MURKY IMPRESSIONS OF POSTMODERNISM: EUGENE GANT AND
SHAKESPEAREAN INTERTEXT IN THOMAS WOLFE’S

LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL AND

OF TIME AND THE RIVER

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In this study, I analyze the significance of Shakespearean intertextuality in the major works of Thomas Wolfe featuring protagonist Eugene Gant: *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*. Specifically, I explore Gant’s habits and preferences as a reader by examining the narrative arising from the protagonist’s perspectives of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. I examine the significance of parallel reading habits of Wolfe the author and Gant the character. I also scrutinize the plurality of Gant’s methods of cognition as a reader who interprets texts, communicates his connections with texts, and wars with texts. Further, I assess the cumulative effect of Wolfe’s having blurred the boundaries between fiction and reality, between the novel and drama. I assert, then, that Wolfe, by incorporating a Shakespearean intertext, reveals aspects indicative of postmodernism.
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CHAPTER I

MURKY INDENTATIONS OF A READER

“My Shakespeare, rise!” [ . . . ]

“My Shakespeare! My Shakespeare! Do you want another piece of pie?” said Helen. Then full of penitent laughter, she added: [ . . . ] “We oughtn’t to treat the poor kid like that.” Laughing, she plucked at her large straight chin, gazing out the window, and laughing absently [ . . . ].

But—“his art was universal. He saw life clearly and he saw it whole. He was an intellectual ocean whose waves touched every shore of thought. [ . . . ] In his sympathetic and well-rounded sense of characterization, he laughs with, not at, his characters.”

Eugene won the medal—bronze or of some other material even more enduring. The Bard’s profile murkily indented. W. S. 1616-1916. A long and useful life.

- Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

Protagonist Eugene Gant is a character who, by the beginning of his fifteenth year of life, “knew all the songs in Shakespeare’s plays, [ . . . ] had tried to read all the sonnets, and failed” (Wolfe, *LHA* 255), and had read all of Shakespeare’s plays with the exception of five: *Timon of Athens, Titus Andronicus, Pericles, Coriolanus,* and *King John* (256). In this comical scene from the heart of Thomas Wolfe’s first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, the narrator portrays a protagonist who has—offstage—been heavily influenced by reading the works of William Shakespeare. On the one hand, the boy who had read so much by the Bard is being teased by his family for his enthusiastic devotion to the poet. On the other hand, he is being honored by judges of writing for demonstrating an astute understanding about the dramatist himself. The voice of the third person omniscient narrator, though, muddies the bounds of discourse. One moment the reader is enjoying the light-hearted banter amongst siblings, the teasing of the baby brother about his inspirational, self-pronounced mission and command that reverberated the historical one of
Ben Johnson: “My Shakespeare, rise!” (307), and the next moment the reader is given a rebuttal of an ambiguous nature—“his art was universal…” (307). Scripted as dialogue, this segment of text is jarring. We must ask whether it is Eugene speaking. We know he had entered an essay competition for the Independent in celebration of the Shakespeare Tercentenary. Could these be the words Eugene has written in his essay? Could it be yet the family—a sibling continuing in a mocking tone? Is this the narrator reading Eugene’s mind? Eugene’s essay? The narrative difficulties revolving around the ideas of reading do not stop with these ponderings. For when we understand that in 1916 young Tom Wolfe entered an essay contest sponsored by Independent Magazine in celebration of the Shakespeare Tercentenary and we learn that the quoted passage in Look Homeward, Angel that rebuts the friendly jesting are none other than the actual words that end Wolfe’s own winning essay (Newell 31), we must revisit the question, “whose narrative is it?” Is it Thomas Wolfe’s? Eugene Gant’s? Wolfe’s narrator would have us believe it is Gant’s. Yet the Wolfe essay is real; it exists. The words belonged to the author before he imparted them to his character. The scenarios, indeed, seem tantamount: Wolfe’s siblings teased him for weeks after glimpsing Wolfe’s own Ben Johnson-echoing tribute: “My Shakespeare, rise!” (Donald 30; Newell 31; Turnbull 17).

Implied, therefore, within this Gantean/Wolfean medal-winning essay is a character/author who has immersed himself in a given set of texts, specifically Shakespearean dramas. Each persona has read them. Each has interpreted them. Each has established a certain voice of authority over them. Each has fancied a transcendence of sort between the works of Shakespeare and “Shakespeare, the Man,” which was the title of Wolfe’s first-place piece (Donald 30; Newell 32; Turnbull 17). According to a judge’s inscription upon Wolfe’s essay, he won “because of the internal evidence it betrays of wide, sympathetic and appreciative reading,

1 Donald’s rendition of Thomas Wolfe’s essay title is punctuated differently: “Shakespeare: The Man.”
and especially because of its appreciation of the genius and spirit of ‘Shakespeare the Man’” [emphasis in original] (32).

Echoing reality, in the fictional rendition of Gant’s winning essay on Shakespeare, the Bard’s head is “murkily indented” (LHA 308) upon the prize. This image, itself obscure and darkly vague, is quite apt, as is the inscription that adorns it: “W. S. 1616-1916. A long and useful life” (308). The elongated dates that begin with the passing of Shakespeare, himself a reader of certain identifiable texts, and end with the onset of Eugene, himself an accomplished reader, serve to mingle the two figures. In a move that could be considered uniquely postmodern, Wolfe has interwoven his narratives of the Bard, the character reading the Bard, and the author writing of the character reading the Bard. It is as if we have a murky impression of Shakespeare that has been indented upon the mind of Eugene Gant that was inscribed by the hand of Thomas Wolfe. Thus, not only do many characters’ lives—both real and imagined—serve as the extension of a cumulative merging of reality and fiction, but one could also argue that many texts do as well.

Within both of Wolfe’s autobiographically structured works of Eugene Gant, Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River, Eugene reads or alludes to three Shakespearean works in particular, The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, and King Lear. Within the pages of his own narratives, Thomas Wolfe establishes an intertextual experience through the biased discourse of protagonist Eugene Gant regarding these Shakespearean texts. In one narrative space, Wolfe characterizes the maturing Eugene as a reader pluralistic in his methods of cognition: at once interpreting the texts, establishing connections that stem from the texts, and struggling against the established authority of the texts; while in another narrative space, he blurs the lines between character and author, between fiction and reality, challenging the reader to
discern whether it is Gant or Wolfe reading Shakespeare and, moreover, whether the reader has been summoned as an audience to a novel or a drama or something altogether different.

Thomas Wolfe’s first two novels can be considered as little more than his thinly veiled two-part autobiography. Certainly, at minimum, as introduced in Look Homeward, Angel, the names and manners of Thomas Wolfe’s parents, William Oliver and Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, are replicated in the names of W.O. and Eliza Gant. So, too, are Wolfe’s siblings mirrored by the fictional children who populate the Gant household, in age, in physical description, and on two occasions—with the twins—in actual name. Further, there is no mistaking protagonist Eugene Gant for Thomas Wolfe himself (Donald 3). Wolfe, too, conceded that Look Homeward, Angel is autobiographical in that it is the story of a young man who, despite his family or his upbringing, discovers his own identity as an artist (178).

In the first novel, Eugene Gant, the youngest of six children of a frugal business woman and a man as passionate about drinking as he is about stonework and oratory, is born and reared in Altamont, Catawba, a fictionalized setting that bears many resemblances to Asheville, North Carolina, Wolfe’s hometown. Eugene details his life with his family, especially his brother Ben, who becomes a newspaperman and is the only one who guides Eugene. When he is sixteen years old, six feet three inches tall, weighing only one hundred thirty pounds, Eugene enters the state university, a fictionalized equivalent to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Here he is at first a loner, experiences his first sexual encounters, and eventually rises to the position of editor of the student newspaper. After the Chapel Hill years, having become alienated from his family with his brother Ben’s death, his father’s imminent death, and his mother’s cold dealings in real estate, Eugene sets off to study at Harvard.
As Lucy Coniff and Richard S. Kennedy explain in their introduction to *The Autobiographical Outline for Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe, to write an autobiographical novel is what Wolfe had set out to do when, in his mid-twenties, he traveled to Europe. No novel emerged, however; not even travel narratives came of his 1924-1925 European escapades. Further, he took no pleasure in teaching composition classes at New York University and never mastered playwriting for professional theatrical productions. As a result, Wolfe was beginning to consider himself a failure. Were it not for Aline Bernstein, Wolfe’s lover for many years, Wolfe might never have achieved his goal to be a writer. It was she who urged him to channel his talents toward novel writing and tell the story of his life, the story he had related to her so intimately, so passionately. It was she who encouraged him to structure his work. It was she who funded him for the year during which he needed to write. Thus, Wolfe began his autobiographical outline in 1926 (xi-xii).

Having been inspired by Coleridge and a theory of John Livingston Lowes, one of his Harvard English professors (Rubin 344), of ‘the deep well of unconscious cerebration’ (qtd. in Coniff and Kennedy xii), Wolfe prepared his highly psychoanalytical autobiographical outline, which begins with his own biological conception: “January 1-10 1900,” Wolfe records, “I was conceived” (*Outline* 3). The idea of conception is one that plays out interestingly, given Wolfe’s history. Wolfe biographer David Herbert Donald predates Wolfe’s conception, Donald himself documenting the very conception of Wolfe’s parents’ romance:

Some time after Cynthia’s death in February 1884, Julia called at Wolfe’s shop to solicit his subscription for the *Golden Treasury of Poetry and Prose*, edited by R.H. Stoddard and F. F. Browne. Conversation about this book led to a discussion of others, and that, in turn, resulted in an exchange of romantic novels, like Augusta Jane Evans’s *St. Elmo*, which they were both reading. He invited her to the theater, and they spent many evenings together. Presently his notes to her took on a more urgent tone. ‘Darling,’ he wrote, ‘dons’t [sic] you see I find it imposssible [sic] to stay away from you.’ By October they were engaged, and they were married in January 1885. (7)
Thus, literature and the reading of it were a part of Wolfe before he was ever borne. As if urged on by his genetic makeup, a concept suggestive of the Platonic existence Wolfe considered intriguing (41), he sought to recall his ‘intellectual development’ (Coniff and Kennedy xiii). In addition to recalling sights, sounds, smells—myriad buried traces of his earliest memories, Wolfe’s interactions with literature, not surprisingly, eked their way into a formation of the character of Eugene Gant, the protagonist who would bear forth his own identity, to an extent. Picture books, children’s stories, library-spent hours—all these prod their way into Wolfe’s autobiographical sketch (xiv). One example of Wolfe’s free-associated thoughts reads as such:


Some references in this passage materialize in Look Homeward, Angel; some references that are merely passing in his outline, such as those to Shakespeare, Wolfe extends considerably in both of his first two novels. Thus, it is from deliberate excursions as this into the privileged glimpses of his own memory that Wolfe emerges to suggest highly individualized meaning postmodern in its tendency, as Steven D. Scott recapitulates, the reader as an active entity, to transform the reader from a consumer of the texts into the producer of the texts, to reveal, and to equate meaning derived from the interactions among the reader, the text, and the contexts to reading itself (1) throughout his autobiographical novels.

When Wolfe published Look Homeward, Angel, he was twenty-nine years old. In pages entitled “To the Reader,” he addresses persons who may deem themselves characterized within it and disclaims that any reality lies amidst its pages when he pens:

this book was written in innocence and nakedness of spirit, and that the writer’s main concern was to give fullness, life, and intensity to the actions and people in the book he
was creating. Now that it is to be published, he would insist that this book is a fiction, and that he mediated no man’s portrait here.

