerges as a symbol of the dark side of man's soul, a symbol of the power of primeval passion.

Dick possessed the stealth and cunning of an animal of the jungle that could appear and disappear almost at will, an animal of prey that was

seen crouching ready to spring but did not, and would merely slink away. Hence the allusion is made to the tiger having stealth, cunning and ferocious power, dangerous to kin and prey alike.

Like his race, Dick was the innocent sufferer at the hands of the White man. After Lon Pilcher drove into the car Dick was driving and struck Dick viciously on the face, not once but twice, Dick took the painful indignity without flinching, with the same stoic calm with which his race accepted the innumerable indignities heaped upon it by the White man for generations although his hands twitched and his eyes became red like an animal's. But when, on that fateful day, his long pent-up feelings broke loose, they erupted like a volcano. His wild sweep through Libya Hill was like a maddened animal's prowl through the jungle clawing at every other animal in reach. Like an avenging angel of doom, he precipitated his own personal Armageddon and swept through the town dealing out vengeance and death indiscriminately.

Wolfe makes no attempt to resolve the conflict in the enigmatic symbol of Dick Prosser, who is an embodiment of the perpetually

conflicting forces of good and evil. The Negro was an abiding paradox to Wolfe, capable of the finest qualities of humanity, a friend, a brother, but equally representative of the worst – a mortal enemy, an unknown demon. In the Negro two opposing worlds join, for he is both a tiger and a child.

Although Wolfe was deeply concerned with racial discrimination he was somehow uneasy with the Jews. He has been vigorously denounced as anti-Semitic and just as stoutly defended. Wolfe had an amazing ambivalence towards Jews – what Leo Gurko calls a perpetual alternation of hate and love.

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, before Eugene entered school, Eugene, Max and Harry “spat joyously upon the Jews” (1929: 79), and render their sentiments: “Drown a Jew and hit a nigger” (1929: 79). These boys took delight in ridiculing Jews and chasing Jewish children over the neighbourhood. There is Edward Michalove, a Jewish student in the Altamont Fitting School, who was called Miss Michalove. The son of a jeweller, the boy’s life at the school was desperately unhappy and tormented for he was the object of ridicule from teachers and students

alike. The cause of abuse is, however, not juvenile anti-Semitism but Edward's effeminacy that brings persecution and hatred.

Anti-Semitism encourages Wolfe's Jew student Abraham Jones to change his name to A. Alfred Jones. This common practice of name-changing is roundly condemned by Wolfe, who heaps ridicule upon "the bravado, the effrontery, and the absurdity of the attempt" (1935: 457) of Abe's attempted disguise: "That he should hope actually to palm himself off as a Gentile was unthinkable, because one look at him revealed instantly the whole story of his race and origin" (1935: 457).

In *The Web and the Rock*, Wolfe places the ridicule in the mouth of Esther Jack, who glories in her Jewish heritage in "Penelope's Web":

"I should like to tell about Jews and Christians, and about Jews who change their names. There's this fellow Burke! Doesn't it make you want to laugh? Nathaniel Burke my eye! ... Can you beat it? His real name is Nathan Berkovich, I've known his people all my life.

The nerve of the fellow! I got so tired of his goings on that I said to him once: 'Look here, Burke. You'd just better be glad you *are* a Jew. Where would you be if it weren't for the Jews, I'd like to know? It's too bad about you.'

His mother and father were such nice old people. The old fellow had a store on Grand Street. He wore a beard and a derby hat, and washed his hands in a certain way they have

before eating. There's something awfully nice about old Jews like that. ... Isn't it a shame – to throw that wonderful thing away in order to become an imitation Christian?

We're fine people. They sneer at us and mock us, but we're fine people just the same. 'Many a time and oft in the Rialto you have rated me ... and spit upon my Jewish gaberdine.'" (1939: 431-32)

Wolfe condemns name changing as indicative of a basic falsity, an attempt to disguise racial origin. The older brothers of Abraham Jones had a small zine business in Boston, and gangsters came regularly demanding money, which the merchants of the district paid "meekly and regularly for protection" (1935: 496). But Barney refused and although his shop had been frequently robbed, he fought the gangsters with tooth and claw. Barney's survival under such conditions is a success in itself and arouses Eugene's sympathy and admiration. Abe's childhood had been replete with instances of racial hatred.

He told Eugene many stories of bloody fights waged back and forth across these pavements, of young boys maimed, crippled, or blinded in these savage fights, of one boy who had his eye torn out of his head by his enemy's gouging thumb in a fight to a finish on one of the piers, and of another whose brains had been smashed out on the pavement below the elevated structure by a rock ... (1935: 495-96)

Abe's sister Sylvia had been thrown on her own resources since childhood. Her unhappy romance had left her with an illegitimate son who never called her 'mother':

... in the physical presence of the boy she saw the visible proof and living evidence of her folly, the bitter fruit of the days of innocence, love, and guileless belief, and as if she was conscious that a joke had been played on both her and her child. (1935: 461)

Yet Sylvia's failures in life had not impeded her drive to succeed in business. Beginning as a salesgirl she then worked in a millinery shop and finally had her own thriving hat-shop on Second Avenue. Sylvia represents the penniless immigrant woman who by her own shrewdness and drive achieved considerable success in business.

The climactic incident in Wolfe's life was his contact with the Jew lady – Mrs. Aline Bernstein. She is the Esther Jack of the novels. She tried her best to promote George Webber's literary ambitions by introducing him to an elite society. The social world into which Esther Jack introduced George is presented in "The World that Jack Built" in *You Can't Go Home Again*. The Jew as a member of this society is revealed by the guests at

Mrs. Jack's party. Wolfe places this party just prior to the stock market crash to dramatize the weaknesses of America immediately preceding that catastrophe. Mrs. Jack's circle of friends is wide and heterogenous. Miss Lily Mandell is a beautiful heiress of Midas wealth, whose sensual charms are incarnate in the word "voluptuous". She likes to assume a pose of superior intellectualism by displaying an interest in such an unlikely subject as Thomas Lovell Beddoes – a writer. George Webber observes the eternal chase re-enacted by Lawrence Hirsch, a banker of huge wealth, who untiringly followed Lily Mandell. Among the guests, there is another dissolute heiress, Amy Carlton, who "had surpassed the ultimate limits of notoriety, even for New York" (1940: 194). Margaret Ettinger comes to the party with her profligate husband John, who had brought his current mistress along. The aged rake, Jake Abramson, upon whom the mark of the fleshpots was plain, is old, subtle, sensual, weary and "had the face of a vulture" (1940: 186:87). Jake's stroking of Esther's arm was "a gesture frankly old and sensual, jaded, and yet strangely fatherly and gentle" (1940: 187). He humorously regales Esther and Miss Heilprinn with an account of the horrors of being on a diet at Carlsbad, the Czechoslovakian

spa, and the food of an English ship. The ship's food, he informs them with "cynic humor in his weary eyes" was "fit for nothing but a bunch of goys!" (1940: 188). The use of this Yiddish term of derision for Gentiles and the mirth it provoked reveals to Webber in a flash the unifying bonds of Jewry and its ancient and proud separateness from the Christian world.

The view of an elite society represented by these Jews is definitely an upper, privileged group whose qualifications rest on either wealth or successful personal attainment, but above all it includes the urban polish and pretence at intellectualism that the 1920s made a cultural and social shibboleth.

Esther defends her race vigorously in verbal battle with George even to the point of equating it with probity and faithfulness indicating Christians as the equivalence of perfidy and disloyalty: "My people are loyal! ... With us, love is a thing that lasts!" and adds sarcastically, "We're not like you fine and noble Christians ... these great and wonderful Gentiles." (1939: 502-3). After this outburst harmony is restored for a time but the racial question remains a touchy point which flares up in their

violent clash: "The Quarrel" in *The Web and the Rock*. When Esther inquires whom George saw at the publishing firm and he replies "A Jew", she instantly recoils. With the spiritual and mental deterioration that George undergoes, a madness compounded of many elements took possession of him, and his mind concocts a fantastic idea: he sees Esther as the nucleus of a sinister Jewish scheme to entrap him. In his feverish imagination Webber sees the entrapment by Esther as a gigantic plot of Jewry, which imperils every Christian man of genius.

But Wolfe's ambivalence is ever-present. By allusion to Einstein Wolfe reminds his readers that the most outstanding single contribution made in the twentieth century in the realm of pure intellect was made by a Jew. The "Jew boy" (1940: 393) as a symbol is thus a tribute to the Jewish race, and it is highly significant that the Jewish seeker strives in the intellectual instead of the financial realm and follows in the footsteps of Einstein rather than those of Otto Kahn.

A harrowing instance of the Jew as a symbol occurs in "I Have a Thing to Tell You" in *You Can't Go Home Again*. Here Wolfe gives a

straightforward eye-witness account of a Jewish lawyer's attempt in 1936 to escape from Nazi Germany and his miserable capture at the border. This man, whom Wolfe dubs "Old Fuss-and-Fidget" and gives no other name, is a symbol of Nazi brutality, but in a general sense he is representative of man's inhumanity to man. This man's personal tragedy is not only that of a Jew enmeshed in the cruel Nazi net; he becomes the larger symbol of man victimized by evil:

And the little man – he, too, paused once from his feverish effort to explain. As the car in which he had been riding slid by, he lifted his pasty face and terror-stricken eyes, and for a moment his lips were stilled of their anxious pleading. He looked once, directly and steadfastly, at his former companions, and they at him. And in that gaze there was all the unmeasured weight of man's mortal anguish. George and the others felt somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow guilty. They all felt that they were saying farewell, not to a man, but to humanity; not to some pathetic stranger, some chance acquaintance of the voyage, but to mankind; not to some nameless cipher out of life, but to the fading image of a brother's face.

The train swept out and gathered speed – and so they lost him. (1940: 540)

In *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), Foxhall Edwards reads in the newspaper that an unknown person has leaped to death from the Admiral

Drake Hotel. Wolfe presents a realistic description of this gruesome suicide that exposes the hollowness of passers-by. Not one person is sympathetic towards C. Green, who jumped to death from a high-rise. No one tries to understand the frustration and alienation behind his desperate action.

So here Green lies, on the concrete sidewalk all disjuncted. No head is left, the head is gone now, head's exploded; only brains are left. The brains are pink, and almost bloodless ... a few fragments of the skull are scattered round – but of the face, the features, forehead – nothing! They have all been blown *out*, as by some inner explosion. (1940: 366)

C. Green is accused of lack of consideration for others. People vie with each other in giving a more startling eye-witness account of the suicide jump. Wolfe notes that C. Green, in the end, has succeeded in acquiring special status from being “life’s nameless cipher” (1940: 363), to a real “man” who at least for once has taken decisive action and done something different from the mundane. Green liked the news and now, becomes a bit of news himself: nine lines of print in *Times*.

A war time sketch – “The Face of War” presents vignettes of social life of which a scene in a “house of pleasure” (1987: 232) frequented by

soldiers arrests attention in its ambiguity and ambivalence. Contrasted to ribaldry and bawdy activity, a tall and slender young prostitute “lay extended at full length on the untidy bed, with one arm thrust out in a gesture of complete exhaustion” (1987: 235). Discovering Margaret in this condition, the harsh, rasping voice of another woman, Fay, instantly becomes low and tender and bedewed with womanly sympathy. As Margaret regains control, the young man accompanying Fay recognizes Margaret as a decent girl from Pulpit Hill who had disappeared two years ago. She enquires after her people, and “as she spoke, she put her slender hand lightly on his arm, with the swift, unconscious tenderness of people in a world of strangers who suddenly meet someone they know from home.” (1987: 236)

“Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time” (1987) describes a parting scene between a husband and wife, and the subsequent death of the husband on a train as witnessed by a young fellow-passenger. The parting scene is full of tenderness and love, and the wife, young and vivacious, tearfully bids her old and decaying husband farewell. The young co-passenger of the husband, however, happens to witness another scene as

the train moves away: a young man approaches the wife on the platform, and they are locked in a passionate embrace. The young co-passenger is not sure whether the husband, too, has witnessed the scene. Further into the journey, the spectre-like old man dies silently.

The husband's silent end jars the reader, particularly after the wife's double role on the platform. But Wolfe's ambivalent attitude leaves enough room for sympathy for the young wife, who deserves better than her lot, and has a right to life.

Eugene's experiences in Professor Hatcher's celebrated course for would-be dramatists is a scalding depiction of falseness, triviality and aping of fashions. Their jargon formed a pattern by which they could be recognized:

“Barrie?” began Mr. Scoville, an elegant and wealthy young dawdler ... “Barrie?” he continued regretfully, in answer to a question. For a moment, he drew deeply on his cigarette, then raised sad, languid eyes. “I’m sorry”, he said gently, with a slight regretful movement of his head – “I can’t read him. I’ve tried it – but it simply can’t be done.” They laughed, greatly pleased. (1935: 114)

In Hatcher's class, the manner counted for wit. They felt that Galsworthy wrote something that looked like a play once, and Shaw might have made a dramatist if he had ever known anything about writing a play.

