

THOMAS WOLFE AND WALT WHITMAN

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CHAPTER I

LIFE AND WORK OF WHITMAN AND WOLFE

With the publication of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass sympathetic foreign critics saw America's coming to maturity. Tired of a second-rate American literature superficially polished by a patterning after Old World models, the English hailed Whitman's originality as the one refreshing aspect of the American output.¹ With the publication, three-quarters of a century later, of Thomas Wolfe's first novel, Look Homeward, Angel, critics recognized another original force in American literature. The novel's tremendous power and sweep, together with its lyric intensity, caused them to link it with Whitman's work.² Like Whitman, Wolfe had no excuses for occasional failure, and it was, as one critic says, "in this way, liked or disliked--and he was both as much no doubt as any man can be--he bestrode American literature like a Colossus."³

There was perhaps no man writing in the twentieth century in America of whom more was expected than was expected

¹Harold Blodgett, Walt Whitman in England, p. viii.

²"Why Gargantuan," New York Times, September 18, 1938, IV, p. 8.

³Peter Monro Jack, "Remembering Thomas Wolfe," ibid., October 2, VI, p. 2.

of Thomas Wolfe. His sudden death in the fall of 1938 came as a severe shock to critics and to the nation as a whole. One critic saw in Wolfe, had he lived, the best chance for our first world novelist born in this century and lamented that "with his story so soon ended what remains is a book and the legend of his hunger in his youth."⁴

We are still too close to Wolfe to give an impartial estimate of his work, but, certainly, one who has read Wolfe must agree with Maxwell Perkins that his work will find its way,⁵ for there is more in his stories than mere autobiography. Like Whitman, Wolfe sought to draw into himself the whole of the American continent and impress upon it his own strong personality. It is this feeling for America that links the two writers. The purpose of this paper is to determine the extent and nature of the kinship between Walt Whitman and Thomas Wolfe, two Americans, who, each living in a different age and working in a different medium, beheld a vision of America and wished to retrieve it and reveal it to their fellow men.

The same controlling motive dominated the lives of Whitman and Wolfe. It was the struggle of these two men to reveal their vision that, in a large sense, governed all they did.⁶

⁴The Wilson Bulletin, XIII, (October, 1938), 121.

⁵The Story of a Novel, p. 12.

⁶Maxwell Evarts Perkins, "Scribner's and Tom Wolfe," The Carolina Magazine, September 1938, p. 17. For Whitman's statement to this effect, see "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads."

This central purpose which gave unity to both lives furnishes a basis for a comparison and study of these two quite different personalities.

Whitman often said that his real autobiography, his true self, was contained in his Leaves. The external facts of his life he did not consider important, and it is said that he consciously withheld facts about his private life which might conflict with his character as revealed in the Leaves.⁷ Thus the outward facts of Whitman's life are not particularly eventful and can be summarized briefly. Whitman was born May 31, 1819, of good middle class stock in the hamlet of West Hills, on Long Island, where his ancestors had lived since the seventeenth century. There seems nothing in his ancestry to differentiate him from any other boy of the community, but Whitman was an extremely sensitive child and early showed an excess of emotional endowment.⁸ As he grew up in this rural community close to the American soil, which had been the soil of his ancestors for generations back, and in sight of the sea, his love for the American soil, for the great out-of-doors, for the sea, became an integral part of him.⁹

⁷Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman, pp. 212-213.

⁸Ibid., p. 19.

⁹See Whitman's poem, "There Was a Child Went Forth," Complete Writings, II, 135. All references to Whitman's poems and prose, unless otherwise stated, are made to the Complete Writings, 10 vols., 1902.

The mind and spirit of the youth were also left free to mature in their own fashion, to find their own channel. The mind of the youth was not directed along certain channels by the indoctrination of formal learning or of a rigid sectarian religion. In fact, there were no religious observances of any sort in the Whitman household. The family, however, were ardent admirers of Elias Hicks, a rather radical member of the Quaker faith. Hicks's influence on Whitman was great, and some stress the importance of this in accounting for Whitman's mysticism. At eleven or twelve, Whitman's formal schooling was over, but it is wrong to think of him as ignorant. He had not, it is true, the clichés of scholars either to guide or to hamper him, but he fed a native curiosity about life by wide and leisurely reading and research. All his life he loved to pore over old or second-hand copies of English and American magazines, seeking information about how the rest of mankind lived or had lived long ago, what religions, what ideas of immortality they had. He also was very much interested in the life about him. This close observation of life, together with his varied reading, did much to develop his critical powers.

During the next years Whitman tried his hand at newspaper work, teaching, and writing for periodicals. His early stories and poems were all conventional and amateurish. One critic says that "at the best, the tales are watery

imitations of Poe and Hawthorne."¹⁰ Whitman's career as a journalist extends from 1841 to 1850. Though his writing of this period was still conventional, one notices a change about 1846 when he became editor of the Daily Eagle. His work of this period reveals dormant forces within himself rising to the surface.¹¹ He expands in the use of the editorial "we" and records his response to the teeming, overflowing life of the city, to the push of the present, to the colorful full tones of the opera and drama. Then in 1848 Whitman's late adolescence was brought to sudden flower by his experiences in New Orleans. Temporarily, his native Quaker prudence was swept away by the immediate and overpowering response of his ripening senses to the beauty and romance of New Orleans. Whitman's notebooks of this time are particularly suggestive and contain germs and tentative drafts of many of his first poems of 1855.

After his return from New Orleans, Whitman remained out of newspaper work. Instead he helped his father build small frame houses in Brooklyn and brooded over the poems he intended to write. Then, after working hours, he read or composed on his poems. Finally, in 1855, about seven years after his first tentative drafts, he set up the type and

¹⁰Walt Whitman, Representative Selections, ed. by Floyd Stovall, Introduction, p. xviii.

¹¹This material has been gathered and edited under the suggestive title, The Gathering of the Forces, by Cleveland Rodgers and John Black.

designed the cover for his first Leaves of Grass. He then sent this thin green volume with little roots dripping from its gold-lettered title, with no name, but with his picture as a frontispiece, to the outstanding literary figures of America. Some ignored the volume, others returned it to the author, still others were shocked, but Emerson was impressed by the poems. Seeming to recognize that in many ways this was the poet for which he had been calling, he wrote a generous letter to Whitman.

It was not strange that Emerson found a complementary spirit in Whitman, for the first Leaves were but a bolder statement of Emerson's own philosophy. For several years Whitman had evidently been brooding upon his mystic knowledge, searching to find the proper expression for these truths. It was Emerson who helped him resolve this difficulty.¹² The eclecticism of Emerson's doctrine appealed to Whitman, whose mysticism was tempered by his keen interest in world affairs (and a certain quality of Yankee prudence in his character). His mysticism was not of the other world, and he realized that to be effective, it must be translated in terms of America and democracy. Taking his cue, perhaps, from Goethe and adopting for himself the self-reliance which Emerson had enjoined, he gave his vision directly as it was projected in his own personality.

¹²Whitman once remarked, "I was simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." J.T. Trowbridge, "Reminiscences of Walt Whitman," Atlantic Monthly, LXXXIX (Feb., 1902), 166.

Thus Leaves of Grass becomes Whitman's autobiography in the fullest sense of the term. His poems tell of the unfolding and development of a human soul. It was Whitman's boast that the Leaves were not just a group of poems, but a man. In the first Leaves Whitman lays the foundations and implications of his future unfolding. And from 1855 until 1892 the main energy of Whitman's life was devoted to rounding out and finishing the poems, his "carte visite" to posterity.

Unlike Whitman, who had thirty-seven years to perfect his plan after he had found himself at thirty-five, Wolfe lived but thirty-seven years, and less than ten years elapsed from the publication of Look Homeward, Angel until his death; so Wolfe had but ten brief years in which to prepare his card. Nevertheless, though working in a different medium, Wolfe followed a method that is essentially the same as that of Goethe and of Whitman. All his novels and short stories are really but parts of an imaginative autobiography. Throughout Wolfe's writings one often finds several references to the same incident, and some of these incidents are the same that he recalls in The Story of a Novel as a part of his own childhood. Ernest Bates says the strength and final value of Wolfe's work are derived from its inextricable mingling of fact and fancy, which has met and satisfied one of the subtlest needs of our time. Had Wolfe lived to write a score of books, Mr. Bates thinks one could safely prophesy that they would be drawn directly from his own experience; for, like Whitman's,

Wolfe's approach is unceasingly personal.¹³ Wolfe readily admitted that his stories were about himself, but like Whitman before him, he hoped also that his stories had a cosmic or universal quality. But Wolfe's stories tend to be true to the literal facts of his life in a way that Whitman's Leaves never were. Though the facts may have been colored and heightened, the stories of Wolfe's heroes are essentially stories about himself. These heroes are all concerned with the same struggle with which he was concerned: the struggle to find some ultimate criterion of values. As Leaves of Grass portrays the gradual unfolding and development of a human soul, so Wolfe's novels are concerned with his struggle to acquire the soul's inheritance. Thus, as one seeks to know the true Whitman through his Leaves, so it is from the thoughts and actions of Wolfe's heroes that we must seek to know Wolfe.

It was Maxwell Perkins of Scribners who "discovered" Thomas Wolfe. As Wolfe stood in the doorway hesitating to enter Perkins' office, the Scribner's editor "thought of Shelley (who was so different in most ways) because of that brightness of his face and the relative smallness of his head and the unruly hair."¹⁴ Perkins read this young man's

¹³Ernest Southerland Bates, "Thomas Wolfe," The English Journal, XXVI (Sept., 1937), 523.

¹⁴Perkins, op. cit., p. 17.

manuscript and saw its possibilities. Other publishers, seeing the huge packing box full of manuscript containing nearly a million words,¹⁵ refused it as entirely too long and loosely organized to be publishable. In 1929, a year after that first meeting with Perkins, Wolfe's first novel, Look Homeward, Angel, appeared. The book won recognition from the critics as the work of a man of genius whose future promised much to American letters.¹⁶ People at once felt the force of a huge personality in Wolfe's rush of words. "The upshot of it was," Wolfe writes, "that after the publication of the book in the autumn of 1929, I found myself with a position as a writer."¹⁷ People desired to meet this new literary discovery and undoubtedly found him as strange as his novel and exceedingly like it. For the great sprawling book with its lyrical sweep and graphic realism seemed a perfect emanation from this giant man with the small wistful face of a child and dreamer.

Less than ten years later, when the rich promise of his early accomplishment had been but partly realized and the magnificent fury of his creative power still flowed with inexhaustible energy, came Wolfe's untimely death, of which

¹⁵"Thomas Wolfe," in "Obituary Notes," The Publishers' Weekly, CXXXIV (September 24, 1938), 1218.

¹⁶Burton Rascoe, Review of Look Homeward, Angel in "Among the New Books," Arts and Decoration, CCCII (February, 1930), 106.

¹⁷The Story of a Novel, p. 13.

his publisher and staunch friend could write, "It seemed inconceivable that one so vibrant with life could die young."¹⁸

✓ At the turn of the century, just eight years after the death of Walt Whitman, Wolfe was born in Asheville, North Carolina. Like Whitman, he was the son of a laborer. Thomas Clayton Wolfe was the youngest of eight children born to William Oliver Wolfe and his wife, Julia Elizabeth Westall Wolfe. Wolfe was educated in his home town, where his mother ran a boarding house and his father was a stone-cutter.¹⁹ Almost at once his family sensed he was unlike them. Perkins says of Wolfe's early years:

His was not the conventional story of neglected, unrecognized genius at all. His schoolteachers, the Robertses in Asheville, knew, apparently, when he was a child, that he was different from the others, and so did all his family, there in the mountains, and they enabled him to go to college--I think Americans can be proud of that.²⁰

As in Whitman's case, perhaps the most complete account of Wolfe's life is to be found in his works, which are autobiographical in the truest sense. Countless details reveal Wolfe's heroes as himself. In Look Homeward, Angel Eugene Cant, like Wolfe, was the youngest in a family of eight children whose father was a stonemason and whose mother ran a boarding house. The Robertses correspond to the Leonards in

¹⁸Perkins, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁹New York Times, September 16, 1938, p. 21.

²⁰Perkins, op. cit., p. 17.

the same novel. One feels that the parting words Margaret Leonard gives to Eugene as he leaves for the University (North Carolina) convey the Robertses' thoughts on the same occasion:

"Eugene," she continued, "we could not love you more if you were our own child. We wanted to keep you with us for another year, but since that cannot be, we are sending you out with our hopes pinned to you. Oh, boy, you are fine. There is no atom in you that is not fine. A glory and a chrism of bright genius rest upon you. God bless you: the world is yours."²¹

So, at the age of sixteen, Thomas Wolfe, like Eugene Gant, left his native town for the University. Eugene at this time was "over six feet and three inches tall, and weighed perhaps 130 pounds. . . full of a wild energy of mind and body that devoured him and left him exhausted."²² Wolfe says of Eugene:

He was a child when he went away: he was a child who had looked much on pain and evil, and remained a fantasist of the Ideal. Walled up in his great city of visions, his tongue had learned to mock, his lip to sneer, but the harsh rasp of the world had worn no grooving in the secret life. . . . His cruel eyes had missed the meaning of no gesture, his packed and bitter heart had sweltered in him like a hot ingot, but all his hard wisdom melted at the glow of his imagination. He was not a child when he reflected, but when he dreamt, he was; and it was the child and dreamer that governed his belief. . . . He exulted in his youth, and he believed he could never die.²³

One feels sure that Wolfe, like Eugene, was the "greenest of all green freshmen," that he was "conspicuous at once not only because of his blunders, but also because of his

²¹Look Homeward, Angel, p. 392.

²²Ibid., p. 391.

²³Ibid.

young wild child's face, and his great raw length of body, with the bounding scissor legs," and that his first year at the university was "filled for him with loneliness, pain, and failure."²⁴ The war in Europe had been raging for two years, and the United States was on the verge of entering when Wolfe went to college. An adolescent during hysterical times, Wolfe, nevertheless, soon adjusted himself to his new surroundings. A personal letter from Dean C.P. Spruill, Jr. tells of Wolfe's brilliant record at the University, where he was a Phi Beta Kappa. (It is interesting to note that Wolfe's best grades were in English and philosophy. He was also interested in journalism and the drama, being editor of the student paper, the Tar Heel, and a member of the Carolina Playmakers, organized by Professor F.H. Koch. Wolfe's one-act play, "The Return of Buck Gavin," was included in the program at the Playmakers' first performance.²⁵

Wolfe received his A.B. degree in June, 1920, when he was nineteen, and he enrolled at Harvard the following fall. Here, his interest in the drama continued, and he was a member of the late George Pierce Baker's famous Forty-Seven Workshop.²⁶ In 1922 he received his master's degree in English, but continued at Harvard another year. From 1924 to 1930 he served as an instructor in English at the Washington

²⁴Ibid., p. 394.

²⁵The Publishers' Weekly, CXXXIV (Sept. 24, 1938), 1218.

²⁶Ibid.

Square branch of the city college in New York City. During his summer vacations he went abroad and wrote plays. After trying unsuccessfully at various times to market his plays, he turned away from this medium, and, in England in 1926, began Look Homeward, Angel.²⁷

The year following the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe received a Guggenheim fellowship, which enabled him to resign from the college and begin work on a second book. A short novel, "The Portrait of Bascom Hawke," was published in Scribner's, April, 1932, and shared a prize award offered by that magazine. A long short story, "The Web of Earth," was published by Scribner's the same year and was later included in Editor's Choice, a book containing a group of short stories selected as outstanding by Alfred Dashiell, then managing editor of Scribner's Magazine. Other short pieces which occasionally appeared in various magazines were, in the main, fragments from some novel either published or projected. Finally, in 1935, appeared Wolfe's huge novel Of Time and the River. This was the second of a series of six books which were to delineate 150 years of American life, the whole series to be called Of Time and the River. This book, which carried on the story of Thomas Wolfe, sold over 45,000 copies in one season and showed that Wolfe's audience was steadily increasing. During the following year From Death to Morning, a series of fourteen sketches, appeared.

²⁷New York Times, September 16, 1938, p. 21.

In 1935 and 1936 Wolfe made trips to England and Germany, where his work had also been well received. After his return from Germany, he published a short novel, I Have a Thing to Tell You,²⁸ which is a strong criticism of the Nazi regime in Germany. Just before starting out on the western trip where he contracted his fatal illness, Wolfe turned over to E.C. Aswell of Harpers a huge manuscript which has since become The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again.

Wolfe died of a cerebral infection at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, September 15, 1938.) There was immediate speculation as to whether his physical condition accounted for his Gargantuan excess of words and energy. An article by Thurston Macauley denies this and says that the immediate cause of Wolfe's death was pneumonia, which opened an old, healed-up tuberculosis scar in his lungs. The infection entered the blood stream and was carried to his brain. Referring to an editorial in the New York Herald Tribune which raised this question and to the answer given by Aswell, Macauley quotes what Dr. Walter E. Dandy, the distinguished brain surgeon who performed the two operations upon Wolfe, wrote Aswell: "His [Wolfe's] intracranial condition, of course, had nothing whatever to do with his mentality; this was a very acute condition, the outset of which in the brain was

²⁸Published in serial form in the New Republic, XC (March 10-24, 1937). Practically this same material forms Book VI of Wolfe's last novel, You Can't Go Home Again.

only of a month's duration."²⁹ This medical report indicates clearly that Wolfe's untimely death was no proof of any abnormal mental condition in him; it certainly did not reveal him as a representative of the type of "mad genius" popular in the public mind. But a medical report, a diagnosis of brain structure, could not reveal the inner torment that moved Wolfe's creative flow--a flow cut off at flood tide in a man who at times seems almost to have had a premonition of his early death. The record of that torment is found not in a medical report or in these bare facts of Wolfe's career as a writer, but in his books, which are essentially accounts of his constant and often frenzied search for the "buried life"--"a leaf, a stone, an unfound door."

After the appearance of Look Homeward, Angel, the more conservative critics watched Wolfe's progress with growing apprehension. In 1936 Bernard DeVoto said that genius was not enough and criticized Wolfe's formlessness and immaturity.³⁰ The year before, Howard Mumford Jones, after reading From Death to Morning, felt "uneasy about Mr. Wolfe's future development as an artist" since "Mr. Wolfe has not increased his resources. The characteristic combination of brooding emotion and graphic brutality, of poetry à la

²⁹"A Writer's Problems," The Publishers' Weekly, CXXXIV (December 24, 1938), 2152.

³⁰"Genius is not Enough," The Saturday Review of Literature, XIII (April 25, 1936), p. 3.

Whitman and realism à la Zola again appears."³¹ A New York Times editorial written soon after Wolfe's death denies that the "Gargantuan" element of Wolfe's writing is necessarily expressive "of the giant American and hurried adolescent people," saying that "a giant country does not have to be expressed in the dithyrambs of Walt Whitman, in whose school the late Thomas C. Wolfe would belong."³²

It is too soon to know whether these criticisms are more valid than others praising Wolfe, but these are of particular interest since each, in a way, links Wolfe with Whitman, our self-announced bard of America and democracy. This recurrent linking of Wolfe and Whitman by various critics has suggested this paper, the purpose of which, as has already been stated, is to study the work of Wolfe in an effort to determine the kinship between Wolfe and Whitman; but the emphasis is on Thomas Wolfe, and only such features of Whitman are brought in as seem pertinent to the discussion of Wolfe's work.

At the same time, this paper does not seek to prove that Whitman was a prime influence on Wolfe or to minimize the influence of other writers. Wolfe says himself that the writing of James Joyce, whom he considered the outstanding prose writer in the twentieth century, influenced him more

³¹"Thomas Wolfe's Short Stories," ibid. (November 30, 1935), 13.

³²New York Times, September 18, 1938, p. 4.

than that of any other author. And it is true that in certain matters of form, the influence of Joyce (particularly of his Ulysses) is at once apparent. The abundance of classical allusion, the double symbolism, and the thematic construction of each chapter with the mythological significance of its title giving the motif, is certainly Joycean.

Wolfe also read the French realists with interest. There is in Wolfe a Proust-like delving within himself for material. At one time Wolfe thought of combining all his works into a "Remembrance of Things Past" that would have far out-numbered Proust's pages.³³ Wolfe was not unaware of the experimental trend of the novel at the time he was writing and, when it suited his purpose, made use of a similar technique. Unlike Whitman, he did not attempt to screen his readings, but those readings were so broad and his works so filled with constant references to other writers that this very profuseness serves as an effective screen. And yet in all Wolfe's writings there is but one passage where he refers to Whitman's work. When one remembers this, together with the many references that show his familiarity with Leaves of Grass, one feels that Wolfe did owe more than he knew or was willing to admit to Whitman and to his vision of what American literature should be and do.

³³ Malcolm Cowley, "Thomas Wolfe's Legacy," The New Republic, XCIX (July 19, 1939), 11.

CHAPTER II

THOMAS WOLFE'S AND WALT WHITMAN'S

VISION OF AMERICA

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
greater than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for
the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back
in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stop-
ping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts
his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.¹

Though working in the medium of the novel, it is as a poet that Wolfe, nearly seventy-five years later, has taken up Whitman's challenge--to find the genius of the American spirit and reveal it to Americans. Even Wolfe, with his great energy of body and spirit, often despaired of ever finishing the task and was constantly harassed by the thought that he had not time enough. But, though death cut short Wolfe's plan, his efforts have not been without results. Others have appreciated the strength and vigor with which he attacked his problem. John Hall Wheelock, in a brief introduction to The Face of a Nation, a selection of poetical

¹Whitman, "Poets to Come," I, 15.

passages from the writings of Wolfe, hails Wolfe as a great poet who, like Whitman, has given us a fresh vision of America:

Now, with the passage of time, it becomes clear that whatever else he may have been or achieved, Thomas Wolfe was, first of all, a poet--a lyric poet of extraordinary intensity, with a sensitivity to word-music, to rhythm and cadence, which can be likened only to Whitman, whose vision of America and the American continent he shared. The American spirit and the American earth of our day as distinguished from the spirit and earth of any other land or time, these are the major themes of Wolfe's writing, and it is as a poet that he articulates them. In so doing he has given many Americans a fresh sense of their country.²

Thus the core of resemblance between Wolfe and Whitman springs from their central theme, which is the same. Wolfe's writings are but a new interpretation of the old "American Dream" of "life more abundant" for everyone that Whitman had interpreted for his age.³ If one admits each as a spokesman for his age, the degree of kinship between them might be stated in the form of a ratio. As Whitman sought to reveal the modern America of his day in its relation to the individual

²The Face of a Nation, p. v.