Yet, after being received like a prophet who is rejected of his own, in *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe rebuts the very charges he had, at his novel’s onset, sought to dispel:

. . . it was as if I were a sculptor who had found a certain kind of clay with which to model. Now a farmer who knew well the neighborhood (22) from which this clay had come might pass by and find the sculptor at his work and say to him, ‘I know the farm from which you got that clay.’ But it would be unfair of him to say, ‘I know the figure, too.’ Now I think what happened in my native town is that having seen the clay, they became immediately convinced that they recognized the figure, too, and the results of the misconception were so painful and ludicrous that the telling of it is almost past belief. (22-23)

Despite his unfavorable reception in Asheville, when it was time to approach his second novel, he and his editor at Scribner, Maxwell Perkins, agreed that it would be a sequel. Wolfe’s focus this time was to examine Eugene as he works through his “feeling . . . that when a man’s father dies the man must discover a new earth for himself and make a life for himself other than the life his father gave to him or die himself” (Donald 280). In an analogy that likens himself to his own father, Wolfe describes his process of writing the work as that of a stonemason “working on a great block of marble, shaping a figure which no one but its maker could as yet define, but which was emerging more and more into the sinewy lines of composition” (*Story* 39).

Thus, *Of Time and the River* continues the multi-layered journey of Eugene Gant—haunted by echoes of his deceased brother Ben and the estranged relationships with both his dying father and his shrewd business-minded mother—who leaves North Carolina for Harvard. At Harvard Gant involves himself with a vast number of personas and experiences some success at writing. Later, he becomes a college instructor in New York City. However, Eugene experiences being repulsed by the social set that had originally attracted him. Funding his own trip, he embarks on a European tour on which he meets Starwick and two Boston girls named
Ann and Elinor. He spends several weeks with them touring in and around Paris, and a quadrangle of unrequited love of sort emerges: Elinor loves Gant, who loves Ann, who loves Starwick, who involves himself in mysterious and out-of-sight affairs. When Gant’s money expires, he returns to the States. Thus, the long fiction of Eugene Gant ends with the protagonist—just like Thomas Wolfe—having earned his Ivy League education, having experienced maturation, and aspiring to establish himself as an important author. If *Of Time and the River* seems to have no definitive ending, perhaps it is because, as Ernest Sutherland Bates conjectured the year prior to Wolfe’s death: “Eugene Gant is Thomas Wolfe, and Thomas Wolfe is anything but ended” (522).

The real author Thomas Wolfe was a man obsessed with literature. This fact is revealed in his voracious reading since childhood, his thirst for the acquisition of books in his personal library, and even his habit of scanning certain publications in libraries across the world (Wolfe, *Notebooks* vols. I – II). When Wolfe created the character of Eugene Gant, the author passed on to his creation attributes he himself possessed. Consequently, as a preschooler Eugene would flip through hefty leather-bound volumes and read “the progression of the centuries pictorially” (*LHA* 50), his brain teeming with visual images, narratives *sans* words (50). As the boy character grows, so does his appetite. He devours his father’s library, exhausts the town library, borrows books from friends, receives them as nourishment at Leonard’s school, and even catalogues assorted titles as he glimpses pieces of literature in the hands and arms and pockets of acquaintances. During his first fifteen years, reading seemed pleasurable and satisfying for the protagonist. Then in Boston Eugene’s hunger swells to a seemingly insatiable craving:

> Now he would prowl the stacks of the library at night, pulling books out of a thousand shelves and reading in them like a madman. The thought of these vast stacks of books would drive him mad: the more he read, the greater the immense uncountable number of those which he could never read would seem to be. [. . . ] He simply wanted to know
about everything on earth; he wanted to devour the earth, and it drove him mad when he saw he could not do this. (OTR 115-116)

The newly displaced Southern boy finds himself reading not for pleasure, not for sustenance, not even for scholarship, but out of a lust for whatever could be said to constitute human experience (115). Later, in France the Christmas of his twenty-fourth year, Eugene notes in his journals: “I hunger for the treasure that I fancy lies buried in a million forgotten books, and yet my reason tells me that the treasure that lies buried there is so small that it is not worth the pain of disinterment” (662). His craving seems to have become futile. Eugene realizes that his perceived splendorous epiphany of the human experience is only one of an imagined lot. He must acknowledge the bitter paradox: the understanding that what his psyche desires is not worth even the energy he expends unearthing it. Once he has conceded this, he must grapple with the source that has defined for him what is and what is not good reading. Ironically, though Eugene freely differs with “authority” about the quality of certain works, he remains affixed to the canon that has been preordained for him.

And yet nearly everything in the world of books that has touched my life most deeply has come from authority. I have not always agreed with authority that all the books called great are great, but nearly all the books that have seemed great to me have come from among this number. (662)

Eugene Gant, like Thomas Wolfe who created him, displays the markings of a reader at once intelligent and frustrated. Regardless of the lingering emptiness of their journeys through the hundreds of thousands of pages of texts, however, both character and author retain their passion for literature. And buried within one passion lies yet another. Just as Wolfe carried on, in the words of David Herbert Donald, “a lifelong love affair with Shakespeare” (29), so Eugene is also, from his youth, enticed by the Bard’s “sonorous and florid rhetoric passages” (LHA 50) uttered in the oratorical recitations of W.O. Gant. Wolfe, when asked by a fellow student at
Chapel Hill if he would sign his name with his middle initial when he had become a famous writer replied: “Hell no, [ . . . ] how would it look if Shakespeare had signed his stuff ‘William J. Shakespeare?’” (Donald 49). In 1931, after a breakup with Aline Bernstein, a time when he could no longer stand to go to the theater; when he withdrew from various forms of art—music, museums, concerts; when he chose not to interest himself in popular publications, Wolfe did “read and reread [ . . . ] Shakespeare’s plays” (253). Apparently he found comfort, escape, and texts worthy of pondering within Shakespeare’s many discourses.

As Thomas Wolfe himself once stated: “Everything in a work of art is changed and transfigured by the personality of the artist” (Story 22). So, too, would the works of The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, and King Lear be altered and interpreted by the reading and rereadings of Wolfe or by the semi-autobiographical character of his creation, Gant. In a study of readers’ tendencies to make intertextual links, which has extended the numbers of ways that readers establish meaning, Douglas K. Hartman has deconstructed two types of intertextual links that aid in the analysis of the protagonist reading Shakespeare in Wolfe’s Eugene Gant novels. Hartman defines the two categories of intertextual links as those that readers make between ideas, events, and people, and ones readers make within the realm of the sociopolitical. According to Hartman, three different reading patterns can be observed within each category. Within the connections among ideas, events, and people, readers may link intratextually, meaning they establish their own links to and within the words, sentences, and paragraphs of the material read (534-537); they may link intertextually, meaning they establish links to bodies of texts within, between, and beyond the material read (537-545); and they may also link extratextually, meaning they establish links beyond the text at hand and even beyond other printed texts, including films, lectures, conversations, etc. (545-547). Eugene Gant’s connections as a reader cross each of
Hartman’s delineated personal linking patterns. Additionally, Hartman argues that within the connections in the sociopolitical, readers tend to adopt discourse stances that may be categorized as logocentric, where readers’ primary purpose is to discover the author’s meaning (548-550); the intertextual, where readers consider several possible interpretations valid (550-553); and resistant, where readers dismiss author meaning and assert their own instead (553-555). Eugene Gant as a reader participates in each of Hartman’s sociopolitically defined discourse modes. Looking at Eugene as a reader and analyzing him in each of these patterns of reading challenges us to decode the murky indentations left by Wolfe regarding his protagonist, his intertext, and his text. Further, the deeper we enter into the blended world of Wolfian/Gantean/Shakeperean text, the more we must carefully scrutinize the genre we are exploring.
CHAPTER II
IMPRESSIONS OF A TRAGI-COMIC ANTAGONIST

Thomas Wolfe accepted and responded to his grammar school teacher’s encouragement to read his award-winning essay “Shakespeare: The Man”\(^2\) in a declamation contest and took home the gold medal (Donald 30). It would appear that his borrowed invocation “My Shakespeare, rise!” had been powerful enough to inspire him, extraordinary enough to move others, and influential enough to impinge on his shaping of Eugene Gant.

In 1912, prior to his the days when young Thomas was recognized for his winning essay, J.M. Roberts made a trip to the public school to read aloud a story to the sixth grade boys. He then asked them to write down the tale in their own words, for he was recruiting boys for North State Fitting School, a college preparatory academy in Asheville, North Carolina. Roberts’s wife Margaret, whom Wolfe considered “the mother of my spirit who fed me with light” (25), labeled Thomas Wolfe’s response the work of a genius. And, thus, Wolfe’s private school career began (22).

That was reality. In Wolfe’s fiction version of his autobiographical novel, however, at age twelve Eugene Gant was recruited from the public school because of his ability to “read” a painting and formulate a personal response to it. Thus, it was his ability to read a work of art that enabled him to become a charter student of the Altamont Fitting School. Accordingly, to understand Eugene Gant as a reader, one must consider the concepts of reading “texts” in the non-traditional sense as well as the traditional. A text, as Hartman has recounted and many others have defined before him, includes signs that are linguistic and nonlinguistic (523). Eugene Gant does not confine himself to reading texts, Shakespearean or otherwise, as found on the printed page. Indeed, meaning, for the protagonist, is often interpreted from sources beyond

\(^2\) Here punctuation within Wolfe’s essay title reflects Donald’s rendering.
print. Interestingly, while Wolfe presents an intellectually promising protagonist who has read all but four of Shakespeare’s plays, Shakespeare was all that he had read of Elizabethan drama (LHA 257). By yielding these facts to us in a disconnected manner, the narrator hints that young Eugene Gant who knows so much still knows so little, which adds depth to the ironic storytelling nature of Wolfe’s narrative. For it is Eugene Gant’s perception, at once enlightened and yet limited, that Wolfe discloses. Moreover, when we compare Wolfe’s reality to Eugene’s, we see Wolfe employing tactics that are postmodern in their effect. According to Larry McCaffery, one characteristic of postmodern fiction is the author’s tendency to insert fragments of real events into his fictional narrative so that fact and fiction are intermingled in such a way that differentiating the two becomes impossible (xxi). For the purposes of the novel, we know Eugene is our reader. Given the background of the author, though, we sense Wolfe is also our reader. After having experienced several years of private school education, we find Eugene at fifteen, who resonates with Wolfe at fifteen, “reading” his learning environment—as if it were a text—with ironic overtones, especially where it coincides with Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice.

In Look Homeward, Angel one of Eugene’s authority figures, Sister Sheba, robs him of conversation with Margaret Leonard, his beloved “spiritual mother” (193), by “snatching [ . . . ] [his and Margaret’s interchange] out of the air” (257) as she appends herself to a dialogue that evolves to exalt Shakespeare’s genius as it imposes a silence on Eugene. It would seem that the juxtapositioning of Shakespeare’s knowledge and Sheba’s lack thereof prompts Eugene’s processing of a kind of extratextual linking. Eugene’s connections are of the nature that Hartman has defined as associations made beyond the printed text. His response to being robbed of conversation is to read the scene as a text, for, as a reader, he cannot be silenced. Accordingly,
Eugene moves from his interpretation of the dialogue of characters to the dialogue within *The Merchant of Venice*, thus, connecting a text within a text:

“I was talking to a feller the other day,” said Sheba, “a lawyer that you’d think might know a little something and I used a quotation out of *The Merchant of Venice* that every schoolboy knows—‘The quality of mercy is not strained.’ The man looked at me as if he thought I was crazy!” [. . . ]

“I said, ‘Look here, Mr. So-and-so, you may be a smart lawyer, you may have your million dollars that they say you have, but there are a lot of things you don’t know yet. There are a lot of things money can’t buy, my sonny, and one of them is the society of cult-shered men and women.’” (258)

Here we see Eugene making intertextual links where he establishes associations between *The Merchant of Venice* and events and people. Eugene’s “text,” the scene wherein Sheba controls the discourse and squelches Eugene’s voice, is a one-sided, Eugene-excluded monologue in dialogue suggests a text with literary merit, one composed by “his” Shakespeare. Young Eugene notes the irony of the situation as he registers the gap between what Sheba, the seventy-three year-old “cadaver” (185) married to the forty-nine year-old “consumptive husband” (185) says and the manner in which she says it. He captures her nonstandard enunciation of “feller” (258) and “cult-shered” (258) to evoke the humorous contrast between Sheba’s perception of her own self-possessed culture and the lawyer’s perception of her as “crazy” (258), much to the reader’s amusement. Sandwiched between the two pronunciations articulated malapropos is the famous opening line of Portia guised as Balthazar when she addresses Shylock in Act IV, scene i, of *The Merchant of Venice*. The spotlight has been narrowed to a mere line, a snippet of a scene, a fragment of the drama, wherein Shylock the Jewish usurer and Antonio the Christian merchant have assembled to hear the judgment of the law pronounced, for Antonio has forfeited in his bond to Shylock and seems doomed to relinquish the collateral, a pound of his “fair flesh” (I.iii.150) to be exacted from the place closest to his heart. Barbara Tovey has summarized this
scene as one in which the audience sees “Old Law” at war with the “New” (276). In this fashion the line Sheba quotes, “The quality of mercy is not strained” (*LHA* 258), evokes a major conflict in the drama: mercy versus judgment. Thus as Eugene “reads” the scene within the scene, Sister Sheba shows herself to be somewhat fluent, to the extent that she deems any schoolboy ought to be, in parroting major lines of major dramas. Evoking a rather comical tone, Eugene notes that Sheba, an unwelcome figure of authority who has impeded his desired dialogue with Margaret, is reciting the memorized line regarding an ethical question and a legal battle regarding it to a lawyer, someone schooled in the exacting of the law. Given that Antonio and his Christian defenders presumably represent the moral society, one must concede that Sheba achieves a level of concinnity. Eugene’s reading of the scene is intertextual. It blends three basic reader-driven perceptions: the knowledge of Shakespeare and his works making one genteel, the understanding of the drama *The Merchant of Venice*, and the textuality of Eugene’s learning environment, the latter of which seems none too profound at the moment.