Professor Hatcher impressed his students by an urbane worldliness, regaling them with gay anecdotes about famous persons he had known and with whom he was on familiar terms – told always casually, apropos of some discussion:

The last time I was in London, Pinero and I were having lunch together one day at the Savoy. (1935: 133)

His students thus developed into “disloyal apes of fashion and the arts” (1935: 135), having nothing but a feeling of amused superiority at such posturings. Wolfe comments:

False, trivial, glib, dishonest, empty, without substance, lacking faith – is it any wonder that among Professor Hatcher's young men few birds sang? (1935: 135)

The multifarious facets of society attracted Wolfe in their diversity. His keen sensibility took note of aspects of human behaviour and transmuted them into art. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene notes the false show of grief at the funeral of Ben, and the hurry to escape. The mourning women

“wept behind their heavy veils, and looked to see if the town was watching.” (1929: 480)

The women moaned loudly when they saw the raw open ditch ... The sobs of the women rose to sharp screams as the coffin slid down upon the bands into the earth ... Then the mourners got back into their carriages and were driven briskly away. There was a fast indecent hurry about their escape. (1929: 480)

Later, in the chilly October dusk, only Eugene and Mrs. Pert are at Ben’s grave. Mrs. Pert muses: “Old Ben will turn into lovely flowers. Roses. I think.” (1929: 484)

After Ben’s death, Gant is on his death-bed. In anticipation of his property, his son Luke and son-in-law Hugh plot to disinherit Eugene because he had received money in excess of what others had ever had. They want Eugene to sign a document: “It’s a release” (1929: 511) says Luke. This haggling for the property of a man not yet dead and the unfair intention to deprive him infuriate Eugene into signing it: “That’s my release, not yours.” (1929: 511)

During Gant’s life-time, he had been a furious drinker, and alcohol was the root cause of his cleavage with Eliza. But when Libya Hill went to

polls on becoming “dry”, Gant marched up with the white silk scrap for teetotalers! He declared “With far-seeing statesmanship” –

“Licker”, he said, “is a curse and a care. It has caused the sufferings of untold millions –” ...

– it has brought poverty, disease, and suffering to hundreds of thousands of homes, broken the hearts of wives and mothers, and taken bread from the mouths of little orphaned children. (1929: 235)

To this ludicrously hypocritical oratory, Major Nethersole of the “wet” battalion responds: “Go on, W.O., but for God’s sake, don’t belch!” (1929: 235).

In *You Can’t Go Home Again*, Wolfe presents the society of New York which hankered for the company of successful artists. George Webber is lionized by many after his first book gets published. These are the “lion hunters” –

They are a peculiar race of people who inhabit the upper jungles of Cosmopolis and subsist entirely on some rarefied and ambrosial ectoplasm that seems to emanate from the arts. They love art dearly – in fact, they dote on it – and they love the artists even more. So they spend their whole lives running after them, and their favourite sport is trapping literary lions. (1940: 266)

Wolfe could critically appraise as well as enjoy flashes of social life. In “The World that Jack Built” (*You Can’t Go Home Again*, 1940), Esther Jack admires herself in front of a mirror in the privacy of her bedroom:

She lifted her arm again and with hand extended, the other hand upon her hip, she turned about once more in her orbit of self-worship. Slowly she turned, still rapt in contemplation of her loveliness, then she gasped suddenly with surprise and fright, and uttered a little scream. Her hand flew to her throat in a gesture of alarm as she realized that she was not alone and, looking up, saw her daughter standing there. (1940: 181)

The daughter had caught the mother in the act. The mother went crimson with guilt, while the daughter luxuriated in the irony of mirth. “Then something quick and instant passed between them in their glance” – and they shook with helpless laughter. There was nothing more to say: “Thus was enacted the whole tremendous comedy of womankind. No words were needed.” (1940: 181)

In the selective instances discussed in this section, we find Wolfe having a keen sense of observation of the society around him. There are strikingly realistic and sensitive presentations of social life. As a social critic, Wolfe exposes callousness, hard heartedness, materialistic greed, hypocrisy and social imbalances and racial prejudice. However, he is

undoubtedly post-modern in his attitude of plural possibilities. The life of the city fascinated him, and fascinates us through his writings, forcing us to see all that we usually overlook, be it through the various associations of death, or adulterous love strangely culminating in death and release, as in "Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time"; social hypocrisy draws flak from Wolfe, yet he is human enough to enjoy the humour in the scandal connecting a respectable middle-aged Church officer to a young actress. Similarly, the young wife in "Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time" is presented so ambivalently that while we criticize her union with her lover the moment after she bids her ageing and decaying husband a tearful farewell, we cannot help feeling sympathetic for her when she gains a young and handsome lover. Wolfe never takes sides, but leaves situations open-ended. This is the peculiar attraction of Wolfe. He justifies animal rivalry and animal justice, while accepting the unfair encroachment of society with reservations. While Wolfe in no way condones the killings by the Negro Dick in "The Child by Tiger", he also does not justify the man-hunt launched against him by the Whites, and remembers the gentleness of Dick in dealing with children. Similarly, Wolfe's attitude towards Jews is

ambivalent. Social behaviour leading to alienation is variously treated and his fictions present society in its myriad interactions, which are stamped by Wolfean humanism and ambivalence.

NATION

This section brings into focus those writings of Wolfe where a national vision is apparent. Wolfe's dream was to record the American experience in its entirety, where the self and the social world could be merged in an expression of a racial idealism. There are instances where his sentiments are directly national, be it nationalistic pride, or the collective experience of a national movement or a criticism of national tendencies. When Walt Whitman said that he sings for America in *The Leaves of Grass*, it was an attempt to subsume all linguistic, racial and cultural differences within America. In Wolfe's case, it is a dream rising above closures or levels of differences. He visualized himself as a representative writer of the American people, and this feeling of responsibility has been part of his authorial mission.

A Prologue to America (1987) depicts the indecision and vacuity that affect modern life in America. People are dazzled by the glitter, but Wolfe implies, it is empty of worth on value. Wolfe has placed opposites together-indecision, poverty, joblessness, lawlessness, cruelty, human indifference vis-à-vis fashion, pomp, luxury, foreign trips, gossip, etc. – all which go together to indicate a deterioration of moral standards. This is not the America of Wolfe's dreams, but the reality he is forced to acknowledge and vent his criticism upon.

Polyphemus (1987) is a highly inspired critical piece recording the pillage of adventurers and fortune-seekers like the Spaniard, who found no gold and emeralds as fabled. He was one-eyed, and could not discover the real wealth of America – her natural wealth and wonders.

Wolfe's biting satire in the story "On Leprechauns" points at the American attitude towards young and aspiring native writers. Obviously, his own bitter struggle to establish himself as a writer is reflected here. In contrast, the warmth and patronage extended to Irish writers, a veiled reference to foreign writers in general, draws Wolfe's ire.

The Names of the Nation (1987) is an inspired patriotic outburst in vindication of nationalistic pride. In response to the sneer of some British and French writers, the speaker gradually compares and contrasts the people, the names of places, the mighty rivers, etc., to demonstrate the superiority of America.

The Plumed Knight (1987) records the transformation of Theodore Joyner, who failed at everything, into Colonel Joyner, an honoured, grizzled specimen of the Confederacy. Joyner, facing failure after failure, started a military academy, for he had nothing better to do. The outbreak of the Civil War saw Joyner marching out at the head of his students. Defeat and return followed. But strangely, Joyner rapidly became the stock type of the Southern Colonel – a plumed knight. The more he imagined himself to be so, the more he looked the part – the grizzled warrior with a mane of graying hair, vaunting war-like epithets. He became a symbol – a romantic embodiment of the spirit of the South. It seemed to him in some strange and transcendental way that the South had been gloriously triumphant even in defeat, and that he himself was instrumental in

bringing about this transcendental victory. Under its soothing spell, the South turned away from harsh realities, and escaped into the soft dream of vanished, imagined glories that had never been.

The North-South divide is a historical truth which Wolfe never tried to camouflage. He always felt that the South was the romantic land of his dreams, and the North promoted Yankee materialism. But the North was the hub of social, political, cultural and literary activity, and it was the North that accorded him literary acclaim, while his own South flooded him with threats and hate-mail after publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929).

The existence of a schism, but a gradual smothering of contradictions to a condition of acceptable America within a broad framework finds literary expression in Wolfe's fiction.

The Dark Messiah (1987) is almost the same as *The Spanish Letter* (1987), where Wolfe witnesses the brutality and repression of Fascism with the horror of an American. Wolfe's fascination for Germany was rudely shaken on his second visit in 1936. The order and discipline in

organizing the Olympic Games astounded him. But he realized gradually that the Games were a means of demonstrating to the world the collective might of the Germans. The protagonist George Webber did not see any of the ugly things whispered about. He did not see anyone beaten, imprisoned, or put to death. He saw neither any concentration camp, nor the physical manifestations of a brutal and compulsive force. But very gradually, George starts sensing that all this was an appearance. The arrest of the Jew “Old Fuss-and-Fidget” (1940: 538) has already been mentioned in the section “Society”; “One Big Fool” depicts the plight of Heilig, a renowned librarian in Berlin, being harassed by the police. He must prove that he is Aryan and no Jew. And Heilig faced severe moral hesitation:

“Gott! She is such a fool! Zis poor lady”, he said, a trifle contemptuously, “luffed my fazzer very much – so much, in fact, zat she did not go to ze trouble to marry him. So zese people come and ask me all zese questions, and say, “Vhere is your fazzer!” And of gourse I cannot tell zem. Because, alas, my dear old shap, I am zis bastard.” (1940: 499)

So Heilig may lose his prestigious job. He may lose his girl. He may be killed:

All ze Chews haf been taken from zier vork, zey haf nozzing to do any more. Zese people come around – some stupid

people in zeir uniform ... and zey say zat everyone must be
an Aryan man – (1940: 498)

The reality was that the entire nation was infested with the contagion of ever-present fear – as if a paralysis had twisted and blighted all human relations, an infamous compulsion had silenced the whole people into a sweltering and malignant secrecy.

In America, all is not well as it appears. Racial discrimination existed on the lines of colour discrimination. Wolfe was vociferous about the plight of the Negro, particularly in the South. Wolfe was well aware that the Negro constituted about one-third of the population of his native state. He was also conscious of the fact that one-third of the American people were disfranchised because they were black. They were also denied of the opportunity for higher education. Wolfe's criticism of the violation of the Negro's civil rights is found in the context of a larger indictment of Pine Rock College:

In fact, inspite of all this high-sounding talk about 'service', 'ideals of leadership', and 'democracy', one could not see that it made much actual difference in the way things were. Children still worked fourteen hours a day in the cotton mills of the state. Tens of thousands of men and women and children were born, suffered, lived, and died in damnable

poverty, bondage, and the exploitation of the tenant farm. One million black inhabitants of the state, about a third of the entire population, were still denied the rights of free suffrage ...One million black inhabitants of the state were denied the right to the blessings of the higher education. (in Reeves, 1968: 25)

Beside his remarks about disenfranchisement and denial of opportunity for highest education, there is no other evidence that Wolfe had in mind institutional change; he was not a reformer like George W. Cable. Perhaps this is only a manifestation of Wolfe's humanitarianism, a desire for more humane treatment of all the oppressed – the Negro in the South or the Jew in Germany. Wolfe recognized something amiss in the total pattern of mankind and made a protest against discrimination and maltreatment which was growing more and more visible at the time of his death.

In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe expresses what to him is "The Promise of America". It depicts his nationalistic pride. He feels that it is only in America that one can achieve anything – for the nation as a whole is full of potentiality and the desire for progress: ... "You will find us burning in the night." (1940: 392)

Here, as you pass through the brutal sprawl, the twenty miles of rails and rickets, of the South Chicago slums – here, in an

unpainted shack, is a Negro boy, and seeker, he is burning in the night. Behind him is a memory of the cotton fields, the flat and mournful pineland barrens of the lost and buried South, and at the fringes of the pine another nigger shack with mammy and eleven little niggers. Farther still behind, the slave-driver's whip the slave ship, and, far off, the jungle dirge of Africa. And before him, what? A roped-in ring, a blaze of lights, across from him a white champion; the bell, the opening, and all around the vast sea-roaring of the crowd. Then the lightning feint and stroke, the black panther's paw – the hot rotating presses, and the rivers of sheeted print! O seeker, where is the slave ship now? (1940: 392)

In the America of Wolfe's desire, the Negro, the Cherokee, the Jew – all get enough opportunity to actualize their ambition and blaze across the darkness of the world. America is a blazing torch to the world, where democracy and equality have offered equal rights to all:

... to every man his chance – to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity – to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combined to make him – this, seeker, is the promise of America. (1940: 393)

In the fictional works discussed above, Wolfe's sentiments are not always of pride and appreciation. Some are critical of the American attitude, implying that Wolfe would rather have it otherwise. He is proud of America's wealth – be it natural or spiritual. He is proud of the beauty

of America, and refers with caustic criticism to the looting of America by outside settlers. However, deterioration in moral values and human standards pain him, as does the attitude of adulating foreign writers to the exclusion of native ones. His horror at the suppression of people in Nazi Germany comes out, the critical attitude implying the admiration and pride he feels for American democracy. Taken as a whole, these stories reflect the illusory image of America in Wolfe's wish-fulfilment dream.