³Frederick Ives Carpenter, "Frame of Reference," The Saturday Review of Literature, XIII (January 25, 1936), 9. Carpenter says: "The 'controlling idea' of Wolfe's novels may perhaps be described as the struggle of the human personality to develop its potential powers of creation, in spite of the forces that seek to frustrate it. Of course this idea is not new. In different terms Emerson described it as the need of self-reliance, and Whitman celebrated it in his 'Song of Myself.' Emerson's essays and Whitman's poetry are autobiographical as Wolfe's novels are. But Emerson's 'self' was closely related to his 'Over-Soul,' Whitman's 'I' was 'cosmic' or 'communal,' and Eugene Gant is the archetype of the creative human personality. . . . At bottom Wolfe's idea of the creative personality and his Americanism are one and the same."

American's ideals, so Wolfe sought to reveal the modern America of his day. Thus Wolfe is to Whitman as our time is to Whitman's time. For beneath the apparent differences of both ages, we recognize our America, and beneath the apparent differences of Wolfe and Whitman, we see a thread, a purpose uniting them both.⁴

How came this vision of America to Whitman and later to Wolfe, and whence came the power and desire to grapple such a task as they envisioned? At least partial answers to these questions lie in discovering the forces that went into the moulding of the two personalities. Both Wolfe and Whitman were extremely sensitive lads with a large emotional endowment and a keen imagination which was constantly fed by their wide and varied reading. Since childhood each had desired to write; however, their early efforts were rather conventional and imitative in character and were little noticed by the critics. After several years of wandering and casting about, each suddenly changed his medium and brought forth a book out of himself that startled the critics to attention. So the vision was an accumulation of what each had been absorbing since birth. As each grew older, the impact of all these sensations began to be significant. When their

⁴In Notes and Fragments Whitman says, "But the truest analogies and connections are not those of the surface, or of first sight or visible: they are often like the subterranean streams of far-apart outlets and different names, but identical at bottom." IX, 15.

import became clear to the poet, he wished to share his knowledge with his fellowmen, for at the core of each man's vision was his love for America and the individual.

Whitman brooded long over the thought "the young Goethe derived from Herder, 'that really great poetry is always (like the Homeric or Biblical canticles) the result of a national spirit,' and the complementary thought that a national spirit is always the result of really great poetry."⁵ He felt this thought had a special significance for America since the spirit of America was not yet revealed to its own people. He states:

No land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing a race of singers and poems differing from all others, and rigidly their own, as the land and people and circumstances of our United States need such singers and poems to-day, and for the future. Still further, as long as the States continue to absorb and be dominated by the poetry of the old world, and remain unsupplied with autochthonous song, to express, vitalize and give color to and define their material and political success, and minister to them distinctively, so long will they stop short of first-class Nationality and remain defective.⁶

Whitman's literary ideas, arising from the firm foundations of his Americanism, are the results of this brooding. Whitman saw that he must strike a new path; his poems were to break the way. However, Whitman thought Goethe wrong in saying that a poet must live apart.⁷ Whitman says that a

⁵Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. 192.

⁶"A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, 65-66.

⁷Notes and Fragments, IX, 112.

poet is not dear to a people "unless he be of them and of the spirit of them, a growth of the soil, the water, the climate, the age, the Government, the religion, the leading characteristics, a height and individuality for his own nation and days and not for other nations."⁸ The American poets are to enclose old and new, for America is the race of races,⁹ and, as the poet is the equalizer of his age and land, he must lead in social and religious progress, particularly religious progress.¹⁰ Whitman felt with Milton that a poet's purpose was to "justify the ways of God to man," and this Whitman wished to do for the America of his day. After competing as a young man for the usual rewards, he found himself at thirty-three with a special desire which had finally defined itself and now dominated everything else:

This was a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America--and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., p. 115. ⁹ Preface to 1855 Leaves of Grass, V, 163.

¹⁰ Whitman says, "The land and sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests, mountains and rivers, are not small themes...but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects...they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls." Ibid., 165.

¹¹ "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, 44.

When Wolfe began to write, his purpose was not so well defined as Whitman's. Wolfe says he was "like the Ancient Mariner who told the Wedding Guest that his frame was wrenched by the woeful agony which forced him to begin his tale before it left him free."¹² In fact, his early writings help him to a truer definition of his task, and in them through the struggle of his heroes, he depicts his own growth of vision. Through the character of George Webber, Wolfe tells of his first realization of the task:

He was for the first time trying to articulate something immense and terrible in life which he had always known and felt, and for which he must now find some speech or drown. And yet it seemed that this thing which was so immense could have no speech, that it burst through the limits of all recorded languages, and that it could never be rounded, uttered, and contained in words. . . .

The greater part of his life had been lived in the confines of a little town, but he now saw plainly that he could never live long enough to tell the thousandth part of all he knew about its life and people--a knowledge that was not merely encyclopedic and mountainous, but that was as congruent and single as one gigantic plant, which was alive in all its million roots and branches, and must be shown so, or not at all.¹³

As Emerson influenced Whitman in bringing his thoughts to a focus, so Whitman may have influenced Wolfe. Scattered throughout Wolfe's writings are casual allusions which show that he was well acquainted with Whitman's work. But there is in Of Time and the River a section in the chapter entitled

¹²The Story of a Novel, pp. 41-42.

¹³The Web and the Rock, pp. 261-262. The figure comparing the plant to life recalls the fig tree comparison of the Upanishads. Much the same idea as that of the first paragraph here quoted was expressed by Whitman in "Song of Myself," sections 25 and 26. I, 65-66.

"Telemachus" which gets at the core of Wolfe's vision of America and of the influence of Whitman. In this chapter Eugene's arrest for drunkenness marks for him a spiritual growth. Eugene felt and understood for the first time the meaning of an immense and brutal authority in life, and "now, he was conscious, even at the moment he came out of the cell, of a more earthly, common, and familiar union with the lives of other men than he had ever known."¹⁴ Shelley had been the poet of his immunity and his inviolability, "but in the years that followed, just as Eugene's physical body grew coarser and more heavy, and his sensual appetites increased enormously, so also did the energy of his spirit."¹⁵ As Eugene, like Wolfe, grew older and became more enmeshed in the life around him, he came to understand that one does not escape out of the world but into it:

And as he discovered this, Eugene turned more and more for food and comfort to those poets who have found it, and who have left great pieces of that golden earth behind them in their verse, as deathless evidence that they were there:--those poets who wrote not of the air but of the earth, and in whose verse the gold and glory of the earth is treasured--their names are Shakespeare, Spenser, Chaucer, Herrick, Donne, and Herbert.

Their names are Milton...Wordsworth, Browning, Whitman, Keats, and Heine--their names are Job, Ecclesiastes, Homer, and the Song of Solomon.

These are their names, and if any man should think the glory of the earth has never been, let him live alone with them, as Eugene did, a thousand nights of solitude and wonder, and they will reveal to him again the golden glory of the earth, which is the only earth that is, and is forever, and is the only earth that lives, the only one that will never die.¹⁶

¹⁴Of Time and the River, p. 389. ¹⁵Ibid. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 390.

As Eugene's spirit became "darker, slower, heavier, smouldering and slow in its beginning heat, and densely woven and involved in all its web-like convolutions,"¹⁷ he turned to Whitman and to those poets of kindred spirit whom Whitman admired so much. It is significant that Whitman, the only American, is included by Wolfe in this passage with the great poets of all time who brought the golden glory of the earth to Eugene. For Wolfe, like Whitman, wished to describe the American earth, and, in this task, he had only Whitman as his heritage and guide.

Wolfe, like Whitman, felt that European imitations could never express the America he knew. He advises that "instead of whining that we have no traditions, or that we must learn by keeping constantly in touch with European models, or by keeping away from them, we should get busy telling some of the stories about America that have never been told."¹⁸ He understood that his was a continuation of the task Whitman saw, and that he faced the same obstacles. His friend Perkins says of Wolfe:

He was wrestling as no artist in Europe would have to do, with the material of literature--a great country not yet revealed to its own people. It was not as with English artists who revealed England to Englishmen through generations, each one accepting what was true from his predecessors, in a gradual accretion, through centuries. Tom knew to the uttermost meaning the literatures of other lands and that they were not the literature of America. He knew that the light and

¹⁷Ibid., p. 389.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 69-70.

color of America were different; that the smells and sounds, its peoples, and all the structure and dimensions of our continent were unlike anything before. It was with this that he was struggling, and it was that struggle alone that, in a large sense, governed all he did.¹⁹

Like Whitman, Wolfe rejected the theory of art for art's sake. His main interest was not to write a well made novel, for, like Eugene, he hated the prettily regular wherever he found it.²⁰ He wished to attempt, as he says Dostoevski did, to trace "with a giant's brush the map of the universe, showing the possibility of man becoming God."²¹ He would have agreed with Whitman that Goethe was wrong in saying the artist must live apart. Wolfe says the artist's reason for being

is to snare the spirits of mankind in nets of magic, to make his life prevail through his creation, to wreak the vision of his life, the rude and painful substance of his own experience, into the congruence of blazing and enchanted images that are themselves the core of life, the essential pattern whence all other things proceed, the kernel of eternity. This is the reason that the artist lives and works and has his being: that from life's clay and his own nature, and from his father's common earth of toil and sweat and violence and error and bitter anguish, he may distil the beauty of an everlasting form.²²

Both Whitman and Wolfe were well acquainted with the great works of literature and had received inspiration from

¹⁹Perkins, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁰Look Homeward, Angel, p. 395.

²¹The Web and the Rock, p. 290.

²²Of Time and the River, p. 550.

them.²³ Still, each felt that the literature of America called for a different expression. As Whitman had announced that America differed from Europe, he proceeded to trace the native spirit by contrasting America with Europe in size and government. To the petty environment of Europe, Whitman opposes the largeness and largess of America, and to the feudalism of Europe, he opposes the democracy of America.²⁴ Wolfe, tracing the American lineaments of our day, makes use of these same working concepts.

Whitman recognized that individuals, nations, and eras are given permanent and separate identity through their material forms.²⁵ Since an individual was conditioned by his nation and time, to gain freedom for himself he must merge himself with his nation and time. The American poet must encompass in himself the whole of America, historically, politically, socially, and geographically.²⁶ Particularly must he make himself one with the wide expanse of the new world which contrasts so sharply with the smallness of Europe. The vast territory stretching far west to California's shores was itself a poem to Walt Whitman, nature's poem tuned to cosmic rhythms.

²³Whitman says, "I know very well the life is in my soul, not in the traditions, the phantoms--but I know the traditions help me well." Notes and Fragments, IX, 191. See The Story of a Novel for a statement of Wolfe's avid reading, p. 46.

²⁴Foerster, op. cit., p. 193. ²⁵"To Think of Time," II, 219.

²⁶Preface to 1855 Leaves of Grass, p. iii.

The vastness of America as it contrasted with the pettiness of Europe was also an integral part of Wolfe's vision of America.²⁷ Wolfe felt with Whitman that the geographical contours of a country are reflected in the character of its people. Thus George Webber did not like "little countries or little people,"²⁸ and Eugene, oppressed by the smallness of England cries:

O God! O God! We have been an exile in another land and a stranger in our own. The mountains were our masters: they went home to our eye and our heart before we came to five. Whatever we can do or say must be forever hillbound. Our senses have been fed by our terrific land; our blood has learned to run to the imperial pulse of America which, leaving, we can never lose and never forget. We walked along a road in Cumberland, and stooped, because the sky hung down so low; and when we ran away from London, we went by little rivers in a land just big enough. And nowhere that we went was far: the earth and the sky were close and near. And the old hunger returned--the terrible and obscure hunger that haunts and hurts Americans, and makes us exiles at home and strangers wherever we go.²⁹

Both Wolfe and Whitman were held by the vastness of our land. But where Whitman's spirit responds buoyantly to this

²⁷In the chapter entitled "The Promise of America" in You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 505-508, Wolfe becomes a giant man taking the Rockies as a footstool and surveying the United States. From there he beholds the cities of the east "flung like star-dust through the field of night." He says, "Observe the whole of it, survey it as you might survey a field. Make it your garden, seeker, or your backyard patch. . . . It's your oyster--yours to open if you will. Don't be frightened, it's not so big now, when your footstool is the Rocky Mountains." Whitman uses this same device in an attempt to present his vision in sensual imagery. See "Song of Myself," I, 73.

²⁸You Can't Go Home Again, p. 558.

²⁹Look Homeward, Angel, p. 424.

vastness and sees in the Rockies the expression of a kindred spirit, Wolfe's spirit is lonely, awed, and swallowed up by the wilderness. For Wolfe identified himself with that which was lost, that which was finite in man, whereas Whitman, gazing at the vast expanse, achieved a sense of identity with the infinite. Wolfe is fascinated by the transiency and bitter brevity of man's time on this earth:

It seemed to him that all man's life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man's grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory came from the brevity and smallness of this flame, and that he knew his light was little and would be extinguished and that only darkness was immense and everlasting.³⁰

To Wolfe all life is written in the turning of a leaf upon a bough. Like Whitman's, Wolfe's most poetic passages spring from his constant wonder at the strangeness and mystery of the earth. Wolfe's attitude toward the world about him was often very close to that expressed in the Vishnu Purana of the Hindus, in Emerson's "Hamatreya," and Whitman's "Pensive on Her Dead Gazing"--that only the earth endures. Later Wolfe, like Whitman, finds calm in the thought that amidst so much change the old earth continues. In his last book, Wolfe says,

"Some things will never change. Some things will always be the same. Lean down your ear upon the earth and listen.

"...All things belonging to the earth will never change--the leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of

³⁰The Web and the Rock, p. 525.

lovers long since buried in the earth--all things proceeding from the earth to seasons, all things that lapse and change and come again upon the earth--these things will always be the same, for they come up from the earth that never changes, they go back into the earth that lasts forever. Only the earth endures, but it endures forever. . . ."³¹

The wail of the fast express as it hurtles across the "huge flowing lift of the earth waves"³² and fades into the horizon becomes a symbol of Wolfe's spirit and of the briefness of man's days. It is often from the windows of the Transcontinental Limited "stroking eighty miles an hour across the continent"³³ that Wolfe has Eugene and George see America. Then, in catalogues longer than Whitman's, Wolfe describes the scenes of America as they flit past.

The rails are laid across eight hundred miles of golden wheat, the rails are wound through mountains, they curve through clay-yellow cuts, they enter tunnels, they are built up across the marshes, they hug the cliff and follow by the river's bank, they cross the plains with dust and thunder, and they leap through flatness and the dull scrub pine to meet the sea.³⁴

The rails cross mighty rivers--"The vast, coiling, never-glutted and unending snakes that drink the continent."³⁵

The rails speed onward over the rivers whose names are flowing and beautiful music--the Monongahela, the Colorado, the

³¹You Can't Go Home Again, p. 44.

³²Look Homeward, Angel, p. 359.

³³Of Time and the River, p. 155.

³⁴Ibid., p. 861.

³⁵Ibid., p. 868.

Tennessee, the Rappahannock.³⁶ They lead to the Hudson River that is "like vats that well with purple and rich wine"³⁷ and sweep past the rich farms bordering the river. In their rich opulence Wolfe says Eugene saw a symbol of all he had dreamed of America as a boy:

The whole design of that earth, with the casual and powerful survey of its great fields, its dense still woods of moveless silence ringing with the music of the birds, its far-off hills receding into time as haunting as a dream, and the central sorcery of its shining river. . . was unutterably the language of all he had ever thought or felt or known of America: the great plantation of the earth abundant to the sustenance of mighty men, and enriching all its glamorous women with the full provender of its huge compacted sweetness, an America that was so casual and rich and limitless and free, and so haunted by dark time and magic, so aching in its joy with all the bitter briefness of our days, so young, so old, so everlasting, and so triumphantly the place of man's good earth, his ripe fulfillment and of the most fortunate, good, and happy life that any man alive had ever known.³⁸

America, "the fabulous country"³⁹ rolls by:

It is the place of autumnal moons hung low and orange at the frosty edges of the pines; it is the place of frost and silence of the clean dry shocks and the opulence of enormous pumpkins that yellow on hard-clotted earth; it is the place of the stir and feathery stumble

³⁶Ibid. In its use of Indian names this passage suggests one in Whitman's poem, "Starting from Paumanok," I, 30.

The red aborigines,
Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds,
calls as of birds and animals in the woods, syllabled to us for names,
Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez...

³⁷Of Time and the River, p. 506. ³⁸Ibid., p. 569.

³⁹Ibid., p. 155. Whitman has long catalogues encompassing the geography of these states in "Our Old Feuillage," I, 206-210. Sections 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 16 and 33 in "Song of Myself" further enumerate the sights and peoples of America. I, 41-82.

of hens upon their roosts, broken barkings of the dogs, the great barn shapes and solid shadows in the running sweep of the moon-whited countryside, the wailing whistle of the fast express.⁴⁰

Small dark towns whip by like bullets. From his train window Eugene catches only "a fleeting glimpse of a silent little square, a few hard lights and then the darkness of the earth again," but these fragmentary things belonged so completely to all the life of little towns he had known that the nocturnal picture of the town was instantly whole and living in his mind.⁴¹

All the rails pointed toward the city and the sea. America was the nation of cities that were supported by the huge materials of the hinterland. Wolfe, this boy from the hinterland, enfolded within him the history of this change. Thus in Wolfe's vision of America as in Whitman's, the material growth of America is an important part of her history. Whitman looked with pride at our expanding frontiers and our material growth and saw these as necessary steps for our spiritual growth.⁴² Wolfe, who felt like Whitman that he must encompass the history of America, knew the record of Europe's blundering with America. He remembered with pity the puny arrogance and short-sightedness of the one-eyed Spaniard who, in a solemn ceremony, took possession of the

⁴⁰Of Time and the River, p. 156. ⁴¹Ibid., p. 32.

⁴²For long catalogues of Whitman's on the growth and material richness of America see: "Starting from Paumanok," sections 14 and 16, I, 28-32; "Song of the Broad-Axe," I, 223-229; "A Song for Occupations," I, 263.

wilderness of Catawba for his king and then sailed away when he failed to find gold in the streets. And yet Wolfe knew the gold was there, for he saw that the material growth of America was more fabulous than the European fable.⁴³

Wolfe says this boy from the hinterland brought to the city the whole packed glory of the earth--the splendor, power, and beauty of the nation. He brought to it the memory of his fathers who had wrested this richness from the wilderness,

who were great men and knew the wilderness, but who had never lived in cities; three hundred of his blood and bone, who sowed their blood and sperm across the continent, walked beneath its broad and lonely lights, were frozen by its bitter cold, burned by the heat of its fierce suns, withered, gnarled, and broken by its savage weathers, and who fought like lions with its gigantic strength, its wildness, its limitless savagery and beauty, until with one stroke of its paw it broke their backs and killed them.⁴⁴

Wolfe's America is a lonely land. There is a note of nostalgia more evident in his writings about the nation than

⁴³See "The Men of Old Catawba," From Death to Morning, p. 180. Wolfe says: "America confirmed this little fable about gold in one short year of her history, and then proceeded to unpoCKET and unearth vast stores of wealth that made the visions of these old explorers look absurd. For she unearthed rivers of rich oil and flung them skywards, she dug mountains of coal and iron and copper out of the soil, she harvested each year two thousand miles of golden wheat, she flung great rails across the desert, she bridged the continent with the thunder of great wheels, she hewed down forests of enormous trees and floated them down rivers, she grew cotton for the world, her soil was full of sugars, citric pungencies, of a thousand homely and exotic things, but still the mystery of her earth was unrevealed, her greatest wealth and potencies unknown."

⁴⁴Of Time and the River, p. 413. For a similar thought see "Pioneers! O Pioneers! I, 279; "With Antecedents," I, 292.

in Whitman's Leaves of Grass. At the time Whitman set out to discover the genius of America, the Revolution was still fresh in men's memory. Old veterans, friends of Whitman's, talked to him of their experiences. Whitman saw in this political freedom that they had gained, a new start, a base for the new spiritual freedom we were also to gain through democracy. He looked toward Europe and saw how deep-rooted tradition hobbled the struggle of the common people to overcome arbitrary rule and gain more freedom. Then he looked toward America, and the spirit of Jefferson was still strong in his veins. Here was a new country, free of centuries of tradition, which accepted the principles of democracy. Here the common man was given freedom as his birthright. He saw in America the triumph of democracy and looked toward America to lead the way for Europe.⁴⁵ He dismissed all doubts and proclaimed himself the prophet and seer of democracy.⁴⁶

Wolfe, likewise, is a poet, but his lyricism is that of a modern and more muscular Walt Whitman behind whom lie years of national disillusionment.⁴⁷ Wolfe was born in a very different world from that of Whitman. The frontier was gone. The democracies had become very imperialistic; natives bent under our imperial sway and understood little of the democratic jargon. With the debacle of the War of

⁴⁵"Song of the Broad-Axe," I, 233-237.