However, Eugene, pondering the significance of the application of the play outside of the classroom, also decodes a subtext of which Sheba remains ignorant. Here he enters a discourse extratextual in nature. He dislikes Sheba’s narrative of the situation and, based on his personal preferences, applies his own personal connotations to it. Worthy of noting is the context of the Shakespearean line given to Portia in disguise in *The Merchant of Venice*, for it underscores the fact that what has been introduced as an argument in a court of law—mercy—is completely irrelevant to the case against the merchant. Certainly, Shylock and Antonio had entered into a mutually agreed-upon, legally binding contract. Eugene’s connections between his understanding of the irony in the scene of *The Merchant of Venice* and his understanding of the irony in the scene in which he has found himself a voiceless player imply that Sheba’s line uttered to the
lawyer in the context of a complete conversation we are not privy to is as immaterial to the topic at hand as it is in Shakespeare’s drama. Sheba has introduced a discourse irrelevant to its setting, for “The quality of mercy is not strained” (*LHA* 258), quoted quite out of meaningful context, means nothing to the lawyer whom she understands to be educated, wealthy, and accomplished. In thinking herself “cult-shered” (258), she thus proves herself foolish and her knowledge undeveloped. An accomplished reader of Shakespeare who deems himself an equally accomplished reader of life events, Eugene exhibits a discourse stance that is as sociopolitical as it is a move to link texts with ideas, events, and people. By implication, Gant understands that the moral society in *The Merchant of Venice* secures its own interests by imposing its preference of Christian values upon a non-Christian, who is left forlorn and alone—Shylock has no choice but to sustain and accept their moral-driven edict. As Wolfe’s narrator recounts the *Look Homeward, Angel* scene, he allows no moralizing on Eugene’s part. In a point of view that is, here, more objective than narrative, echoing the feeling of a drama rather than a novel, Eugene merely observes the ironic connection between his understanding of the two items at hand, the “fiction” of Shakespeare and the “reality” of Sheba. Through it he relates his distrust of elders, another characteristic typical in postmodernism (McCaffery xx). In its understatement of presentation, the association is, perhaps, more piercing than any narrated moral dictate might be: Sheba, in her authority-clad role of knowledgeable woman and self-positioned judge, is no more worthy of “the society of cult-shered men and women” (258) than any other character who imposes her values onto others. Moreover, Eugene’s link with the injustice Shakespeare dramatizes in *The Merchant of Venice* implies yet another level of meaning. By associating the existence of the same injustice Shylock receives with what Sheba has done to the lawyer she judges as well as what she has done to Eugene himself, whom she silences, the protagonist of
*Look Homeward, Angel* subtly aligns himself outside the moral society. Thus, Eugene, the protagonist of his own life’s story, establishes a bias: he identifies with the snubbed, the outcast, the forsaken.

Through his intertextual links to scenes from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, we see Eugene Gant as a character divided. On the one hand, he desires freedom from the constraints of authority inflicted on him by the likes of Sheba; on the other, quite ironically, he uses his cognition of an authoritative text by the Bard himself to cast the very judgment he condemns. Thus, the protagonist’s mastery of Shakespearean works such as *The Merchant of Venice* actually ensures that he remains shackled to authoritative constraints. Wolfe, it would seem, by positioning his young protagonist as highly focused in his proficiency in Shakespeare yet extremely lacking in his understanding of other works from the time period, subtly reduces his effectiveness to the level of Sister Sheba’s. Each reader knows only so much. Eugene longs to render Sheba’s ignorance, thereby stripping her and her ideologies—her “knowledge” of the great works of the great Shakespeare—so that he can lay them bare for what they are, arbitrary impositions from sources of power. Eugene sees Sheba’s imposition on his and Margaret’s dialogue and into the interchange with the lawyer’s as arbitrary. She is a source of power Eugene would prefer to dispel. This longing to reveal the arbitrariness of authority is one of the defining attributes of postmodernism (McAffery xx). Yet, while he would defy the bogus definition of “cult-shered society” persons like Sheba perpetrate, he commands the ability to judge the shallowness of her definition because he himself possesses the very knowledge that defines said culture. The irony puts him in a catch-22 situation that he and Wolfe bitterly understand cannot be escaped.
In Book VII, “Kronos and Rhea: The Dream of Time” in *Of Time and the River*, Eugene Gant is no longer a boy but now a mature, educated young man who has just begun to come into his own identity as a writer and who has begun to form some conception of what America is while he tours foreign lands. In Chapter XCVII he is at once lost and yet at home in his dreams. He is at once comforted by and yet unsettled by the eternality of the river, of time itself. He is at once certain he hears the outcries from voices around the world and yet disquieted that there exist more voices he will never hear. And it is in this context, within his final pages of the second part of his autobiographical journey, that Eugene not only once more alludes to *The Merchant of Venice*—this time its focal point, an episode from Act III, scene i—but also parodies it. The emphasis of the scene at hand is on Shylock dealing with his double-edged sword of pain: the rebellion of his daughter and the mockery of his enemy. At this point in Shakespeare’s drama, Shylock has learned that his daughter Jessica has stolen from him and forsaken her heritage, only to elope with Lorenzo and become a Christian. We see the character as a man scorned because of his heritage. Having been betrayed by his own flesh only heightens his desire for vengeance upon Antonio. However, in *Of Time and the River* a narrative voice commandeers the original Shakespearean scene and alters it, replacing the Jew with a “Yank”:

I am a Yank! [. . .] Hath not a Yank ears? Hath not a Yank lies? Truths, bowels of mercy, fears, joys, and lusts? Is he not warmed by the same sun, washed by the same ocean, rotted by the same decay, and eaten by the same worms as a German is? If you kill him, does he not die? If you sweat him, does he not stink? If you lie with his wife or his mistress, does she not whore, lie, fornicate and betray, even as a Frenchman’s does? If you strip him, is he not naked as a Swede? Is his hide less white than Baudelaire’s? Is his breath more foul than the King of Spain’s? Is his belly bigger, his neck fatter, his face more hoggish, and his eye more shiny than a Munich brewer’s? Will he not cheat, rape, thieve, whore, curse, hate, and murder like any European? (848-849)

The narrative voice Wolfe establishes here is difficult to place. It takes on a philosophical tone that is somewhat removed, somewhat detached from time and setting. Though obscured in its
presentation, the parody within the dream is the conception of Eugene. For this reason, we can identify Eugene’s personal links as well as sociopolitical ones. Fundamentally, the fact that this dream-like scene intermingles with the scene from *The Merchant of Venice* characterizes it as intertextual: it is one in which Eugene constructs links between a text—in this case, *The Merchant of Venice*—and its events and people. In Eugene’s rendering, reverberations of Shylock’s having been “disgrac’d [. . .], hind’red [. . .], laugh’d at [. . .], mock’d [. . .], scorn’d [. . .], [and] thwarted” (III.i.54-57) solely because his is a Jew are modified. Rather than a solitary Jew pondering that his eyes cannot see his own dismal plight, in *Of Time and the River* we see a Yank representative of a brotherhood pondering that his ears cannot hear the discontented voices crying out against him. Intertextually, Wolfe connects Shylock’s conflict with that of the World War I. The Yank, because Gant equates him with Shylock’s character, seems to be, like Shylock, one who exists outside the moral society. Thus within the puzzling scene, Eugene, like the Shakespeare he loves, seems to challenge the judgment of the moral society he himself determines to define. In lieu of Shylock’s personal and tangible voice, Eugene’s elusive visionary consciousness compares the nationalities of European soils that condemn the “American.” Each of the peoples mentioned in his Shylock-evoking narrative—those from Germany, France, Sweden, Spain—suggests an analogous relationship: the “foreigner” who disdains the “American” is likened to the Christian who persecutes the Jew. As there is no humor to be gleaned from this scene in its original form in the Shakespearean text, so is there no humor present in Eugene’s parody. The intertextuality takes on a sociopolitical dimension that offers itself up for multiple interpretations. Does Eugene himself know what this passage means? Who defines a Yank? Exactly what defines a Yank? Who is right and who is wrong, according to Eugene’s reading? Has Eugene’s mind concluded that the earth alone is
sacred and good? That the people who inhabit it are profane and corrupt? What are we to do with
the fact that so many of these nationalities make up American culture as well? Eugene’s
conclusions, while certainly biased towards his native land, are ambiguous. No longer a youth
but now a matured adult as well as a burgeoning writer, his envisaged connections have taken on
new depth, with obscurity as murky as the dream that he is relating.

Considering the identification of Eugene in his autobiography with the tragi-comic role of
antagonist Shylock, who, as Ann Barton has stated, exists as a player in yet an alien to the
society he belongs (285), is critical to comprehending Eugene’s interpretations as a character.
From the intertextual workings of *The Merchant of Venice*, another text arises. It could, in fact,
be viewed as a commentary on Eugene/Wolfe himself. But the narrative voice Wolfe employs—
especially in *Of Time and the River*—can at times obfuscate the character/author relationship.
Regarding this difficulty, C. Hugh Holman maintains that Wolfe’s third person narrative has a
tendency to shift in voice and time and, thus, creates a confusion therein. He asserts, furthermore,
that Wolfe’s usage of it in his first two novels was primarily an editorial decision (78-79). Yet,
regardless of original authorial intent in either work or the criticism regarding the author’s
command or lack thereof of the narration, both Gant novels are fashioned throughout from
Eugene’s point of view. Further, everywhere Eugene intersects with *The Merchant of Venice*, he
somehow identifies with Shylock, even to the extent of taking on his voice. In *The Merchant of
Venice*, Shylock is saved from being a tragic character in that he is allowed to live the life of a
Christian at the end, something the Elizabethan audience, which would empathize with the
plights of the moral society, would have deemed positive. This end, however, will never bring
peace or comfort to Shylock, nor does it to Eugene.
Shylock’s relations with others are, at best, mistrustful (Barton 285). One could argue that so are Eugene’s. Indeed, though The Merchant of Venice is categorized as a comedy, there is not much clowning or many pleasantries to be enjoyed in the Shylock/Antonio plot. The antagonist’s character certainly experiences the same sort of alienation found at the core of Eugene Gant, one Eugene, like Shylock, seems never to escape. Similarly, while the humorous perspective of Eugene’s youthful observations are comical, the ponderings that full-grown prejudice unleashed attains are tragic. Significantly, it is the raw pain of Shylock’s demoralizing woe that is evoked in the final pages of Eugene’s narrative.