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Chapter-V

RHETORIC OF AMBIVALENCE

An attempt is made in the present chapter to explore the context of rhetoric and ambivalence and their interrelationship. As there cannot be any final statement regarding either ambivalence or rhetoric, the study has attempted to trace the history and meaning of rhetoric and ambivalence, and to observe the issue from psycho-analytic, Derridean and post-modern perspectives, contextualizing readings of self, subjectivity and articulations in narrative discourse.

According to the *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol.15, 1980), *rhetoric* has been traditionally applied to the principles of training communicators – those seeking to persuade or inform others. In the twentieth century it has undergone a shift of emphasis from the speaker or writer to the auditor or reader.

From the traditional point of view, *rhetoric* might be limited to the insights/terms developed by rhetors/rhetoricians in the classical period in ancient Greece, about 5 century B.C., to teach the art of public speaking to their fellow citizens in Greek republics, later to children of the wealthy in

the Roman empire. Because some sort of public performance was regarded as the highest reach of education proper, *rhetoric* as a discipline or as a principle of pedagogy and learning was at the center of the educational process in Western Europe for 2000 years – well into the nineteenth century. *Institutio oratoria* (before AD 96; “The Training of an Orator”) by ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian – was a book on rhetoric. In the present day emphasis has changed from creative instruction to effective communication in the form of writing/narrative.

In a general sense, *rhetoric* can be described as the study of language in its practical uses, focussing on the effects of language, especially persuasion, in order to achieve desired effects on readers. From Aristotle to post-structuralism, ‘rhetoric’ as the means of communication has undergone radical changes in meaning and function. In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined rhetorical discourse as the act of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case, and focused on the means and devices that an orator uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on an audience that will persuade them to accede to his point of view. Most of the later rhetoricians of classical era concurred

in the view that rhetoric concerns the principles of that type of discourse whose chief aim is to persuade an audience to think or act in a particular way.

A rhetorical approach to literature is a highly traditional approach to texts. The great classical critics – Aristotle and Longinus were rhetorically oriented. There were great practitioners, like Cicero and St. Augustine who further developed on the theory of rhetoric. According to Cicero, rhetoric developed out of the need for complicated arguments concerning restoration of property to uncertain rightful owners after the expulsion of tyrants from Sicily. It was then a necessary and practical art, and so it remains at core.

Rhetoric has from the beginning been looked upon as an instrument of dubious morality. The earliest rhetorician on record, Corax of Sicily, failed in a political career and therefore turned to teaching rhetoric. His pupil Tisias sought to evade paying tuition fee, and argued in court that he owed nothing because if Corax had indeed taught him the art of persuasion as agreed, he could persuade the jury to let him off paying; if he could not persuade them, Corax had not performed his part of the contract and did

not deserve to be paid. To this Corax replied, "If you do persuade the jury, I have taught you the art and you owe me the fee; if you do not persuade them, they will order you to pay the fee" (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 1). Invoking the proverbial wisdom that bad eggs come from bad birds, the jury contemptuously dismissed the case.

Rhetoric has since often been dismissed as sophistical machinery for making the worse appear the better reason, or as an empty parcel of words artfully ornamented but signifying nothing. Usually it is the other party's proposal that is denounced as 'mere rhetoric'; one's own is a statesmanlike response to the situation. If a politician advocates some particular course of action, he is likely to proclaim self-righteously that 'the time for rhetoric is past'.

Thus rhetoric has a long history of being sneered at and distrusted, as concerned with the specious rather than the true, style rather than substance, words rather than deeds. Even Plato in his *Gorgias* called it a *mere knack* (although he thought more highly of it in the *Phaedrus*), and the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (once ascribed to Aristotle) defined rhetoric as the art of cheating. Rhetoricians were sometimes associated with

Sophists and held to be dangerous to the State; in the second century BC the Greek practitioners of rhetoric in Rome were exiled by a decree. Centuries later John Locke thought of rhetoric as “that powerful instrument of error and deceit” (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 2) and Yeats remarked that “sentimentality is deceiving one’s self; rhetoric is deceiving other people” (*Ibid.* 2). Today many editorials condemn the hollow-rhetoric of the over-thirty generation and, like Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*, activists often go away declaring themselves convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences.

Despite this history of suspicion and contempt, rhetoric has survived and flourished. Aristotle produced a *Rhetoric* as the counterpart of logic and begins with the inescapable point that must ultimately justify rhetoric: *all men in some way use rhetoric*. Aristotle’s work became the basis of studies by Cicero, Quintilian and Erasmus, and the root of rhetoric’s honourable place in the *Trivium*, the foundation of medieval education, composed of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. St. Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric; William of Auvergne wrote a *Rhetorica divina* that offered to

teach men the art of persuading God to forgive their sins. Renaissance schoolboys read Cicero's *Orator* and Quintilian's *Institutes* and Erasmus' *Copia*. Notable among derivative vernacular manuals of rhetoric are Leonard Cox's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1524) and Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetorique* (1550). John Prideaux, a Churchman, produced in 1659 *Sacred Eloquence: or, the Art of Rhetoric as It Is Laid Down in the Scriptures*. In the eighteenth century Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* and Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Letters* are notable, as is Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* in the nineteenth. Much of the earlier rhetorical energies were devoted to analyses of style and delivery. In the last decades there has been a resurgence of vitality in the field of rhetoric. Not only have critics like W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Wayne Booth applied rhetoric to literary criticism, and Edward Corbett and Dudley Bailey revived an interest in classical rhetoric, but pioneers like I.A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, and Francis Christensen have tried to develop a "new rhetoric". All the while, of course, even those who condemned rhetoric as deception or evasion have been indulging in their own brands. Modern activists who insist on "telling it like it is" are using rhetorical persuasion in street oratory and the underground. More than

that, the law's recognition of verbal assault emphasizes the fact that rhetoric is not just escape from action – it can *be* action.

Over the ages, the definition of Rhetoric has both widened and narrowed. For Corax and his contemporaries it was the practical power of persuasion. Aristotle elevated it to the theoretical realm by defining it as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion under all sorts of circumstances, aimed at persuading hearers that something is expedient or inexpedient, just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable. Therefore, Aristotle would have the speaker know something about human character, human emotions, and the rules of dialectic. Rhetoric, Aristotle thinks, ought to be used to defend truth and justice, but it can be employed on the other side by the skillful speaker.

Aristotle's criteria for style were clarity and propriety. Cicero added ornament, and the point is often made that each style is appropriate to special situations – as Quintilian put it. Gradually rhetoric acquired its alternative meaning of stylistic ornamentation, in the context of a less vigorous and democratic age, when rhetoric was no longer so central to the life of the city but more related to the artifices of the schools. Dubley

Fenners' *Artes of Logike and Rhetoricke* (1584) calls rhetoric the "arte of speaking finely" and divides it into "garnishing of speech" and "garnishing of the manner of utterance." (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 4)

Invention, arrangement, style and delivery were the generally recognized branches of rhetoric in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The rising scientific spirit wanted either no rhetoric at all or a rhetoric of perspicuity. The Enlightenment, while upholding reason and clarity, also rediscovered Longinus and the sublime of thought and style. John Holmes represents a school of rhetoricians who meant by rhetoric the art of the moving figure, polished inflection, and forceful gesture. Some of them reduced their discipline to elocution.

By another of the directions of the eighteenth century, Locke contended that man could know only what had come to him through his senses. This led to a rhetoric built on the psychology of the day: Associationism. George Campbell in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) attempted to provide a tolerable sketch of the human mind and from the science of human nature try to ascertain with greater precision, the radical principles of that art, whose object it is, by the use of language, to operate

on the soul of the hearer, in the way of informing, convincing, pleasing, moving or persuading.

The importance of persuasion has remained central among English rhetoricians, whether their concern is the most pleasing flourishes of style, as with elocutionists, or the arguments best calculated to exploit the patterns of the human mind, as with the psychologists.

Kenneth Burke, the most original modern explorer of the 'new rhetoric', defines rhetorical language as "inducement to action" (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 7) and studies the means of identification or con-substantiation that permits successful persuasion. As he puts it in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) – "You persuade a man only in so far as you can talk his language by speech, gestures, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his." (Burke, 1950: 55; quoted in Jordan, 1971: 7)

Are all means of persuasion rhetorical? Bribery? Blackmail? Crossing the right palms in an appropriate manner can be a most efficient inducement to action. And how about force? Does rhetoric come out of the barrel of a gun? Slang suggests as much in calling a pistol a "persuader".

What of subtle means of persuasion, including treating a client to a good dinner or plying a girl with flowers? Perhaps the colouring of blossoms to attract birds and insects for purposes of pollination might be called nature's rhetoric. None of these means, crude or delicate, is likely to be recognized as rhetoric unless it lends itself to a stylized form of communication.

I.A. Richards takes a semantic approach to rhetoric, asserting that it is or should be "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (1936: 9) and argues that "the whole business of Rhetoric comes down to comparisons between the meanings of words." (1936: 37)

Henry James maintains that to make the imagined picture of reality glow with more than a dim light, requires the artist's finest compositional powers. And, since any sense of composition or selection falsifies life, all fiction requires an elaborate rhetoric of dissimulation. His talk about rhetoric is mostly about how to increase in each work the reader's pleasure derived from qualities sought equally in all his works.

Wayne Booth addresses the question whether rhetoric is compatible with art. In treating technique as rhetoric, he seems to have reduced the

free and inexplicable processes of the creative imagination to the crafty calculations of commercial entertainers. The whole question of the difference between artists who consciously calculate and artists who simply express themselves with no thought of affecting the reader is an important one, but it must be kept separate from the question of whether an author's work, regardless of its source, communicates itself.

Booth observes that all of the clichés about the natural object being self-sufficient are at best half-truths. Though some characters and events may speak for themselves their artistic message to the reader, and thus carry in a weak form their own rhetoric; none will do so with proper clarity and force until the author brings all his powers to bear on the problem of making the reader see what they really are. The author cannot choose whether to use rhetorical heightening. His only choice is of the kind of rhetoric he will use.

Donald C. Bryant was assigned the task of surveying "Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope" for the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1953. He defined it as "the rationale of informative and suatory discourse" (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 8). His overall view of rhetoric is in the Aristotelian

tradition, taking on the substantive role of invention and psychological inclusions:

So far as it is concerned with the management of discourse in specific situations for practical purposes, it is an instrumental discipline. It is a literary study, involving linguistics, critical theory, and semantics as it touches the art of informing ideas, and the functioning of language. It is a philosophical study so far as it is concerned with a method of investigation or inquiry. And finally, as it is akin to politics, drawing upon psychology and sociology, rhetoric is a social study of a major force in the behaviour of men in society (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 9).

This is rhetoric at its most comprehensive. Recently, Francis Christensen has been developing a *generative rhetoric* adapted from generative grammar, which uses the principles of addition, direction, level of generality, and texture in a pragmatic investigation of something like the ancient concept of amplification. Similarly, Richard E. Young and Alton L. Becker have drawn upon theories of tagmemic grammar in their article/works "Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Contribution". Agreeing with Burke that rhetoric aims at identification with the reader, they suggest the writer use internal discovery patterns analyzable into particles, waves and fields.

Thus rhetoric renews itself in various ways. It has meant and continues to mean many things to many people. Its history has been sometimes the story of the human search for truth and meaning sometimes in the form of the effort to mislead and manipulate. Always it has been concerned with man and his relations to his fellows. Plain or ornate, it is a humane discipline.

Edward P.J. Corbett comments:

...rhetorical criticism is that mode of internal criticism which considers the interactions between the work, the author, and the audience. As such, it is interested in the *product*, the *process*, and the *effect* of linguistic activity, whether of the imaginative kind or the utilitarian kind. When rhetorical criticism is applied to imaginative literature, it regards the work not so much as an object of aesthetic contemplation but as an artistically structured instrument for communication. It is more interested in a literary work for what it does than for what it is [quoted in Guerin & others (ed.), 1999: 320].

While dealing with the work itself (hence, “internal”), rhetorical criticism considers external factors in so far as it “uses the text for its ‘readings’ about the author and the audience. Particularly important is the effect of the work on its audience (what it does). This is not surprising, in that the original emphasis on rhetoric was on persuasion and for that we go back to the classical Greeks.

As a matter of fact, literary criticism itself really had some of its beginnings in rhetorical analysis, for our early critics – Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Horace were devoted students, indeed formulators, of rhetoric. As late as the eighteenth century, rhetorical considerations played an important role in criticism, for learned men and women still knew and practised formal rhetoric. Today much of the criticism of Medieval, Renaissance and Neoclassical English and Continental literature can still profitably explore rhetorical strategies. Recently, however, the conscious and often impressive efforts to realize once again the advantages of rhetorical analyses of literature have not been limited to such earlier works. Today's new rhetoric may be expressed either in terms of classical rhetoric or through the insights gained in practical rhetoric without the use of Greek and Latin terms. Creative writers may address themselves to the 'audience', while 'arranging' their 'argument' and working within a 'style', without realizing that these are parts of traditional concerns of rhetoricians.

A rhetorical approach helps us to stay inside the work, although we may go outside it for terms and naming strategies, being always aware that

the original author was a person who chose between available options. In this methodology, then, rhetorical analysis, on the one hand, is similar to and supportive of the formalistic approach, but, on the other, may go beyond it. Among the questions raised by the rhetorical approach are: What can we know of the speaker or narrator? To whom is he or she allegedly speaking? What is the nature of that addressee, that audience? What setting is established or implied? How are we asked to respond to the situation created? Are we being asked to make a distinction between the ethos (the ethical stance) of the author and the statements of the central character (for example, a distinction between the comprehensive view of Mark Twain and the limited view of Huckleberry Finn?). As persuasive discourse, the rhetoric of a literary work requires or invites the reader to participate in an imagined experience. The awareness of rhetorical features and structures of words tells us a great deal about the author and the created voice. Our response to manipulated language tells us even more about the meaning of the work and quite a bit about ourselves as registers of meaning.