⁴⁶"One's-Self I Sing," I, 1. ⁴⁷Bates, op. cit., p. 525.

1914, skepticism became rife. Literature became realistic. The nineteenth century had so successfully revolted against old traditions that the twentieth century found itself with nothing new to deny and nothing to believe in. Whitman was read by more and more aspiring young authors who copied his style, his radicalism, and his realism but ignored his idealism. The quest of the new poetry for externality and immediacy of impression has led away from the poetry of ideas.⁴⁸ There is no cosmic spirit in the new poetry, and its trend is away from the giant's swinging stride. Yet one Titan remains. In the mad twenties after the war to make the world safe for democracy had proved a costly failure and in the dark days of the thirties with war clouds ever growing more threatening, Wolfe writes of his love for America and of his search to find some ultimate criterion of values. In his writings he weaves together the strains of defeatism and disintegration with a hope and a belief in unity, in "something over all." Though not employing the medium of verse, it is as a poet filled with the cosmic spirit that he speaks.

However, Wolfe's gaze is not so clear as Whitman's. Gone is the swinging certainty which emanates from the Leaves. There is no buoyant call like Whitman's to drop doubt and despair and enter with him into this greater life.

⁴⁸John Livingston Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, p. 309.

Wolfe's words are like a voice from the crowd, now full of a wild hope as he nears the door to that greater life, now frenzied with despair as the almost open door fails to open and fades away, a mirage in man's memory. Often in Wolfe the idealism is tormented, but it remains and is not killed by looking at life realistically. And the basis of his idealism, as of Whitman's, is his belief in the common man. After every doubt and battle, it was to the common man, the laboring man who was close to the earth that he turned for strength. Like Whitman, who responded to the hearty animality of the cab drivers of New York, Wolfe preferred the "regular" people, as he called them. Maxwell Perkins relates an incident that also recalls Whitman. Wolfe, at the time, was living only about two blocks from Perkins. These two blocks were almost slum-like and the streets were filled with children who, Perkins says, all knew Tom:

When he went by in his long, slow, country stride, looking at everything, they would call out, "Hello Mr. Wolfe." And the police all knew him too. Once my wife said, "A flowerpot has disappeared from one of our window boxes. I can't understand how it happened." The window box was too high for anyone to reach, you would think, and who would want a geranium? Long afterward, one night Tom said: "I meant to tell you, I took one of your geraniums. I was coming in but the house was dark so I just took a flowerpot, and a cop saw me and said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm taking it home to water it.' He just laughed." This was New York. Was the cop afraid of Tom and his great size? No, he knew him, and understood him: that human quality in Tom had made friends with⁴⁹ everyone around, and they knew he was one of them.

⁴⁹Perkins, op. cit., p. 16.

Wolfe himself and his family are the real basis of his faith and fiction. Wolfe was at his best when writing of things that had become an integral part of himself, of these people he knew and understood, many of whom probably had some basis in fact--Eugene's family, particularly his father, his father's friends, Mike Fogarty, Ollie Gant, Jannadeau, Dr. Coker, Dr. McQuire, Harry Gugman, and Nebraska Crane. He does not gloss these over or conceal their shams and hypocrisies. Yet one feels that Wolfe has a sympathy for them and that, as Whitman had done before him, he senses a curious strength and nobility behind their weaknesses.

Whitman's belief in democracy, in the essential worth and integrity of the masses, was an essential part of his philosophy. Since he saw each man as a potential god, his poems were not to glorify any special class of people but just man. His spontaneous "Song of Myself" seems an almost unconscious spilling out of these thoughts. His "I" is no moral philosopher, but a pagan, primal man, discovering all over again his youth; and for him the world is young. He sweeps aside all curtains and intimately shares with each of us the wonder of his discoveries.

Wolfe's approach in Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River is the same. In the spontaneous overflow of these earlier books, in the groping of Eugene and his response to the world about him, we can trace his growth of

vision with each new discovery. Unlike Whitman, Wolfe's hero is not sharing his vision with us. He is still, as Wolfe was, in the midst of the struggle to attain a clearer insight. When Wolfe began his writing, he did not know just where he was going. In his novels we get the struggle almost as it was taking place in Wolfe. Hence his works are more chaotic than Whitman's Leaves, and it is sometimes hard to trace the growth of vision, but with his last book, he rounds the circle and states his philosophy almost as though he had a premonition of his early death.

So in Wolfe the growth is a gradual and all but unconscious process. The truths in his early novels are not pointed up or moralized about. Wolfe has no class struggle in mind as he writes of the common people. Like Whitman's, his approach is unceasingly personal. Abstract questions have no interest for Wolfe until they have become a part of living--until they have ceased to be abstract.⁵⁰ Wolfe, like Whitman, deals with individuals and sees their faults, but he never moralizes in these early writings. One critic says:

The shocking, shameful contrast in America between the conditions of the rich and poor has never been more powerfully and indignantly presented than in his work, but it is this contrast as it affects individuals, never as summarized in a class struggle. The same indifference to abstractions and classifications appears in his

⁵⁰ Bates, op. cit., p. 522. Whitman always translated the abstract in terms of the material world. A morning glory at his window satisfied him more than all the metaphysics of books.

ethical attitude. He burns with instinctive rage against shams and snobbishness and cold-heartedness, but he does not moralize or believe that evil is really evitable.⁵¹

Like Whitman, Wolfe sees people as natural forces and accepts the fact that as such they could work both good and evil.

(Wolfe's sympathy and understanding of the common people grew as he matured. The almost unconscious love and sympathy with the common man expressed in Wolfe's earlier books gradually come to the fore until, as in Whitman, personal love is replaced by love of humanity.) Whitman cried to the common people to claim their own at every hazard and declared, "By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."⁵² As Wolfe matured, his ideas more and more approximated Whitman's, but, through the character of Eugene, we learn that as a youth he wished to escape his father's world of sweat and toil. In Of Time and the River Wolfe tells of a visit Eugene made with people who had escaped the confusion of life:

At the moment it seemed to him to be the life for which all men on the earth are seeking, about which all men living dream, towards which all the myriads of the earth aspire; and the thing above all which made this life seem so beautiful and good was the conviction that filled him at that moment of its essential incorruptible righteousness

In that blind surge of youth and joy, the magic of that unbelievable discovery, he could not estimate the strange and bitter chance of destiny, nor ravel out that grievous web, that dense perplexity. He could not see how men had groped and toiled and mined, and grown blind

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²"Song of Myself," I, 62.

and bent and gray, deep in the dark bowels of the earth, to wreak this moonlight loveliness upon a hill; nor know how men had sweat and women worked, how youth had struck its fire and grown old, how hope and faith and even love had died, how many nameless lives had labored, grieved, and come to naught in order that this fragile image of compacted night, this priceless distillation of its rare and chosen loveliness, should blossom to a flower of moonlight beauty on a hill.⁵³

Gradually a feeling steals over Eugene that the life of the rich is not enchanted, but barren. Eugene rebels against the rigidity of social custom and feels there is something empty, false, and untrue in this kind of reverence, something against the real warmth and friendliness of man.⁵⁴ He comes to feel that, like Moses, he must go back to his father's world of sweat and toil and error and find joy of living, truth, and beauty in the lives of common men.⁵⁵

What Wolfe says of Helen, Eugene's sister, one feels is true of Wolfe himself. Conquering an impulse to greet first the more prominent men who have come to see her father, Helen turns to the workingmen dressed in their "good clothes" and greets them warmly. At the same moment she heard Ollie Gant's deep and powerful laugh, saw Jannadeau's great yellow face and massive domy brow, and "was overwhelmingly conscious of that immeasurable mountain of a man, Mike Fogarty, beside her, the sweet clarity of his blue eyes, and the almost

⁵³Of Time and the River, pp. 539-540.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 570. Whitman in "Song of Myself" says, "I wear my hat as I please indoors or out." I, 56. In the same poem he characterizes these people as "plentiful manikins," "positively not worms or fleas." I, 94.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 571.

purring music of his voice" as he spoke to her:

And instantly, having heard these words, and feeling the strong presences of these powerful men around her, it seemed to Helen she had somehow re-entered a magic world that she thought was gone forever. And she was immensely content.⁵⁶

As Wolfe's vision grows, he never loses the feeling he shares with Whitman and the Orientals, that only the earth endures. More and more he sees that man cannot escape his ties with the earth, that man must turn to the earth, that all man's strength comes from the earth, from man's love of earth. So Wolfe turns to the laboring man, the innocent man and earth's son in each of us.

In Wolfe's later books this feeling is more consciously expressed. Wolfe almost seems to have this truth as the thesis or moral purpose of his last book. He sees that it is the richness of the earth here in America that has helped mould us as individuals and helped make us a power among nations. He gradually comes to see that the richness is also the cause of our losing our way. He sees that the great shining city is, after all, nothing in itself; it is but an emblem of the richness of the hinterland brought forth by man's labor. Book II of You Can't Go Home Again is an expression of this truth. Through the character of Mr. and Mrs. Jack, George's friends and representative of the best of their kind, Wolfe shows the innate falseness of the life of high finance. The solid-looking dwelling of the Jack's,

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 251.

so placed over the hollowed out bowels of the earth that it trembles with the passing of each train beneath it, becomes a symbol of the structure of their lives.

At Mrs. Jack's party the unreal life of the city reaches its climax, and in the abrupt end to the party caused by the fire, Wolfe sees an epitome of the complete catastrophe to come. It is at this party, staged on the eve of the stock market crash, that George Webber realizes he must break with Esther and her world of wealth and privilege if he is to succeed in his creative endeavor.

For he had learned tonight that love was not enough. There had to be a higher devotion than all the devotions of this fond imprisonment. There had to be a larger world than this glittering fragment of a world with all its wealth and privilege. Throughout his whole youth and early manhood, this very world of beauty, ease, and luxury, of power, glory, and security, had seemed the ultimate end of human ambition, the furthestmost limit to which the aspirations of any man could reach. But tonight, in a hundred separate moments of intense reality, it had revealed to him its very core. . . . He had sensed how the hollow pyramid of a false social structure had been erected and sustained upon a base of common mankind's blood and sweat and agony. So now he knew that if he was ever to succeed in writing the books he felt were in him, he must turn about and lift his face up to some nobler height.⁵⁷

He had learned that,

in America, of all places, there could be no honest compromise with special privilege. Privilege and truth could not lie down together. He thought of how a silver dollar, if held close enough to the eye, could blot out the sun itself. There were stronger, deeper tides and currents running in America than any which these glamorous lives tonight had ever plumbed or dreamed of. Those were the depths that he would like to sound.⁵⁸

⁵⁷You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 320-321.

⁵⁸Ibid.

He had come to the core of his vision--a love of mankind and a desire to share his hard-won truths with them.

Here, through the character of George, we learn that Wolfe has sensed the same truths that had impelled Whitman three-quarters of a century before to write his Leaves for the America that was to come. However, that idealistic America of the future that Whitman envisaged implied a strong criticism of the American life of his day.⁵⁹ So, if he dreamed, it was purposeful dreaming. His eyes were awake to the present. He saw as clearly as Wolfe the tendencies of the times and the shams and weaknesses of mankind,⁶⁰ but he refused to keep account with lamentation. Cassandra-like, he foresaw our world of today, and, sensing the danger of our direction, threw the whole of a great personality into Leaves of Grass in an effort to break the ground in the direction we ought to go--to point the way toward the development of greater individuals.

Seventy-five years later Thomas Wolfe sensed that what Walt Whitman had feared had come about. After the crash of 1929 the outside world kept creeping in to George Webber so

⁵⁹John Burroughs also notes this. He says that the Leaves "are indirectly a tremendous criticism of American life and civilization, and they imply that breadth of view and that liberation of spirit--that complete disillusioning --which is the result of culture, and which all great souls have reached, no matter who or what their school masters may have been. Whitman: A Study, p. 205.

⁶⁰For a strong indictment of these shams, see Democratic Vistas, V, 61-63.

that as he sought to find himself, he sought to find what was wrong in America:

"I know," said George. "But I'm not thinking about the Stock Market. I'm thinking about America. . . . Sometimes it seems to me," he continued slowly, like a man who gropes his way in darkness over an unfamiliar road, "that America went off the track somewhere--back around the time of the Civil War, or pretty soon afterwards. Instead of going ahead and developing along the line in which the country started out, it got shunted off in another direction--and now we look around and see we've gone places we didn't mean to go. . . ." ⁶¹

Whitman had seen what was to come in America clearer than the rest of his contemporaries. In later years Whitman came to realize that the progress of the human race is slow, and that it would take many years for America to fulfill his hopes. But he clung to his conviction that democracy was necessary for the progress of human souls. Through democracy the common people were to gain freedom for the mind, the body, and the spirit. Whitman found his hopes for democracy personified in Lincoln, an American of common stock who had risen to a position of eminence, a rugged individual who believed in the unity of the nation and yet loved both North and South. Here in Lincoln was the typical leader for a democracy of people whose intense pride was to be equalled and held in check by their great love and sympathy for their fellow men. ⁶² So in his vision of America, Whitman conceived his duty as that of prophet and leader. His "barbaric yawp"

⁶¹You Can't Go Home Again, p. 393.

⁶²"Song of Prudence," II, 149.

must arouse and awaken the common people to greater endeavor--to the development of more Lincolns.

When Wolfe began writing, he had no lesson in mind. He wrote because he felt he must,⁶³ and he wrote of that which was nearest to him--the struggle of a creative artist to find his way. At first he was interested in world affairs only as they helped or hindered him individually. He did not interest himself in politics, and he shared the average American's contempt for law and authority.⁶⁴ Yet Wolfe's vision of America grew as he matured. As he delved into his own particular problem, he became aware that his was likewise the task of every man and that every man must be free to work this problem out for himself. Whitman, who realized this, had seen democracy as the solution. But the relation of the individual's problem to that of the government was not brought home to Wolfe until his last visit to Germany in 1936. This time he did not find the Germany he loved. A short novel, I Have a Thing to Tell You, written after his return, notes with bitterness the changes there. It is through this indictment of totalitarian government

⁶³The Story of a Novel, p. 6.

⁶⁴Of Time and the River, p. 338. Wolfe says of Eugene, ". . . He had seen the million evidences of force, privilege, and compulsion applied to the lives of people around him, so that like every other native of the land in which he lived, he had in his heart no belief in law whatever, and knew that legal justice . . . was achieved by fortuitous accident rather than by intent."

that one traces Wolfe's realization of the necessity of democracy for the freedom of man's soul. In this novel, which originally appeared in serial form in The New Republic, Wolfe recounts his leave-taking from a German friend who had come to see him off and of the chance acquaintances he made during his train ride out of Germany. In this simple narrative lies a stinging criticism of a concept of government wholly foreign to Wolfe's Americanism.

Wolfe's German friend pleads with him not to write about conditions in Germany, as the Germans like Wolfe and publishing this criticism would mean the banning of his books from Germany. Wolfe, who grew up in a country whose constitution guarantees the right of free speech and free press, replies that "a man must write what he must write. A man must do what he must do."⁶⁵ In contrast to this bold assertion Wolfe notes his friend's utter resignation:

I noticed, as I had so often done before, the deep and tragic resonance of his quiet voice, a voice touched somehow, for an American, with unfathomed depths of living, with a resignation that had long since passed despair, a fortitude that had gone far past both pride and hope.⁶⁶

Not only is the man's spirit crushed by his lack of intellectual freedom, his physical and emotional freedom is curtailed as well:

⁶⁵"I Have a Thing to Tell You," The New Republic, XC (March 10, 1937), 136.

⁶⁶Ibid.

And then, his friend said wearily, with the tone of bitter indifference that had become so marked in one short year: "It does not matter. I do not care. I pay no attention to these stupid people. I have my work. I have my girl. If they let me keep them that is all that matters . . . If you have a girl you must marry her and-- may I tell you?" he said frankly--"I cannot marry. I do not make enough money. It would be quite impossible! . . . If you have a girl then you must have two rooms. And that also is quite impossible! I have not even money enough to afford two rooms."⁶⁷

On the train Wolfe strikes up a pleasant acquaintanceship with the people who are traveling in the compartment with him--a Pole, a German man and woman, and a Jew. The Pole comments to Wolfe that the pleasant comradeship shows how good people are and how easy it is to get along with one another if only the "damned politicians" would let things alone.⁶⁸ As they near the border, officials become suspicious of the Jew, search him, and find that he is trying to escape from Germany with his money. Wolfe says the Jew knew his fate:

We looked at him for the last time, and he at us--this time, more direct and steadfastly. And in that glance there was all the silence of man's mortal anguish. And we were all somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow guilty. We all felt somehow that we were saying farewell, not to a man but to humanity; not to some nameless little cipher out of life but to the fading image of a brother's face.⁶⁹

Here, Wolfe, sensing a more significant farewell to humanity

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 133. Whitman, a century earlier, realizing that man must have an outlet for his sexual urges had shocked more sensitive souls by insisting in his "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" sections of his poems that emotional freedom was necessary for the development of a sane and healthy personality and for the progress of the soul.

⁶⁸Ibid. (March 24, 1937), 202. ⁶⁹Ibid., 206.

than even he realized, a farewell starkly symbolic in the light of recent world events, saw in this blind persecution of race hatreds a contradiction of all that is decent and human in mankind--the growing of an ugly force which is the antithesis of Whitman's doctrine and of the American democratic idea of equality to all races.

The seizure of the Jew causes a gloom to settle over the travelers. The Pole who had been visiting relatives says he is anxious to get home. Wolfe is surprised to find that the Pole's home is New York and that he is a naturalized American whose fervor for America is unbounded.

"I am sick of Europe," he went on. "I am tired of this foolish business, these politics, these armies and this talk of war--the whole damn stuffy atmosphere."⁷⁰

He is anxious to get back to the freedom of America and forget the militarism, the regimentation, and the regulations of Europe, and Wolfe says he shared his friend's enthusiasm.⁷¹

As the travelers cross the border, Wolfe hears the woman sigh slowly with relief:

In a moment she said gently and simply: "Do not misunderstand. I am a German and I love my country. But--I feel as if a weight has lifted from me here"-- and she put her hand upon her breast again. "You cannot understand perhaps just how it feels to us but--" and for a moment she was silent as if painfully meditating what she wished to say. Then quickly, quietly: "We are so happy to be--out!"⁷²

⁷⁰Ibid. (March 17, 1937), 161.

⁷¹Ibid., 162.

⁷²Ibid. (March 24, 1937), 207.

And Wolfe who had fled from America so often, discovered that he too was glad to be "out":

It [Germany] was no foreign land to me. It was the other half of my heart's home. It was the dark Helen I had found, it was the dark found Helen I had lost--and now I knew, as I had never known before, the countless measure of my gain--the way that now would be forever closed to me--the way of exile and of no return--and another way that I had found. For I knew that I was "out." And that I had now found my way.⁷³

Wolfe, like Whitman, knew that he was a "this side" man. He had found his way, and he was going home to America. From a blind acceptance of America he had come to a deeper understanding of the principles upon which America was founded. He had come to feel that "the democratic formula is the only safe and preservative one for coming times,"⁷⁴ and that democracy guarantees the greatest amount of physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom to mankind. He had caught the vision of Jefferson and of Whitman.

But, through the character of George Webber, Wolfe tells us that America is not free from this same peril of blind force and compulsive greed.⁷⁵ It is the same peril

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Democratic Vistas, V, 79.

⁷⁵Wolfe says: "In Germany it was hopeless: it had already gone too far to be checked now by any measures short of death, destruction, and total ruin. But in America, it seemed to me, it was not mortal, not incurable--not yet. It was desperate, and would become more desperate still if in America, as in Germany, men became afraid to look into the face of fear itself, to probe behind it, to see what caused it, and then to speak the truth about it. America was young, America was still the New World of mankind's hope, America was not like this old and worn-out Europe which seethed and festered with a thousand deep and uncorrected ancient maladies. America was still resilient, still

that Whitman saw threatened us when we shunted off after the Civil War. Wolfe almost repeats Whitman's words. He tells us to peel off the gauze of the seeing eye as George has finally done, to look our times in the face with the plain searching light of truth, for it is the only remedy for the suffering soul of man.⁷⁶

He sees democracy as the hope of mankind, but he sees that we must win back our faith in the fundamental truths upon which our nation was founded.⁷⁷ He thinks the depression marks both an end and a beginning. We must get back to these fundamentals, we must find the "real America, the America that has always been, the America that was yet to be."⁷⁸ So Wolfe seeks to recall to Americans the love of truth and of freedom so necessary to the development of a true democracy, to the development of true individuals.

So, then, to every man his chance--to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity

responsive to a cure--if only--if only--men could somehow cease to be afraid of truth." You Can't Go Home Again, p. 730.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Through the character of George, Wolfe says, "People are afraid . . . to look at things and see them as they are. We've become like a nation of advertising men, all hiding behind catch phrases like 'prosperity' and 'rugged individualism' and 'the American way.' And the real things like freedom, and equal opportunity, and the integrity and worth of the individual--things that have belonged to the American dream since the beginning--they have become just words, too. The substance has gone out of them--they're not real anymore." You Can't Go Home Again, p. 393.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 324.

--to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him--this, seeker, is the promise of America.⁷⁹

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 508.

CHAPTER III

SIMILARITIES AND CONTRASTS IN TECHNIQUE

Whitman did much during his lifetime to encourage the belief that he was an inspired "naif." Wolfe, too, with no encouragement on his part, has been put in this same class along with Whitman. This designation by the critics comes partly from a failure to understand the writing technique of Whitman and Wolfe. For a close analysis of each shows that neither was naive or lacking in critical powers. In their writing both had a definite aim in view and set up certain guide posts which they were to follow, and, although they were working in different mediums, there is often a haunting similarity in their ideas about writing.