The origin of Wolfe’s passage in Of Time and the River can be traced to his Notebooks. On June 11, 1930, at 4:15 P.M., he scrawled this note (within a list of other notes):

4. The barren land (Make this elaborate—“Hath not a Yank” etc.) (470)

The editors’ note on Wolfe’s entry reads:

This is one of the products of Wolfe’s national consciousness during the summer of 1930. It found its place, at length, in Eugene Gant’s dream of time and longing for home in OT&R. The English voice has spoken with gentle deprecation: “Of co’se, I know you couldn’t undahstand my feelin’—faw aftah all, you ah a Yank—but thöh you ah! Sorry!” and Wolfe’s bardic American voice takes up a long reply: “Hath not a Yank ears? . . . .” (470)

Indeed, Eugene Gant’s and Thomas Wolfe’s biases become interwoven; then they are interwoven into the fiction, into narrative, to the point that we cannot rightly separate the two.

The acts of confusing the narrative, the perspective of the narrative, and the authorial voice of the narrative are qualities indicative of postmodernism. In a move that could be considered playful, another characterizing trait of postmodern authors (McCaffery xx), Wolfe “plays” with the original Shakespearean passage. Wolfe’s twist removes the perspective of Shylock, the character who has been discriminated against, to replace it with the perspective of Eugene in an antagonistic-like outcry that, ironically, while it may perceive its own discrimination, becomes
discriminatory in his retaliation. Eugene’s vengeance will be his thoughts, his words, his quest for judgment. Having so read *The Merchant of Venice* and having so matured to parody it in his dream, Gant further evidences characteristics suggestive of postmodern fiction: blending dark humor with literary parody and surrealism (xix). Traditionally, to parody a work suggests that it is notable, and, perhaps, that it should not be. Knowing Wolfe’s love of Shakespeare, it would seem improbable that he intended this surrealistic-type monologue to ridicule either the tragi-comedy or its author. Instead, this may be considered another of Wolfe’s tributes—albeit indirect—to “his” Shakespeare.
CHAPTER III

IMPRESSIONS OF DUPLICITY

And meanwhile it may be well to recollect that Shakespeare merely wrote *Hamlet*; he was not Hamlet.


While it may not surprise us to find bits and pieces of fiction-in-the-making inscribed in an author’s personal notebooks—character sketches, chapter outlines, ideas for scenes—finding an imaginary character’s ironic comments regarding the author’s wistful journal entries is quite another experience, indeed. But this is precisely the case within The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe. Wolfe’s Eugene Gant’s remarks actually find their way into Wolfe’s own notebooks—post Wolfe’s entry. Wolfe had entered a series of definitions and descriptors of time in 1931, and then, according to Kennedy and Reeves, in 1934 the persona of Eugene Gant added his comments about time, by borrowing the following series of quotations from *Hamlet*: ³

For this relief much thanks; tis bitter cold and I am sick at heart.  
Well said, old mole! Canst work i’ the earth so fast?  
Wild and whirling words, my lord! (549)

The effect of Eugene’s scribbled recitations in response to Wolfe’s purposeful and researched reflections establishes a sort of dialogue between Eugene and Wolfe. Hamlet’s first line penned by Eugene in response to Wolfe’s musings on Time is exchanged between the two sentinels meeting at the midnight hour (I.i.8); the second, between the ghost of King Hamlet and Prince Hamlet and his friends as they prepare to swear on Hamlet’s sword by the oath he has yet to form (II.i.163); the third, Horatio’s response to Hamlet’s initial remarks after he had spoken with the ghost of King Hamlet (II.i.133). In the fictional character’s sequence of comments, Eugene

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intimates several perspectives regarding time. In his first comment, Wolfe’s protagonist suggests that a time of imminent visitation is at hand. In his second borrowed line from Prince Hamlet, Eugene Gant implies that the time to act follows a meeting of the minds. Then, in Eugene’s final bit of ironic commentary he implies that an appearance of insanity follows the time spent in tête-à-tête with an apparition that could save or damn. While it is not my purpose here to discuss Wolfe’s or Eugene’s philosophy of time, it is meet to note that the voice of Eugene Gant permeates Wolfe’s journals. Gant’s persona recalls the text of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, gleans from the character of Hamlet his own story, and speaks the resulting links in the private notebooks of his own creator. Given this discourse between author and character and Shakespearean lines, one can surmise that reading the tragedy of Hamlet impacted the author Wolfe and his character Gant immensely.

Moreover, another entry in Wolfe’s notebooks wherein he directly mentions Shakespeare’s characters—specifically Hamlet and Lear, the latter of which will be discussed in Chapter IV—is found under Wolfe’s heading “A Note on the Quality of Night and Darkness in American Writing” (920). These entries would have been penned between 1937 and 1938. Near the middle of his list of reflections in American writing, one entry found amidst many others is “the great gold ring of Chaucer’s coin is not for us—nor Shakespeare—Hamlet [is] dark and Macbeth full of midnight hell and Lear storm-Stygian—and yet the whole of it is all slashed through with gold and light” (920). Again, there is no need here to digress into a discussion of Wolfe’s quest to define America or its literature; however, we can conclude that the dark elements of American writers seemed to Wolfe “coarse” (920), unrefined and distasteful. Conversely, the dark elements of Shakespeare might have seemed to Wolfe refined and worthy of imitation. And so the fact that Wolfe reads Hamlet’s character as “dark” but not “coarse”, one
that is mysterious and appealing to those who read of him, and the fact that Eugene responds to
mediations on time in terms of “dark” *Hamlet* will prove themselves significant as we study
Eugene’s interaction with this drama full of night and darkness within his autobiography.

A common impression apparent throughout the works of Wolfe’s biographers is the
divided nature of his personality, represented at their extremes by “the lamb and the tiger” (64),
as John Idol, Jr. states. Wolfe could betimes “scoff or praise” (64) others. His social behavior
was unpredictable: he might be one time garrulous and anther time remote (64). As we have seen
and will continue to observe, Eugene Gant, covered with the murky indentations of the makings
of the man who authored him, is himself a character divided. Without a doubt he greatly admires
and praises “his” Shakespeare’s accomplishments; without a doubt he also occasionally scoffs at
Shakespeare’s style. While attending Leonard’s school, Eugene fancies himself—at fifteen—a
competent critic of Shakespeare’s tendency to speak “absurdly and pompously when he might
better have spoken simply” (*LHA* 256). As a reader, Eugene confesses that he tires of the
eloquent passages—the “admired beauties” (256) he calls them—Shakespearean characters and
lines immortalized by some divine Majority, those critics who determine what is labeled good;
perhaps, too, those who instruct. Instead of the scenes of his father’s classical oratory
repertoire—“Marc Antony’s funeral oration, Hamlet’s soliloquy, the banquet scene in Macbeth,
the scene between Desdemona and Othello before he strangles her” (*LHA* 50-51)—Eugene finds
Shakespeare at his very best in lines often overlooked by orators, by readers. As an example,
Eugene interprets the following, citing *Hamlet’s* Laertes after he learns from the Queen of
Ophelia’s death:

“Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears.”

You really can’t beat that (he thought). (256)
Interestingly, Eugene scripts himself a line as he reads, even inserting an aside of sorts—“(he thought)” (256)—into his dialogue not with Laertes, but Shakespeare. Further, given the nature of an aside, we must wonder if Eugene is addressing his own reading audience, as well. Here we see Wolfe confusing our expectations of genre. Are we reading his novel? Shakespeare’s drama? Or is this, rather, a dramatic interchange between Eugene and Shakespeare or between Eugene and the reader of his autobiography? Wolfe would have never had the opportunity to hear Derrida utter: “Ne pas mêler les genres” (qtd. in Atridge 223). But had he, he might have been pleased to know the hypothesis Derrida argues in “The Law of Genre,” for in it Derrida asserts that a work belonging to and participating in a genre is two different things entirely. According to Derrida, texts participate in one or more genres, and participation does not equate with belonging to the one or more genres (230). Certainly Wolfe the author inherently resisted the law of genre of which Derrida so philosophized. Whatever the overlap of the margins of genus in the interplay of Eugene and the lines of Laertes, Eugene the reader actively participates in and comments on the tragedy he reads. Seemingly not concerning himself with what nomenclature of writing he was compiling, in the Laertes passage Wolfe presents Eugene as a reader who comprehends the profound significance of the two fleeting lines. Here Eugene’s reading is intratextual, for he is making connections within the words, the sentence, and the surrounding text of Hamlet. These lines appeal to the aesthetic nature of Eugene: he deems them simple and, hence, beautiful. They clearly reinforce the plot, for Ophelia has drowned, overtaken by water. Eugene links the significance with Laertes’ succinct eulogy of sorts with the weight of what his few words imply: Laertes will not dishonor his sister in her death by the outpouring of more water—even if spilled from his own mourning eyes—upon her lifeless body. Moreover, given Eugene’s identification with the antagonist Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, there is
significance in his conclusion that the lines of Laertes, also an antagonist, cannot be “beat” (256). In the tragedy of *Hamlet*, Laertes exists as the literal antithesis of Hamlet. Hamlet is the moralist who cannot move himself to vengeance; Laertes is the immoralist who will not be delayed in his vengeance. The two Shakespearean characters find themselves in similar dilemmas but deal with their crises differently; notably, Eugene offers his praise to the more adversarial character.

In the final scene of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe evokes *Hamlet* once more. The scene is surreal. It takes place at 3:15 A.M. in the town square, “under a blazing moon” (514). It is just before Eugene Gant is about to leave for Harvard; the character is contemplative, walking, sleepless, alone. Under the moonlight Eugene can make out his father’s name “faded, on the old brick” (514) of his shop. He notes the postured marble angels. Then he sees his deceased brother Ben. But Ben denies that he has died, denies that he is a ghost. Is he angel or demon sent to save or to damn? He offers Eugene no answers, no explanations. In what appears to be a supernatural event, the headstone angels uproot their feet and rustle back and forth; the stony lambs are freed of their rigidity to bleat and graze. Eugene is overwhelmed by it all. Then Ben melts in the light of dawn like the ghost of King Hamlet when he “scent[s] the morning air” (I.v.58). The scene is ephemeral. And it is within this setting that the dialogue between the real/not real Ben and the night-roaming Eugene takes place. Eugene cannot conceive that such a vision as this can come to pass on the square in Altamont. To everything he sees he says, “not here!” (LHA 517). For Eugene, even the chimes of the bank deny that his experience in this place could be legitimate. Eugene, though a player in the scene, reads it as well:

The bank-chimes struck the half hour.
“And there’s the bank” he cried.
“That makes no difference,” said Ben.
“Yes,” said Eugene, “it does!”
I am thy father’s spirit, doomed for a certain term to walk the night—
“But not here! Not here, Ben!” said Eugene.

“Where?” said Ben wearily. (517)

The most fantastical element of this scene is the echo of King Hamlet’s ghost. Eugene “hears” it. He assesses it. It is hazily narrated in one of the most evocative scenes of Look Homeward, Angel. Employing both reading patterns, Eugene’s links are intertextual: he establishes a connection between Hamlet’s introduction to his father’s ghost and his comprehension of his brother’s form. In making the textual link—which itself has no speaker, no identifiable narrative voice—Eugene evokes multiple images, including Hamlet’s willingness to be damned rather than not speak to the spirit or goblin; Hamlet’s disclosure that he does “not set [his own] life at a pin’s fee” (I.v.65); and Hamlet’s understanding “that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!” (I.v.108). Further, as a discourse stance, he is considering several interpretations. Eugene seems to be reading the scene attempting to validate it hoping, “Touching this vision here, / It is an honest ghost” (I.v.137-138). Perhaps his brother Ben is wrong; he really is dead, he really is a ghost. Perhaps he is not honest, the vision cannot be trusted. Perhaps as Eugene had bemused earlier “which one of us is the ghost, I wonder?” (516), he is imagining that he himself is the true ghost, or the “honest” ghost. Perhaps he, like Hamlet, is considering the outcome of death, an appraisal of life, or the essence of duplicity.