Rhetorical ambivalence in the works of Thomas Clayton Wolfe is self-evident. It is a statement of his attitude to life which was all-inclusive. He wanted to project a totality of experience in his works. But the method he adopted of juxtaposing opposites is very much rooted in a projection of paradoxical self-awareness.

Wolfe's attempt closely resembles what Virginia Woolf advocated:

The novel should not imitate objective life by means of a plot, but should present the "luminous halo" or "semi transparent envelope" of consciousness, the unsequential and perhaps irrational form in which life is really experienced (Quoted in Ellmann and Fiedelson, ed., 1965: 12-13)

The dominant themes in Wolfe's writing, as discussed in Chapter III are alienation, time and death. He himself claimed that his works are autobiographical. And his declared intention was to present a national consciousness to establish an American identity. His romantic temperament was in striking contrast to his penchant for social criticism. Likewise, his lyrical exuberance ran counter to his acute realistic observation. Though the desire for unity and synthesis of the multiple worlds is an awareness in Wolfe, a careful study of his works reveals that a sense of ambivalence is evident in most of his works, while he tries to

solve the insoluble contradictions and paradoxes of life by embracing and devouring all experience available.

In his magisterial observation, Ezra Pound maintains that “good writing” should be “perfectly controlled” in which the writer says “just what he means” (1968: 5-6). Eliot profoundly echoes Pound when he discovers lack of integration between the theme and style in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* stating that the protagonist lacks “objective correlative” (1966: 101). Both Eliot and Pound favour classical order and precision in style. They were critical of and opposed to what Pound calls the “blurry” and “messy” style of romantics. As Susan Langer puts it: “The primary function of art is to objectify feeling” (quoted in Selden, 1988: 317). So it all depends on the choice of language that carries the weight of the feeling. If language is used to express/objectify feeling, it also reveals the person’s character whose feeling(s) it expresses or gives shape to. In this sense, the saying that “style is the man” becomes very significant. It points at both the nature of the artist, his psychic make up and his ability to handle language.

Walter Pater, in his famous essay on “style”, while discussing various aspects of style and comparing the stylistic differences of creative writers, implies that man is the marker of his style. In appreciating Flaubert’s style of writing excellent letters, he discovers one Madame X who, in fact, was the source of his inspiration. It is, therefore, understood that style reveals the man, his personality, and his artistic convictions. In his words:

In this way, according to the well known saying “Style is the man”, complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things, the purity of this medium, its laws and tricks of refraction, nothing is to be left there which might give conveyance to any matter save that. (1967: 24)

The romantics, with their natural contempt for anything prescriptive argue that the orator or his literary counterpart lack *sincerity* for their discourse is tutored by prescriptions and norms. The romantic poets stake claims to *originality* for abandoning all rhetorical conventions and speaking out from the heart. Twentieth century criticism has often abandoned this romantic faith in hoping for a possibility of *authentic* and *original* utterance.

From the Freudian revisionist *Lacan* comes the notion of the Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which the child has not yet differentiated himself/herself from the mother and has accordingly not yet learned language. The Oedipal crisis marks the entrance of the child into a world of symbolic order (language) in which everything is separate, including conscious and unconscious, self and other, words and actions. This transition also marks entry into a world ruled by the “Law of the Father” where “isms” or rules confine us; Lacan calls it the phallo-centric or phallogo-centric universe (by which he connects maleness to the power of the word he believes men control – “phallus” and “logos”). The Imaginary is the realm of the feminine and the vital source of language that will later be tamed and codified by the laws of the father.

Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language; like language its power arises from the sense of openness and play of meaning. When we read language we may identify gaps in what is signified as evidence of the unconscious, for language is a mixture of fixed meanings and metaphors.

The Bakhtin School is concerned with language or discourse as a social phenomenon. Voloshinov maintains that words are active, dynamic social signs, capable of taking on different meanings and connotations for different social classes in different social and historical situations. The Bakhtin School considers verbal signs as an arena of continuous class struggle. Every speech act is an implicit acknowledgement of its situatedness, its conflicted or co-operative production. Every instance of speech is always inherently reflexive, social and meta communicative.

Roman Jakobson's study of "aphasia" (speech defect) and its implications for poetics provide the practical critic with a fertile ground for interpretative applications. A given sentence may be viewed either vertically or horizontally. Each element is *selected* from a set of possible elements and could be substituted for another in the set. The elements are combined in a sequence, which constitutes a parole. This distinction applies at the levels of phoneme, morpheme, word and sentence. Jakobson noticed that aphasic children appeared to lose the ability to operate on one or other of these dimensions. 'Contiguity disorder' results in substitution in the vertical dimension as in metaphor, while 'similarity disorder' results

in the production of parts of sentences for the wholes as in metonymy. Jakobson suggested that normal speech behaviour also tends towards one or other extreme, and that literary style expresses itself as a leaning towards either the metaphoric or the metonymic. The historical development from romanticism through realism to symbolism can be understood as an alternation of style from the metaphoric to the metonymic back to the metaphoric. David Lodge applied the theory to modern literature, adding further stages to a cyclical process: modernism and symbolism are essentially metaphoric, while anti-modernism is realistic and metonymic.

Deconstruction arises out of the structuralism of Roland Barthes as a reaction against the certainties of structuralism. Like structuralism, deconstruction identifies textual features but, unlike structuralism, concentrates on the rhetorical rather than the grammatical. Whereas structuralism finds order and meaning in the text as in the sentence, deconstruction finds disorder and a constant tendency of the language to refute its apparent sense. Hence, the name of the approach: texts are found to deconstruct themselves rather than to provide a stable identifiable

meaning. Deconstruction views texts as subversively undermining an apparent or surface meaning, and it denies any final explication or statement of meaning. It questions the presence of any objective structure or content in a text. Instead of alarm or dismay at their discoveries, the practitioners of deconstruction celebrate the text's self-destruction, that inevitable seed of its own internal contradiction, as a never-ending free play of language. Instead of discovering one ultimate meaning for the text, as formalism seems to promise, deconstruction describes the text as always in a state of change, furnishing only provisional meanings. All texts are thus open-ended constructs, and sign and signification are only arbitrary relationships. Meaning can only point to an indefinite number of other meanings. Thus deconstruction involves taking apart any meaning to reveal contradictory structures hidden within. Neither meaning nor the text that seeks to express it has any privilege over the other, and this extends to critical statements about the text. When deconstruction denies connections of mind, textual meaning, and mythological approach, it represents for structuralists only nihilism and anarchy.

Deconstruction opposes logo-centricism, the notion that written language contains a self-evident meaning that points to an unchanging meaning authenticated by the whole of western tradition. It would demythologize literature and thus remove the privilege it has enjoyed in academe. In deconstruction, knowledge is viewed as embedded in texts, not authenticated within some intellectual discipline. Since meaning in language shifts and remains indeterminate, deconstructionists argue that all forms of institutional authority shift in like manner. Since there is no possibility of absolute truth, deconstructionists seek to undermine all pretensions to authority, or power systems, in language.

The most important figure in deconstruction – Derrida claimed that the western tradition of thought repressed meaning by repressing the limitless vitality of language and by moving some thought to the margin. Yet while Derrida argued to subvert the dominant western mind set, he also recognized that there is no privileged position outside the instabilities of language from which to attack. Thus, deconstruction deconstructs itself; in a self-contradictory effort, it manages to leave things the way they were,

the only difference being our expanded consciousness of the inherent play of language-as-thought.

This continual change of perspective is a post-modern condition which foregrounds instabilities of the structure or language system. Language constitutes reality, but the focus is on decentralization. The Self no longer is the center of the system. The Self therefore no longer uses language to express itself. Rather, language speaks through the person. The self becomes the medium of culture and language. This pluralism and heterogeneity, discontinuity and indeterminacy creates split personalities or schizophrenics.

Nietzsche's belief that language is essentially figurative and not referential or expressive was taken up by the key theorists of post-structuralism notably Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White and Paul de Man. There is no original unrhetorical language, discourse is always shaped by 'desire' which is in turn communicated in tropes and figures. Paul de Man develops this argument about rhetoric to its fullest extent. He takes the views that figure of speech (tropes) pervade language exerting a force which destabilizes logic and meaning.

Paul de Man maintains a belief in the referential power of literature – its ability to act in relation to an outside, however unsubstantive that *no thing* may be. Poetic language is in fact defined in terms of action: it is not the eruption of nature into consciousness, or consciousness into language, but a continued attempt to figure a void, rather than face the *nothingness of being*. He asserts that

[p]oetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau's longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. (*Blindness and Insight* quoted in Sim, Stuart, 1995: 99)

His later work, however, engages more fully with contemporary semiotics. It indicates an anxiety of reference, a reluctance to view reference as anything more than a linguistic function, and one amongst many. Grammar, for de Man, operates machine-like, without regard for position or the body, with pathos emerging as a mere effect of language. The creative potential of language which might be made available in what Geimas calls *a zone of entanglement*, or in what Kristeva calls *signifying practice*, is not possible from de Man's point of view because the complicated link between logic and grammar is compromised, finally, by

rhetoric: “considered as persuasion, rhetoric is performative but when considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance” (*Allegories of Reading* quoted in Sim, Stuart, 1995: 99).

De Man’s thinking is everywhere concerned with the question of the status of the self: its complex insinuation into language, and the structure of a knowledge produced and internalized from this desire for a ‘human’ principle of unity. For de Man, criticism has traditionally overlooked the problem of the structure of self-understanding by remaining blind to the absolute gulf between signifier and signified. In “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, a ground-breaking essay written in 1969, de Man mounted a formidable challenge to the mainstream English and American historians of romanticism. Beginning from this insight that there are no necessary link between sound images and concepts – and, indeed, that conceptual categories themselves do not correspond across linguistic and discursive boundaries, that they are especially subject to temporal displacement – he effectively deconstructed the assumptions that lay behind what have been taken as the self-evident constructs of that period. Coleridge’s efforts in theorizing a precise referential relationship between self-consciousness

and nature are seen as having succeeded only retrospectively, since this assumption survives unexamined in modern criticism.

Hence de Man's later work focuses on the materiality and self-reflexivity of language, its repeated attempt to give a shape to a self which culminates in ever more sophisticated figurations standing in place of a failure to do so. Whereas in his earlier work de Man was concerned to undermine the theological impulse behind traditional criticism (a criticism still controlled by romantic mythologizing) by showing how romantic texts indicate a new insight regarding the relationship between consciousness and nature – a relationship defined not by a clear distinction between inside and outside, but by a tension which exists internal to a structure of intentionality – his later work focuses on figures relating to selfhood (prosopopoeia, for example) and how a self is produced by them.

The insight that reconciling the phenomenal and psychic with the world and the word is an inevitable impossibility, yet the ethical necessity of continuing this attempt even despite the knowledge that language will always strive to efface the signs of its failure to achieve such a correspondence, is the driving impulse behind de Man's writing. Reading,

rather than being a journey through the materiality of the letter which at some point produces a flash of insight, a promise of totality in which the meaning of a text is revealed in all its cohesiveness, is in fact, for de Man, the arduous confrontation with aporias, conflicts and contradictions which inevitably *add up to nought*. Thus it can be nothing more than an allegory of the process of signification which stops short of thematic or narrative recovery by dint of constant negation.

Besides the epistemological questions involved in analyzing rhetoric, we must give attention to 'desire' and 'style'. 'Desire' has a deeper implication in creative endeavour and is directly related to the artist's psychic world. Very often an artist attempts to achieve something he possibly cannot because of a tangible incompatibility between his psychic make-up or 'desire' and his ability to express that 'desire' in language. The lives of talented men and women abound in episodes of "filling up" and "breaking through again". This disequilibrium has been assumed to be intrinsic to genius. A successful artist is one who manages to camouflage his personal ambivalence in the form of stylistic flourish. The communication of one's self can become more inhibited where there

is more to communicate; a greater degree of self-revealing is the artist's business in life whether or not he writes in the manner of Joyce or in the manner of Dickens.

Freud emphasizes the unconscious aspects of human psychology. He asserts that most of our actions are motivated by psychological forces over which we have limited control. Freud maintains that the human mind is structured like an iceberg so that its great weight and density lie beneath the surface (i.e. below the level of consciousness). That most of the individual's mental processes are unconscious is thus Freud's first major premise. The second is that all human behaviour is motivated ultimately by what we would call sexuality. Freud designates the prime psychic force as *libido* or sexual energy. His third major premise is that because of the powerful social taboos attached to certain social impulses, many of our desires and memories are repressed (i.e. actively excluded from conscious awareness).

