

## 22 CRITICS DISCUSS

Thomas Wolfe

(1900-1938)

“In Europe several times during the expatriate decade, he had no impulse to be an expatriate himself. His novels, begun in London or planned in Paris, rose out of his longing for America. He might be affected by *Ulysses*, but when he came to write he was nearer Whitman.... A full head taller than ordinary men, Wolfe with his enormous appetites was immensely sensitive.... His whole work was a history of his gigantic desires and desperate frustrations.... Nor was Paris or London more hospitable than New York. In the fall of 1926 he began his homesick novel *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) in London, as if needing to recapture the bitter, wild splendors of his first twenty years....

Wolfe like Hemingway--or like Byron or Whitman--was a writer with a single principal hero: himself in one form or another. *Look Homeward, Angel* may be regarded as a kind of prologue, devoted to the young hero in his province. In *Of Time and the River* Eugene goes to Harvard, returns to his father's funeral, lives restless in New York, travels to England and France and back. In *The Web and the Rock* George Webber, after two hundred pages of a youth unlike Eugene Gant's but strikingly parallel to it, arrives in New York with an ardent hunger like Gant's to read all the books and know all the people in the world, writes a novel that sounds much like *Look Homeward, Angel*, has an intricate, protracted love affair with an older woman, travels in Europe, and at the end feels, for at least a moment, reconciled to his abnormal body and his human fate.

After Wolfe's death the hymns and visions and radiant catalogues in his writings were brought together in a volume called *The Face of a Nation* (1939). It was prose to match Whitman's poetry, and Wolfe and Whitman would long be remembered together. These rich passages in Wolfe stood out all the more strongly because his great novel--the four are really one--lacked the powerful structure that might have reduced its parts to their due places in the whole. His chronicle of a hero during his first thirty years is a tumultuous series of scenes held together by the unity of a single giant hunger and desire, charging forward without sense of direction, haunted by the perpetual image of time as an infinite river in which men lead their short and trifling lives, so soon forgotten in the universal flood.

Again and again Wolfe broke into lyric laments over the terrible brevity of joy. But he was one of the most opulent of novelists, and the whole of America was his theme. There is a body to his work as well as wings. Sometimes he wrote at greater length than his materials called for. His passion for fine words made him frequently verbose. He often strained his sentiments and ecstasies. His comic scenes are commonly grotesque. Yet when his emotion was perfectly aroused, as in his account of the prodigious life and even more prodigious death of Oliver Gant, Wolfe was almost incomparable. His fine words all fit, and there are not too many of them. His sentiments and ecstasies are authentic and perennial. Oliver Gant has been too magnificent in life ever to seem grotesque, and there is nothing grotesque about his gigantic death. Perhaps only his son could have told his story. His son told it.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 343-44, 347-48

“Some of Mr. Wolfe's material is not subordinated to the intention of the book. What is his intention? On what is the mass of material focused? What is to give it form? His novels are obviously autobiographical. This means that the binding factor should be, at least in part, the personality of the narrator, or since Mr. Wolfe adopts a disguise, of the hero, Eugene Gant.... The hero is really that nameless fury that drives Eugene. The book is an effort to name that fury and perhaps by naming it to tame it. But the fury goes unnamed and untamed. Since the book is formless otherwise, only a proper emotional reference to such a centre could give it form. Instead, at the centre there is this chaos that steams and bubbles in rhetoric and apocalyptic apostrophe, sometimes grand and sometimes febrile and empty; the

centre is a maelstrom, perhaps artificially generated at times; and the other tangible items are the flotsam and jetsam and dead wood spewed up, iridescent and soggy as the case may be.”

Robert Penn Warren  
*American Review*  
(May 1935) 199-202

“Mr. Wolfe has power, passion, a singular fearlessness, the ability to create individual scenes of brilliant truth, a genius for lyrical prose unequalled in contemporary letters, insight into certain types of characters and problems. But Mr. Wolfe the artist has advanced scarcely a step since *Look Homeward, Angel*. He is full of self-pity. If he is a genius, he is still an adolescent genius. His universe is utterly or mainly subjective, and the result is a transcript of experience curiously true in some particulars, curiously false in others.”