As pointed out by John Idol, Jr., Wolfe did not believe in “daemons” (27), but he incorporated Shakespearean Graeco-Christian pneumatology as a means metaphorically to represent our dualistic nature as he saw it (27). While Wolfe uses a deliberate literary trope, in this concluding scene we also see Wolfe’s being postmodern in his style as he evokes various stimuli that serve to at once elucidate and confuse the narrative. The well known scene of Hamlet is conjured to add ignotum per ignotius and subtext to Eugene and Ben’s meeting. Even the very perspective of the Shakespearean allusion’s narrative is nebulous. We know not from whence it
comes. Revisiting the authorial voice of the narrative, we are left to ponder, like Hamlet, like Eugene, and perhaps like Wolfe, whether or not this “ghost” and his directives can be trusted. In the pages of Eugene’s story that follow, we learn that in his vision, this vision, Eugene’s “head was sick with the million books” (LHA 520); thus, Eugene links this vision with his reading. His mind is overloaded. Prefiguring Wolfe’s contemplations on darkness and night in American writing that would find themselves penned in The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe several years following the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, we see Eugene “alone with Ben, and their feet were planted on darkness, their faces were lit with the cold high terror of the stars” (520). If Wolfe in his notebooks determines that “Hamlet is dark…yet the whole of [Shakespeare’s dark writings] is slashed through with gold and light” (920) as he attempts to better understand American works, perhaps Gant in his synthesis of his own reading of “the million books” that included Hamlet attempts to refine the impact of coarse darkness in literature long pondered by Wolfe from his own personal reading. Where author and character meet, where their narrative experiences mingle, one must ask: “Whose story is this”? The postmodern tactics Wolfe employs leave that conclusion an item for debate.

During Eugene’s post-Harvard experiences narrated in Book IV “Proteus: The City” in Chapter XLVIII of Of Time and the River, Eugene “reads” the Hotel Leopold and its questionable patrons and their interlocutions, making a text out of them. The setting of the Hotel Leopold is described as blanketed in “the spirit of defeat” (437) by its “terrible transiency—not the frank transiency of the great tourist hotels with their constant daily flux of changing faces—but the horrible transiency of lives held here for a period in the illusion of a brief and barren permanence” (437). The climax of the scene features the narration of “Hamlet’s mighty judgment” (446) regarding “what a piece of work is man” (Hamlet II.ii). Inside the hotel’s white-
tiled lobby, amidst a semi-crowded gathering of the old and dying, one character stands out: Doctor Thornton, one of the first female physicians in the country. When she enters, she becomes the center of attention. The otherwise lifeless crowd grows more buoyant with her every word. They are enraptured to learn that Doctor Thornton has been stowed away in her room all day, reading. Though they are clueless as to whom Ruskin is, they, nonetheless, reason that Thornton’s reading of his prose passages is noble. Further, with Doctor Thornton’s philosophizing on the beauty of life as she poses such rhetorically leading questions as “‘How can any one grow tired who lives and moves and breathes in this great world of ours?...’” (445) and making her audience aware of the fact that she “‘feast[s her] soul upon the infinite beauties of God’s heaven, the glorious proportion of the sidereal universe’” (445) to see everywhere “the noble works that man has fashioned” (446), Eugene quite wryly labels her proclamation a “sonorous eulogy” (446). Then, in the pinnacle of her performance Doctor Thornton in all her glory quotes Hamlet in some of his most memorable lines, only to be undercut in her philosophy by Eugene’s ironic analysis:

“‘What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a God!’”

And having sonorously pronounced Hamlet’s mighty judgment, the wonderful old woman, who had herself for thirty years been one of the most prosperous abortionists in the nation, looked benevolently about her at all the specimens of God’s choice article who were assembled in the lobby. (446)

Here Eugene’s link between ideas takes on a sociopolitical dimension and implies logocentricity, where his primary purpose is to bring to light the author’s meaning. For the irony Eugene finds in the endeared doctor’s character cannot be understood without proper understanding of Shakespeare’s lines. It would seem Wolfe intended a deliberate parallel to Shakespeare’s structure, for the deep and probing thoughts given to Hamlet in Act II, scene ii, of the tragedy
seem misplaced, at best, as they are couched within his interchange full of antic disposition with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet’s palaver seems full of crazed ramblings, on the one hand, and intelligent ponderings, on the other. So, too, is the effect given the intertextual workings within Wolfe’s writing. Eugene makes no single interpretation of the scene. Is the doctor as pathetic as the rest of her entourage? Is she truly noble in spirit? Is she a mad woman? Is hers a picture of feminism at its best, or at its worst? Is there nothing more to be found in the aged than the hypocritical and the lost? Has she grown weary of living? As Doctor Thornton exits and the chapter ends, Gant leaves us reading her final line: “‘Tired? How could one ever grow tired, my friends, in this great world of ours?’” (447). We feel as if the lights have been dimmed and the final curtain has been drawn. This drama is over. Yet the grander work of fiction continues its pluralistic participation within distorted boundaries of genre. Wolfe proceeds, breaking the law of academia that proclaims, “Genres are not to be mixed” (Derrida 223) as he goes.

Near the final pages of Of Time and the River, as he did with The Merchant of Venice, Wolfe once again blends Eugene’s dreams with his Eugene’s literary knowledge to bring about something of an echo yet something new. Evoking a soliloquy of Hamlet’s as the tragic hero, Eugene in his dreams is seemingly fascinated with death as he ponders what it means “not to be,”

To die, to sleep—
No more, and by a sleep we say end

To die, to sleep—
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause; there’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life: (III.i.59-68)

Wolfe, fragmenting Shakespeare’s original, synthesizes from it something of his own.

“While Paris Sleeps!”—
By God, while Paris sleeps, to wake and walk and not to sleep;
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
to wake and walk and sleep and wake, and sleep again,
seeing dawn come at the window-square that cast its wedge before our glazed, half-
sleeping eyes,
seeing soft, hated foreign light, and breathing soft, dull languid air that could not bite and
tingle up the blood,
seeing legend and lie and fable wither in our sight as we saw what we saw, knew what we
knew.  

A semblance of the tragic verse that in him seems to live and move and have its being, Wolfe’s
prose bears a ghostly semblance to Shakespeare’s. Poetically, Gant’s dream and Hamlet’s
rumination compare in structure and movement; in topic, they contrast two distinct yet analogous
ideas: the portent in contemplating the unknown dreams of death and the horror in the dream of
wakefulness that cannot elude reality. When we note Wolfe’s reversal in content, in context, then
we become cognizant of the significance Eugene finds in dreaming and death and waking and
living, recounted from Gant, dreamless in his own dreams, awake when others sleep, a product
of the night.

Realigning Wolfe’s text into poetically styled lines makes more apparent the
intertextuality. Wolfe has fused Eugene’s dream with the scene from Hamlet to emphasize the
repetition of the idea of sleep—to the extent that the word “sleep” itself is positioned similarly in
Shakespeare’s text and in the Gantean/Wolfean text. Eugene’s intertextual interplay of Hamlet’s
lines within his own dream does not reveal—as Hamlet’s lines do—a conflicted man in his full
consciousness searching for what it means to die, what it means to sleep eternally. Conversely,
Eugene’s dream unveils a conflicted Eugene searching what it means “to wake and walk and not

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4 For the purpose of correlating both Shakespeare’s and Wolfe’s pieces, Wolfe’s prose passage has been divided into
poetic divisions. The original text in its prose form reads as follows:
“While Paris Sleeps!”—By God, while Paris sleeps, to wake and walk and not to sleep; to wake and walk
and sleep and wake, and sleep again, seeing dawn come at the window-square that cast its wedge before
our glazed, half-sleeping eyes, seeing soft, hated foreign light, and breathing soft, dull languid air that could
not bite and tingle up the blood, seeing legend and lie and fable wither in our sight as we saw what we saw,
knew what we knew. (849)
to sleep” (849) at night, while Paris sleeps, the latter phrase itself another allusion possibly to two different films that highlighted hidden evils of the Parisian life.\textsuperscript{35} Also, extratextual is Eugene’s unconscious awareness—his self-subjugated desires not to see what he sees, not to know what he knows about the foreign land he presently inhabits. As with the similar blending of scenes in \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, here, too, Wolfe’s quasi parodying of the Shakespearean lines it evokes, counters Hamlet’s longings in Eugene. The first protagonist wants to know; the second does not. As is his discourse pattern, Eugene’s intertextuality yields multiple readings. He does not delineate what the legends, the lies, and the fables of Paris are. Eugene merely records that he perceives them to be such. His implications remain unspecified. He, the stranger, walks and roams, not sleeping while Paris sleeps, but instead, sleeping when dawn breaks over the foreign land that falls so short of his native soil. No longer fascinated with Paris, Eugene, no longer innocent to the facts, no longer romanticizes it. In writing such passages as this Wolfe, perhaps, communicates his workings out of what Hamlet himself says: “A dream itself is but a shadow” (II.ii.260).

The multi-layered discourse—Gant to Wolfe, Wolfe to Gant, Gant to Shakespeare, Gant to his audience, Wolfe to Shakespeare—that Wolfe evokes through Eugene around the idea of \textit{Hamlet} suggests the complexity within Gantian/Woflean concepts regarding action versus inaction and timeliness versus meaninglessness, each antithetical in nature, each contemplated in Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}, each at war within Shakespeare’s protagonist and antagonists, each manipulated in Wolfe’s \textit{Look Homeward, Angel} and \textit{Of Time and the River}. For \textit{Hamlet},

\textsuperscript{5} The two films entitled “While Paris Sleeps” may have both influenced Wolfe. One, a melodrama released in 1923, was based on a novel, The Glory of Love, by "Pan." In it, a Parisian woman falls in love with a young American tourist of whom her father does not approve. In love with this same woman, a local sculptor in a rage of jealousy kidnaps and tortures the American, who is rescued at the last minute, reunited with his Paris love, and who receives, this time, her father’s blessing. The second film is a 1932 expose of the European white slave trade. A convict father escapes from jail to save his daughter from falling into prostitution; however, he, who supposedly died a war hero in WWI, must hide from her his identity.
considered a time-consuming play, to prove so heavily influential in what can be considered
time-consuming works of Wolfe, becomes, then, emblematic of Wolfe’s profuseness. Wolfe has
written of Eugene Gant, as McCaffery might have described, “mammoth encyclopedic
narratives” (xiii). Further, Wolfe seems to have devised a structure of discourse that multiplies
itself in the plausible perspectives it invokes as he maneuvers his contemporary experiences
through diverse “allusions, symbols, and language forms” (xiii). Likewise, Eugene’s application
of his knowledge of *Hamlet* is one vehicle by which Thomas Wolfe meets another criterion for
postmodern writing. McCaffery has defined this criterion as that of transforming myth and the
culture of the day into presumed fiction (xiii). When one considers Wolfe’s fascination with the
Platonic idea of prenatal existence (Donald 41; Idol 28; Kennedy “Question of Genre” 9), his
interest in what Kennedy labels “the naturalistic myth of the universe governed by chance”
(“Question of Genre” 9), his preoccupation with John Livingston Lowes’s theory of the “deep
well of unconscious cerebration” (Coniff and Kennedy xiii; Donald 72; Idol 27), his sincere
interest in psychoanalysis (Coniff and Kennedy xiii; Donald 148-149; Idol 26), and his
concerns in the thirties with the social ills of the Great Depression (Idol 29), one can scrutinize
how the myths and cultures of his own learning and life work their way into the major works that
feature protagonist Eugene Gant. Additionally, Wolfe blends the myth and culture from “his”
Shakespeare’s day—the Renaissance belief in ghosts and their existence as trustworthy or
deceitful. In these ways, Thomas Wolfe casts a murky impression of an author postmodern in
spirit. Perhaps Bernard DeVoto was somewhat misdirected when he stated, “Mr. Wolfe is
astonishingly immature, and [ . . . ] he has mastered neither the psychic material out of which a
novel is made nor the technique of writing fiction” (134). Perhaps, instead, “Mr. Wolfe” was
merely an author ahead of his time.
CHAPTER IV

IMPRESSIONS OF FOOLS

Wolfe was an exasperating man, a warm companion with a rich sense of humor and touching generosity of spirit and, alternately, a bastard of truly monumental dimensions…the good Wolfe and the bad Wolfe.