The *Encyclopaedia of Psychology* defines ambivalence as "the existence of two (possibly contradictory) values, goals or directions ... the simultaneous occurrence of two antagonistic emotions" (Vol. 1; 1972: 47-

48). Ambivalence is a poignant and fundamental feature of human nature. It is a truism that ambivalence of thought and emotion on the part of an artist on most occasions bear upon his works. It seems that ambivalence has been Wolfe's second self, a fact which his works reveal in abundance. Wolfe is a dreamer as well as a realist. The enormity of his uncontrolled creative energy makes him a writer, lost in contradictions, projecting paradoxical worlds without being able to harmonize them. It might be that this is the real source of creative art in which the real becomes unreal, fantasy presides over reality and the artistic self becomes multiple selves. In this sense, Wolfe has produced an aesthetics of radical situatedness, which at one level affirms and at another level negates subjectivity. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has the characteristics of a romantic artist who perceived his own self as a product of the available experiences. He thus situates his self in an imminent teleology where mind comes to itself through loss of itself as subjective possession and recovery through being in the world. Thus it is necessary to examine Wolfe's psychological ambivalence which is a product of his turbulent life and which in turn bears upon his works.

Wolfe's works are almost universally recognized to be his own experiences in the world presented under the transparent disguises of his protagonists. As his works have been intensely autobiographical, it may be said that the sense of ambivalence, which has been central to his genius, has been very much a part of his growing up which moulded his psyche. His attachment to his mother, his adoration for, yet hatred towards his father, his mother's rejection of his father, and Wolfe's relationship with others both men and women are psychologically significant. The insecurity during the influential developmental years of childhood and adolescence structured a fractured psyche as discussed in Chapter II. And later on, when he attempted creative activity, he could only produce works of ambivalence. His fixation for contradictions and paradoxes, his tendency to develop intense relationships and quite as suddenly to sever ties, and his dreams of harmony can be directly sourced in his psychology.

Wolfe's works are so paradoxical and ambivalent that they project a multidirectional attitude. This multiplicity of possibilities is a typically post-modern stance, since ambivalence at the rhetorical as well as psychic level deconstruct the apparent significance or surface meaning of the

works. As Beep says (Fadiman, *The Wolfe at the Door* in Holman, 1962: 39): “What is it that we speak so well and cannot know?” – Wolfe might have concurred. There are gaps and silences in the text, which are ambivalent. Articulation and desire often do not go hand in hand.

Wolfe’s ambivalence is probably best demonstrated in his attitude towards the Negro and the Jew. The Negro is invariably a “nigger”, and as discussed in detail in Chapter-IV, a Negro is associated to all things inferior and evil. This sentiment was a part of Wolfe’s growing up in the South of America, and was ingrained in his psychic attitude. Wolfe thus ‘otherizes’ the Negro, who is non-white, has come originally from Africa, lives in ‘nigger town’, etc. Contradicting this attitude, we find Wolfe a champion of the Negro, and vociferous in the unfair deal meted out to him. Wolfe – in a burst of nationalistic pride in the democracy of America, declares: ‘... to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining golden opportunity ... this, seeker, is the promise of America.’ (1987: 483-4)

Remarkably, as in the Dick Prosser episode in *The Web and the Rock*, the Negro is afforded Wolfe’s gargantuan sympathy. Dick was a model servant, meek and amiable to the children. But when he explodes in

wrath, he deals out death indiscriminately. He is both a child and a tiger – as evident from the title “The Child by Tiger”. Yet when the posse of white men butcher Dick, whose ammunition has run out, and display his ‘carcass’ in a shop window, Wolfe’s sympathies are with Dick. Dick is being deprived of the treatment even a dead enemy deserves. His body, referred to as ‘carcass’ attains the status of a slain animal in a *shikar* and people gloatingly point out the holes their bullets made.

“That’s where I got him. Hell, after that he didn’t know what hit him. The son-of-a-bitch was dead before he hit the ground. We all shot him full of holes then We sure did fill him full of lead. Why, hell yes,” he declared positively, with a decisive movement of his head, “We counted upto 287. We must have put 300 holes in him.” (1939: 154)

But while Dick receives Wolfe’s sympathy, he is still the other; for to be sympathetic is to be on a higher position from where one can afford benevolence. And to be sympathetic, is to treat the object of sympathy as the “other”, for one cannot be sympathetic towards oneself. The claims of Wolfe expressing his ‘self’ through his writings come back with an added force.

The Negro gets Wolfe's sympathy in dealing with Judge Bland who mercilessly entraps them in loans for which they have to pay perpetual interest. But the ambivalence comes out in Wolfe's treating of the Negro woman as a sex symbol. Eugene's thoughts as a newspaper route boy reveal this repressed desire for the negro woman: May Corpening. And later, when trying to exact newspaper dues from Ella Corpening, Eugene trembles with desire. Ella, sensuous and knowing, tells him that a "white gent'man" (1929: 252) is going to give her a dollar. Eugene is also white, though he is just a boy who cannot afford a dollar. In the undeclared bargain – the silence in the text – Eugene is invited inside by Ella and bestowed sexual favours. No mention is made thereafter of the money due for newspapers. But when Eugene rushes away from the stifling embrace of Ella, he rejects the black 'other' as degrading and below standard:

He strained back desperately against the door, drowning in her embrace.
 "Get–'way nigger, Get–'way", he panted thickly. (1929: 253)

Wolfe never allows an unambiguous unidimensional approach. The terrible attraction of a negress remains, though Eugene/Webber gets involved with a number of white women. It is notable that

Eugene/Webber never tries to bond emotionally with a black woman. His involvements with white women, however, never prove to be fulfilling. The chief among them deserve mention: Louise, the little waitress in a hotel in Charleston (1929: 298); Else Von Kohler in Germany (1940: 507); Ann in France (1935: 759); the lion-hunters who sought him during his period of literary fame (1940: 269). May be Wolfe did not even realize that the white woman was the better alternative to the black by virtue of racial superiority, but his ambivalence would never allow any woman to be anything but the other. Finally, in the culminating event of his involvement with Esther, beginning towards the end of *Of Time and the River* and continuing through *The Web and the Rock*, the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion on various levels surfaces: it is love at first sight; when Eugene sees Esther, “he only knew that from that moment his spirit was impaled upon the knife of love” (1935: 911); Esther is a Jewess, and Webber’s anti-Semitism hurts her, and often she hits back; Esther is much senior in age, and motherizes Webber. While the protagonist welcomes Esther’s affection, her praise, her culinary expertise, the almost oedipal relation with her, he revolts against her attempts to guide and mould him. He happily accepts financial support, but throws her out of the flat she has

rented for him. In "The Quarrel" (*The Web and the Rock*), they part forever:

"Done to you!" he said. "Why, God-damn you, I've given my life to you! That's what I've done to you! You've grown fat and prosperous on my life and energy. You've sapped and gutted me; you've renewed your youth at my expense – yes! And given it back again into that old painted whore-house of a theatre. 'Oh, deary me, now!'" he sneered, with an insane and mincing parody of her complaint. " 'What have you done to me, you cruel brute?' What have you done to this nice, sweet, female American maid who hardly knows the difference between sodomy and rape, she is so pure and innocent! What did you mean, you depraved scoundrel, by seducing this pure, sweet girl of forty when you were all of twenty-four at the time, and should have been ashamed to rob this Broadway milkmaid of her fair virginity? Shame on you, you big country slicker, for coming here among these simple, trusting city bastards and wreaking your guilty passion upon this innocent, blushing bride before she had had scarcely twenty-five years' experience in the ways of love! Shame on you, you bloated plutocrat of a two-thousand-dollar-a-year instructor, for enticing her with your glittering gold, and luring her away from the simple joys she had always been accustomed to! When you met her she had scarcely three Pierce Arrows she could call her own – but she was happy in her innocent poverty", he sneered, "and content with the simple pleasures of the Jewish millionaires and the innocent adulteries of their wives!" (1939: 567)

This torrent of rhetorical ambivalence and irony is possible only in Wolfe.

The rhetorical violence that the protagonist, Webber, indulges in seems to have a sensual pleasure in the utterance of hurtful words breeding words, a

precise example of logo-sexuality. The basis of rhetoric being persuasion, rhetoric imbues the speaker with power. In the logo-centric world, if we posit power in rhetoric as originating from Logo-Dei, the male-oriented power paradigm is complete.

Wolfe's realization of the power of rhetoric and the adulation it affords immensely gratifies his male-ego. There is a narcissistic bent in his psyche - for he was arguably in love only with himself, the magician of words, but never clearly understood it and attempted to discover a fulfilling love in his various entanglements, and possibly this ambivalence never allowed any relation to attain fruition. Neither can any definition be fixed on his rhetorical style, for he experimented with the entire gamut of rhetorical manoeuvring within his capacity - normal speech, lyrical outburst, impassioned exhortation, dialectical jargon, Negro lingo, Jewish vocabulary, slang, abuse, etc. etc.

The power of logos in the logo-centric male-dominated structure of the world, where the woman is the 'other', who must conform, satisfy, serve - and one form of serving is as Milton would say in "On His Blindness" - "They also serve who only stand and wait" (Milton, 1994:

80) – the woman has to wait for the burst of rhetorical violence to eddy. It may be noted that unless there is an ‘other’ as object, the violence cannot erupt. There is sexual fulfillment in devising rhetorical abuse – and if there is no ‘other’, there is no rhetoric. The source of creativity thus stands on this binary structure – and Eugene’s father W.O. Gant’s daily invective upon his wife Eliza (quoted in Chapter-IV) beautifully explicates the point. And later in life, Eugene/Webber – who hates his father, emulates his father’s rhetorical invective on the mother-figure of Esther, the ‘other’. One is tempted to equate the separation of Eugene’s parents to the separation between Webber and Esther. Instability resulting from insecurity had become a deep-rooted fixation.

Wolfe could not comprehend anything unless it had been brought forth in its contradictoriness. The binaries of life caused him ambivalence, and he titled the book quoted above in terms of binaries: *The Web and the Rock*. The constant displacement of the subject in the process of negotiation in Wolfe’s fiction brought about this ambivalence.

Like the Negro, the Red Indians get their share of ambivalent gaze from Wolfe. A childhood friend Nebraska Crane is afforded love and

affection, and sympathy when he muses about impending retirement from the pinnacle of fame and fan-following as a baseball star, but the death of an unknown Cherokee is subject for mirthful comment: “Another Redskin bit the dust” (1929: 276). The Jew, too, describes Wolfe’s ambivalence at various levels. In classroom, the amber flesh of Jewesses is deeply disturbing – terribly attracting, as also terribly repulsing:

Their dark flesh had in it the quality of a merciless tide which not only overwhelmed and devoured but withdrew with a powerful sucking glut all rich deposits of the earth it fed upon: they had the absorptive quality of a sponge, the power of a magnet, the end of each class left him sapped, gutted, drained, and with a sense of sterility, loss, and defeat, and in addition to this exhaustion of the mind and spirit, there was added a terrible weariness and frustration of the flesh: The potent young Jewesses, thick, hot, and heavy with a female odor, swarmed around him in a sensual tide, they leaned above him as he sat there at his table ... (1935: 478)

Among the male students, Abe Jones is accorded generous literary space, and Eugene’s relation with Abe deserves separate mention. Abe never approved of Eugene’s teaching, and always had plenty of critical suggestions to offer for the betterment of the instructor’s performance. Everyday after class he would follow Eugene: “the gray-faced Jew beside Eugene made the weary lights burn dim: he gave a tongue to weariness, a

color to despair” (1935: 443). Even though Eugene squeezed himself dry in an effort to enlighten his students, Abe never had any satisfaction:

He took those swarthy swarming classes and looted his life clean for them: he bent over them, prayed, sweated, and exhorted like a prophet, a poet, and a priest – he poured upon them the whole deposit of his living, feeling, reading, the whole store of poetry, passion and belief: he went into the brain of a dullard like a surgeon, and he blew some spark of fire into a glow in even the least and worst of them, but that gray-faced Yiddish inquisitor hung doggedly to his heels, the more he gave, the more Abe wanted; he fed on Eugene’s life, enriching his grayness with an insatiate and vampiric gluttony, and yet he never had a word of praise, a sentence of thanks, a syllable of commendation. (1935: 444)

Abe’s complaints got on the nerves of Eugene, and one day he exploded his wrath on Abe, and threatened to throw him out of his class. This turned the scales, and Abe begged and wept not be turned out, because, he confessed, it was the best class he had. This satisfies Eugene’s ego, and the relation is drastically transformed.

When Abe is thoroughly subjugated and cowered down, he becomes worthy of a patronizing affection, the ‘other’ as an object of sympathy. Eugene condescendingly visits Abe’s home, and Abe’s family members all become objects of sympathy, even admiration, for their tenacity and ability to fight against odds. Abe’s brothers fought tooth and claw to resist

gangsterism in Boston; Abe's sister Sylvia gradually climbed the business ladder to progress from salesgirl to owner of a hat-shop. Her having an illegitimate son who never called her mother elicits sympathy from Eugene. The tragedy of betrayal in love and its consequences bring forth Wolfe's sympathy on Sylvia, as also on Louise, the seductive waitress in a hotel at Charleston, who also is landed with an illegitimate child.