"There was too little attention given to the writing intelligence of Wolfe," says one critic who found Wolfe to be "an acutely reasonable and informed conversationalist on the subject of writing."¹ And although Whitman was not a professional critic, Norman Foerster thinks him "nevertheless one of the most important critics that America has produced because of the theory of literature that he formulated."²

¹Peter Monroe Jack, op. cit., p. 2.

²Op. cit., p. 157.

Whitman's theory of poetry was an integral part of his philosophy of life. He felt that the core of our life was the development and evolution of an individual soul. His poems were to be the means of sharing this vision with mankind. "In the centre of all," he said, "stands the Human Being, toward whose heroic and spiritual evolution poems and everything directly or indirectly tend, Old World or New."³ Thus in attempting to bring forth his vision of America, Whitman, like Goethe, wished to group his material around one personality which, in addition to being Walt the individual as he was enmeshed in American life, would also contain the cosmic or elemental characteristics of all men in all past time. In this way each of the Leaves would have an integral part in recording the growth of a soul. Since Whitman shared himself with his readers through his poems, he believed their form extremely important, but his ideas shaped themselves organically in a manner that, to conventional critics of his day, seemed formless.

For a time critics were inclined to think that Whitman's technique was merely lack of technique. He was called the raw, original bard. Yet his early efforts in the medium of the novel and his early poetry were conventional. While he was editor of the Eagle he had condemned Carlyle for being radical in form,⁴ but as he matured, read Emerson, saw the

³"A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, 54.

⁴The Gathering of the Forces, op. cit., 291.

drift of world affairs, he became convinced that he must find a new and different expression for the poems he must write. For one of his first principles was that form and matter must coincide, and he felt that the material which the poet of his day should deal with differed from the material of feudalism.

Judged by conventional standards, form does break down in the Leaves. Whitman discarded the idea that poems should be fitted to set forms as he discarded the deistic concept of a planned universe, for he believed that each thing in the universe was an integral part of an organic whole and, therefore, subject only to the intrinsic law of its nature. As his poems were to show the oneness of man and nature, he thought the form of these likewise should "tally nature." He felt that his work was alive, organic, that a poem should have the freedom and simplicity of the organisms of nature, and like them, derive its form from the quality of the life within.⁵ Whitman believed "the poet must not tamper with the spontaneous unfolding of what is pressing outward to birth and growth, is not to compose his poem, but let it proceed unhindered from his own composition."⁶ This does not mean, however, that Whitman's poems were easily written. Critics today realize that the 1855 Leaves of Grass was not

⁵See Foerster, op. cit., pp. 180-181, for a summary of Whitman's scattered statements as to the qualities of a poem.

⁶Ibid., p. 172.

such a spontaneous outburst as Whitman would have them believe. Notebooks of Whitman's show that after he had conceived the idea for his Leaves, he labored with his material over a period of nearly eight years before finding what he felt was an adequate expression of it. "To speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside," was, Whitman felt, "the flawless triumph of art."⁷ All his life he worked patiently with his material until he felt he had achieved the most natural, and therefore the most effective, expression for it.

This philosophic calm, this sense of timelessness in Whitman, accounts for much of the difference between him and Wolfe. For Wolfe seems always to have felt somehow that he did not have time enough. Unlike Whitman, who was mature when he conceived the idea of his Leaves and then spent the rest of his life working it out, Wolfe started to write before his vision was clear. Thus there is always a double process going on in Wolfe--growth of vision and growth of technique. This different attitude toward time is really a fundamental difference in personality and is reflected in their thought, their technique, and their method of work.

Whitman never seemed to have a set working routine. He wrote from inspiration and did not try to force his poems.

⁷Preface to the 1855 Leaves of Grass, V, 170.

His everyday life was leisurely and uneventful, as he desired it to be, since he felt that the poet must have plenty of leisure for the functioning of his creative imagination. When the weather was fine, he loved to spend hours by the seashore, and often slipped off to read his favorite books there.⁸ Perhaps he would go walking with John Burroughs and visit with their acquaintances along the street, but if his mood changed, he would leave his friend without giving any explanation.⁹ Sometimes on a week-end visit to a friend he would be moved by some inner creative force, and the company might see nothing of him all day. It was in such mystic communions that Whitman seemed to find inspiration for his poems, though they did not come easily or write themselves.

Whitman would usually have one clear vision of a poem or the thought for a poem. This he would jot down on any piece of paper handy, or in one of his notebooks that he had made by pinning some wrapping paper together. Perhaps for several days he would do no more about the poem. Then maybe another thought would come. The story is told that he would string these thoughts together on a piece of twine, and when the string of notes was long enough, would piece his poem together. Whether or not the story is true, this is more or less the way Whitman wrote his poems. He

⁸"A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, 55.

⁹Henry Bryan Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman, p. 112.

received an idea; then he read, and thought, and grouped his information about this central idea until he felt he had gathered sufficient material for the poem he wanted to build. Then he worked over these thoughts and facts, phrasing and rephrasing them, and using his catalogues built of solid facts to point the way toward some ideal truth he wished to impart.¹⁰ But never does one read of his being impatient or hurried. There was a feminine passiveness and receptivity in Whitman's acceptance of his world that was lacking in Wolfe, who was shot through with a nervous energy that would give him no rest.

Each writer drew his material from his own life--the sights about him, the books he had read, his own thoughts and feelings. Each loved to watch the crowds of New York by night and by day. But where Whitman was always a welcome and imposing figure as he strode along in his loose-fitting working clothes emanating calmness, health, and good cheer, Wolfe prowled the streets restlessly at all hours, searching. He would peer earnestly into people's faces as they passed, trying by the very intensity of his gaze to attain the inmost secret of their lives. He could not gain that tranquility which came to Whitman from his sense of mystic union with all nature and humanity.

This restlessness is evident in Wolfe's reading. It

¹⁰In "Song of Myself" Whitman says he but uses facts to enter into the area of his dwelling. I, 61.

seemed to him, as it did to Eugene, that he must read all the books ever written in order to glean all the accumulated wisdom of the world. Whitman, too, though not a bookman, read widely and strove to increase his knowledge, fill in the gaps, and attain accuracy in detail, but he read slowly and extracted the last morsel from a single book or article. As Wolfe grew older and more mature, he came to realize that Whitman's method was the more satisfactory, that he must cull and direct his reading and experiences, that "the unlimited extent of human experience is not so important for him as the depth and intensity with which he experiences things."¹¹ But in his youth he was filled with an insatiate curiosity and greed. He wished to know everything, be everywhere, and all at once. He was obsessed with the idea that he must get all of this down on paper somehow. So Wolfe filled endless notebooks with huge catalogues of towns, cities, counties, states, and countries he had been in; with the most provocative and suggestive descriptions he could write of countless houses and rooms and people.¹² He wrote for hours at a stretch, and then, when he had written himself out, he often paced the streets unable to sleep.

When Wolfe began to write, he did not know where he was going, what he should do. He fled to France and wrote because he felt he must. Then, while he was in Paris and homesick for America, the whole pageantry of America swept over

¹¹The Story of a Novel, p. 47.

¹²Ibid., p. 43.

him. After that a purpose began to define itself in him. Unlike Whitman, Wolfe found himself and America by fleeing from them. After living in Europe he

had come to understand very plainly that what many of us were doing in those years when we fled from our own country and sought refuge abroad was not really looking for a place to work, but looking for a place where we could escape from work; that what we were really fleeing from in those years was not the Phillistinism, the materialism, and ugliness in American life which we said we were fleeing from, but from the necessity of grappling squarely with ourselves and the necessity of finding in ourselves, somehow, the stuff to live by, to get from our own lives and our own experience the substance of our art which every man who ever wrote a living thing has had to get out of himself and without which he is lost.¹³

When he ceased fleeing from himself, he discovered America by finding it in his heart, his memory, and his spirit while in a foreign land.¹⁴ Wolfe says he really believes it was from his homesickness for America, "from this emotion, this constant and almost intolerable effort of memory and desire," that the material and structure of the books he began to write were derived.¹⁵ Through his own experience Wolfe realized, as Whitman had done before him, that he was America, and that all he could honestly know and tell about was what he had experienced.

Since Wolfe felt that all serious creative work must be at bottom autobiographical, he grouped his material about his own personality.¹⁶ His purpose, like Whitman's before

¹³ Ibid., p. 29. ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 30. ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

him, is really to share with us the growth of this personality. Wolfe found, as Whitman had, this struggle of the soul the unifying core of all his work:

From the beginning--and this was one fact that in all my times of hopelessness returned to fortify my faith in my conviction--the idea, the central legend that I wished to express had not changed. And the central idea was this: the deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man's search to find a father, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united.¹⁷

Wolfe and Whitman drew the world within and then gave their vision of it to mankind. Whitman says:

The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet. He consumes an eternal passion and is indifferent which chance happens. . . . What balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy. Other proportions of the reception of pleasure dwindle to nothing to his proportions.¹⁸

Wolfe, in characteristic fashion, expresses this same urge in terms of hunger:

This is the artist, then--life's hungry man, the glutton of eternity, beauty's miser, glory's slave--and to do these things, to get the reward for which he thirsts, with his own immortality to beat and conquer life, enslave mankind, utterly to possess and capture beauty he will do anything--be ruthless, murderous, and destructive, cold and cruel and merciless as hell to get the thing he wants, achieve the thing he values and must do or die.¹⁹

Since Wolfe and Whitman have drawn the world within,

¹⁷Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁸Preface to the 1855 Leaves of Grass, V, 167.

¹⁹Of Time and the River, p. 551.

the urge in their writings is outward, toward expansion. This gains vastness and magnitude for their writings at the risk of long repetitious passages and seeming inconsistencies. Because of this lack of restraint, both have been accused of formlessness. But Wolfe deliberately discarded the restraint of the well-made novel as Whitman had discarded the patterned verse, for, like Whitman, he felt that a piece of writing must be organic, shaped by the material itself. He felt he must find the form for the expression of this material within himself. Wolfe says that critics have objected that there was an intemperate excess in his researches; but he replies that with all the waste and error and confusion this excess led him into, it brought him closer to a concrete definition of his resources. He glimpsed the form for which he was struggling. He writes:

I know the door is not yet open. I know the tongue, the speech, the language that I seek is not yet found, but I believe with all my heart that I have found the way, have made a channel, am started on my first beginning. And I believe with all my heart, also, that each man for himself and in his own way, each man who ever hopes to make a living thing out of the substances of his one life, must find that way, that language, and that door--must find it for himself as I have tried to do.²⁰

Although Whitman wrote in verse and Wolfe in prose, many critics have recognized that Thomas Wolfe was essentially a great lyric poet. One thinks that

his finest writing is in those magnificent hymns to death and sleep in Look Homeward, Angel, in the hymn

²⁰The Story of a Novel, p. 49.

to New York City in Of Time and the River, in the journey on the railroad with which the latter commences, in his catalogue of American rivers, and in his always perfect scenes of death.²¹

These chants poured first from the poet's soul of Wolfe.

He says:

There was nothing at first which could be called a novel. I wrote about night and darkness in America, and the faces of the sleepers in ten thousand little towns; and of the tides of sleep and how the rivers flowed forever in the darkness.²²

Wolfe wrote all these hymns before he began to trace the first dim outlines of a formal pattern for his novel. These chants which set the tone to the whole work were later woven together by narrative episodes. Perhaps for this reason his first two books are more spontaneous and seem primarily the work of a poet. And it is in these books, particularly in the more poetic passages, that Wolfe's technique seems most similar to Whitman's.

Naturally the abruptness of Whitman's verse seemed very raw and original to critics schooled in Tennyson, Byron, and Shelley, who, like most of the other great English poets, had followed the Greek classic tradition. Today, however, critics recognize that Whitman's rhythms were not new or lawless and that the newness of his rhythms was really a return to older forms. One states:

The truth of the matter is that they are not new, since they are, to go no farther back, at least as old

²¹Bates, op. cit., p. 524.

²²The Story of a Novel, pp. 37-38.

as Hebrew poetry; nor are they free, for they have laws as rigid in their own way as the versification of Beowulf, or The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.²³

Critics now generally agree that the King James version of the Bible exerted a great influence on the style of Whitman's verse. Bliss Perry says that in the rhythmical pattern of the English Bible, Whitman found the charter for the book he wished to write.²⁴ Since this analogy with the method of Hebrew versification provides certain specific principles by which Walt Whitman's verse technique can be analyzed, and since Wolfe's poetic prose is strikingly reminiscent of Whitman's Leaves, it is worth while to see whether the visions of the two writers emerge in similar forms--that is, specifically, whether Wolfe makes any consistent use of these same Hebraic principles in the more poetic passages of his works.

The Use of Specific Literary Devices

Parallelism.--The first of these principles is "parallelism." In Leaves of Grass the line is the rhythmical unit, as the end punctuation shows. Each line balances its predecessor and completes or supplements its meaning. This "parallelism" may be called a "rhythm of thought."²⁵ This thought rhythm is the most fundamental principle of the Leaves. In the Leaves as in the Old Testament, there are

²³ Allen, op. cit., p. 226.

²⁴ Walt Whitman, p. 96.

²⁵ Allen, op. cit., p. 221.

four types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, and climactic. But in the Leaves, the synonymous is by far the most common. In this type of parallelism the second line strengthens the first by repeating the thought as, "I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable."²⁶

Wolfe constantly makes use of this mode of repetition of thought. In a poetic description of man's youth he says:

It is the thing he cannot bear to lose,
It is the thing whose passing he watches with infinite sorrow and regret,
It is the thing whose loss he must lament forever.²⁷

Again, in a chant to America's thousand lights and colors:

It is a fabulous country;
It is the place where miracles not only happen,
but where they happen all the time.²⁸

The antithetical parallelism where the second line denies the first is but infrequently used in Leaves of Grass.

However, Allen cites as an example,

A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking.²⁹

This is used more often by Wolfe. In his description of man's youth he says,

It is the thing whose loss he must lament forever,

²⁶"Song of Myself," I, 108.

²⁷ Of Time and the River, p. 454. As Whitman designated his unit of rhythm by the end punctuation of his lines, so here, and in the following quotations, the longer sentences of Wolfe have been broken into lines according to the punctuation and written as verse in order that the parallelism may be more apparent.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 125. ²⁹"A Woman Waits for Me," I, 124.

And it is the thing whose loss he really welcomes
with a sad and secret joy,³⁰

and again,

That being rich, we are so poor;
That being mighty, we can yet have nothing;³¹

or,

A young man is so strong, so mad, so certain and so
lost.
He has everything and he is able to use nothing.³²

The synthetic or cumulative parallelism in which the
second line, or succeeding lines supplement or complete the
first is found more often in the Leaves. An example is

I celebrate myself, and sing myself
And what I assume, you shall assume.³³

In a continuation of the passage just cited from Wolfe there
is an example of cumulative parallelism:

He has everything and is able to use nothing.
He hurls the great shoulder of his strength forever
against phantasmal barriers,
He is a wave whose power explodes in lost mid-oceans
under timeless skies,
He reaches out to grip a fume of painted smoke;
He wants all, feels the thirst and power for everything,
and finally gets nothing.³⁴

These various types of parallelism are mixed together
all through Wolfe's writings, and examples of almost every
type can be found in a single description. Thus Wolfe

³⁰Of Time and the River, p. 454.

³¹Ibid. This and the following quotation are antithetical within the line and the two lines are synonymous.

³²Ibid. ³³"Song of Myself," I, 33.

³⁴Of Time and the River, pp. 454-455.

supplements his line in the passage about America--

It is the place where miracles not only happen, but
where they happen all the time--

with about four pages of cumulative rhythm like the following:

It is the place of exultancy and strong joy, the place
of the darkened brooding air, the smell of snow;
It is the place of the fierce, the bitten colors in
October, when all the wild, sweet woods flame up.³⁵

In the fourth type of thought parallelism used in the Leaves, the "climactic" or "ascending rhythm," each succeeding line adds to its predecessor, usually taking up words from it and completing it.³⁶ Perhaps the best example of this found in Whitman is in the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." The third line is, "I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring." Then the last words of the line begin the new line and a further expansion of thought, "Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring. . ."³⁷

Wolfe often makes use of this expedient to link his thoughts and rhythms more closely. In his description of the waters of darkness, which falls naturally into lines and stanzas very similar in form to Whitman's, the last line of the first stanza is

Sired by the horses of the sea, maned with the dark,
they come.

³⁵Ibid., p. 155.

³⁶Allen, op. cit., p. 223.

³⁷Leaves of Grass, II, 94.

Then, as in Whitman, the next paragraph goes on from the last words of the preceding sentence:

They come! Ships call! The hooves of night, the horses
of the sea, come on below their manes of darkness.

Later in the same passage the thought is carried from the preceding to the next paragraph:

Have we not heard the river, the rich immortal river,
full of its strange dark time?

Full with the pulse of time it flows there. . . ³⁸

The Leaves are rich in internal parallelism as well as the parallelism of the line. Mr. Allen in his study of Whitman's prosody dissects "To Rich Givers" and stresses the fact that this internal parallelism is not incidental in the total effect of the Leaves.³⁹ Wolfe, too, often made use of internal parallelism as shown in the example of antithetical parallelism already cited.⁴⁰

The "envelope."--Another stylistic device which Whitman used is what biblical prosodists call the "envelope."⁴¹ In this the parallelism may be either of figures or of thought. In the thought-parallelism the first line states an idea, succeeding lines bring forth parallel thoughts and then the last line concludes or seals the envelope. These envelopes are often set apart in Whitman's verse and take the place

³⁸Of Time and the River, p. 510.

³⁹Allen, op. cit., p. 225.

⁴⁰See examples of antithetical parallelism cited, p. 64.

⁴¹Allen, op. cit., p. 225.

of the stanza. The movement in these envelopes reminds one a little of the strophe and antistrophe of the chorus in the Greek drama. The following is an example:

Passage to more than India!
 Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?
 O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those?
 Disportest thou on waters such as those?
 Soudest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?
 Then have thy bent unleash'd.⁴²

Often the envelopes are left open in Whitman's verse. With Wolfe the same is true. Wolfe's envelopes are not all perfect and are of figures as often as of thought. (He starts out with an idea and then lets succeeding passages play endless variations upon the first, going back and picking up phrases and figures; finally he comes back to the original thought. As an example of this, four paragraphs enlarge upon George Webber's thoughts "as he lay in his dark berth and watched the old earth of Virginia as it stroked past him in the dream-haunted silence of the moon." His thoughts follow the flowing movement of the train and its familiar noises bring back forgotten memories--of his childhood, his departure, of "the years that flow by like water." Then in a single concluding line, he brings us back to his place of departure: "The train rushed onward through the moonlit land."⁴³ With Wolfe these envelopes are not of

⁴²"Passage to India," II, 196.

⁴³You Can't Go Home Again, p. 88. Another good example of this envelope technique is found on page 370.

free verse pattern but are representative of loose prose rhythms and often extend over a page or more. But it seems significant that he does make use of this same overlapping technique that Whitman employed to give a sort of unity and emphasis to his writing. In this rather broad way Wolfe constantly makes use of thought-parallelism in his narrative as well as in his more lyrical sections, and it is thought-parallelism which forms the first rhythmical principle of Whitman's Leaves.

Phonetic recurrence.--The second main rhythmical principle of Whitman's Leaves is what Allen calls "phonetic recurrence." He notes that the parallel thought rhythms not only tend to fall into similar grammatical constructions, but also tend to fall into similar sound patterns.⁴⁴ The first of these reiterative devices which Whitman uses so extensively is "epanaphora" or initial repetition. This appears in 262 of 403 poems and gives pattern to 4000 of the 10,500 lines.⁴⁵ Often whole poems have practically the same initial reiteration throughout. Eighteen of the nineteen lines in the poem, "We Too How Long We Were Fool'd," begin with "we." In the poem, "Not Heaving from my Ribb'd Breast Only," all lines have initial reiteration. In "Salut au Monde," sections five through ten (comprising over seventy-

⁴⁴Allen, op. cit., p. 230.

⁴⁵Autrey Nell Wiley, "Reiterative Devices in Leaves of Grass," American Literature, I, 161.

five lines) have identical reiteration with the exception of two concluding lines, one in section six and the other in section ten.

Wolfe in his novels makes almost as extensive use of epanaphora as does Whitman. In his description of America with its thousand lights and colors, epanaphora occurs sixty-five times in five pages.⁴⁶ In this passage with the constantly recurring "it is" there is an occasional italicized break which like Whitman's use of the parenthesis helps keep the repetition from becoming too monotonous. Long sentences and paragraphs (which are often only one sentence) are linked together to an unusual extent by this initial reiteration. In Whitman it is the personal pronoun "I" that is used so often; in Wolfe, it is "and" and "he." In one section, nine of nineteen paragraphs begin with "and"; four begin with "that"; and two others begin with "eight." Only four out of the nineteen paragraphs begin with a different word.⁴⁷

The second reiterative device which Whitman employs almost as extensively as the initial repetition is "epanalepsis" or medial and final reiteration. Epanalepsis appears in forty-one per cent of Whitman's poems.⁴⁸ Often

⁴⁶ See Of Time and the River, pp. 155-160, beginning with the line, "It is the place of the howling winds. . ."

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 473-476.