-William Styron, “The Shade of Thomas Wolfe”

Regarding Wolfe’s patrilineal side of the family, Thomas Wolfe biographer Andrew Turnbull reports that W.O. Wolfe, Thomas’s loquaciously charged father, “would often read aloud the more sonorous passages of Shakespeare” (13), and that “Tom inherited his [father’s] taste for rhetoric” (13). Regarding Thomas Wolfe’s childhood household and how W.O. related with the matrilineal side of the family, another Wolfe biographer, David Herbert Donald, records:

Thomas Wolfe grew up in a kind of social no-man’s land. His family had neighbors but not friends. They had relatives in the city but rarely saw them. Julia’s brothers, who became prosperous businessmen, had little to do with their sister and her numerous, rowdy offspring, whom they called “those wolves.” W.O. reciprocated their dislike, and he taught his children that Westall was “a synonym for selfishness, coldness, and unpleasant eccentricity.” (22)

Additionally, Thomas Wolfe captures his own reflection of his parents, the two strains of his family, in The Autobiographical Outline for Look Homeward, Angel when he ponders, parenthetically,

(Meanwhile, what was happening between them [W.O. and Julia]? The powerful instinct for property was growing in her—the children growing up—[his] daily tirades did not matter) (6)

Correspondingly, one can sense the dissension between the two lineages and the possible uncertainty this created among the Wolfes’ children. Because Thomas Wolfe went on to write in his Outline that “[e]verything I write [is] immensely flavored with me” (56), it is no surprise that in the fictional world he scripted for Eugene, the protagonist must come to terms with his
family’s discord: W. O. Gant for his oratory and the Pentlands for their foolery (256). Suitably, then, reflections of Shakespeare’s plays in general evoke in Eugene discord, resentment, and betrayal.

Eugene determines that, though his father has a passion for great literature, W. O. does not understand what defines truly inimitable work, for “most of the famous [Shakespearean] declamatory passages he had been familiar with, for years, by Gant’s recitation…now…wearied him” (256). Moreover, Eugene despises W. O. ’s drunken ramblings as well as his habit of launching his regular dinnertime “supreme invective, a ceremony which required a half hour in composition, and another three-quarters, with repetition and additions, in delivery” (41). And as he reads Shakespearean fools’ lines such as those uttered by Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Eugene becomes cognizant that they “reminded him unpleasantly of the Pentlands” (256).

Eugene has rejected the foolish talk of the religious fanatic Bacchus Pentland who had been said to roam the countryside announcing, “Hit’s a comin’!” (8) with his “flat, drawling, complacent” (8) voice as he repeatedly predicted various dates for the Battle of Armageddon. Eugene has placed no value on the “ribald” (Idol 154) speech and “verbal fire” (154) of his Uncle Bascom Pentland. He even tires of what Idol terms a “superstitious nature” (130) and what Eugene terms the “nagging and carping attack[s]” (*LHA* 417) of his mother, Eliza Pentland Gant. Thus, elegance from rote, tedious storytelling, turns of phrases, and railing, boastful, or indecent wit—these all mean nothing to Eugene. The protagonist has come to loathe the distinct markings of the Pentland clan—“its pert complacency, its incessant punning, its success” (24) as he connects them with a barrage of fools.

Not only does Eugene connect his dislike of Shakespeare’s humor with his home environment, but with it he also connects a disappointment within the educational milieu of his
adolescence. Eugene’s perspective of thoughtless humor convinces him that Shakespeare’s mastery does not lie in the Bard’s “windy fools” (256). Further, Eugene reads his teacher’s interaction with the Shakespearean text as a text, labeling Margaret’s amusement as she laughs “dutifully” (256) at such a source of comedy as feigned. In fact, he implies that he questions his teacher’s proficiency:

And all the wordy pinwheels of the clowns, which Margaret laughed at dutifully, and exhibited as specimens of the master’s swingeing wit, he felt vaguely were dull. He never had any confidence in Shakespeare’s humor—his Touchstones were not only windy fools, but dull ones. (LHA 256)

Here, in sociopolitical connections wherein he takes a discourse stance as a resistant reader, one who, according to Hartman, dismisses all authorial meaning and asserts his own instead (553-555), he snubs the humor to which his “spiritual mother” (LHA 193) responds, finding it boring at best. Whatever Shakespeare’s intended meaning in scripting the lines, Eugene finds them pointless. Thus it is Eugene’s own preferences that dictate his perception of quality and scholarship which, in turn, extratextually, extend to those in authority over him. Thus, for his own entertainment he

went about and composed parodies, which, with a devil’s grin, he told himself would split the sides of posterity. Such as: “Aye nuncle, an if Shrove Tuesday come last Wednesday, I’ll do the capon to thy cock, as Tom O’Ludgate told the shepherd when he found the cowslips gone. Dost bay with two throats, Cerberus? Down boy, down!” (256)

Eugene the reader now takes on the role of the author. The protagonist establishes a sense of authorship, superseding the authority of Shakespeare by blending altered lines from several
different Shakespearean clownish characters or dramas for his own amusement, enjoying the intertextuality he musters within his own mind. His inclusion of the word *nuncle* carries a certain level of import, for “nuncle” can be traced to only one of Shakespeare’s plays, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, which itself is the source of true quality for Eugene because he claims it is “the only play that held his interest from first to last” (256).

*King Lear*, a drama of isolation and loss, one that highlights division—between and amongst characters, families, kingdoms, and in its questioning issues that Frank Kermode has summarized as love, mortality, and majesty (1299)—appeals to Eugene, amidst his own autobiographical drama of isolation and loss, himself divided in his nature, a protagonist who closely identifies with antagonists, one who sees through duplicity he cannot escape, and one who admires yet admonishes the works of Shakespeare. To Eugene, the most commendable character in this Shakespearean tragedy is Lear’s Fool (*LHA* 256), a complex creature whose size of role belies his import within Shakespeare’s drama. The importance Eugene attaches to the Fool is complicated to assess, for wide ranging interpretation of the Fool’s nature exists and differs among critics and directors alike. Some render Lear’s Fool as “half-witted, a natural whose wisdom is instinctive clairvoyance or as a sage rationalist, shrewd and thoughtful” (Foakes 133). He can be cast as young or old; moreover, his character can represent a voice lofty, “the King’s conscience” (133); a voice defiant, “in social protest” (133); or a voice inconsequential, “a court fool” (133). Eugene, however, gives Wolfe’s audience no basis, no rationale, for his conclusion, only stating that he finds Lear’s Fool “alone [. . . ] admirable—a sad, tragic, mysterious fool” (*LHA* 256). Wolfe does not allow his readers to see the reader Eugene’s processing methods. One does not discover when or how Eugene draws his conclusion or under whose authority—home? school? both? neither?—he reaches it. One connection we can
infer, given Eugene’s conclusion and based on the Fool’s couple of hundred lines and the means and manner by which they intersect with other players’ roles, is that Eugene’s links are intratextual, that he is establishing links within the words, lines, and speeches of the characters of *King Lear* itself. Eugene’s crowning the Fool as praiseworthy without proffering any justification as to his assessment thwarts one’s ability to interpret Eugene’s interpretation. Accordingly, the affinity Eugene holds toward the Fool transcends the character of Eugene himself: it is as if Eugene Gant takes on a bit of the Fool’s melancholy, his tragedy, his mystery.

Yet Eugene’s true fascination with passages in *Lear* lies in connections to Shakespeare that, like Laertes’s in *Hamlet*, “the elocutionist misses” (257). Once again, as he does in *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Eugene decodes an antagonist’s lines,

the terrible and epic innovation of Edmund, in *King Lear*, drenched in evil, which begins:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess,”

and ends,

“Now, gods, stand up for bastards” (257)

Logocentric in focus, for apparently, here, his primary purpose as a reader is to discover Shakespeare’s meaning, Eugene finds Shakespeare’s true genius in speeches those in authority over him ignore. He ponders Edmund’s “evil” (257) first lines in the play, his first soliloquy. In Shakespeare’s drama, Edmund’s orations tempt an audience to empathize with the inferior circumstances of his birth and subjugated place in society. In Eugene’s *bildungsroman*, in spite of the fact that he identifies with Edmund, a character solitary, alone, unfortunate, anonymous, and vengeful, Eugene’s “deep” (257) musings conclude the antagonist to be vile. In a move postmodern, Wolfe draws on Shakespeare’s work to characterize Eugene by establishing Eugene’s intertextual interaction with Edmund’s lines penned by Shakespeare. Indirectly, then, Wolfe evokes *King Lear* in order to better articulate his novel. Ironically, Shakespeare’s villain
Edmund obscurely unfolds for readers the essence of Wolfe’s non-villain Eugene. Thomas C. Moser describes Eugene’s essence as being “full of ‘desire and longing’ for some vague perfection never precisely located” (120). Pamela Hansford Johnson finds Eugene’s essence to be that of an “interpreter” (40), for, as she evaluates, he is “seldom quite so important as the people around him” (40). Bruce McElderry, Jr. casts him as sensitive and able to construe the humorous side of life (192-194). But perhaps the purest essence of Eugene Gant is what William Styron and others have termed Tom-Eugene. Notably, as Styron concludes, Tom-Eugene was at once full of spirit yet full of bastardy (103).

By revealing Eugene’s understanding of Edmund the base’s opening lines, Wolfe suggests an unstable world—perhaps understood best in the person of Wolfe himself. After all, Wolfe transcribed in his own Autobiographical Outline the very line from Lear he ultimately includes in Angel: “Now, Gods stand up for bastards” (26). In their footnote regarding Wolfe’s inscription, Conniff and Kennedy remark that the passage is one Wolfe greatly admired (26). Knowing the admiration and repulsion Wolfe held toward his own kindred—his desire for their acceptance and his weariness of their imprudence, it requires no suspension of disbelief to recognize the depth of instability that engirded Thomas Wolfe. Interestingly, Wolfe, who has given Eugene an independent mindset regarding literary criticism, formats Eugene’s responses to Edmund’s lines as standard, for Eugene deems Edmund and Edmund’s lines “drenched in evil” (257). While this evaluation does not challenge conventional interpretation of Edmund’s character, Gant finds aesthetic beauty in the lines and, perchance, something magnetic in the presence of malevolence. In presenting Eugene via layered—even shared—authorship, Wolfe once again achieves an enigma: are his the poetic lines of a tragic drama, the prose passages of his autobiographical novel, or merely a vast work of fiction, itself violently defying the law “Ne
pas mêler les genres” (qtd. in Atridge 223)? Characteristic of postmodern fiction, then, this excerpt of Eugene reading Shakespeare’s *King Lear* emphasizes Wolfe’s concentration on the language, specifically, the malicious language. Additionally, it emphasizes Wolfe’s making of fiction by using someone else’s fiction as his foundation. Furthermore, it highlights subjectivity in the fact that young Eugene scorns time-honored passages in deference to ones he allows have been swept over. Certainly Eugene’s connections evolve around himself; yet simultaneously, they fall short of utter narcissism, especially when one considers the text that immediately follows Edmund’s lines:

> It was as dark as night, as evil as Niggertown, as vast as the elemental winds that howled down across the hills: he chanted it in the black hours of his labor, into the dark and the wind. He understood; he exulted in its evil—which was the evil of earth, of illicit nature. It was a call to the un-classed; it was a cry for those beyond the fence, for rebel angels, and for all of the men who are too tall. (257)

Here Eugene is not at all irrelevant in his intertextual connection between the evil he bemuses in Edward’s lines and the evil he detects among the divisions of Altamont’s society. Eugene’s connections as a reader take on a sociopolitical dimension. Wolfe’s narrative bears marks of hatred and racism: his language is brooding; yet, it is here that Eugene seems to connect the true state of Edmund’s base condition to the state of the evil of the existence of the “unclassed” (257). Has Eugene compassion on the state of Altamont’s unclassed? It is ambiguous. What Eugene does acknowledge is the “illicit nature” of a world that has no place for the socially oppressed, the rebellious interlopers, and those with physical anomalies (standing six feet, six inches, for example). He seems to establish a link with the evil of Edmund and the evil of a world that engenders the Edmunds. As much as he is logocentric, Eugene is at the same time resistant in his connections. As a reader, he can perceive and identify with the social ailment that should not be, yet even what he labels “evil” cannot penetrate his own character enough for him to release his own prejudices. All of these poignant, conflict-ridden, Lear-like moods pass through Eugene, yet
Eugene remains static, unchanged. Though the narrative Wolfe pens is jarring—indeed, moving. Ironically, his protagonist himself remains unmoved. Wolfe uses Eugene’s reading to affirm the existence of disorder and irrationalism in Eugene’s world, which, predictably, echoes Wolfe’s own. As a young boy, Wolfe, because of his mother’s habit in hiring a black maid or cook but her inability to earn the respect of her hired help and, thus, retain them, was the one sent into what Donald terms the “Negro section” (19) of town to find replacement workers. Wolfe’s first interactions with persons of a different race and culture were not good ones, and he ended up inheriting the typical white Southerner view of the time: “that Negroes were a ‘black millstone’ on the progress of the South” (19-20). By simultaneously creating for readers a vague impression of fiction, of fact, and of autobiography, Wolfe undeniably reflects traits that are postmodern while he, sadly, perpetuates an ugly myth that deserves to be dispelled.