Illegitimacy – the binary opposite of legitimacy, had a deep fixation in Eugene's/Wolfe's psyche. Presumably the home atmosphere during his growing up – his father's activities outside of wedlock, the atmosphere at Dixieland, his mother's boarding house which had a reputation of a "chippy house" (1929: 119), the activities of his siblings Steve, Luke and Ben, all together inculcated a strange fascinated repulsion towards illegitimacy. It is very difficult to grasp the tilt of the scales, the subtle shift of mood of ambivalence. Eugene's/Webber's love for Esther is by far the most fulfilling, longer-than-the-rest emotional involvement. It is sometimes idyllic as a romantic poem; sometimes naturalistic in visual details. Ethically, Eugene's/Webber's love for Esther and her response are legitimate to Eugene/Webber, all the while Esther being a married woman.

The protagonist accuses Esther of being disloyal in love-and identifies her to her Jewish race, himself becoming a representative of a Gentile. His manuscripts are refused and returned by all publishers, but when Esther sends him to a publisher who, too, refuses Webber, he associates the refusal to the publisher being a Jew. Jewishness comes for derision, but he starves until Esther comes to his lodging and cooks him delicious Jewish food. Webber suffered from financial crisis – and he admired the world of the rich and affluent with longing in “The World that Jack Built” (in *You Can't Go Home Again*), bitterly aware that the financial world was controlled by Jews. Simultaneously, the vacuity and meaninglessness of life of the idle rich necessarily comes to the fore. The death of two liftmen goes unnoticed and the rich are concerned with the protection of their property from fire. The discrepancies of society erupted as ambivalent binaries to Wolfe, and C. Green lying exploded on a New York street on account of his suicide jump from a high rise merits only nine lines of print in the “Times” to be served with coffee at breakfast.

He was life's little man, life's nameless cipher, life's manswarm atom, life's American – and now he lies disjuncted and exploded on a street in Brooklyn! (1940: 363)

Much of the criticism of Wolfe's work has centred on its seemingly uncontrolled and formless exuberance, and it has become almost a critical truism that he possessed great talent but little control, a magnificent expertise over language but a limited awareness of the demands of the plot, a sensuous recall that was nearly total but an almost shocking unwillingness to subject his material to critical elision.

It has also been leveled against Wolfe that there is no sense of proportion in his writing, that the sight of a rusty iron railing evokes as much emotion in him as the death of his father, an absurd and even monstrous lack of discrimination. But if such is the reaction, why not acknowledge it? And from the standpoint of an artist, use it? Many respected critics, Yvor Winters among them, seem to believe that there exists a kind of limiting factor that says that one event, one subject, one involvement must be superior in importance to another. That certain emotions are legitimately the result of certain events and that there is some kind of inflexible criterion that determines this, some standard that we can discover and use. Winters assumes that there is or should be a definite

proportion between what is observed and experienced and the emotional reaction it evokes, a kind of law, a totalitarian censor.

Scott Fitzgerald wrote: "The more valuable parts of Tom were the more lyrical parts, or, rather, those moments when his lyricism was best combined with his powers of observation" (Dickey 1987: XIV). This is evident in various works, as at the end of *Of Time and the River*:

The ship was now wholly anchored: she lay there in the water with the living stillness of all objects that were made to move. Although entirely motionless, outwardly as fixed and permanent as any of the headlands of the coast, the story of her power and speed was legible in every line. She glowed and pulsed with the dynamic secret of life, and although her great sides towered immense and silent as a cliff, although the great plates of her hull seemed to reach down and to be founded in the sea's bed, and only the quietly flowing waters seemed to move and eddy softly at her sides, she yet had legible upon her the story of a hundred crossings, the memory of strange seas, of suns and moons and many different lights, the approach of April on far coasts, the change of wars and histories, and the completed dramas of all her voyages, characterized by the phantoms of many thousand passengers, the life, the hate, the love, the bitterness, the jealousy, the intrigue of six-day worlds, each one complete and separate in itself, which only a ship can have, which only the sea can bound, which only the earth can begin or end ...

And above this, her decks were ablaze with light. Her enormous superstructure with its magnificent frontal sweep, her proud breast which was so full of power and speed, her storied decks and promenades as wide as city streets, the fabulous variety and opulence of her public rooms, her vast

lounges and salons, her restaurants, grills, and cafes, her libraries, writing rooms, ball-rooms, swimming pools, her imperial suites with broad beds, private decks, sitting rooms, gleaming baths – all of this, made to move upon the stormy seas, leaning against eternity and the gray welter of the Atlantic at twenty-seven knots an hour, tenanted by the ghosts, impregnated by the subtle perfumes of thousands of beautiful and expensive women, alive with the memory of the silken undulance of their long backs, with the naked, living velvet of their shoulders as they paced down the decks at night – all of this, with the four great funnels that in the immense drive and energy of their slant were now cut sharp and dark against the evening sky, burned with a fierce, exultant vitality in the soft melancholy of this coast. (1935: 905-6)

This is the rhetoric of Thomas Wolfe who undertakes complete immersion in a scene, and accepts imaginative surrender to whatever a situation or a memory evokes in which the sense of life as submitted to and entered.

Wolfe once characterized himself, in contrast to the “Flaubertian ‘taker-outer’, as a great ‘putter-inner’, of the company of Balzac and Sterne” (Wolfe’s letter to Scott Fitzgerald; quoted in Dickey, 1987: XI). He wants to include anything and everything that is relevant to his presentation – selectivity is secondary to inclusion. If we take a situation where two writers treat the same subject, the first with the classical purity of under-statement, the incisiveness and technical balance of a skilled

poet, and the other with the length and copiousness of Wolfe, we might gain insight into two opposite ways of doing things. Quietly and with telling understatement and balance, Edwin Arlington Robinson speaks of prostitutes, those ‘veteran sirens’:

But they, though others fade and are still fair,
 Defy their fairness and are unsubdued;
 Although they suffer, they may not forswear
 The patient ardour of the unpursued.
 (Quoted in Dickey 1987: XI)

This observation is incisive and powerful as Baudelaire’s poem on the same theme, “Le Jeu”. It leaves out a great deal, but the details it touches on, the quiet, resigned quality of the rendering imagination, the use of the devices of traditional poetic form combine to make the passage one of the most memorable evocations on the subject. But Robinson omits much that could have been retained. Here are some prostitutes from Wolfe’s “The Face of the War”:

And this timid, yet inherent desire for some warmer and more tender relation even in the practice of their profession was sometimes almost ludicrously apparent as they moved warily about among the tables, soliciting patronage from the men they served. Thus, if a man addressed them harshly, brutally, savagely, with an oath – which was the customary form of greeting – they would answer him in kind. But if he spoke to them more quietly, or regarded them with a more kindly

smiling look, they might respond to him with a pathetic and ridiculous attempt at coquetry, subduing their rasping voices to a kind of husky, tinny, whisper, pressing against him intimately, bending their bedaubed and painted faces close to his, and cajoling him with a pitiable pretense at seductiveness somewhat in this manner:

‘Hello there, big boy! ... Yuh look lonesome sittin’ there all by yourself ... whatcha doin’ all alone? ... Yuh want some company? Huh?’ ... whispered hoarsely, with a ghastly leer of the smeared lips, and pressing closer – ‘Wanta have some fun, darling? Come on!’ – coaxingly, imperatively, taking the patron by the hand – ‘I’ll show yuh a big time’.
(1987: 233)

This passage has a fullness of effect that concentration, brevity and restraint cannot afford. The concision of Robinson may suggest the essence of the whores’ meaning, their sadness and serio-comic condition, but it does not, and cannot, to the extent that Wolfe’s comprehensive treatment does, give the physical actuality of their situation, what it feels to be among them, to listen to them, to look at them in detail, to experience being near them and with them. This kind of fullness demands amplitude and specificity. Only by a process wherein nothing was omitted could Wolfe convey what he wanted to communicate, trusting that each subject, each event, would have its truthful say, through him, only if he did not stand in its way with cautiousness and paraphernalia. In a changed

rhetorical style, Wolfe, in the same story, records his sympathy and pity for the pitiable fallen women. He depicts the extreme exhaustion they suffer, as also the genuine tenderness they are capable of:

The girl, who was tall, slender, and very lovely, was, save for her shoes and stockings, naked, and she lay extended at full length on the untidy bed, with one arm thrust out in a gesture of complete exhaustion, the other folded underneath her shining hair, and her face, which had a fragile, transparent, almost starved delicacy, turned to one side and resting on her arm, the eyelids closed. And the eyelids also had this delicacy of texture, were violet with weariness, and so transparent that the fine network of veins was plainly visible.

The other woman went softly over to the bed, sat down beside her, and began to speak to her in a low and tender tone. In a moment the girl turned her head toward the woman, opened her eyes, and smiled, in a faint and distant way, as if someone who is just emerging from the drugged spell of an opiate: "What? ... What did you say, darling? ... No, I'm all right", she said faintly ..." (1987: 235)

This sense is totally bereft of the harsh and vulgar association of soliciting with its typical jargon. The tenderness that is exchanged between a sufferer and a fellow-sufferer is deeply touching. This exuberant rhetoric is Wolfe's very own. Everything he sees, touches, and remembers, come to him in absolute abandon regardless of the consequences, for every second of his writing life and actual life move together to give the world his best shot. Nothing can be missed. The process is, in a way, a kind of morality.

This process presents the million possibilities and particulars of life all at once – even when they are mutually contradictory and exclusive. This generates a sense of ambivalence that becomes the core of his works.

Actually Wolfe was struggling throughout his career toward some solution in the making of a democratic yet patriotic artist. As Alexis de Tocqueville had perceived in 1830 that in democratic communities, where men are all insignificant and very much alike, each man instantly sees all his fellows when he surveys himself. The poets of democratic ages, therefore, can never take any man in particular as the subject of a piece. Walt Whitman had attempted to sing the nature of America by celebrating the American he knew best, hoping to find in his own generic experiences an image of the national self. Thomas Wolfe set much the same objective. Having given expression to his national self, usually through a powerful evocation of time, place and action, employing to its fullest his intensely sensuous style – almost literally rubbing the objects of experience against the readers' nerve-ends – Wolfe seldom felt that the evocation of feeling was enough. He added rhetorical exhortation and explanation, reasserting

in rhythmic prose the meaning of what he had earlier written powerfully in a dramatic scene:

“Yeah. He died on Sattidy. When he went home on Friday night he was OK.”

“Oh, Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

And for a moment they were balanced in strong silence.

“Gee, dat was tough, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Dey didn’t find him till duh next day at ten o’clock. When dey went to look for him, he was lyin’ stretched out on duh bat’ room floeh.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Dey found him lyin’ deh,” it said.

And for a moment more the voices hung in balanced silence.

“Gee, dat’s too bad ... I guess I was away when all dat happened.”

“Yeah. Yuh musta been away.”

“Yeah, dat was it, I guess. I musta been away. Oddehwise I woulda hoid. I was away.”

“Well, so long, kid ... I’ll be seein’ yuh.”

“Well, so long!”

A window closed, and there was silence; evening and far sounds and broken cries in Brooklyn, Brooklyn, in the formless, rusty, and unnumbered wilderness of life.

And now the old red light fades swiftly from the old red brick of rusty houses, and there are voices in the air, and somewhere music, and we are lying there, blind atoms in our cellar-depths, gray voiceless atoms on the manswarm desolation of the earth, and our fame is lost, our names forgotten, our powers are wasting from us like mined earth, while we lie here at evening and the river flows ... and dark time is feeding like a vulture on our entrails, and we know that we are lost, and cannot stir ... and there are ships there! There are ships! ... and Christ! We are all dying in the

darkness! ... and yuh musta been away ... yuh musta been away ...

And that is a moment of dark time, that is one of strange, million-visaged time's dark faces. (1987: 76)

In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe maintains:

... in the cultures of Europe and of the Orient the American artist can find no antecedent scheme, no structural plan, no body of tradition that can give his own work the validity and truth that it must have ... the labour of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him. (1936: 92)

In his quest of a complete language, Wolfe experimented in treating the same theme in various situations. Death, which fascinated Wolfe, may be cited as an example of diverse rhetorical treatment of the same theme:

Ex. (1) October had come again, and that year it was sharp and soon: frost was early, burning the thick green on the mountain sides to the massed brilliant hues of blazing colours, painting the air with sharpness, sorrow, and delight. Sometimes, and often, there was warmth by day, and ancient drowsy light, a golden warmth and pollinated haze in afternoon, but over all the earth there was the premonitory breath of frost, an exultancy for all men who were returning and for all those who were gone and would not come again.

My father was dead, and now it seemed to me that I had never found him. He was dead, and yet I sought him everywhere, and could not believe that he was dead, and was sure that I would find him. It was

October and that year, after years of absence and of wandering, I had come home again. (1987: 79)

- Ex. (2) Nine floors above the earth, a little figure was deftly catching in a bucket the nails or rivets of red-hot steel which the man with tongs was tossing to him from the forge. For a moment, the feeder had paused in his work, had turned, tongs in hand, for a breather, and had spoken to a man upon another girder. The catcher, meanwhile, grateful for this respite, had put his bucket down and stood erect, a cigarette between his lips, the small flame of a match held in the cave of his brown cupped hands. Then the feeder, his throat still loud with some scrap of bawdry irrelevant to steel, turned to his forge, gripped with his tongs a glowing rivet, and his throat still trembling with its laughter, tossed deftly, absently, casually in its accustomed arc, that nail of fire. His scream broke in upon the echoes of his laughter, carrying to the glut of faultless and accurate machinery in the street below him its terrible message of human error.