⁴⁸ Wiley, op. cit., p. 161.

there is both initial and final reiteration in the same lines as:

I will know if I am to be less than they
 I will see if I am not as majestic as they,
 I will see if I am not as subtle and real as they,
 I will see if I am to be less generous than they...⁴⁹

Wolfe does not make as consistent use as Whitman of epanalepsis, and it is not as significant for his art, but in his more poetic passages, it is almost as evident as in Whitman's verse. Here is a passage from The Face of a Nation chosen at random:

October has come again, has come again. . . . I
 have come home again, and found my father dead...and
 that was time...time...time...Where shall I go now?
 What shall I do now? For October has come again, but
 there has gone some richness from the life we knew,
 and we are lost.⁵⁰

Another passage written as verse shows clearly the initial and final reiteration:

Full with the pulse of time it flows there,
 Full with the pulse of all men living, sleeping,
 dying, waking, it will flow there,
 Full with the billion dark and secret moments of
 our lives it flows there.
 Filled with all the hope, the madness and the pas-
 sion of our youth it flows there.⁵¹

In Wolfe as in Whitman these parallelisms of thought and the phonetic recurrences are expressed in like grammatical construction; so there is the third rhythm of grammar.

⁴⁹"By Blue Ontario's Shores," II, 124.

⁵⁰The Face of a Nation, p. 159. From Of Time and the River, p. 328. The periods are Wolfe's.

⁵¹Of Time and the River, p. 510.

Mr. Allen finds three uses for these reiterations in Whitman's Leaves which are also applicable to Wolfe's writing. The first and most important one is to produce cadence, since the musical rhythms of the line depend largely upon phonetic recurrence; the second use is to bind the lines together into strophes or stanzaic divisions; and the third is to achieve a purely oratorical effect.⁵² Certainly one must not minimize the importance to Whitman and Wolfe of the third, for much of the power and swing of their works is gained through this oratorical technique, which was natural to both. Whitman, who had dreams of being a lecturer, wrote his poems to be spoken and planned to tour the country with his Leaves. The oratorical method certainly came naturally to Wolfe, who grew up listening to his father's bold rhetoric. This leads to Wolfe's adoption of a method very similar to that Whitman used in treating his material. Wolfe's writings, like Whitman's, are filled with long and endless catalogues, and, seemingly, each writer had the same purpose in using the catalogues. One critic's remark about Whitman, that it was as though he tempted the muse by offering her the world with complete descriptive catalogues,⁵³ seems equally true of Wolfe. Both men really did wish to give us the world. The catalogues were meant to suggest the endless

⁵²Allen, op. cit., p. 230.

⁵³Walt Whitman, Representative Selections, ed. by Floyd Stovall, Introduction, p. xii.

diversity of this world and yet to show always the unity beneath the diversity. Each person was conceived as a microcosm of the macrocosm.

In their organization Wolfe's writings are very similar to Whitman's. There is no plot to unravel. There is no adherence to unities. Wolfe's works are a chain of poems, episodes, thoughts and moods which are given a sort of unity since all emanate from the same person. Each episode, poem, or mood is a loose "envelope"; that is, Wolfe will state an idea or mood, then, employing a stream of consciousness technique, he will write all the various connotations and implications branching from the original idea. Then his concluding statement rounds the circle by coming back to his first idea. Thus the only completion or close organization in Wolfe's writing is within these little units or envelopes which are strung together by various means. Whitman's poems followed a similar technique. Miss Wiley has remarked that his lyricism is one of extremely broad circles. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman makes use of a "leit motif," the heart-shaped leaves of rich green, death, star, lilac, him I love.⁵⁴ And he sweeps back to pick up one of these key words throughout the poem. Wolfe's refrain, "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door," becomes his "leit motif" and one of his principal ways of tying together his various units. His works are a constant

⁵⁴Wiley, op. cit., p. 170.

mingling of going out and coming back to this refrain. Like the strophic stanzas of Whitman, the movement is reminiscent of the old Greek dramas.

Allusions.---In the preface that preceded his first Leaves, Whitman said that the American poet must give up allusions, inversions, and all the stock poetic tricks.⁵⁵ Wolfe goes to the opposite extreme from Whitman, who counseled himself to make no reference to other writers and their books, and whose memory was so poor that he sometimes forgot where he had received an idea and thought it original. Wolfe's works, so filled with allusions, are somewhat reminiscent of the days of Chaucer when the learning of the author was estimated by the number of allusions in his writing. There are references to everything from the Alger books to Homer, from Sophocles to With Stanley in Africa. Wolfe tells of the reading of Eugene and often forgets to transfer his thoughts about these readings to the third person. Thus in speaking of Euripides, he suddenly speaks as Wolfe: "The Oedipus Rex is not only one of the greatest plays in the world; it is one of the greatest stories." Then in the next sentence, he switches back to Eugene, "And Euripides (whatever the disparagement of pedantry) he thought one of the greatest lyrical singers in all poetry."⁵⁶

Like Joyce's work rather than Whitman's, Wolfe's

⁵⁵Preface to 1855 Leaves of Grass, p. ix.

⁵⁶Look Homeward, Angel, p. 422.

writings are sprinkled with classical allusions. With Wolfe these are often used to point out the contrast between the ideal and the real. Wolfe enjoys the ludicrous effect he gains by quoting some dignified lines of an old writer about an incongruous situation in modern life. Talking of fried chicken in a dirty little cafe, he says, "Hail to thee, blithe spirit, bird thou never wert."⁵⁷ He describes a pageant where business must be represented for the commercial success of the enterprise as being introduced thus in eloquent iambs:

"Fair Commerce, sister of the Arts, thou, too,
Shall take thy lawful place upon our stage."
They came and passed: Ginsberg's--"the glass of fashion
and the mould of form"; Bradley the Grocer--"when first
Pomona held her fruity horn"; the Buick Agency--"the
chariots of Oxus and of Ind."
Came, passed--like pageantry of mist on an autumnal
stream.⁵⁸

Though Wolfe is showing that much of the old writing seems to have no place in our commercial world, he does use a wealth of allusions. In this respect he is unlike Whitman, who demanded simplicity, a "plate-glassy" style, and who wanted no draperies, however rich, between him and his readers.⁵⁹

Imagery.--At the same time Whitman demanded a "plate-glassy" style, he insisted that the poet's method must be indirect, suggestive. Since it is largely through the poet's use of imagery and figures that this method is achieved,

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 338.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 374.

⁵⁹Preface to 1855 Leaves of Grass, p. vii.

Walt's statements seem contradictory. The key to this paradox lies in Whitman's feeling for words.⁶⁰ In speaking of his art he always said he was careful in the selection of words, and though he experimented widely, his word sense seldom failed him. The sprinkling of foreign words adds little to his poetry, but it was a part of his theory that we should enrich our language by making free use of those in any other and absorbing them into our own. It was part of Whitman's theory that the poet must encompass the whole of life and break the path for others to follow. Knowing that the poet must express himself through words and realizing how much depended on the choice of the right word, Whitman wanted nothing to limit the richness of his choice. To him all words were the diction of poetry. In his first poem he speaks of "belch'd words."⁶¹ Since his were to be the poems of democracy, he often made use of the vernacular. He employs "swag" for "sag,"⁶² "wag" for "wave,"⁶³ and often begins his statements with "I reckon" or "I guess."

Whitman also felt that the poems of democracy should make use of vocational words, or words technical to a profession, and his long catalogues are filled with such words. Particularly does he draw from his knowledge of carpentry. In one poem he speaks of himself as "plumb in the uprights,

⁶⁰Allen, op. cit., p. 234.

⁶¹"Song of Myself," I, 34.

⁶²Ibid., 46.

⁶³Ibid.

well entretied, braced in the beams."⁶⁴ Again, in the same poem, the carpenter "dresses his plank" and "the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp."⁶⁵ He often draws from shipbuilding and navigation. He speaks of love as a "kelson" of creation,⁶⁶ and his eyes "settle the land."⁶⁷

Old words are often used effectively by Whitman. If there is no word that suits, he coins one or uses a noun as a verb, or an adjective or verb as a noun, or a verb as an adjective. He speaks of the "posh" of snow, of the "soughing" twilight, and of icy peaks as "topples of brittle and blue." Whitman made no distinction between the diction of poetry and prose because to him a single word, all words, were suggestive.⁶⁸ This theory of Whitman's about the suggestiveness of words lies behind his use of images and resolves his seemingly paradoxical statement. Since words alone were suggestive to Whitman, there was no need for long descriptive passages in his work. His poetry, like conventional poetry, is full of figurative language, but the objects are simple and concrete and more often merely named rather

⁶⁴Ibid., 36.

⁶⁵Ibid., 48.

⁶⁶Ibid., 38.

⁶⁷Ibid., 43.

⁶⁸One critic distinguishes the diction of prose from that of poetry by saying that the difference lies in the use of the word. The function of prose is to state; that of poetry, to suggest. To this critic, Whitman often failed to be poetic because he was too literal. See Lowes, op. cit., p. 181.

than described. Mr. Allen says:

The imagery of Leaves of Grass is a brilliant illustration of the James-Lange Theory; it expresses emotion either by naming the sensations of which the emotion consists, or it immediately portrays the emotion by naming the concrete objects which may be counted upon to produce the sensation. . . . Indeed the discovery of the catalog method of producing an imaginative response was probably the beginning of Walt Whitman's "new" system of prosody.⁶⁹

Mr. Lowes, however, feels that in Whitman we have only the material for poems; things are not poems. Words must convey the poet's heightened emotion to the reader, who may not have such a background of rich connotations.⁷⁰ But if at times Whitman's lines fail to be suggestive to the average reader, often there are lines of breath-taking beauty, and one is reminded that Whitman said music had inspired more of his poems than he could remember. In the passage of "Song of Myself" beginning with "I am he that walks with the tender and growing night" and continuing through "Smile, for your lover comes," his use of words is unerringly right and beautifully poetic.⁷¹

Since Wolfe was writing in prose, there was no question as to suitable words. But Wolfe's gigantic ambition was to record the whole volatile, changing language of America. Dialects and colloquial expressions interested Wolfe, and he got the vitality and raciness of colloquial dialect into his writing. In "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" the whole

⁶⁹Op. cit., p. 236.

⁷⁰Lowes, op. cit., p. 181.

⁷¹Leaves of Grass, I, 58-59.

narrative is told in the Brooklyn lingo, and in "The Men of Old Catawba" we hear the dialect of the mountain people.

Wolfe, too, was interested in descriptive words and, like Whitman, often coined words if he found no word which he thought adequate to express the exact thing that he wished said. He is particularly fond of combining a noun with an adjective to form his adjective. A cigar is "spit-limp";⁷² Eliza's nose is "stove-red";⁷³ Eugene is "ghost-eared," "whisper-tongued";⁷⁴ he describes an engineer as "his goggled brother with steel-steady, rail-fixed eyes."⁷⁵ He uses nouns as verbs or makes up verbs. Thus, "the engine slatted noisily,"⁷⁶ "the wind snakes through the grasses,"⁷⁷ "stogged in the desert."⁷⁸

Wolfe had not Whitman's saving sense in the use of words and often elaborated his statements of fact with long descriptive passages. His images and figures are more descriptive than Whitman's, but in some of these passages one feels that there is a strained effect that is rarely found in Whitman, who strove to attain the simplicity of nature in his poems. Here is a passage about dawn which shows how earnestly Wolfe sought to make us see the daybreak as it was for him:

⁷²Look Homeward, Angel, p. 75. ⁷³Ibid., p. 40.
⁷⁴Ibid., p. 295. ⁷⁵Ibid., p. 30. ⁷⁶Ibid., p. 301.
⁷⁷Ibid., p. 169. ⁷⁸Ibid., p. 423.

Nacreous pearl light swam faintly about the hem of lilac darkness; . . . the edges of light and darkness were stitched upon the hills. Morning moved like a pearl-gray tide across the fields and up the hill flanks, flowing rapidly down into the soleable dark.⁷⁹

In another place Wolfe says, "He saw the pale stars drown, and ragged light break open on the hills."⁸⁰ Or, "Spring was coming on again across the earth like a light sparkle of water spray."⁸¹ Wolfe, like Whitman, often twists his figure of speech to make it more forceful. Thus he speaks of "singing trees of birds,"⁸² of the "rippling flutiness of the live piping birdy morning,"⁸³ and of "warm-throated plum-dropping bird notes."⁸⁴

Sensory appeals.--Though Whitman and Wolfe were of mystic temperament, both realized that it is by appeals to the senses more than to the brain that a piece of writing comes alive for us. An outstanding quality in the character of each was his extreme sensitivity to sensory impressions. This, coupled with their constant, childlike wonder at life, accounts in large measure for the freshness and force of their writing.

Whitman was particularly fond of the sense of touch. It was his use of the sense of touch, his sexual imagery, that so shocked the first readers of the Leaves. Of course Whitman had a purpose in writing "Calamus" and "Children of Adam," but his first poem which seems so spontaneous is

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 173.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 300.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 507.

⁸²Ibid., p. 301.

⁸³Ibid., p. 180.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 165.

likewise full of sensuous imagery. With Whitman the sense of touch was highly developed and love was synonymous with life, (but the sense of smell dominated Wolfe, and an infinite hunger seemed his driving force. (To Wolfe's characters even love is translated in terms of hunger.⁸⁵ Eugene while still a baby in his crib thinks lusciously of mysterious and succulent food.⁸⁶ In his dreams, as a boy, Eugene loots old cities--for food.⁸⁷ Wolfe says of Eugene:

He thought of food--food in a hundred glorious shapes and varieties: the literal sensual images of food blazed in his mind like paintings from the brush of a Dutch master, and it seemed to him that no one had ever painted, spoken, or written about food before in a way that would do it justice.⁸⁸

Wolfe dwells on the stupendous eating of the Gant family. The rich in Wolfe's novels are always eating "strange fabulous foods" which he names for us in catalogues as long as Whitman's.) To Wolfe as to Whitman the mere naming of these things calls forth a vision of the earth. His writings throughout are filled with images of smell, descriptions of food, of the grocery wagon, "musty, spicy, odorous with the fine smells of the grocery store,"⁸⁹ of all the various markets he sees. Wolfe describes the negro, Jackson, in his vegetable stall at the market

⁸⁵The Web and the Rock, p. 444.

⁸⁶Look Homeward, Angel, p. 41. ⁸⁷Ibid., p. 276.

⁸⁸Of Time and the River, p. 365.

⁸⁹Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 42-43.

surrounded by wide slanting shelves of fruit and vegetables, smelling of the earth and morning--great crinkled lettuces, fat radishes still clotted damply with black loam, quill-stemmed young onions newly wrenched from gardens, late celery, spring potatoes, and the thin rinded citrous fruits of Florida.⁹⁰

The whole world is translated to Wolfe's characters in terms of smell. The smell of India tea at the Fair makes Eugene remember the "nostalgic thrill of dew-wet mornings in Spring, the cherry scent, the cool clarion earth, the wet loaminess of the garden, the pungent breakfast smells and the floating snow of blossoms."⁹¹ Eugene remembers the good male smell of his father's sitting room, the exciting smell of chalk and varnished desks, the good smell of nails in a hardware store, the smell of hot daisy fields in the morning.⁹² Spring to Eugene is the smell of dogwood and laurel, and he senses the approach of fall by the smell of the air which is "mellow and autumnal," and October is "the smell of smoke and the odor of burning leaves."⁹³

Symbolism.--One of the most noticeable things about Whitman's verse is that, like the biblical recitatives, his poems consist of a series of changing figures. Like the Buddha and Christ, Whitman revealed his truths in a series of homely figures. It did not matter to him whether his symbolism was always clear to the reader, for he believed that the contradictions and generality of the Bible were part

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 187. ⁹¹Ibid., p. 84. ⁹²Ibid., p. 85.

⁹³Of Time and the River, p. 366.

of the reasons for its enduring. Thus the Leaves are a composite parable to which the reader must supply his own interpretation and conclusion.

Wolfe, too, through sensuous representations wishes to reveal the invisible and immaterial truths. Like Whitman, he sees beneath all material objects the essence of some unseen power, some unfathomed mystery, and his writings become the legend of the Holy Grail. The story of one young man's search for his father is meant to be symbolic of the search of all human beings for God or ultimate truth. He gives us the actions of the young man; a constant refrain reminds us of his search, and we must interpret the facts.

Significance of These Similarities

The foregoing discussion does not mean to imply that Whitman's art can be explained by showing its similarity to Hebrew poetry, for the many evident departures in Whitman's verse from any set law of versification show his final mode of expression to be peculiarly his own just as Wolfe's is essentially his own. But this analogy does give a basis for departure and serves to emphasize definite trends in Whitman and Wolfe. For in their revelation of the elemental truths seen in their vision both writers sought to catch the organic and rhythmic utterance of natural things, and, consequently, there is in the expression of each a definite and deliberately primitive quality. This strong feeling or

intuitive knowledge about the universe which each held found a natural outlet in a poetic and rhythmic utterance.

So, between these two writers working in such dissimilar forms as poetry and the novel, there are certain evident similarities in style--their use of an oratorical technique; the frequent use of long catalogues; the use of repetition and of thought rhythms; and their constant appeals to the senses. These likenesses between Whitman and Wolfe are most clearly seen in the early works of the latter, where Wolfe, his imagination full of the exuberance of youth, is as much poet (in the larger sense of the word) as novelist.)For this reason the examples cited have been taken mainly from his earlier works, but this does not mean, of course, that these poetical devices were abandoned in his later and perhaps more mature novels. One finds them in You Can't Go Home Again, but they are used with greater restraint and are merged in the bigger pattern of the experimental novel technique with which Wolfe was evidently working.

Wolfe, like Whitman, was trying to do a specific job for American literature, and, as with Whitman, this task was an essential part of his vision of America. Wolfe felt that he, too, must make a new pattern if he were to succeed in expressing the America he knew. A careful reading of Wolfe's early books suggests that he drew inspiration from Whitman's work and, as far as his medium would permit, made use of a technique very similar to Whitman's. But through these

similarities, we feel the contrast of two strong personalities and sense Wolfe's struggle to attain his own pattern. Since Wolfe hoped to express his vision of America through the words and actions of his characters, he had an entirely different technique to achieve if his task was to be successfully completed.⁹⁴

During the same period that Wolfe is struggling with technique, most of his energy is absorbed in thinking through his problem, in seeing relationships, in finding himself.⁹⁵ Though this growth is necessary and of vital importance, it does seem to have hampered Wolfe's efforts to attain a proper form. One feels that for this reason, Wolfe's last two books fail in some respects to come up to the standards of his first more spontaneous and inspired writing.

Look Homeward, Angel might be called Wolfe's "Song of Myself." Here, as in Whitman's song, with the emotional intensity and fresh exuberance of youth, he reaches heights not attained in his later novels. Without restraint, with complete abandon, Wolfe writes of his childhood, and out of his rich and retentive memory, he recreates this bright world of youth as seen through the eyes of Eugene, a sensitive child who is a projection of Wolfe himself. This material was so much a part of Wolfe's life for many years, so thoroughly digested, and so unconsciously thought about that it

⁹⁴See the quotation cited on page 61 of this paper.

⁹⁵The Story of a Novel, p. 41.

seemed to come tumbling forth of its own volition and to seek its own channel.⁹⁶ In speaking of this, Wolfe writes:

I was very young at the time, and I had the kind of wild, exultant vigor which a man has at that period of his life. The book took hold of me and possessed me. In a way, I think it shaped itself.⁹⁷

Wolfe continues, saying he had had no literary experience--

and yet my book, the characters with which I had peopled it, the color and the weather of the universe which I had created, had possessed me, and so I wrote and wrote with that bright flame with which a young man writes who never has been published, and who yet is sure all will be good and must go well.⁹⁸

As a consequence of the almost spontaneous outpouring of his first book, Wolfe says he learned little from it about how to write a novel. This is the problem he had to face after publishing Look Homeward, Angel. In The Story of a Novel, Wolfe candidly and frankly tells of his experiences in writing his second book, Of Time and the River.

This second book, which continues the story of Eugene, is a novel of escapism. Perhaps it is because Wolfe is dealing with escapists and not through any fault of technique that the characters seem less important to us. However, one feels instantly that Wolfe is becoming conscious of his writing technique. There seems to be a more deliberate attempt to make use of a form similar to Joyce's Ulysses. While Wolfe's approach is still largely personal and autobiographical, he attempts to broaden the significance of his hero's acts by seeing them as the experiences of man. Like Joyce's

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 4.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 8.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 9.

Ulysses, Wolfe's book follows a thematic construction with the theme of each chapter held in the mythological significance of its title. Adapting an idea of Joyce's to fit his own needs, Wolfe draws his chapter titles from the heroes of classical mythology. The character then becomes a symbol for the universal quality Wolfe hopes to portray in a certain chapter. Thus Wolfe's first chapter, which tells of Eugene's restlessness and flight, is entitled "Orestes: Flight before Fury." The other titles are: "Young Faustus"; "Telemachus"; "Proteus: The City"; "Jason's Voyage"; "Antaeus: Earth Again"; "Kronos and Rhea: The Dream of Time"; and "Faust and Helen." Each chapter thus forms a separate unit and portrays a definite phase in the unfolding and development of this central personality.

Though one still feels that in this book Wolfe is "not quite his own man," as he says of this period in his hero's life, we see that Wolfe is learning about technique through experimentation and sense an increasing surety of purpose, a maturer hand. As a whole the work contains the same characteristics as Look Homeward, Angel. Both the style and the content grow from the first book and form a piece with it. Wolfe, in combinations of stark realism and lyric poetry, is still writing of that misguided, gargantuan youth. Though the book often bogs down and the characters lose a little of their epic quality, one cannot escape the strength and solidity of this book which contains some of Wolfe's finest writing.

Between these first two books of Wolfe and the two books published after his death, there is a very definite break. Several factors probably contributed to this change. For one thing it is hard to know whether the last two books represent the finished work of Wolfe, although the publishers insist that the manuscript of the two books was completed and turned over to Mr. Aswell of Harpers before Wolfe left on his western trip. If this is true, perhaps the books reveal Wolfe's need of Mr. Perkins to help him round out his manuscript. But at least part of this break was a direct reflection of a definite change in Wolfe himself.