But one cannot argue that Eugene as a reader is a master decoder. In a lesson during which Margaret teaches Eugene about Shakespeare’s “profound knowledge of the human heart, his universal and well-rounded characterization, his enormous humor” (259), Eugene, reacting to the scene as if it were a text, responds to it with cynicism:

“And observe, Eugene,” she said, “[Shakespeare] never made vice attractive.”
“Why didn’t he?” he asked. “There’s Falstaff.”
“Yes,” she replied, “and you know what happened to him, don’t you?”
“Why,” he considered, “he died!”

“. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
“Then, note,” she said, “how none of [Shakespeare’s] characters stand still. You can see them grow, from first to last. No one is the same at the end as he is in the beginning.”

In the beginning was the word. I am Alpha and Omega. The growth of Lear. He grew old and mad. There’s growth for you. (259)

Here Eugene establishes links that are both intertextual and extratextual. In the former, Eugene links his learning environment to bodies of text that he has read, including three of Shakespeare’s
dramas, Parts I and II of *Henry IV* and *King Lear*, and the Bible. In the latter, Eugene establishes links beyond these texts that extend to the educational background of his teacher. According to Eugene, Margaret was “a voice that God seeks” (260). While he regards her instruction on Shakespeare as the “tin-currency of criticism she had picked up in a few courses at college, and in her reading” (259), his dialogue interchanged with her in the scene submits to her “gauds” (259), as he labels them. He links what she says that he disagrees with to the “glib jargon of pedants” (259) taught her by others. It is only through Eugene’s silent annotation to the text, “In the beginning was the word. I am Alpha and Omega. The growth of Lear. He grew old and mad. There’s growth for you” (259), that one understands Eugene’s intertextual cognizance of the scene through that of other scenes he has read. He appears a resistant reader here, one who subjects all other suggested meanings to the authority of his own. He references the Bible’s declaration of the nonexistent beginning and end of a supernatural God who presents himself as the essence love and majesty—one outside the restrictions of mortality. Then Eugene associates the only work of Shakespeare’s that entirely—from “Alpha to Omega”—holds his interest. Shakespeare, in all the purity Margaret claims he wrote with (259), creates in Lear a sad portrait of a man who is forced to succumb to his mortality. His growth “from first to last” is toward his demise, and he loses in his struggle to enjoy love, majesty, and life. The irony Eugene suggests in his brief commentary that follows his and Margaret’s interchange reveals that he is a reader who connects within, among, and between texts as he processes his understanding. The fact that, despite his disapproval of Margaret’s lecture, she remains somehow above the shortcoming magnifies the significance of his chosen intertext. Her interaction with Eugene prompted his links. Interestingly, Eugene’s processing allows Margaret to share a supernatural plane with God, one who “passed through [his] barred and bolted boy-life with the direct stride of a spirit” (260).
Of course, in Wolfe’s adolescence he, like Eugene, adored his teacher at North State Fitting School, Mrs. Margaret Roberts, with an untainted idealistic love and benefited greatly under her instruction (Donald 23-26; Turnbull 13-18). She was a source of inspiration and encouragement for him well after his days at North State and Wolfe seemed to thrive on her approval (Turnbull 56-57, 65-66; 93-94). Correspondingly, in the semiautobiographical version of the story, Eugene will not allow Margaret Leonard to be anyone’s fool.

Then, in the final fifty pages of Of Time and the River, one senses the effectuation Eugene’s reverence for King Lear has had on his own narrative. Eugene has been wandering across France struggling to survive when he becomes overwhelmed with the memory of his homeland. Amidst narrative ponderings from a voice that could be a narrator’s and could be Eugene’s, Eugene’s consciousness, as it were, travels from Shakespearean drama to Shakespearean drama to Shakespearean drama. Back-to-back references fill the pages, one moment alluding to The Merchant of Venice overtly, the next alluding to Hamlet subtly, and finally alluding to Lear equivocally. In the final series of references, the protagonist’s consciousness identifies with sons of “lost and lonely fathers,” children of men of “hardy loins” (OTR 849). The narrative is difficult, philosophical, and searching. Eugene Gant, who has been the reader of Shakespeare, seems to be converging with a climactic understanding of his identity through the assimilation of “his” dramaturge Shakespeare. Gant’s sociopolitical link is intertextual, for the narrative itself pullulates with questioning: “For what?” (849-850) Eugene cries nine times following the onset of his connection as a child of “hardy loins” (849). Through his discourse stance as a reader, Eugene seems to consider innumerable interpretations of Lear as it relates to life as valid. His link between ideas, events, and people is extratextual, for he establishes links far beyond Lear, far beyond other printed texts, beyond films, lectures,
conversations, etc. Instead he links “the unbearable ache, the incurable loneliness” (849) he has noted in Shakespeare’s tragedy—perhaps gleaned from all three characters: Lear, Lear’s Fool, and Edmund—with “the pioneers…their bells and churches…a million memories…ten thousand sights and sounds and shapes and smells and names of things…a nation…a people…a hunger…” (849) and more countless traits stemming from his assessment of America. But one must ask who the antecedent of the aforestated “his” is. Wolfe sensed that the stuff of Shakespeare was not “for” American writing, yet he could not escape Shakespeare’s “storm-Stygian” Lear, whose whole was “slashed through with gold and light” (Notebooks 920). Consequently, so blurred become the once separate existence of Shakespeare’s writings, Eugene’s ponderings, and Wolfe’s interpolations that the circumstances of the life of Wolfe himself intermingle inseparably from Wolfe’s Eugene Gant work itself.

One can liken the murky impression of Shakespeare on the medallion Tom-Eugene earned as a boy to the murky impressions of so many fools—in literature, in life, and in love—Wolfe has fashioned into his major works of fiction featuring the protagonist Eugene Gant. Shakespeare’s imprint seeps through Wolfe’s narrative as a muse, giving Wolfe voice and direction with which to passionately pursue Wolfe’s own themes.

In closing, as Tom-Eugene’s Lear-evoking thoughts of love and majesty give way to thoughts of morality and the gravity of time, the difficult-to-separate narrative voice quotes more Shakespeare, Sonnet 73, when he cites “that time of year thou may’st in me behold” (OTR 863). Given Wolfe’s love of the aesthetic and poet’s heart, it seems appropriate to close this chapter by citing Shakespeare’s sonnet in its entirety, the whole of which Wolfe surely intended his Of Time and the River Bard-quoted line to evoke:

That time of year thou may’st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold—
Bare [ruin’d] choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see’st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum’d with that which it was nourish’d by.

This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long. (1856)
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Wolfe is a dues-paying member of the kiss-my-ass school of American writing…undisciplined, formless and shapeless…who breaks out periodically in these beseeching, hallucinatory fragments that repulse many readers who cut their eyeteeth on Hemingway and Camus.

-Pat Conroy, “Thomas Wolfe”

Modernist fiction in America that was published just prior to World War I and up to World War II often broke established rules, attempting to generate an original style through which to express the classic plight of man amidst his universe. Many works produced during this movement were experimental in form and style. Interestingly, Thomas Wolfe’s first two published novels, Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River, though written during this period of time, were too confessional or too embarrassingly over-the-top for some modernist critics. The Southern Agrarians and other select critics charged Wolfe’s writing with “repetitiveness” (Holliday 3), “verbosity” (3), provinciality, and lacking structure. Some even asserted that he possessed a poor command of rhetoric. (Holliday 2-4). For whatever the “canonizers” believed Wolfe did or did not do well, as Robert Falk expresses, “the unique quality of Wolfe’s writing transgressed at some point or other most of the pet canons of [contemporary] schools of critical thought, and he has been thoroughly admonished for his sins” (188). Today, Wolfe’s work is minimally anthologized (Holliday 2) and almost never taught in high schools.

In fact, it is precisely the assessment from such accomplished authors as William Styron that compels one to look at Thomas Wolfe’s major works featuring protagonist Eugene Gant in a different way. According to Styron:
it is the lack too often of an organic form—a form arising from the same drives and tensions that inspired the work in the beginning—which now appears to be one of Wolfe’s largest failings and is the one that most seriously threatens to undermine his stature as a major writer. The awful contradiction in his books between this formlessness and those tremendous moments which still seem so touched with grandeur as to be imperishable, is unsettling beyond words. (103)

Perhaps Wolfe authored these “failing” works all out of their time. What if there were form present in Wolfe’s apparent formlessness? What if in his major Gantean works he was pushing even the bounds of high-modernism beyond its limit?

Most movements emerge as a slow nascent process, a gradual development of creative trends in style and form that can be found in the works of a variety of artists. Sometimes these trends do not seem to be bound to geographical territories or even their corresponding eras. Currently, postmodern fiction is a term that is in the process of becoming ever refined in its definition. Some inherent descriptors of it, as communicated in Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide, edited by Larry McCaffery, are the traits by which Thomas Wolfe’s writing has been critiqued as intertextual. In summary, those traits include the fictional writer’s tendency to intermingle fact and fiction; his affinity to play with words and language; his penchant for intertwining dark humor, parody, and surrealism; his structuring of discourse that multiplies itself in the perspectives it invokes, his knack of transforming myth and his contemporary culture into presumed fiction, and his presentation of a subjectivity, one that is distrustful of elders and takes no solace in the stance of authority, itself perceived as subjectively empowered (xii-xxii).

Looking at the protagonist Eugene Gant as a reader and analyzing him according to his reading enable us to approach Wolfe’s first two novels from a postmodern position. Eugene’s voice is the overriding perspective from which each narrative is told. Noting how Gant processes his own story in relation to what he has read enlightens us to Wolfe’s postmodern writing tactics.
Thus, it is advantageous to analyze Eugene Gant according to Douglas Hartman’s recent research regarding intertextual links of proficient readers: it alerts Wolfe’s readers to the fundamental character of Eugene, one that is complexly linked to Wolfe himself. Hartman has noted two basic categories of intertextual links: those among ideas, events, and people and those that have to do with circumstances social, political, cultural, or historical. Within the former he finds three basic connections: intratextual, where readers establish links within the words, sentences, and paragraphs of the material read (534-537); intertextual, where they establish links to bodies of texts within, between, and beyond the material read (537-545); and extratextual, where readers establish links beyond the text at hand and even beyond other printed texts, including films, lectures, conversations, etc. (545-547). Within the socio-political links, Hartman finds that readers may be logocentric, their primary purpose is to discover the author’s meaning (548-550); intertextual, they consider several possible interpretations valid (550-553); and resistant, they dismiss authorial meaning and assert their own instead (553-555).

By cataloguing much of the reading Eugene accomplishes, including the libraries full of books he devours, Wolfe presents a character that, to accurately assess, one must examine his immersion in letters. Eugene’s fondness for Shakespeare and Shakespeare’s works surfaces in both Gant novels, and in Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River Thomas Wolfe establishes an intertextual experience through the discourse of protagonist Eugene Gant regarding three of Shakespeare’s dramas—The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, and King Lear. For readers of Wolfe, Eugene emerges as a reader who is pluralistic in his methods of cognition. The protagonist interprets texts, establishes links from the texts, and often struggles against the established authority of texts. All the while Wolfe, in another narrative space, clouds his points of divergence from character and author and from fiction and reality. Wolfe’s readers, then, must
confront the authorship of the work they are reading, the identity of the central character, and whether this novel—one often frowned upon by contemporary critics—even belongs to the genre of the novel.