His scream was "Christ"! and at that word so seldom used for love and mercy the startled eyes of the other man leaped from his match upon the death that whizzed toward him. Even in the six feet of life that still remained to him, his body had its time for several motions. It half turned, the knees bent as if for a spring out into space, the shoulder stooped, the big brown hands groping in a futile, incompleting gesture for the bucket. Then, half crouched and rigid, with palms curved out in a kind of grotesque and terrible entreaty and one foot groping horribly into thin air, he met his death squarely, fronting it. For a moment after the rivet struck him, his body paused, crouched, rigid, like a grotesque image, groping futilely and horribly into space with one clumsy foot, and with a wire of

acrid smoke uncoiling at his waist. Then his shabby garments burst into flame, the man pawed out in sickening vacancy and fell, a blazing torch lit by a single scream. (1987: 41-42).

Ex. (3) Then, as I put my coin into the slot and thrust on through the wooden turnstile, I saw the man who was about to die. The place was a space of floor, a width of cement which was yet one flight above the level of the trains, and the man was sitting on a wooden bench, which had been placed there to the left, as one went down the incline to the tunnel.

The man just sat there quietly at one end of the bench, leaned over slightly to his right with his elbow resting on the arm of the bench, his hat pulled down a little, and his face half lowered. At this moment, there was a slow, tranquil, hardly perceptible movement of his breath – a flutter, a faint sigh – and the man was dead. (1987: 45-46)

A fundamental concern with opposites is reflected in Wolfe's literary style itself – in a balanced antithesis of shocking juxtaposition of images, and in his used of contradictory phrases, such as *changeless change*, *splendid and fierce and weak and strong and foolish*, *of wandering forever and the earth again*, and *the web and the rock*.

Wolfe's tendency to see and to express things in terms of opposites represented, according to some critics, a failure of his mind to grapple adequately with a problem. To some extent, it was an expression of his

southern qualities, for a typical native of the southern states is fascinated by paradox, enamoured of ambiguity, devoted to the particular and the concrete, and, although a dreamer of grandiose dreams, seldom the articulator of effective larger structures. The southerners were, like Wolfe himself, caught between the romantic view of their own past and the realistic fact of their present condition. And over the years they have proved themselves capable of living with unresolved contradictions. Wolfe grew up with certain paradoxes which formed an important aspect of his life, and ultimately became part of his art. The following examples elucidate the point:

Ex. (1) But now that the time had come for parting, the woman and the dying man said nothing. Clasped arm to arm they looked at each other with a stare of burning and voracious tenderness. They embraced, her arms clasped him, her living and voluptuous body drew toward him, her red lips clung to his mouth as if she could never let him go. Finally, she fairly tore herself away from him, gave him a desperate little push with her hands, and said 'Go, go! It's time!'

... the train began to move slowly out of the station. And all the time the man was leaning from a window in the corridor looking at her, and the woman was walking along beside the train, trying to keep him in sight as long as she could. Now the train gathered motion, the woman's pace slowed, she stopped, her eyes wet, her lips murmuring words no one could

hear, and as he vanished from her sight, she cried, 'Auf Wiedersehen!' and put her hand up to her lips and kissed it to him.

For a moment longer, the young man, who was to be this specter's brief companion of the journey, stood looking out the corridor window down the platform ...

Suddenly she stopped. Someone out of the throng of people on the platform had approached her. It was a young man. The woman paused in a startled manner, lifted one gloved hand in protest, started to go on, and in the next moment they were locked in a savage embrace, devouring each other with passionate kisses.

... For a moment the young man looked intently at the beak-like face, the closed weary eyes, wondering if this dying man had seen that meeting on the station platform, and what knowledge such as this could now mean to him. But the mask of death was enigmatic, unrevealing; the youth found there nothing that he could read. A faint and luminous smile was playing at the edges of the man's thin mouth, and his burning eyes were now open, but far and sunken, and seemed to be looking from an unspeakable depth at something that was far away. In a moment, in a profound and tender tone, he said:

"That was my wife. Now in the winter I must go alone, for that is best. But in the spring, when I am better, she will come to me." (1987: 170-71)

Ex. (2) (Speaking of a Negro servant, a child's response is expressed):

He never boxed with us, of course, but Randy had two sets of gloves, and Dick used to coach us while we

sparred. There was something amazingly tender and watchful about him. He taught us many things – how to lead, to hook, to counter and to block – but he was careful to see that we did not hurt each other.

(Thereafter, it is reported):

“It’s that nigger. He’s gone crazy and is running wild,” – “It’s Dick!” ... “They say he’s killed four people.”

(And later, when pursued by the mob):

At the creek edge, he turned again, knelt once more in the snow, and aimed. It was Dick’s last shot. He didn’t miss. The bullet struck Wayne Foraker, a deputy, dead center in the forehead and killed him in his saddle. Then the posse saw the Negro aim again, and nothing happened. Dick snapped the breach open savagely, then hurled the gun away. A cheer went up. The posse came charging forward. Dick turned, stumblingly, and ran the few remaining yards that separated him from the cold and rock-bright waters of the creek.

And here he did a curious thing – a thing that no one ever wholly understood. It was thought that he would make one final break for freedom, that he would wade the creek and try to get away before they got to him. Instead, he sat down calmly on the bank, and as quietly as if he were seated on his cot in an Army barracks, he unlaced his shoes, took them off, placed them together neatly at his side, and then stood up like a soldier, erect, in his bare bleeding feet, and faced the mob. (1987: 333-45)

The most obvious of Wolfe's strengths is his competence in handling language. The word has for him unique powers; he was fascinated by language, enchanted by its rhythm and cadence and enamoured of its rhetorical powers. Language was the key he sought to unlock mysteries and to unloose vast forces; he approached it almost in the spirit of primitive magic. This aspect of language he expressed in the prologue to *The Web and the Rock* (1939):

Could I make tongue say more than tongue could utter! Could I make brain grasp more than brain could think! Could I weave into immortal denseness some small brede of words, pluck out of sunken depths the root of living, some hundred thousand magic words that were as great as all my hunger, and hurl the sum of all my living out upon three hundred pages – then death could take my life, for I had lived it ere he took it: I had slain hunger, beaten death! (1939: Prologue).

Thus rhetoric is an instrument to negotiate the processes of life, chiefly, the approach of death in an onrush of time. Wolfe rarely uses the concept of time without the qualifiers of its inevitability. Realizing and accepting the inevitability of death, Wolfe attempts to transcend it through images of vibrant vitalism. He describes characters who are enormous in figure, hunger, sexuality and disease. The aggressive positivism of the life-enhancing/life-satisfying processes are a gauntlet thrown in challenge to

the life-denying processes of disease and death. The example of tables groaning with food seems to be a rhetorical wish-fulfilment:

Everyone was eating; everyone was drinking. A ravenous hunger – an insane hunger that knew no appeasement, that wished to glut itself on all the roasted ox flesh, all the sausages, all the salt fish in the world, seized Monk and held him in its teeth. In all the world there was nothing but Food – glorious Food. And Beer – October Beer. The world was an enormous Belly – here was no higher heaven than the Paradise of Cram and Gorge. (1939: 668)

After the quarrel and parting with Esther, Webber leaves for Europe. But ambivalently, he cannot: “He had come away to forget her: he did nothing but remember her” (1939: 623). He reflects on what he had foretold

Esther:

“You are the best and truest friend I ever had. You are the noblest, greatest, and most beautiful woman that I ever saw or knew. You are the woman that I love.” These were the words his heart had uttered. And then his head had coldly interposed, with its reasons of which the heart knew nothing: “And no matter where I go, or when I leave you, as I shall –” thus the head; and then the heart again – “down at the bottom of my soul I’ll keep on loving you forever.”

It was true – all true. The love and now the leaving – all true together. (1939: 622)

Wolfe cannot find a solution to his fragmented feelings which however are manifested in his narratives: “the shades, pauses, and interjections of

people who are unconscious of the world, or of their own words” (1939: 632).

Another aspect of Wolfe’s use of language is his accurate and vivid dialogue. Wolfe had a remarkable ear for folk-speech, and his characters speak personal dialects set down with great verisimilitude. His characters’ speech is always marked by distinctiveness in diction, syntax and cadence. Accuracy, however, is a less obvious quality of their speech than gusto and vigour are. There is a feeling of great energy in the speech of most of them, as evident in his short story “Chickamauga”:

The last charge happened jest at dark. We came along and stripped the ammunitions off the dead – we took hit from the wounded – we had nothin’ left ourselves. Then we hit the first line – and we drove ‘em back – we hit the second and swept over ‘em. We were goin’ to take the third and last – they waited till they saw the color of our eyes before they let us have hit. Hit was like a river of red-hot lead had poured down on us: the line melted thar like snow. (1987: 395)

Wolfe sought a language – a door – a tool of communication not only in the rolling territories of rhetoric but also in the sensuous images drawn from the world’s body, which is the distinctive aspect of the language of

lyric and dramatic writing. And here, in the concrete and particularized representation of the sensory world, he was triumphantly the master:

There had been rain the night before, and now the river was filled with the sweet clean rain-drenched smell of earthy deposits. He could see the delicate white glimmer of young birch trees leaning from the banks, and on the other side he saw the winding whiteness of the road. Beyond the road, and bordering it, there was an orchard with a wall of lichen stone: a row of apple trees, gnarled and sweet, spread their squat, twisted branches out across the road, and in the faint light he saw that they were dense with blossoms: the cool intoxication of their fragrance overpowered him. (1987: 210)

Wolfe's concern with language is so great that he might have said of his total work, as Whitman did of *Leaves of Grass*, that it is only a language experiment. Language or rhetoric is the logical expression of Wolfe's sense of alienation which he generalized to be at the core of all human experience. He saw each individual in the world as living in a compartment, in isolation from his fellows and unable to communicate adequately.

Juxtaposing a vivid, dramatic scene, complete with mannerisms like gap-fillers and physical movement, with a lyrical incantation is Wolfe's forte. In *Of Time and the River*, a group of young men are observed indulging in cheap liquor in a train compartment:

“Why, you’ll kill yourself drinking that stuff raw! Don’t you know that? You must be crazy! ... Wait a minute”, he muttered suddenly, comically, dropping the bottle deftly into his pocket, as the swarthy, pompous little man named Wade entered, attired in blue pyjamas and a dressing gown, and holding a tooth-brush and a tube of toothpaste in his hand:

“Good evening, Sir! ... Ah-hah! ... How d’ye do!” said Robert, bowing slightly and stiffly, and speaking in his grave, staccato, curiously engaging tone. (1935: 67)

Some lines later, Wolfe engages in lyrical prodigality:

And outside, floating past their vision the huge pageant of its enchanted and immortal stillness, the old earth of Virginia now lay dreaming in the moon’s white light.

So here they are now, three atoms on the huge breast of the indifferent earth, three youths out of a little town walled far away within the great rim of the silent mountains, already a distant, lonely dot upon the immense and sleeping visage of the continent. Here they are – three youths bound for the first time towards their image of the distant and enchanted city, sure that even though so many of their comrades had found there only dust and bitterness, the shining victory will be theirs. Here they are hurled onward in the great projectile of the train across the lonely visage of the everlasting earth. Here they are – three nameless grains of life among the manswarm ciphers of the earth, three faces of the million faces, three drops in the unceasing flood – and each of them a flame, a light, a glory, sure that his destiny is written in the blazing stars, his life shone over by the fortunate watches of the moon, his fame nourished and sustained by the huge earth, whose single darling charge he is, on whose immortal stillness he is flung onward in the night, his glorious fate set in the very brain and forehead of the fabulous, the unceasing city, of whose million-footed life he will tomorrow be a part. (1935: 67-68)

Ambivalence presides at the very thematic level. Wolfe describes the controlling theme of his works as "the search for a father" (in Holman, 1975: 25), and defined that search as a search for certainty, an "image of strength and wisdom external to his (man's) need and superior to his hunger" (*Ibid.*, 1975: 26). In one sense, this search is the seeking for an individual with whom communication can be established and maintained. The search grows out of Eugene's loneliness in his childhood and the sense of isolation which he has in his world. It is intensified by his inability to communicate his love to his brother Ben. In his later life, whether for Eugene Gant or for George Webber, it finds expression in the relationships established and broken with Francis Starwick, Esther Jack and Foxhall Edwards, to name only the few major figures. About all these relationships there is a recurrent pattern: the new person is approached with eagerness; an intense relationship is established; then a failure of communication and understanding occurs; and Gant/Webber rejects the friendship. The affair with Esther Jack is, perhaps, the clearest example of this pattern. It is debatable whether idea of the search for the father, with its suggestion of myth and fable, defines as well as does the representation

of loneliness – the fundamental theme of Wolfe, whether that loneliness he described as the search for “a stone, a leaf, an unfound door” (*Ibid.*, 1975: 26), as the urge to wandering and the counter-tug of home (articulated in *The Web and the Rock* and *Of Time and the River*), or as the desire vicariously to be one with and to understand ten thousand men in the cities, towns and hamlets of America.

There are very few people in fictional works as alienated as W.O. Gant and his wife Eliza. Each is lost in an envelope of private experiences and each tries vainly to express himself – Gant through rhetoric, invective, alcohol and lust; Eliza through garrulity, money and real estate. The terrible incompatibility in which they live reaches its almost shocking climax when, at the last moments of Gant’s life, they finally speak across the void to each other, and Gant’s expression of kindness and remorse dissolves Eliza into tears.