During the period of finishing Of Time and the River, Wolfe seems suddenly to have matured, to have found himself. As he says, "It was during this time [in Brooklyn] that I lived my life through to a first completion."⁹⁹ Thus one important part of the double process was rounded, and half of his problem was solved. The ten years from 1925 to 1935, but particularly the years 1931 to 1935, were spent in exploring his range and thinking through his problem as a man and a writer. This exploration of which Wolfe tells briefly in The Story of a Novel is what he later expands into the final part of The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again. He says of this period:

It was as if I had discovered a whole new universe of chemical elements and had begun to see certain relations

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 61.

between some of them but had by no means begun to organize the whole series into a harmonious and coherent union. From this time on, I think my efforts might be described as the effort to complete that organization, to discover that articulation for which I strove, to bring about that final coherent union. I know that I have failed thus far in doing so, but I believe I understand pretty thoroughly just where the nature of my failure lies, and of course my deepest and most earnest hope is that the time will come when I shall not fail.¹⁰⁰

He concludes this passage by saying that the exploration is still going on but not with the same intensity--

because the work it led to, the work that after infinite waste and labor it helped me wonderfully to define, that work has reached such a state of final definition that the immediate task of finishing it is the one that now occupies the energy and interest of my life.¹⁰¹

After finishing Of Time and the River, Wolfe made another trip abroad. About this time he decided he must break with Perkins because he wished, upon his return to America, to be entirely his own man, to make a completely new start in the books he now intended to write which were to be the fruit of his own rounded vision.

Two things the critics had said about his work seemed to have rankled deeply in Wolfe's mind. One was that his approach was too autobiographical; the other was that he was hostile to an intellectual idea, that he got at reality through his emotions rather than his intellect. His last books seem an effort to overcome these two criticisms. In them he attempts to go back over his life, to see it objectively, and to analyse this process of maturity, showing

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 35-36.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 41.

its broader and deeper significance.¹⁰²

The first part of The Web and the Rock is a condensation of the material of Look Homeward, Angel, and though Wolfe changes the names and looks of the people in his novels, their essential characteristics remain unchanged. George Webber, like Eugene, is still a projection of Wolfe himself, though in keeping with his more objective style. The action in these novels does not center so much on George; consequently, the organization is more episodic and less unified than in Look Homeward, Angel. Then suddenly in the middle of The Web and the Rock, a short preface prepares us to pick up the time thread of Wolfe's own life where Of Time and the River left off. The remainder of this book and Wolfe's final book cover the ten year period of exploration that Wolfe tells of briefly in The Story of a Novel. As Wolfe approaches closer to the stage of his life just completed, he becomes so interested in tracing and putting down for us the steps in his own growth that at times action in the novel almost ceases, and, instead, it reads like a diary.

The latter part of The Web and the Rock and the first part of You Can't Go Home Again do have considerable unity of action since the narrative here centers upon the conflict between George and Esther. But the latter part of You Can't Go Home Again deals with the years 1931 to 1935. During

¹⁰²For a definite statement of this attempt, see the author's note to The Web and the Rock.

this time Wolfe had no close associations and was living completely within himself, and though his power of description enables him to reveal the pageantry of America and his greater insight into American life, the paucity of other living characters and of action makes one leave the book with a sense of lack. Although the last two books are important philosophically as a study in the development of an immensely interesting personality, the novels as a whole do not seem as forceful as Look Homeward, Angel, or Of Time and the River.

Once George Webber is warned by McHarg (apparently Sinclair Lewis) to listen to the critics and to follow them when he knows they are right but to do nothing that might destroy his "wallop."¹⁰³ In these novels it seems that George has gained his intellectual insight but at the cost of Wolfe's wallop. Wolfe brings all his thoughts to bear toward making us see the steps in George's development, to see each act in relation to the whole scheme of things. His technique departs even farther from the patterned novel, and he uses all sorts of devices in his attempt to reveal every side of George's character--great blocks of expository and editorial comment, stream of consciousness, impressionistic technique, dramatic dialogue, and even the diary form. We get his message and recognize the truth of his analysis of the lack in American life, yet we miss the fire of his

¹⁰³You Can't Go Home Again, p. 575.

earlier work. These two novels reveal that though Wolfe himself has matured and is no longer lost, he has not as yet solved the other half of his problem. He has not as yet found the form for which he was struggling.

One cannot help feeling that the nature of his fault lies in the two things he was trying to overcome. He fails in his deliberate attempt to be objective, for he was unable to get outside himself. Furthermore, Wolfe does seem to have written best when he ceased thinking and felt; then he seems intuitively or unconsciously to have got down more of what he wished to say. So far as his writing technique was concerned, it does not seem to have been necessary for him to know where he was going, and, indeed, his best work seems to have sprung from his essential conflict with life and with the world. Thus in Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River and in some of Wolfe's short stories, he does succeed in what he was trying to do--he does show "that every man on earth held in the little tenement of his flesh and spirit the whole ocean of human life and time."¹⁰⁴ In "The Web of Earth" Wolfe achieves a form perfectly suited to his talent and his purpose. Here in the region of the short story and short novel, Wolfe does succeed. In dealing with people he knew and understood, Wolfe handled characters superbly. He knew how to extract the last particle from one episode or mood. "Child by Tiger" and "Boom Town" stand alone as fine

¹⁰⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 262.

short stories. These show that Wolfe was constantly seeking new forms for his material. Perkins, his friend and publisher, said he never felt Wolfe was lacking in form:

In a large way he knew where he was going, and given twenty years and many volumes, I often thought, he might have fully achieved a proper form. But as he had to fit his body to the doorways, vehicles, and furniture of smaller men, so he had to fit his expression to the conventional requirements of a space and time that were as surely too small for his nature as they were for his subject.¹⁰⁵

Wolfe's most successful writing shows that his approach was not that of an intellectual but was, like that of Whitman, much more--it was the intuitive knowledge of the poet and prophet and seems to indicate that his future form would eventually have come from a use of this knowledge.

¹⁰⁵Op. cit., p. 15.

CHAPTER IV

THE PHILOSOPHY OF WALT WHITMAN AND THOMAS WOLFE

To understand the philosophy of a Kant or Hegel and to ferret out the philosophy of a Whitman or Wolfe, are two quite different things. In the former the philosophy is formulated and put before us in the most technical and precise language of which the philosopher is capable. His sole purpose is to make as clear as possible to us the intricacies of his reasoning concerning the truths of the universe.

Great poets and writers, too, are concerned with the fundamental truths, but they are also concerned with the artistic form in which these are presented. They do not reason about truths; they feel them. A great poem is as much feeling as thought, and its truth is most often revealed in symbols or figurative language.

However, in Whitman we feel at once the tone of the prophet as well as the poet. He is not interested in art for art's sake, but for humanity's sake.¹ He has come to resume the correct perspective on old things--to recall to us the plain, divine facts.² In his pages he expounds no

¹"A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, 45.

²Horace Traubel, *op. cit.*, I, 222.

formal doctrine, and, as he says, he is full of contradictions.³ Like those of the Bible, his truths are concealed in parables. But he has a profound ethic, a profound metaphysic as vital in his pages as hearing or eyesight.⁴ And, though he is elusive on specific issues, one can pick out the general points of his philosophy.

With Wolfe, however, the problem is more than interpreting the symbols. A writer of fiction sees the world through the eyes of his characters. From the actions, thoughts, and moods of the characters, we may arrive at their philosophy, but this is certainly not necessarily that of the author. We have Othello's philosophy, Macbeth's, and King Lear's, but do we know Shakespeare's except from inference? Of course, with Wolfe as with Whitman, we have his own admission that his works are autobiographical, but Wolfe adds that so is all fiction at bottom autobiographical.⁵ It has already been pointed out that Wolfe's heroes are usually himself. But there is still the problem of deciding whether the groping of Eugene and George represents a phase that Wolfe has passed through in the development of his philosophy or whether it represents the most mature thoughts of Wolfe. Wolfe's last book, You Can't Go Home Again, seems to indicate that these gropings were but

³"Song of Myself," I, 108.

⁴John Burroughs, Whitman, A Study, p. 127.

⁵Preface to Look Homeward, Angel.

a phase in the gradual development of a human personality. Since Wolfe's last novel is but an elaboration of the material found in The Story of a Novel, an account of his own experience, one feels rather definitely that the books do approximate very closely to Wolfe's own philosophic growth. It will probably devolve upon Wolfe's intimate friends and associates to give us any final analysis revealing just how nearly identical was the philosophy of Wolfe at the time of his death to the philosophy of Eugene and George.

The general trend of Wolfe's philosophy here presented is gleaned from his published works and from one or two critical articles. The philosophy expressed by Wolfe's characters has not been attributed to Wolfe himself unless there was some substantiation for so doing. Wolfe does not, like Whitman, seek at first to play the role of prophet or dream of founding a new faith, but he does tell us a legend which is applicable to all men in all time and is fraught with philosophical significance--his is the legend of man's hunger in his youth. In the struggle for growth of this one personality, Wolfe sees the history of all mankind. In Eugene and George, he traces these stages of growth--first the physical, then the mental, and finally the spiritual development.

The core to the philosophy of both Whitman and Wolfe lies in their prescience of something in and above this apparent world of the senses. Both held the mystic's belief

in the validity of intuitive knowledge. To understand the significance of this belief for their philosophy, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the terms "mystic" and "mysticism."

The word "mystic" was originally taken over by the Neo-Platonists from the Greek word "mystikos," a name given to one being initiated into the divine mysteries. Webster's Dictionary defines mysticism as the doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, is attainable through intuition or insight in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or intelligence.

Each mystic arrives at his knowledge through direct communion with the ultimate. The mystics' feeling of union with the universe is, psychologists think, most similar to the sexual act and is a sublimation of it. For this reason Knight Dunlap sees mysticism as pure emotion and denies its validity as a third kind of knowledge. To him it is the tender-minded person's short cut to the ultimate--a Narcissistic condition or a retreat--and of negative importance.⁶ Nevertheless, it is the leading characteristic of some of the greatest thinkers and poets of the world--of the founders of the eastern religions, of Plato and Plotinus, of Spinoza, Goethe, Dante, and Hegel, and it is the leading characteristic of Whitman and to a lesser extent of Wolfe.

⁶Mysticism, Freudianism and Scientific Psychology, p. 40.

The mysticism or cosmic consciousness of these men, like that of Whitman and Wolfe, was never associated with pathological conditions. To Whitman his mysticism was the flower and proof of his sanity, soundness, and health, and it was not at all akin to that of the ascetic who scourged his flesh and waited impatiently for death. He says,

I believe in you my soul, the other I am
must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.⁷

Wolfe, however, was a little more impatient with the limitations, the "delicious burdens," which this life placed upon man's spirit and was often depressed by them. Of Whitman, Bruce Weirick says,

He has perhaps that rarest of qualities attained by only the very greatest of the world's spirits, what the Germans term "Weltanhang" or world sense, and what is perhaps better translated as his cosmic outlook.⁸

The Germans recognized this same quality in Wolfe, admired his books, and never thought of them as translations at all. These few great spirits, Weirick says, have assimilated a point of view with regard to the universe that is so comprehensive as to give a kind of significance to everything they touch.⁹

⁷"Song of Myself," I, 38.

⁸Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p. 10.

⁹Ibid., p. 11.

Each of these men had arrived at this point of view through his mystic experience of union with the ultimate. And each describes the experience in similar terms. Whitman and Wolfe also experience this sense of mystic union with the ultimate. Whitman's expression of this is more vivid and is expressed in terms of a love act:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer
 morning
 How you settled your head and gently turn'd over
 upon me,
 And parted the shirt from my bosom bone, and
 plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart
 And reach'd until you felt my beard, and reach'd
 till you held my feet.¹⁰

Wolfe tells of Eugene's mystic experience in these terms:

As that incredible knowledge came to him, a fury, wild, savage, wordless, pulsed through his blood and filled him with such a swelling and exultant joy as he had never known before. He felt the savage tongueless cry of pain and joy swell up and thicken in his throat, he felt a rending and illimitable power in him as if he could twist steel between his fingers and he felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to yell into the faces of the men with a demonic glee.¹¹

And what is this knowledge that fills the heart of these mystics with such joy--this knowledge about which all mystics agree? It is this--that unity underlies all diversity. The underlying principle of Whitman's and Wolfe's cosmic philosophy, as it was of Krishna's, is that there is but one core to the universe. Unity underlies all diversity,

¹⁰"Song of Myself," I, 38.

¹¹Of Time and the River, pp. 35-36.

and each thing in the universe is an integral part of the well-joined scheme.¹² Whitman says that "there is no object so soft but what it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe,"¹³ and Wolfe says of Eugene that "the vast wheel of life of which he was the hub spun round."¹⁴ Whitman in his first song says, "Divine am I inside and out,"¹⁵ and in all people he sees himself. In the brood of the turkey hen and himself he "sees the same old law."¹⁶ Wolfe, like the Orientals, compares all life to a single plant alive in all its million roots and branches.¹⁷

All mystical thought springs from this doctrine of immanence. This primary belief or assumption postulates certain others. Thus, the mystic must of necessity see all time as one, for if God is immanent in all things, there can be no beginning or end. This doctrine also destroys the dualism of the Christian concept of the universe. The mystic must account in some other way for the contrasting forces of the world: matter and spirit, good and evil, God and nature, nature and man. If there is no beginning or end, the mystic must explain death, and the relation of the individual

¹²"The Bhagavadgîta," Book 18, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. V.

¹³"Song of Myself," I, 105.

¹⁴Look Homeward, Angel, p. 585.

¹⁵"Song of Myself," I, 63. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷The Web and the Rock, pp. 261-262.

to the ultimate, that is, his concept of the soul, of immortality.

This is the foundation upon which Whitman and Wolfe, like all mystics, build their philosophy, but often the resulting structures differ so widely that one wonders that the foundations could be the same. Thus the belief which led to the caste system in India is the basis of Walt Whitman's belief in Democracy. From this same basis, we shall trace the growth of Wolfe's philosophy, noting to what degree the philosophy assimilates that of Whitman.

Whitman brooded upon this knowledge which he knew was the same truth the prophets and Jesus had each interpreted in their day, and he conceived it his duty as a poet to be the prophet and leader and interpret this vision for his age. It seemed to Whitman that the times were propitious for a new lease on faith. Science, coming to the fore, was breaking down old religious concepts; nations were attempting to shake off the old bonds of feudalism and accept the principles of democracy. Whitman realized that his mystic experience must be translated in terms of the modern age and America if it was to be a vital force. As he brooded on this thought and watched the constant change and forward press of world events, he came to see democracy as the solution--democracy in thought and literature, in science and government; democracy in human relations, and above all, democracy in religion. Thus love, democracy, and religion

are the themes of all Whitman's verse. Each is necessary to the other and all are fused to make the one. This philosophy of Whitman's was not carefully thought out and set down as an explanation of the universe; rather like that of Jesus, his was a "way of life." By these beliefs he patterned his own actions, thoughts, and feelings and then shared his solution with us by giving us himself in Leaves of Grass.

One does not find the clear conviction of Whitman running through Wolfe's pages. His words are not written in the spirit of a man who has achieved a solution of the riddle of the universe. Whitman in his notes says his words are:

for the great men, the gigantic few that have plunged themselves deep through density and confusion and pushed back the jealous covering of the earth, and brought out the true and great things, and the sweet things, and hung them like oranges rounder and riper than all the rest among our literature and science.¹⁸

Wolfe's pages, on the other hand, reveal the pain, the sweat, the hope, and the heartbreak of a man digging and plunging through the density and confusion in search of this fruit which he feels must be there, but which becomes intangible as he reaches out to grasp it. He feels that this mighty universe is one huge plant or tree, but so far he has not a blossom for tangible evidence.

One of the main tenets of the mystic's belief which was held by both Whitman and Wolfe is that all time is one

¹⁸Notes and Fragments, IX, 143.

time. Whitman says he does not talk of any beginning or end, for there was never any more than there is now.¹⁹ He laughs at what you call dissolution²⁰ and accepts time absolutely.²¹ His long catalogues are but a means of expressing this mystic identification with all time. Whitman says the push of the past is behind us all. Wolfe, too, recognizes this linkage of past and present and in a long catalogue ties the birth of Eugene with the events of all time.²² Both Whitman and Wolfe understood that all time was centered in themselves. Whitman, in his statement, "I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I am an encloser of things to be,"²³ sees that he holds in himself all the fruitage of past ages, and that all that is to be developed in the future must go on from his level. As he says, there is nothing actually new, only an accumulation or fruitage.²⁴ Wolfe begins his first book with a statement of this same thought:

Each of us is all the sums he has not counted; subtract us into nakedness and night again and you shall begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas.

The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London outpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death and every moment is a window on all time.²⁵

¹⁹"Song of Myself," I, 35. ²⁰Ibid., p. 57. ²¹Ibid.

²²Look Homeward, Angel, pp. 35-36.

²³"Song of Myself," I, 98. ²⁴Notes and Fragments, IX, 12.

²⁵Look Homeward, Angel, p. 1.

This concept of time is woven all through Wolfe's pages. He says it was the problem of trying to show how the various elements of time acted and reacted on the lives of his characters which almost defeated him in the writing of his novels. He wished to show how all these were one. First, he was concerned with the time of the present and immediate future. The second time element was that of the past time of the individual and the race,

one which represents these same characters as acting and being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment but by all that they had experienced up to that moment.²⁶

This is the idea back of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Then Wolfe says there was a third time element which he conceived as being time immutable, "the time of rivers, mountains, oceans and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his days."²⁷ Whitman knows this phase of time also. He finds calm in the thought

That coursing on, what'er man's speculations
Amid the changing schools, theologies, philosophies,
Amid the bawling presentations new and old,
The round earth's silent vital laws, facts, modes
continue.²⁸

Both recognized the fact that this immeasurable universe

²⁶The Story of a Novel, pp. 51-52. ²⁷Ibid., p. 52.

²⁸"The Calming Thought of All," II, 313.

of time with its billion forms had no beginning or end, but their attitude toward time was different. Both realized that man's mortal days on this earth were only a pin point in eternal time. But Whitman identified himself with that which was immortal in him and saw that he thus had the best of time and space. Wolfe identifies himself with that which is mortal in him, the lost man, and is saddened when he thinks of the briefness of man's day. Two passages in Whitman and Wolfe bring out this difference in attitude. Each is discussing the briefness of man's days. Wolfe says:

And other men, and other voices, words, and moments such as these would come, would pass, would vanish and would be forgotten in the huge record and abyss of time. . . . The trains would hurtle onward bearing other lives like these, all brought together for an instant between two points of time--and then all lost, all vanished, broken and forgotten. The trains would bear them, onward to their million destinations--each to the fortune, fame, or happiness he wished, whatever it was that he was looking for--but whether to a sure success, a certain purpose, or the thing he sought--what man could say? All that he knew was that these men, these words, this moment would vanish, be forgotten--and that great wheels would hurtle on forever and the earth be still.²⁹

Whitman, as he crosses the Brooklyn ferry, starts with the same thought as Wolfe:

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross
 from shore to shore,
 Others will watch the run of the floodtide

 A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years
 hence others will see them.³⁰

And Whitman, seemingly, will not be there, but he concludes,

²⁹ Of Time and the River, pp. 42-43.

³⁰ "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," I, 192.

It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not
I am with you, you men and women of a generation,
or ever so many generations hence.³¹

He knows that they look back to him because he looked forward to them.

A second consequence of this mystic belief in unity is the rejection by the mystics of the dualistic concept of the universe. John Addington Symonds states:

Those who conceive of cosmic unity at all, contemplate spirit and matter as the "x" and "y" of one inscrutable, yet only real, existence. This was undoubtedly the attitude of Whitman. Every detail of the world endowed with life, with shape, contained for him God, was a microcosm of the whole, an apparent and ever recurring miracle.³²

For Wolfe as well as for Whitman each object was a microcosm of the macrocosm. Wolfe says Eugene gazed at passers-by and fixed in his mind the fine mapping upon their limbs and faces of their own little cosmos.³³ Another of his characters says, "I'd like to see a forest in a single leaf, the whole earth in a single face."³⁴ Each thing is thus the whole in miniature, and spirit and matter in each is but a phase of the one existence. Thus the mystic must explain how these seeming opposites are the same. Wolfe's and Whitman's feeling was similar to that of the Hindus, who saw these opposites as the positive and negative of the same

³¹Ibid.

³²Walt Whitman, p. 44.

³³Look Homeward, Angel, p. 510.

³⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 421.

idea and held that there was a mystic affinity of the positive for the negative.

The Orientalists said there are two forms of Brahma, the material and the immaterial, the mortal and the immortal, that which is definite and that which is fluid. Each is an aspect of the one. They explained the world by saying Brahma had first called forth creation from himself. Then creation or Maya took one form after another (always feminine) and Brahma became the masculine of that form and so on up from the lowest animal life.³⁵

Whitman makes use of the same analogy, for he too understands that the push of the world is held in the mystic affinity between these opposites. He says,

The analogy holds in this way--that the soul of the universe is the male and genital master and impregnating and animating spirit--Physical matter is Female and Mother and waits barren and bloomless the jets of life from the masculine vigor, the undermost first cause of all that is not what death is.³⁶

Whitman's first and longest poem is built from this analogy, taking it for a foundation and rising to it for a climax. Among his passages of purest poetry are those in which he celebrates the nuptials of the soul and the world. Again he states the thought thus:

Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance,

³⁵Sacred Books of the East, XV, 258.

³⁶Walt Whitman's Workshop, ed. by Clifton J. Furness, p. 49.

always substance and increase, always sex,
 Always a knit of identity, always distinction,
 always a breed of life.³⁷

There are few, if any, isolated passages in Wolfe's writing where the import is so clear as this of Whitman's, but the feeling that there is a mystic affinity between opposites threads its way through all Wolfe's pages, and its import is as important for Wolfe as for Whitman.