Just as Shakespeare’s profile was “murkily indented” (*LHA* 308) on Thomas Wolfe’s medal for his essay and Eugene’s award for the same, so have varying impressions been “murkily indented” on Wolfe’s Gantean texts: impressions of a tragi-comic antagonist, impressions of duplicity, and impressions of fools. Like the medallion bearing Shakespeare’s image, these impressions, though identifiable, are equally imprecise. A complementary balance exists, as if forged by delicate craftsmanship to evoke mystique within an identifiable image. Deciphering Wolfe’s first two novels, like identifying a murky image impressed upon a medallion, is accomplished by focusing on both the linguistic and nonlinguistic texts Eugene Gant reads. His text ranges from actual lines of a Shakespearean play to a setting or dialogue of other characters into which the lines of a Shakespearean text mingle. Regardless of the “text” in the world he indwells, Eugene interprets meaning everywhere.

Showing himself to be a character bearing impressions of the tragic-comic antagonist Shylock, himself forced to bear grave injustices, the adolescent Eugene makes an allegiance with characters falling outside Shakespeare’s moral society, revealing the postmodern trait of communicating his bias—his subjective perspective—in his ongoing multilayered connections with, to, and from *The Merchant of Venice*. First, in *Look Homeward, Angel* he reads Sister Sheba as an unwelcome interlocutor who exalts Shakespeare’s genius and proves herself not-so-geniuses, all the while silencing Eugene. As Eugene “reads” this scene, which emphasizes one solitary Shakespearean line, “The quality of mercy is not strained,” he links extratextually to relate the thematic relevance of the drama outside of a setting of direct classroom instruction.
Intertextually, he comprehends the chasm between the refinement of one who possesses knowledge of Shakespeare and the refinement of the knowledge proffered him (and others) by Sister Sheba. He interprets irony after irony from the text so that the narrative suggests the weightiness of a Shakespearean subtext. In a drama-like objective point of view, Eugene communicates a postmodern distrust of elders, finding Sheba as an authority figure, un“cult-shered”(258) and inept, and implying that her existence as someone who commands textual authority and, likewise, authority over him prevails without reason. Then, in Of Time and the River, the matured Eugene alludes to the same tragic-comedy. This time, as observed in works of postmodern fiction, he presents with dark humor Eugene’s twisting Shylock’s words to parody them, the effect of which is none-too-comic and all-too-surreal. In this voice of consciousness-type narrative of blended voices, Eugene makes intertextual connections, linking Shylock’s inner conflict with a nation’s inner conflict. He makes extratextual connections, too, as ideas of Northerner and Southerner and Foreigner come in to play. His discursive stance is intertextual, as well, as the text he manipulates beckons multiple interpretations, from him as a reader and from Wolfe’s readers as readers. Overriding all these factors is Wolfe’s history, his life, his experiences, his notebooks, all of which suggest an important element of postmodern fiction. Wolfe has confused the narrative on another level; thus, extricating Wolfean fact from Gantean fiction becomes arduous.

In Wolfe’s scenes involving lines from or allusions to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, separating the merged narrative voices becomes even more unmanageable. When one considers the fact that Wolfe pens Gant’s ironic commentaries—which are quoted lines from Shakespeare’s Hamlet—in Wolfe’s personal notebooks on Wolfe’s own ponderings, the question of authorship leaves the analyzer without a solution. Wolfe blends this narrative complexity, then, with Eugene’s textual
links stemming from or related to one of Shakespeare’s plays wherein the Bard creates one of his most complex characters who himself reads “Words, words, words” (*Hamlet* II.ii.192), pushing the problems of postmodern narrative to its extremity and leaving for readers myriad impressions of duplicity. In the multiple scenes Wolfe evokes in each Gantean novel, Eugene can be observed reading—literally or figuratively—the lines of Laertes, the antagonist; a scene wherein King Hamlet’s ghost plays a crucial role; and scenes evoking two soliloquies of Prince Hamlet. By scripting Eugene a line following those of Laertes, Wolfe allows his protagonist to participate concurrently in more than one genre, drama and novel, and one genre evoking dual genres is a trait of postmodern fiction. Additionally, intratextual in his connections, Eugene’s reading, which unveils his fascination with another antagonist, reveals his love for the aesthetic, much like Wolfe’s love of the same. During the surreal final dramatic climactic scene of *Look Homeward, Angel*, a line of Shakespeare becomes an interlocutor with Eugene and Ben’s ghost. Eugene’s reading of this scene is intertextual on two levels in that he connects his realization of his living/dead brother Ben to Hamlet’s realization of his living/dead father King, and as a discourse stance in that Eugene ascertains multiple plausible interpretations of Ben’s existence and of his own. Given that in this scene “the million books” (520) Eugene and Wolfe have partaken of swarm Eugene’s brain, one finds another nasty entanglement to be dealt with, for Tom-Eugene seems to inhabit one brain. Then, in *Of Time and the River*, Wolfe’s focus moves to Hamlet himself. Now a Harvard graduate, Eugene interprets Shakespeare’s lines given to Hamlet in Dr. Thornton’s recitation of the same. Eugene’s reading is logocentric as he reaches for Shakespeare’s meaning to establish the irony of the doctor’s “sonorous eulogy” (446), once again evoking for readers that Wolfe has participated in dual genres, his novel yields ever so slightly to Shakespeare’s drama. More postmodern in his effects, Wolfe, in his final allusion to
Hamlet fragments Shakespeare’s “[t]o be, or not to be” (III.i.55) lines. Intertextual in the manner in which Eugene’s rendering fuses his dream with Hamlet’s ruminations; Eugene’s consciousness is also extratextual. It is a quasi parody in that Gant evokes Hamlet’s lines but counters them in content. Thus, Eugene’s final discursive stance regarding this scene is intertextual as he perceives multiple interpretations. Wolfe is postmodern in his rendering of his own experiences through alluding to Hamlet, building upon Shakespeare’s suggested symbols and applied language. Lastly, in all the mythical and cultural analysis Wolfe has interwoven into his intertextual scenes between Eugene and Hamlet, Wolfe’s writing is equally postmodern.

The multiple-layered impressions of fools—from the pen of Wolfe and from the influence of Shakespeare—upon Eugene Gant—specifically as he reads them in circumstances surrounding King Lear—touch every part of his character. In Look Homeward, Angel, Shakespeare’s plays serve as an impetus for Eugene’s familial connections. Extratextually, he associates W.O. with oratory and Eliza and her clan with foolery. Moreover, Eugene finds foolery surprising and unpolished in the characters that comprise Shakespeare’s fools—excepting Lear’s fool—as well as in what he is taught about the fools at school. He presents himself as a most resistant reader where his interpretations of comedy are concerned; in fact, he prefers to intermix various Shakespearean clown lines in such a way that he—Eugene—takes ownership of authorship. With Lear’s fool alone, “admirable” (256), “sad” (256), and “tragic” (256), he truly makes an intratextual connection. However, regarding the first lines spoken by Shakespeare’s antagonist Edmund the base, Eugene’s discursive stance is logocentric: Eugene identifies with the character and is characterized as Edmund is—sensitive, interpretive, overlooked, zealous, and dastardly. Something about the nature of malevolence intrigues Eugene as Eugene suggests, which is described by Wolfe, which was previously characterized by
Shakespeare. Thus, attributes of postmodern fiction arise yet again. Further, Eugene is enamored with the words and language of Shakespeare’s Edmund. Eugene subjectively selects and rejects lines in *King Lear* based on his preferences, not the preferences of authority figures, and he connects intertextually Edmund’s evils to the social circumstances he deems evil in his world, those that closely mirror experiences in the life of young Thomas Wolfe. Eugene’s logocentricity in detecting the vileness of Edmund within himself gives way to resistance as Eugene perpetrates the vileness rather than releasing his racial and social prejudices. Here, Wolfe’s own story line once again intermingles with Eugene’s to confuse what is fiction and what is fact. Then, under the tutelage of Margaret, Eugene connects character growth in *Lear* with madness and proves himself intertextual as he interrelates texts and meanings and irony. He proves extratextual as a reader when he establishes links between the texts in question and the probable sources of Margaret’s learning of Shakespeare’s works. Knowing that Thomas Wolfe had a Margaret in his young life and education, Wolfe’s work becomes pluralistic in its genre participation: autobiography, novel, even drama. In *Of Time and the River*, Wolfe presents Eugene as a reader intertextual in his discourse stance: he must grapple with a multitude of possible interpretations of *Lear* and make sense of that for himself. Postmodern fictional traits surface as Wolfe’s readings and Eugene’s readings conjoin to the point of being inseparable given Wolfe’s allusion to *Lear* and his references to the Bard and the tragedy in his personal notebooks.

Thomas Wolfe once claimed that “[t]he thing a young writer is likely to do is confuse the limits between actuality and reality” (*Story* 21), perhaps in response to such critics as DeVoto, whose perspectives on appropriate genre writing—specifically novel writing—differed greatly from the product of Wolfe’s work:

A novelist represents life. When he does anything else, no matter how beautiful or furious or ecstatic the way in which he does it, he is not writing fiction. Mr. Wolfe can write
fiction—has written some of the finest fiction of our day. But a great part of what he writes is not fiction at all: it is only material with which the novelist has struggled but which has defeated him. (136)

Certainly, there are those who have argued that Wolfe wrote or did not write fiction, novels, autobiography, satire, poetry, dramas, epics (Falk 189), “fictional” thesauri (Kennedy 77), or any other categories into which critics have attempted to squeeze Wolfe’s work. To assess Wolfe’s major Gantean works from the fundamental makeup of the central character as well as Wolfe’s inclination was to practice pluralistic participation in any or all of the aforementioned genres gives cause to reevaluate Wolfe as an important writer, one proto postmodern in his form and style. Indubitably, as Robert Falk has so aptly stated:

> Romantic in temperament, Elizabethan in the enormity of his appetite for experience, he was a strange accident of time appearing as he did in the uncertain flux of an America between wars. And yet he read its essential meaning. (192)

Just as Wolfe read the essential culture of his own day, so did his protagonist Eugene Gant read the essential themes of three Shakespearean dramas. Through presenting Eugene as a reader of Shakespeare, Wolfe guides his protagonist through the maturational issues each human being must eventually confront. Thus the manner in which Wolfe’s contemporary critics once assessed him and his writing may not be accurate when considering *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River* through a postmodern lens. For, as Falk narrates, H. S. Canby did not discern Wolfe’s complexity when he iterated that “Wolfe, in 1935, was an important writer who was not ‘integrated’ and *Of Time and the River* was an ‘artistic failure’ because it was neither poetry, drama, fiction, or satire” (189). Falk further asserts that DeVoto did not consider the makeup of Wolfe’s fiction when he claimed that “Wolfe’s early books transgressed the bounds of the novel by failing to embody the theme dramatically in character” (189). Adding to DeVoto’s words, Falk writes: ‘The novelist,’ [DeVoto] said (implying that there is an abstract and archetypal “novelist”), ‘makes his point in the lives of the characters, not in tidal surges of rhetoric’ (189).
In support of Falk’s claims, thematically, Eugene Gant as a reader of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* faces the question of “Who dictates who I may become?” with bold resistance and defiance of the authority figures who have been set in his life, as he would suppose, rather arbitrarily. Then, as a reader of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Eugene time after ponders “What is a man’s life?” as he repeatedly searches for and perpetually reaches no peace-rendering conclusion. Additionally, through the only play of Shakespeare’s by which he remained in the entirety of his reading totally engrossed, Eugene comes of age but only after recurrently grappling with the ominous question, “Who am I? (A great “king” or merely the “king’s” shadow…). Thus, it is the protagonist’s ongoing quest to work his way through issues that are inherently human that sustain Wolfe’s work, at once cutting-edge and frustrating, and overall ahead of its time.
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