“Eliza”, – he said – and at the sound of that unaccustomed word, a name he had spoken only twice in forty years – her white face and her worn brown eyes turned toward him with the quick and startled look of an animal – “Eliza,” he said quietly, “you have had a hard life with me, a hard time. I want to tell you that I’m sorry.”

And before she could move from her white stillness of shocked surprise, he lifted his great right hand and put it gently down across her own. (1935: 265)

Despite Wolfe's epic intentions to represent the totality of the consciousness of America, the final outcome is fraught with ambivalence. His fragmentary work, which he failed to unite and synthesize, is ultimately the record of his self and only very partially that of a nation. Wolfe himself was aware of this when he called it

a giant web in which I was caught, the product of my huge inheritance – the torrential recollectiveness ... which became a living, million-fibred integument that bound me to the past, not only of my own life, but of the very earth from which I came, so that nothing in the end escaped from its inrooted and all-feeling explorativeness. (in Holman, 1975: 36)

In Wolfe, imagination is as important as reality; fragments are important as well as the whole; lyricism and dramatic representation must have equal prominence. It is an impossible task to hold these together as he wants to be everything at the same time. The moment one is all-inclusive, giving equal importance to the million diversities of the world and is unable to choose and take one particular stance, ambivalence is inevitable. To the end Thomas Wolfe retained a childlike, pristine delight in the manifold shapes, colours, odours, tastes, sounds and multifarious textures of

experience and his work tries to communicate this delight of living rhetorically.

The shape of Wolfe's entire career reflects startling ambivalence because of his inability to resolve contradictions. From birth to death he was an alienated man, vainly seeking communion. He who would have written the definition of a nation, could only attempt to define his own *self*. When the self becomes verbalized, the conflict between the creative self and the lived self becomes apparent. This conflict creates a psychic schism that allows the author to drift without having conscious control over the narrative. The split self of the author does not allow an integrated subject representing the authorial self to command the narrative. It is because of this reason that the narrative very often begins with an inspired flourish, but gradually gets tamed into a kind of prosaic, laboured monotone. Having this aspect of Wolfe in mind, when we explore the articulated plurality, we find that Wolfe is a natural writer who, in fact, recreates himself in language in his works. Language creates its own reality. The frame of reference is determined by rhetoric. If language is central to life, it is central to fiction. Performative language creates something which is

not already existing. As we look for symmetry, we find disruption. This actually does not take place at the level of thought and writing: the text decides to be like that. Wolfe indulges in formlessness – it allows free play of rhetorical exuberance. Narrative disruption can be viewed as ambivalence. Metaphoric play may be attributed to the ambivalence in the authorial self. The ambivalence that is apparent at the rhetorical level not only reflects the personality of the author and his concerns, but the very making of writing itself that erases gaps in the body by the very device of language. Rhetoric, therefore, in Wolfe's writing, is not only a device of creativity, but also a tool, and finally, a measure of the linguistic self of the writer as a human being. This position substantiates the Derridean concept that nothing is outside language. If we accept the thesis that language creates its own reality, it will be easier to appreciate Wolfe's oeuvres in that ambivalence becomes the very force that concretizes and disrupts the rhetorical narrative structure. Therefore, the so-called rhetorical ambivalence could be considered as Wolfe's strength that can connect him to the postmodernist fictional trend. In this sense, he could be considered a proto-postmodernist.

Wolfe in his works, practically at every level – sentence, paragraph, scene, theme – centralizes ambivalence of rhetoric, both in its clarity and confusion. He remains a split personality who wanted to embrace all and represent all, and in his vehement refusal to choose and select, left behind a record of an ambivalent totality.

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Chapter-VI

CONCLUSION

Thomas Wolfe had Faust's impulse to do everything limitless, and Whitman's passion to put it all on paper. While still a student at Harvard and not a celebrity as a novelist, Wolfe wrote to his mother:

I know this now: I am inevitable, I sincerely believe that the only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease, or death ... I will go everywhere and see everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think of all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and will write, write, write. (Quoted in Moser, 1967: 225)

Few writers have immersed themselves in the turbulent stream of experiences more thoroughly than Wolfe. He lives through the variegated experiences of life and attempts to articulate the intensity of personal experience, which he sees as the fountainhead of creative process. As F.R. Leavis maintains about Swift: "He was, in various ways, curiously unaware – the reverse of clairvoyante. He is distinguished by the identity of his feelings ... and he certainly does not impress us as a mind in possession of its experience" (quoted in Steiner, 1969: 237). By *mind in possession of its experience*, Leavis implies the taking on of the pertinent, sombre precision of facts. In the flowing narrative of Wolfe's works, the

sombre precision may be absent, but the presence of the author is felt at every level recording everything in an impressionistic manner.

The formless, all-inclusive exuberant narrative pattern is the first most noticeable characteristic of his works. The declared intention to include all and experience all that life offers, necessarily generates rampant confusion and disrupts/affects integration in Wolfe's writing. Like a romantic, Wolfe sees life as a condition of disjointed fragments – and his frantic attempt had been to achieve some measure of unity. The inspired artist is experiencing spontaneous pangs of creativity, producing unrelated fragments and unsuccessfully struggling to harmonize them into a whole.

Hemingway's style of presentation is one way of looking at the use of language where precision and objectivity matters most. On the other hand, we have Joyce, Proust, Faulkner and Gunter Grass where use of language is driven to its limits. Wolfe may be classified with the latter writers. In Wolfe's writing, words seem to flow in an untamed manner, engendering other words in ungoverned profusion. Where he is in control, Wolfe's language has a thrust and vital sensuousness that carry all before

them. It might be that like Wittgenstein, he has a problem of escaping from the *spiral of language*. Wittgenstein's entire work leans on the question whether there is any verifiable relation between the *word* and *fact*. That which we call fact may be a veil spun by language to shroud the mind from reality. Wittgenstein compels us to wonder whether reality can be *spoken of*, when speech is merely a kind of infinite regression, words being spoken of other words (Steiner, 1969: 41). Wittgenstein's philosophic dilemma may be considered to be at the very core of Wolfe's genius. He has not consciously pursued a philosophical inquiry into the relationship between the word and reality, but was caught in its irresolvable contradictions. Wolfe's theoretical work *The Story of a Novel* is an indicator of that dilemma.

Wolfe understands life in patterns of opposites, and this gives rise to a sense of ambivalence that pervades his literary articulations. Ambivalence at the level of *lived life* and artistic endeavour has been the compelling force of Wolfe. Ambivalence has presided over his narrative articulations, holding together the seemingly uncontrolled, fragmented style. Being the most poignant and excruciating fundamental feature of

human nature, ambivalence has served as the origin of Wolfe's creativity. The simultaneous occurrence of two antagonistic emotions caused Wolfe's turbulent creative energy to project paradoxical worlds without wishing to, or being able to, harmonize and synthesize them.

This sense of ambivalence structures Wolfe's rhetoric. The rhetoric of Wolfe is part of his legend. Building a fury of signs, he elevates words and sounds to an intensity which is unique in his style; protean and boundless, he urges language into a wildness and power that signalizes his transcendent view of the world. Rhetoric in its metaphorical and metonymic possibility is central to our understanding of language creating its own reality. Wolfe, like the romantics, stakes claim to originality by abandoning all rhetorical conventions, and speaking out from the heart. But the incompatibility between his psychic make up or *desire* and his ability to express that desire in language leads to a rhetorical ambivalence. The torrential onrush of experiences attempting to involve and include the American nation in general together with the representation of his lived experience as the fountainhead of artistic creativity further enhance his ambivalence. Ambivalence is inevitable as Wolfe's all-inclusive world-

view attempts to project a totality of experience, a consciousness and identity of America, as perceived by his self. As style represents the man, Wolfe's style of juxtaposing opposites reflects his own ambivalent self, a diasparactive, fragmentary self-awareness.

This ambivalent rhetoric creates plural possibilities in the reading of his texts. The multiplicity of possibilities is a typically postmodern attitude, as ambivalence at the psychic as well as rhetorical level deconstruct the apparent surface meaning of his works. Articulation and desire very often do not go hand in hand, and Wolfe loses control over the text as his rhetorical excess gushes out at random and the text structures itself. Language thereby creates its own reality. The frame of reference is determined by rhetoric. Wolfe indulges in formlessness – which allows free-play of rhetorical exuberance. However, this exuberance is disrupted, because of an inbuilt psychic ambivalence.

The ambivalence at the rhetorical level not only reflects the personality of the author but the very making of writing itself that erases gaps in its body by the very device of language. Therefore, rhetorical ambivalence could be considered as the very force of Wolfe's writing that

connects him to the post-modernist fictional trend. We may, therefore, consider Wolfe as a Proto-Postmodernist writer.

Alienation, time and death are three major themes in Thomas Wolfe's writing that are used in conjunction with each other. This feeling of alienation hinges on the romantic notion of the necessary and irreversible loss of a state of happiness and innocence, and it is only through this experience that maturity comes. With maturity comes the *consciousness* of alienation, and the human need for psychological support and dependence.

Wolfe could never form any lasting relation with anybody – whether male or female. His own life was anguished by fragmentariness and a fractured sensibility. His parents were alienated from each other, and Wolfe spent his childhood in a divided home. His brother Grover died in infancy, and Grover's twin Ben in his youth; his father died when Wolfe was a young man. These experiences made him long for human love and warmth, but relations did not blossom into permanence. Nonetheless, he explored and experienced human relationships in various explosively different forms, but it is notable that all of them ended in fission.

Together with the insecurity that love and life are transient is the ever-present consciousness of the irreversible onrush of time and of the threatening approach of death. The hunger to see all, know all and express all comes into conflict with death. Death fascinated Wolfe in all its forms, all the more because it was so menacing and so vague. As Wolfe researched on the myriad possibilities and expressions of death, he sometimes condemned death, often eulogized it and sometimes showed a calm acceptance to its inevitability. The transience and mutability of life are directly controlled by the uncontrollable passage of time, and Wolfe seethes in frustration and alienation. While time allows Wolfe some space in attempting to actualize his massive programmes, suddenly time would irrevocably terminate that space. Thus Wolfe, in a mad frenzy, tries to experience more and communicate more in an attempt to defeat time. He suffers the frustrating anxiety of existence, being unable to find a route to freedom except through death. His writings are packed in an explosive abundance with an anguish over his situation, his sense of tragic incommunicability, of alienation, and his frenzied response to the crisis.

Wolfe's works challenge us as readers in various ways. His works assail our consciousness and make vulnerable our identity and self-possession. His nostalgia for the lost world of childhood makes us scared at the inevitable loss. In a society where racial hatred is acute, Wolfe depicts a typically ambivalent attitude towards the *other*. There are instances of his vehement sympathy for the victimized Negro as in the Dick Prosser story, or when the Negro is the victim of Judge Bland's avaricious usury. But the same Negro is denigrated by Wolfe as the social *other*, racially responsible for various evils in society; the Negro woman is projected as an amoral sex symbol. Similarly, Wolfe's anti-Semitism seeps through in his works, but Wolfe befriends and patronizes the Jew Abe Jones and is indignant at the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany. The culminating point, however, is Wolfe's passionate affair with the Jew lady Aline Bernstein – an ambivalent relationship of intense love and hate. Wolfe refuses to sieve and segregate for artistic purpose. His all-engulfing humanistic temper defies or enjoys defying social expectation when the young lady passionately embraces another man just after bidding tearful farewell to her dying husband. Wolfe is proud of America and at the same time hates its apathy to its own citizens. While he saw and experienced life

and gave it expression through an autobiographical self, he also saw himself as a social critic and spokesperson for America. His all-devouring appetite accepted everything which life offered, but his critical gaze exposed social hypocrisy, inhumanity, materialistic greed, racial discrimination, subjugation, scandal, adultery, murder and human baseness in general.

Wolfe elevates his life to the level of art. He gives expression to his personal, lived experiences without distortion or concealment. Caring precious little for rules and norms, Wolfe invoked the ire of literary critics, but his works remain a truthful representation of his life. If a limit was to be applied to exuberant spontaneity and inclusiveness, it would clamp a mechanical dead hand on true individual reaction and real emotion as it exists rather than as it is supposed to exist according to critical canons. The notion that there is some kind of inflexible standard that sets emotional proportions is a mistake, and a denial of the actual, spontaneous, even biological reflex out of which creation comes. The fact that Wolfe was moved with an aspiration towards the infinite cannot be denied. In this endeavour he deliberately wanted to set himself free of any norm. He

insisted on having total artistic freedom, which involved energy and excess, and transformed and transmuted the intense experiences of his life into art.

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BIO-DATA

Sivasish Biswas

(Male, 29 December 1961)

- Academic:** M.A. (Visva Bharati, Santiniketan)
PGDTE (CIEFL, Regional Centre, Shillong)
M.Phil (NEHU, Shillong).
- Experience:** Served in different colleges of Assam since 1987. Presently serving as Senior Lecturer in Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam.
- Other interests:** Athletics and Cricket. Participated in Athletics at the District and University level. Captained college teachers' team in inter-college cricket tournament.
- Marital status:** Married, having one son. Wife serves in Karimganj College as Senior Lecturer in English.