Like Whitman, the Eugene of Wolfe's novels recognizes sex as the procreative force of the world and sees Maya standing by the opened door in the jungle web of "nigger-town."³⁸ Wolfe makes use of the same symbolism and analogies as Whitman and the Orientalists. For Wolfe the "viscous and interminable seas" that wash forever at the land typify the solid forever marrying the liquid. Though usually the spirit is identified with the masculine, to both Whitman and Wolfe the sea is a symbol of spirit and is personified as a woman. Whitman calls it the "dark mother"; Wolfe, a large and fruitful woman.³⁹ It is the mother from whom we were wrested at birth and to whom we are again united by death. As all rivers "that drink with ceaseless glut the land"⁴⁰ forever make their way to the sea, so the river "dark with our stains, and heavied with our dumpings,

³⁷"Song of Myself," I, 35.

³⁸Look Homeward, Angel, p. 584. ³⁹Ibid., p. 522.

⁴⁰Of Time and the River, p. 509.

rich, rank, beautiful and unending as all life, all living" forever flows by us to the sea.⁴¹ The stony isle of life, Wolfe sees, is girdled round by moving waters, and to him as to Whitman the shore symbolizes death as the dividing line between pure spirit and matter.

Wolfe in his symbolism recognizes the fluid quality of the soul and necessarily of the universe since all is of one essence. But these truths are not the first thing evident in Wolfe's writings. In Whitman's poems one finds a constant reiteration that there is no matter without spirit and no spirit without matter, that "the unseen is proved by the seen," that there is no light without darkness, no life without death, no good without evil, no growth without pain and struggle.⁴² Wolfe's pages do point to these same truths, but here we are with the person who is wresting these truths from painful experience. Wolfe gives us his heroes in the midst of battle. Only gradually and dimly at first do they win through to a knowledge of these contradictory truths which at first they cannot reconcile.

Wolfe says that at eight Eugene's spirit was netted in the complexity of truth and seeming. He could not understand the torturing paradox of the ungenerous-generous, the selfish-unselfish, or the noble-base.⁴³ Nor could Eugene understand "the weird combination of fixity and change."

⁴¹Ibid., p. 510. ⁴²Burroughs, op. cit., p. 171.

⁴³Look Homeward, Angel, p. 116.

He was "the haunter of himself, trying for a moment to recover what he had been part of,"⁴⁴ for Eugene did not understand growth and at that time did not know that he had passed these lost selves for a reason. Eugene was also bewildered "before the unsearchable riddle--out of death life, out of the coarse rank earth a flower."⁴⁵

But as Eugene grows older his intuition of this relationship between opposites becomes a little clearer and stronger. Thus, once as he sped across the country,

it seemed to him that these two terrific negatives of speed and stillness, the hurtling and projectile movement of the train and the calm silence of the everlasting earth, were poles of a single unity--a unity coherent with his destiny, whose source was somehow in himself.⁴⁶

George Webber, the hero of Wolfe's The Web and the Rock, also feels the unexplainable oneness of contradicting forces:

Wild, wordless, and unutterable, but absolutely congruent in his sense of their irreconcilable and inexplicable coherence, his spirit was torn. . . by the strange and bitter unity of that savage conflict, that tormenting oneness of those dual and contending powers of home and hunger, absence and return.⁴⁷

It was the hunger in these youths that drew them to the city which becomes in Wolfe's novels at once the symbol and epitome of the ever-changing diversity of the material world, the Maya of the Orientals. Wolfe recognizes as universal

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 192.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 224.

⁴⁶ Of Time and the River, p. 35.

⁴⁷ The Web and the Rock, p. 157.

the extrovert quality of youth. Always youth desires to go forth to find and conquer the world. Thus Eugene cries:

Proud, cruel, everchanging and ephemeral city, to whom we came once when our hearts were high, our blood passionate and hot, our brain a particle of fire: infinite and mutable city, mercurial city, strange citadel of million-visaged time--Oh! endless river and eternal rock in which the forms of life came, passed, and changed intolerably before us, and to which we came, as every youth has come with such enormous madness, and with so mad a hope--for what?

To eat you, branch and root and tree; to devour you, golden fruit of power and love and happiness; to consume you to your sources, river and spire and rock, down to your iron roots; to entomb within our flesh forever the huge substance of your billion-footed pavements, the intolerable web and memory of dark million-visaged time.⁴⁸

In The Web and the Rock Wolfe says:

And herein lies the magic and the mystery and the wonder of the immortal city. It offers all and yet it offers nothing. It gives to every man a home, and it is the great No Home of the earth. It invites all human drops of water to the grand oblivion of its ceaseless tides, and yet it gives to every mother's son the promise of the sea.⁴⁹

Wolfe, like Whitman, realized that we project our world from ourselves.⁵⁰ Eugene recognized that the city had no existence save that which he conferred upon it, and he wondered how it had lived before he came, how it would live after he left.⁵¹ Wolfe's youths often have bitter and lonely

⁴⁸ Of Time and the River, p. 508.

⁴⁹ The Web and the Rock, p. 316.

⁵⁰ See "Song of the Rolling Earth" for Whitman's expression of this truth. I, 268.

⁵¹ Look Homeward, Angel, p. 509.

moments because they realize that they cannot possess the world of matter. Wolfe says of youth:

The strange and bitter miracle of life is nowhere else so evident as in our youth. And what is the essence of that strange and bitter miracle of life which we feel so poignantly, so unutterably, with such a bitter pain and joy, when we are young? It is this: that being rich, we are so poor; that being mighty, we can yet have nothing, that seeing, breathing, smelling, tasting, all around us the impossible wealth and glory of this earth, feeling with an intolerable certitude that the whole structure of the enchanted life. . . is ours at once, immediately and forever, the moment that we choose to take a step, or stretch a hand, or say a word--we yet know that we can really keep, hold, take, and possess --nothing.⁵²

The key to Wolfe's novels is found in his short prefaces--the theme, the essential unity is there. The pages that follow amplify and echo the thought and tone of the prefaces. Here is the preface to Wolfe's first novel, Look Homeward, Angel:

. . . a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces.

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.

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

O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?

O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.

So, the story of Eugene's youth is the story of an

⁵² Of Time and the River, p. 454.

individual whose spirit wishes to find the way to heaven, to become one again with Brahma, with the ultimate. The youth feels a little as the Hindu felt, that this flesh is a prison since it limits his flight. His is the story of the flight from the alone to the alone as Plotinus the Neo-Platonist described it. For in all the diversity of the material world one often loses sight of God since one can only see God alone. Like a blind man Eugene gropes for the door to the remembered land, but he knows not where to seek. He drives his flesh and his senses; he seeks to know all the people, see all the thousand sights, be everywhere at once. Like Faustus he would perhaps sell his soul to quench his thirst.

All Wolfe's youths have this "Faustian hunger," and all are projections of Wolfe. The youth in "Portrait of Bascom Hawke" seeks to draw mercy from the cobblestones, wisdom from the million sights and faces. He wishes to be all, to know all, to have in his hand "the whole riddle of the vast and swarming earth as legible, as tangible. . . as a coin of minted gold."⁵³ The chapter "Young Faustus" in Of Time and the River carries on this same idea. The youth is almost driven mad by the endless diversity of the universe. He wants to fix every one of its myriad phases and moments in his mind and hold it there unchanging. And so each of

⁵³"Portrait of Bascom Hawke," Scribner's Magazine, XCI (April, 1932), 249.

Wolfe's youths, like himself, has an unquiet mind, a famished heart, a restless soul. Each loses all hope, and then suddenly it awakes again and the old feeling returns

that he is about to find the thing for which his life obscurely and desperately is groping--for which all men on this earth have sought--one face out of a million faces, a wall, a door, a place of certitude and peace and wandering no more.⁵⁴

Wolfe, like Whitman, attributes this hunger to every man. Each individual soul has a portion of creative instinct which seeks to expand through tangible expression in this material world. It is this that makes Gant wish to carve an angel's head. Wolfe knew that there was something bound up in every man that must come out and grow or else destroy him. He knew it to be so in his own case. He says:

I realized another naked fact which every artist must know, and that is that in a man's work there are contained not only the seeds of life, but the seeds of death, and that the power of creation which sustains us will also destroy us like a leprosy if we let it rot stillborn in our vitals.⁵⁵

So, too, gradually the youths in Wolfe's novels realize that everything in this world is symbolic, that we can't know intangibles. They learn that we can only seek expression through symbols, through projection of ourselves. Wolfe says that as a baby Eugene's mind was caught in a net because he had no words to work with. Thus Eugene realizes his first

⁵⁴ Of Time and the River, p. 90.

⁵⁵ The Story of a Novel, p. 55. Also, Wolfe shows in his novel, OF Time and the River, how the characters, Ben and Starwick, are destroyed because they find no outlet for their creative urge.

escape must come through language,⁵⁶ but when he masters language, he finds it inadequate. Whitman, too, had found it inadequate. Speech taunted him, saying, "Walt, you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?"⁵⁷ Whitman realizes that he cannot put from him what he really is, for he knows, as Eugene knows later, that the real words are not these upright lines, but are in the earth and air.⁵⁸ Wolfe, too, felt that there was more to be known than his finite senses could grasp. He says of Eugene:

There lay in him something that could not be seen and could not be touched, which was above and beyond him--an eye within an eye, a brain above a brain, the Stranger that dwelt in him and regarded him and was him and that he did not know. But, thought he, I am alone now in the house; if I can come to know him, I will.⁵⁹

Whitman said he but used the facts of positive science to enter the area of his dwelling,⁶⁰ and he did not doubt that "interiors have their interiors, and exteriors have their exteriors, and that the eyesight has another eyesight, and the hearing another hearing, and the voice another voice."⁶¹ Thus Wolfe, like Whitman and the Orientals, felt this final wisdom was above the senses.

From these moments of mystic communion Wolfe's youths

⁵⁶Look Homeward, Angel, p. 37.

⁵⁷"Song of Myself," I, 65.

⁵⁸"Song of the Rolling Earth," I, 268.

⁵⁹Look Homeward, Angel, p. 494.

⁶⁰"Song of Myself," I, 61.

⁶¹"Assurances," II, 227.

acquired new hope. Wolfe says of Eugene, who lamented that he had never had a great moment of living in which he had measured up to its fullness:⁶²

O, the wonder, the magic and the loss! His life was like a great wave breaking in the lonely sea; his hungry shoulder found no barriers--he smote his strength at nothing, and was lost and scattered like a wrack of mist. But he believed that the supreme ecstasy which mastered him and made him drunken might some day fuse its enormous light into a single articulation. He was Phaeton with the terrible horses of the sun; he believed his life might pulse constantly at its longest stroke, achieve an eternal summit.⁶³

Wolfe knew that his abnormal hunger and insatiable curiosity were extravagant and wasteful, but he could not reason the fury out of his system; he had to live it out, and that is the story he has told in his books. It seems that Wolfe did realize, as the Orientals had,⁶⁴ that in this constant search after diversity he was losing himself, was disintegrating, but like Whitman, he seems to have known that he was not moving toward final disintegration. For in Of Time and the River when he first described how fury came to Eugene, he said that ten years were to pass before the youth could know any rest from this fury; and at the close of The Web and the Rock the youth who has found a rest from fury is just ten years older than the one to whom fury came. Thus it seems that Wolfe saw this period of disintegration as a phase belonging to all youth, particularly of all youth

⁶²Look Homeward, Angel, p. 589. ⁶³Ibid., pp. 510-511.

⁶⁴See Katha Upanishad, Sacred Books of the East, XV, 17.

in America today. George Webber and Eugene are like the mourner in Whitman's beautiful elegy on Lincoln who hears the song of the thrush, but, still held by the lilac and the star, cannot as yet accept its comfort. For these youths after a period of strain or deep emotion have a mystic intuition or vision in which the stranger that is in them speaks to them, guiding them, but they are not yet ready to heed.

During one of these conversations Eugene asks, "Why has the web been woven? Why do we die so many deaths?"⁶⁵ To which the stranger within replies, "Each time that you die, you will be born again and you will die a hundred times before you become a man."⁶⁶ Again Eugene laments that he has nowhere to go. The stranger tells him he must find the place. Then Eugene cries that he is lost, and the stranger within him says, "You must find me."⁶⁷

At the close of Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene has a mystic experience in which he holds a conversation with his dead brother and sees a vision of life and of the future.⁶⁸ First

⁶⁵Look Homeward, Angel, p. 522.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 577-578. Whitman in his poems had said that life was the leavings of many deaths, and that he had no doubt died many times before.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸It is in these cryptic conversations, particularly in this one between Ben and Eugene, that Ernest Bates finds the whole key to Wolfe's work. See Bates, op. cit., p. 522. In these conversations Wolfe approaches very close to the philosophy of Whitman.

Ben says he is not dead and Eugene wonders whether he is the ghost.⁶⁹ In his vision Eugene saw the square of his home town filled with the great lost legion of himself-- "the thousand forms that came, that passed, that wove and shifted in unending change, and that remained unchanging Him."⁷⁰ He saw the square was also filled with Bens; he, too, was one and many.

Eugene saw dead cultures and dead bestial gods, the "old cautious hucksters" that Whitman said lived for their time. But Eugene saw, as Whitman had, that "amid the fumbling march of races to extinction, the giant rhythms of the earth remained. The seasons passed in their majestic processions, and germinal Spring returned forever on the land--new crops, new men, new harvests, and new gods."⁷¹

Then, after Eugene has seen these things, he sees the foiled quest of himself. He sees that this obscure and passionate hunger, the same that had darkened his father's eyes to "impalpable desire for wrought stone and the head of an angel," is not to be appeased there among the cities.⁷²

⁶⁹See Whitman's poems "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" and "Pensive and Faltering." In the latter poem Whitman perceives that he is the spectre.

⁷⁰Look Homeward, Angel, p. 622. Whitman had understood this. In "Song of Myself" he says to the sea that he guesses what it means. He, too, is of one phase and all phases.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 623. This is a statement of Whitman's thought and of Plotinus's that life is an eternal progression and that all goes outward and onward.

⁷²Ibid.

Ben says, "Fool, why do you look in the streets?" And Eugene questions, "Where is the world?" To which Ben replies, "Nowhere. You are your world."⁷³ This truth that Ben imparts to Eugene is the truth which the mystics and the great romantics saw. This is why Whitman sees the earth as holding a mirror, for we see in the earth what there is in ourselves.⁷⁴ Eugene says he has saved one land unvisited, Arcadia. Then, in his vision, he is there with Ben on the brink of the dark, and the dream of the cities and the spectres of the people he has known and loved are far behind him. Eugene thinks it is the good strong medicine of death. So he questions if this is the end, if he has eaten life and not found it. Ben cries, "Fool, this is life. You have been nowhere." "But in the cities?" "There are none. There is one voyage, the first, the last, the only one."⁷⁵ This is the same voyage that Whitman embarks on in "Passage to India." Wolfe says of Eugene:

He stood naked and alone in darkness, far from the lost world of the streets and faces; he stood upon the ramparts of his soul, before the lost land of himself; heard inland murmurs of lost seas, the far interior music of the horns. The last voyage, the longest, the best.

"O sudden and impalpable faun, lost in the thickets of myself, I will hunt you down until you cease to hound my eyes with hunger. I heard your foot-falls in the desert, I saw your shadow in old buried cities, I heard

⁷³Ibid., p. 624.

⁷⁴See Whitman's poem, "A Song of the Rolling Earth."

⁷⁵Look Homeward, Angel, p. 625.

your laughter running down a million streets, but I did not find you there. And no leaf hangs for me in the forest; I shall lift no stone upon the hills; I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter. . . ."⁷⁶

But the years of fury must go by. Thus it is not until ten years later that George Webber realizes the union of body and soul and its significance. George, lying in a hospital after a tavern brawl, gazes at his battered face, seeing it as something apart from himself. "Suddenly all pride and vanity destroyed--he laughed. The battered mask laughed with him, and at last his soul was free. He was a man."⁷⁷ The stranger in Eugene had told him he must die many times to become a man. And now George Webber at twenty-nine feels he has become a man. He had come to see, as Whitman saw, that the body did not imprison the soul. When he was young, he had loved his body; then he had hated it because of its limitations. Wolfe says of George:

He despised it because its power of smell, taste, sight, sound, and touch let slip forever, as all flesh must, the final potent, and completest distillation of life, the matchless ecstasy of living.⁷⁸

For ten years he had striven to make his body quench the hunger of his spirit. Now, because he accepted the limitations of his body, he was free:⁷⁹

⁷⁶ ibid. ⁷⁷ The Web and the Rock, p. 690.

⁷⁸ ibid., p. 692.

⁷⁹ Whitman in "Song of Myself" says he uses the stallion but for a moment before passing on. He realized that revolt

He knew now that the demon of his mortal hunger would be inches and eternities from his grasp forever. He knew that we who are men are more than men, and less than spirit. What have we but the pinion of a broken wing to soar half-heavenward.⁸⁰

He knew that the flesh had not betrayed him. He belonged to the family of this earth. He had now departed wholly from the Oriental's feeling that the flesh was to be overcome. This flesh and he had discovered the earth together.

He had learned through a wisdom of the body and the brain, that a spirit which thinks itself too fine for the rough uses of the world is too young and callow, or else too centered on itself. . . to find itself by losing self in something larger than itself, and thus to find its place and do a man's work in the world.⁸¹

George, who is a projection of Wolfe himself, had now learned to love life and his fellow men, to hate the death-in-life, and to know that it was better to live than die. Thus the closing pages of The Web and the Rock indicate that George at twenty-nine has almost arrived at the place where Whitman was when he began his Leaves.

Now, after tracing the growth of Wolfe's ideas to a mature point, it is necessary to see whether the philosophy of the two is the same. In their concept of the ultimate Whitman and Wolfe denied as too narrow and too small the conventional religious concept of God. Before their cosmic doctrine that sees the whole universe as a manifestation and a

was necessary for the freedom of the spirit. This freedom, however, was "under the law." See "Freedom" in Speciman Days and Collect, V, 297.

⁸⁰The Web and the Rock, p. 693. ⁸¹Ibid., p. 692.

part of the one mind, the old and traditional concepts break down and are fused in this new concept of religion which is broad enough to include the religions of all the races of all time.

Whitman always claimed that religious purpose underlay all his verse,⁸² but to some a religion as inclusive as his was seen as no religion. It is in answer to such a comment that Whitman says:

I claim everything for religion: after the claims of my religion are satisfied nothing is left for anything else: yet I have been called irreligious--an infidel (God help me!): as if I could have written a word of the Leaves without its religious rootground. I am not traditionally religious--I know it: but even traditionally I am not anti: I take all the old forms and faiths and remake them in conformity with the modern⁸³ spirit, not rejecting an item of the earlier programs.

But Whitman had no use for churches. He conceded that for fledglings the church might offer some help, but he saw in this ready-made security that the church offers a death-blow to the freedom of the spirit which is the essence of religion. He realized that an established religion was a dead religion. This is what he means when he says:

I am done with the letter of the church--with its hands and knees: but that part of the church which is not jailed in church buildings is all mine too, as well as anybody's--all of it, all of it.⁸⁴

Wolfe, too, evidently denied the traditional concept

⁸²"Preface of 1872," v, 189.

⁸³Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 10.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 11.

of religion. At college Wolfe took a keen interest in philosophy, and he and his philosophy teacher became close friends; so, it is very probable that he, like his hero Eugene, was denounced as an infidel by a good Baptist woman of the town because he denied the religion of the churches.⁸⁵ Wolfe says that Eugene had gone to church for years and yet always departed from it with the sad heart of a stranger.⁸⁶ George Webber remembers the "good smell and feel of the church which was not so much like God as like a good and decent substance in the world."⁸⁷ It was like an ordered destiny, like Sunday morning peace and decency, and good dinners, money in the bank and strong security.⁸⁸ But these youths, like Whitman, sensed that there was something beneath all this and "gathered some of the pain, the mystery, the sensuous beauty of religion, something far deeper and greater than this austere decency."⁸⁹

Whitman and Wolfe turn away from the churches because they feel something deeper. They deny personality to God since they see him as infinite, immanent in all things, and recognize that any personality, however grand, would limit the ultimate and make it less than God. Thus, like the Orientals, they realize the ultimate can only be expressed

⁸⁵Of Time and the River, p. 65.

⁸⁶Look Homeward, Angel, p. 140.

⁸⁷The Web and the Rock, p. 103.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Look Homeward, Angel, p. 140.

in negative terms. John Symonds says of Whitman's religion:

We might call it cosmic enthusiasm and hail it as the dawn of a new spiritual day. . . . It has a character and essence all its own from which notions of a personal deity, of rewards and punishments for the individual have been purged away.⁹⁰

At the same time, two men so constantly personal in their approach to life as Whitman and Wolfe realize that man's spirit demands ideals and that, since man cannot love or understand intangibles, man must delimit God and make him in his own image in order to approach closer to him. Thus Whitman and Wolfe understand that we project our Gods from us and bestow on them the highest qualities that we can imagine at that time. Then, as we grow, the ideals change and the old Gods are replaced by others. So Whitman sees himself as "an acme of things accomplished" and says he outbids at the start the "old cautious hucksters." Christ, to him, is the "elder brother," the perfected generic man (that waits potentially in each of us), but not God.

Wolfe has Eugene see this truth in his vision, but Wolfe too realizes that individuals must have concrete ideals to worship as Eugene worships his teacher, Margaret Leonard:

But enduring, a victorious reality amid his shadow-haunted heart, she remained, who first had touched his blinded eyes with light, who nested his hooded houseless soul. She remained--⁹¹

⁹⁰ Symonds, op. cit., p. 59.

⁹¹ Look Homeward, Angel, p. 216.

Then, in the remainder of the passage, Wolfe expresses the same thought about the change of the gods:

O death in life that turns our men to stone! O change that levels down our gods! If only one lives yet, above the cinders of the consuming years, shall not the dust awaken, shall not the dead faith revive, shall we not see God again, as once in the morning on the mountain? Who walks with us on the hills?⁹²

This concept held by Whitman and Wolfe that God is immanent in all things destroys the idea of evil as an absolute. To Whitman evil is only an unripe kind of good. This concept of evil follows from the belief in the mystic affinity between opposites. Thus there can be no good without evil, and evil is only the negative of good. Whitman recognizes that even evil has its place in the world and says there can be no greatest character without having passed through sin.⁹³ He knows that he too has the potentiality of evil within him and so recognizes the harlot and the criminal as his brother and sister since they are also potential gods.

Wolfe does not deny the evil of the world, but like Whitman, accepts it as a part of the world. Wolfe tells of George's first realization that this world of shame and degradation was his also:

⁹²Ibid. Later in You Can't Go Home Again, Foxhall Edwards becomes the father of George's spirit until he is able to grasp the idea of the Absolute. See p. 437.

⁹³Notes and Fragments, IX, 142.

Ira, Dock, and Reese! These were savage, foul, and bloody names, and yet there was a menacing wild promise in them too. World of the "mountain grills," the poor whites, the nameless, buried, hopeless atoms of the wilderness, their lives yet had a lawless, sinful freedom of their own. . . . Was it really there?

Yes, it was there--strangely, horribly there, never-to-be-forgotten, never wholly to be remembered or believed, haunting the soul forever with the foul naturalness of a loathsome dream. It was there, immutably, unbelievably there, and what was most strange and terrible about it was that he recognized it instantly--that world of Ira, Dock, and Reese--the first time that he saw it as a child; and even as his heart and bowels sickened with their nauseous disbelief of recognition, he knew it, lived it, breathed it utterly to the last remotest degradation of its horror.⁹⁴

As we have seen, the philosophy of Whitman and Wolfe discards the deistic concept of the universe. Whitman does believe in a planned universe, though it is not the old teleological concept of the deists that sees God as a sort of architect who draws the plans for the universe, which then proceeds according to a form laid on from without.

To Whitman the world was one organic whole, but he did not think the mechanistic theory of the universe was satisfactory. Whitman's philosophy was, as De Selincourt says, a kind of evolutionary vitalism.⁹⁵ He believed that the processes of life are not exclusively determined by mechanical causes or explicable by the laws of physics and chemistry alone, but that the functions of life are due to some vital principle or force and that life is in some part self-determining. Thus the plan for the future unfolding of life

⁹⁴The Web and the Rock, pp. 56-57.

⁹⁵Walt Whitman: a Critical Study, p. 242.

is not laid on from without but is contained within life itself as the future orange is contained in its seed. Whitman accepted the findings of science and the theory of evolution and did not find them antagonistic to his mystic doctrine.

He says:

I accept Reality and dare not question it,
Materialism first and last imbuing.⁹⁶

He accepts and uses the facts of science, but he realizes that these cannot explain the ultimate. He but enters by the facts of science to the area of his dwelling.⁹⁷ For he recognizes that the true reality lies beyond the facts, but the facts corroborate his belief that

law is the unshakable order of the universe forever; and the law over all, and law of laws, is the law of successions; that of the superior law in time, gradually supplanting and overwhelming the inferior.⁹⁸

Whitman's line, "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses," is a restatement of this same belief in the law of unity and progress.⁹⁹

Wolfe, too, felt that life was one organic whole, governed by the same law or necessity, and that according to

⁹⁶"Song of Myself," I, 61.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Democratic Vistas, V, 79.

⁹⁹"Song of Myself," I, 100. This idea is not new to mystical thought. Emerson took as his motto for Nature, "And striving to be man, the worm mounts through all the spires of form." This is, after all, but a restatement of the same idea in Plotinus: "All things desire contemplation and verge to this as their end, not only rational animals, but those destitute of reason." See Frederick Carpenter, Emerson and Asia, pp. 42, 68.

this law the development of life was continual and upward.

Wolfe says Eugene recognized that

beyond all misuse, waste, pain, tragedy, death, confusion, unswerving necessity was on the rails; not a sparrow fell through the air but that its repercussion acted on his life, and the lovely light that fell upon the viscous and interminable seas at dawn awoke sea-changes washing life to him. The fish swam upward from the depths.¹⁰⁰

Both Whitman and Wolfe saw necessity as the will of the Absolute, but this necessity did not limit the freedom of the individual soul. Since each is an integral part of the Absolute, which is self-determined and therefore free, the true will of the individual is also self-determined and free.

Whitman was so convinced of the necessity of freedom that he added the spirit of rebellion to the usual trinity in his conception of the Absolute. The poem in which he sets forth his analysis of the Divine Ideal is called "Chanting the Square Deific." It is deific or god-like, not God, because Whitman knew that the relative human mind could not predicate God and is thus forced to make God in his own image. The first of these four concepts necessary to the "Divine Ideal" is Law, inexorable destiny, or natural law that is universal and irrevocable. This law is personified in the Jehovah of the Old Testament, in Brahma, in Kronos. The second concept, which is that of consolation, of healing and affection, seems to contradict and compensate for the implacable fact of the first. This creates deities like

¹⁰⁰ Look Homeward, Angel, p. 193.

Christ, Vishnu or Krishna, Hermes and Hercules. The third side of the square is revolt or Satan, the deity of individual will in opposition to the Universal. This concept is necessary since the human mind cannot project a spiritual world where strife will not be equally present with love and where both will not be antagonistic to destiny. Whitman's fourth side to the square is "Santa Spirita," which fuses law, love, and revolt into true spirituality. In reality his square really resolves itself into a triangle with "Santa Spirita" as its eidolon or true reality.

Wolfe makes no such analysis of the "Divine Ideal" in his novels. But the theme of his books is a recognition that he knows, like Whitman, that the riddle of the universe lies in man's continual search for "The Ideal" which will be forever just a step, a foot away. Like Hegel, whom Whitman read and who helped him to a clearer explanation of his similar doctrine, Wolfe seems to see life as a sort of triplicate process. The whole world is composed of opposites which are, after all, poles of a single unity. The whole force of life is derived from the desire of these opposites to unite. All life is a process of this becoming one. Then the union or fulfillment of the process is death. But ever from the union springs new life which in turn contains the seeds of an even greater struggle.

The same forces that make up Whitman's conception of the ultimate are vital in Wolfe's world. Wolfe saw that

natural law, giving unity in the midst of change, was necessary; strife was necessary for growth and progress; and love, he saw, was the "kelson of creation," the uniting force. In this world where forces seem constantly to seek the disintegration of the individual, Wolfe thinks that the dominant push, the thing that is central to all living is man's search for his father whom he has lost and with whom he must be reunited.¹⁰¹ This need finds its expression through love. Wolfe, like Whitman, thus understands love as an expression of the creative, the positive force in the universe. Wolfe says the terrible and beautiful sentence, "We must try to love one another," is the last, the final wisdom earth can give:

It stands there, awful and untraded, above the dusty racket of our lives. No forgetting, no forgiving, no denying, no explaining, no hating.

O mortal and perishing love, born with this flesh and dying with this brain, your memory will haunt the earth forever.¹⁰²

The two sections of Whitman's verse most often misunderstood deal with his concept of love as physical and spiritual. It was his identification of the sexual or procreative impulse with the spiritual or creative force of the universe that caused Whitman to celebrate the divineness of sex in "Children of Adam." The sexual love finds expression and

¹⁰¹The Story of a Novel, p. 39.

¹⁰²Look Homeward, Angel, p. 616. In his last novel, You Can't Go Home Again, Wolfe expresses this belief even more strongly. He says that man, out of his strong belief in life, made love, and at his best, man is love. p. 436.

fulfillment in its offspring, but since man is more than body, this physical impulse does not fully satisfy man's needs. Man realizes that there is something beyond sex, and though Gant has the fulfillment of his procreative urge in the unity of his family, his eyes still darken with the desire to carve an angel's head.

Whitman and Wolfe know that sex is a necessary part of the creative impulse and must not be thwarted, but they also realize that sex is but one expression of this creative impulse in all men. Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is a beautiful expression of his knowledge that the creative instinct of the poet is but a sublimation of the sexual instinct. He realizes that he must die to physical love in order to give freedom to his poetic genius. In You Can't Go Home Again George is finally forced to leave Esther for the same reason. His love for Esther does not leave him free for the creative work of his life; thus his love for her must be transformed into creative endeavor if his character is not to disintegrate.

The "Calamus" group of Whitman's poems deal with the love between souls which finds fulfillment only in death, for both Whitman and Wolfe believed that love was greater than life. This love between souls is more spiritual to Whitman, for it is through the individual souls that each of us is linked to the One. Since souls as a part of the Absolute can never die, Whitman and Wolfe must explain the

relation of souls to the ultimate and to each other before and after death. Whitman's poem "Eidólons" furnishes the clearest statement of his thoughts.

To Whitman the eidólons (images) of life are the only true reality. Whitman's concept of eidólons is similar to Leibnitz's theory of monads. It is also similar to Plato's belief that the idea was the only reality, but where the ideal of Plato was fixed, Whitman's eidólons are fluid, and this fluidity enables them to merge with other eidólons and become the basis for an endless growth and progression.

The thought of Whitman's theory of eidólons is that every material object of the universe has spiritual effluxes which remain changeless and eternal after the dissolution of the object itself.¹⁰³ When they emanate from an organic form, these effluxes unite to produce a spiritual image of that form which is its soul. Thus each human life in all its activities, physical, mental, and emotional, is summed up and made immortal in its eidólon. Whitman says:

Not the types set up by the printer return their
impression, the meaning, the main concern,
Any more than a man's substance and life or a
woman's substance and life return in the body
and the soul,
Indifferently before and after death.¹⁰⁴

Neither Whitman nor Wolfe thought this body a prison of the soul, for both believed that it was through the body and

¹⁰³Walt Whitman, Representative Selections, p. 414.

¹⁰⁴"Starting from Paumanok," I, 26.

its actions here on earth that the soul was given identity.¹⁰⁵ Whitman says:

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be,
I knew I should be of my body.¹⁰⁶

Whitman calls material objects dumb, beautiful ministers since he realizes that the soul is the form which is determined by the matter of the body. At our birth a portion of the general soul was struck off and was given identity through our body, and, as we live and grow, our acts affect the growth of our soul. Whitman states, "You are not thrown to the winds, you gather certainly and safely around yourself."¹⁰⁷

Wolfe, too, sees this interaction between the body and the soul and the universe. Thus he has Eugene say:

I am, he thought, a part of all that I have touched and that has touched me, which, having for me no existence save that which I gave to it, became other than itself by being mixed with what I then was, and is now still otherwise, having fused with what I now am, which is itself a cumulation of what I have been becoming.¹⁰⁸

Neither Whitman nor Wolfe believed that death brought a cessation of life. Of course each realized that the body must

¹⁰⁵For Wolfe's view see the last pages of The Web and the Rock. See section thirteen of "Starting from Paumanok" for Whitman's expression of the idea. I, 26.

¹⁰⁶"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," I, 195.

¹⁰⁷"To Think of Time," II, 217.

¹⁰⁸Look Homeward, Angel, p. 192.

complete its cycle of birth, death, and decay, but even the flesh to them found new meaning and new life in death.) Whitman remarks that the corpse is good manure, but from it lovely flowers shall spring.¹⁰⁹ Eugene knows that Ben will come back each spring in flowers and will not die again.¹¹⁰ Still, both know that the real you is not contained in the dead corpse. These lines show Whitman's view:

Of your real body and any man's or woman's real body,
Item for item it will elude the hands of the corpse
cleaners and pass to fitting spheres
Carrying what has accrued to it from the moment of
birth to the moment of death.¹¹¹

Eugene, too, knows that the Ben he knew is not in the dead body before him. He asks:

Is this his bright particular flesh, made in his
image, given life by his unique gesture, by his one
soul? No, he is gone from that bright flesh. This
thing is one with all carrion; it will be mixed with
the earth again. Ben? Where? O lost!¹¹²

It is impossible for him to believe in the nothingness of Ben. Then Ben comes to Eugene in a vision and tells him there is no death. He shows Eugene the one true voyage, the voyage of the soul, and Eugene sees that death is the gateway to this "Passage to India."¹¹³ Ben shows Eugene what Whitman knows. Whitman says he tramps a perpetual journey,

¹⁰⁹"Song of Myself," I, 106.

¹¹⁰Look Homeward, Angel, p. 583.

¹¹¹"Starting from Paumanok," I, 26.

¹¹²Look Homeward, Angel, p. 570.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 625.

for after we start we never lie by again.¹¹⁴ This is the truth that George Webber learns. For a moment the soul of the youth longs for a return to the simpler and more contented life of the child he used to be. But the body answers, "You can't go home again."¹¹⁵ There is no return. George Webber saw, as Whitman saw, that the journey is forever outward, onward, expanding.

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

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

"--Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending-- a wind is rising, and the rivers flow."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴"Song of Myself," I, 102.

¹¹⁵The Web and the Rock, p. 695.

¹¹⁶You Can't Go Home Again, p. 743.

CHAPTER V

WOLFE THE POET-PROPHET

He had come again to "the unsearchable riddle--out of death, life, out of the coarse rank earth, a flower."¹

George's parting words to Foxhall Edwards might easily be Wolfe's farewell to this earth.² For Wolfe, like George, had lived his life through to a first completion made final by his early death. But one feels that to Wolfe, as to Whitman, death signifies a new beginning. As Wolfe's life and work seem an answer to Whitman's challenging plea to future writers, so Wolfe's death marks a new beginning, and his life and work become, in turn, a pivot for the writers that are to come.

Whether or not Wolfe consciously sought to pick up Whitman's challenge, his link with Whitman is nevertheless significant, for though in a different generation and in a different medium, his is a continuation of the task Whitman saw. Thus the core of Wolfe's kinship with Whitman and of his possible significance to future generations lies in the

¹Look Homeward, Angel, p. 224.

²You Can't Go Home Again, p. 708. George says: "As you will see, my whole experience swings round, as though through a predestined orbit, to you, to this moment, to this parting. So bear with me--and then, farewell."

poet-prophet combination in Wolfe.

Between Whitman and Wolfe there was a natural affinity. In several respects their natures were akin. What Norman Foerster says of Whitman could be quoted with equal truth about Wolfe:

In his emotional and imaginative endowment Whitman was, beyond question, impressively massive, and this endowment was served by his sound physical organization, especially by his senses, which were more exquisitely responsive than those of any other American writer.³

Wolfe, too, was endowed with a large imagination; he, too, was always filled with wonder at life. From his youth he had had a mystic intuition of something but half-remembered, of something lost. He also wanted to know all, to search to the core of things. To a man of such a temperament, Whitman would be a gold mine. Wolfe was fitted to take all that Whitman could give and to do as Whitman said all great poets did:

The great poet absorbs the identity of others and they are definite in him or from him, but he presses them all through the powerful press of himself--loads his own masterly identity.⁴

As one feels that Whitman's Leaves are different for his having read Emerson, so one feels that Wolfe's writings must

³American Criticism, p. 159. Wolfe said, "The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes and feel of things with concrete vividness." The Story of a Novel, p. 31.

⁴Notes and Fragments, IX, 120.

have been influenced by his reading of Whitman. Wolfe's purpose, as he finally defined it after he matured and took inventory of himself as a writer, was one with Whitman's-- to show the average American of his time becoming God. In doing this Wolfe adopted an attitude and method closer to Whitman's than to that of any of his contemporaries. He says:

It seems to me that the task is one whose physical proportions are vaster and more difficult here than in any other nation on the earth. It is not merely that in the cultures of Europe and of the Orient the American artist can find no antecedent scheme, no structural plan, no body of tradition that can give his own work the validity and truth that it must have. It is not merely that he must make somehow a new tradition for himself, derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of American life, the structure of his own design; it is not merely that he is confronted by these problems; it is even more than this, that the labor of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him.⁵

The gist of these lines is identical with Whitman's plea in Democratic Vistas for a new American literature. The following is a continuation of Wolfe's plea and hope for cosmic articulation, given because it is a very definite summary, in Wolfe's own words, of the likeness between Whitman and Wolfe:

Such is the nature of the struggle to which henceforth our lives must be devoted. Out of the billion forms of America, out of the savage violence and dense complexity of all its swarming life; from the unique and single substance of this land and life of ours, must we draw the power and energy of our own life, the articulation of our speech, the substance of our art.

⁵The Story of a Novel, p. 92.

For here it seems to me in hard and honest ways like these we may find the tongue, the language, and the conscience that as men and artists we have got to have. Here, too, perhaps, must we who have no more than what we have, who know no more than what we know, who are no more than what we are, find our America. Here at this present hour and moment of my life, I seek for mine.⁶

It is significant that the kinship between Whitman and Wolfe is dual. As has already been pointed out in a previous chapter, there is between these two writers an obvious similarity in style, Wolfe's rich, flowing and exuberant lyricism so evident in his first two novels duplicating not only in spirit, but in numerous technical devices the fecund free verse of Whitman. But there is a further likeness. As Wolfe matures, becomes less lyrical, less like Whitman in the expression of his thoughts, the thoughts themselves approximate ever more closely to the thought behind Whitman's verse. Even a superficial study of Wolfe's last novel, You Can't Go Home Again, reveals the emergence of a new Wolfe, a prophet.

This prophet, Wolfe, still a poet, was moving forward into a place left vacant by Walt Whitman, who believed that he was shaping not only American art but American life for the generations to come. Wolfe was no longer merely a raw-boned mountain lad looking out over the vast mystery of America and drunk with its bigness and its beauty. He was-- certainly he felt himself to be-- a mature writer who had seen much of the world and come home again with the knowledge that one never comes home and yet that the land, America, was

⁶Ibid., pp. 92-93.

home and that it must no longer be completely a mystery. Here were Americans, his brothers, the center, the focus of the flow of forces which he now sought to understand and record in the form of a novel. It was not a conventional novel, and Wolfe tore its form asunder seeking with every device at hand to come back not only to the central and philosophic truth about his main character, George Webber, but also to the truth about a nation of hollow men, of hollow Americans, who were living a life in the webbed cities of his land that was without the richness of the earth.

There are perhaps numerous competent American novelists who have devoted themselves to portraying in one fashion or another the American scene. But no recent American novelist has sought to get at the truth about America in precisely the manner of Wolfe, as a lyric realist, as an intuitive philosopher, as a poet-prophet. And whether or not one believes the novel a success, and whether or not one believes he might have written another and still better novel, one feels at least that he is on the road to truth and perhaps to an inspired truth. Wolfe may reveal no more about American life than other men. His last book offers the same social criticism that one finds in John Steinbeck's story of the "Okies," and yet, somehow, one feels that Wolfe's novels are born of a far greater vision than even so good a piece of social reporting as Grapes of Wrath. Wolfe is moved by social needs, but his vision of man's soul goes

far beyond the mere correction of those abuses. It is a vision of the complete man, the hollow man filled in, given not only food for his physical needs but an inner fire to warm him. This was the complete democratic man Whitman saw.

Wolfe senses a drying up of the spiritual sources and knows that without them a person or a nation is doomed. Our time, the depression through which Wolfe lived, is proof that Whitman was right in saying material riches are not enough. Time and again during the depression Wolfe found proof of this in his own friends and acquaintances. When their outward symbols of wealth were gone, they had no inner equivalent from which they might draw new strength.⁷ Wolfe realized with Whitman and the other mystics that our world is within, that if we are to find richness and joy in this life, we must have richness within. As Whitman prophesied in his poem, "Song of the Redwood-Tree," Wolfe, too, realized that the richness of the material world should be but a symbol of our inner richness. Instead of seeking to build up a world of "Maya," we should seek to make the inexhaustible wealth of the world a part of ourselves. Wolfe feels the inherent wealth of man, "a manswarm atom, a nameless cipher, who in an instant could clothe his life with all the wealth and glory of the earth."⁸

⁷See chapters entitled "The Catastrophe" and "The Hollow Men" in You Can't Go Home Again.

⁸The Web and the Rock, p. 293.

Because Wolfe not only had a personality big enough to grasp this vision but also had the genius to reveal it to fellow Americans, he takes his place with Whitman and those poets whom Eugene admired so much--"those poets who found the earth and who have left great pieces of that golden earth behind them in their verse as deathless evidence that they were there."⁹

But for future generations Wolfe's message, Wolfe's personality, may overshadow any success or failure of technique. At a time when preachers utter mere platitudes, when the "primitive spirit of greed and lust and force"¹⁰ is tearing down the forward march of civilization, Wolfe turns his back on an art primarily interested in form and seeks instead to give us his vision of human destiny. In his art he has attempted to reveal the essentials of life, and he knew through his own experience that it takes courage, struggle, and heart-break even to glimpse these essentials. Like Whitman, Wolfe seeks to show that the wealth of the whole earth is every man's if he will but take it. The struggle of Eugene and George is not meant to be the history of a "genius" but of a man--to show that at bottom every man is an artist, that every man must create something from the substance of his own life if he is not to die.

⁹See the quotation on page 24.

¹⁰You Can't Go Home Again, p. 705.

And we? Made of our father's earth, blood of his blood, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh--born like our father here to live and strive, here to win through or be defeated--here, like all other men who went before us, not too nice or dainty for the uses of this earth--here to live, to suffer, and to die--O brother, like our fathers in their time we are burning, burning, burning in the night.¹¹

And though Wolfe's life was consummated at an early age, one feels he would be content if the fire of his life might make the way a little less dark for other creative souls to follow.

¹¹Ibid., p. 505.

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