Howard Mumford Jones  
*Saturday Review*  
(30 November 1935) 13

“His imagination has provided him with a great theme and his accurate memory flashes infinite exact detail of the life which he intends to make his book. But he cannot control the theme or reduce his substance to a medium. He will write neither poetry nor prose, but both. He will not be content with the literal autobiographic description of men and events which his journalistic sense supplies so readily but must intersperse with passages of sheer fantasy or poetical uplift. He will stick neither to fiction nor to fact. Hence the reader never enters into that created world of the real novelist which has its own laws, its own atmosphere, its own people, but goes from here to there in Mr. Wolfe’s own life, seeing real people as he saw them, and often recognizing them...not as created characters but as literal transcripts from the life. So that the effect is always of being in two worlds at one time, fiction and fact, until curiosity takes the place of that ready acceptance of a homogenous life in the imagination which a fine novel invariably permits.”

Henry Seidel Canby  
*Seven Years’ Harvest*  
(Rinehart 1936) 168

“Something of the homefolk’s first resistance to the book about the home town may lie behind the criticism of Wolfe’s books as undisciplined and formless. I suspect in some such criticism a wish, like Asheville’s to have a native story a little nicer, a trifle neater, more ordered and patterned to delicacy and decorum. And now at his death I expect that the suggestion will be strenuously stirred that had he lived Tom Wolfe’s big, sprawling, powerful, pouring prose would have been served in neater packages of sweeter stuff. It is possible to say anything about the dead. In Wolfe’s case, they may even make him a classicist who might have been. But our loss will remain the unbounded vitality, the uncaptured power which made his books and his world and all his Gants and Pentlands alive. Form and discipline undoubtedly in important respects he lacked; it is lacking also in the confusion which is as much a part of American life as Tom Wolfe was.”

Jonathan Daniels  
*Saturday Review*  
(24 September 1938) 8

“An uncompleted novel by Tom Wolfe much the same as a completed novel.” [To Hadley Mowrer, 26 July 1939] “I think Tom was only truly good about his home town and there he *was wonderful and unsurpassable*. The other stuff is usually over-inflated journalese.” [To Maxwell Perkins, 12 October 1940] “You can have your boy Tom Wolfe too, and his sainted mother. If Max hadn’t cut ten tons of shit out of Wolfe *everybody* would have known how bad it is after the first book.” [To Charles Scribner, 4 October 1949] “[Nelson Algren] makes Mr. Thomas Wolfe the over-bloated Lil Abner of literature look about how he always looked to us professionals. If Max Perkins had not cut one half million words out of Mr. Wolfe everybody would know how he was but except for the first good book, *Look Homeward, Angel*, he never had enough on the ball to strike out Miss Billie Burke in her 64<sup>th</sup> year.” [To Malcolm Cowley, 11 October 1949] “Tom Wolfe was a one book boy and a glandular giant with the brains and the guts of three mice.” [To Charles Scribner, 18-19 May 1951] “Tom Wolfe wrote only of his own life with rhetoric added.” [To

Charles A. Fenton, 18 June 1952] "Am no Tom Wolfe, all the words have to make sense; which can be tiring." [To Charles Scribner, 31 March 1960]

Ernest Hemingway  
*Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*  
(Scribner's 1981) 493, 517, 678, 681, 696, 726, 764, 901

"After the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) [he] devoted his full time to writing. This strongly autobiographical novel, displaying originality and intensity as well as debts to Dreiser, Lewis, Joyce, and other contemporary novelists, was continued in a sequel, *Of Time and the River* (1935)... A posthumous novel, *The Web and the Rock* (1939), has as its central character George Webber, apparently the Eugene Gant of the previous books, despite the author's claim that 'It is the most objective novel that I have written,' the first half of the book closely parallels the material of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and the second part serves as a sequel to *Of Time and the River*. The title indicates symbolically the problem of his first book: The web of experience, environment, and ancestry, in which the hero is snared; and his attempt to escape by finding the rock, which is the original strength and beauty of vision of his father. He concludes that 'you can't go home again,' that you must go forward, you can't return to a dead past.

The sequel, *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), deals with George's life after his return to the U.S.; his kindly relation and later dissatisfaction with an internationally famous but disillusioned novelist and with his editor, who fatalistically accepts the sickness of civilization; his unsuccessful attempt to return to the roots of his hometown, whose morality has become shoddy during the prosperous decade of the '20s; and his horrid discovery of the destruction of the Germany he had once loved. It is the story of a man who recognizes that a corrupt society destroys each individual in it, but nevertheless believes that 'the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land is yet to come.'...

Throughout his fiction there is a self-fascination and self-torment that endow his writing now with a lofty romantic quality, now with the prosaic quality of literal reporting of the hero's life. His intensity results in both a powerful emotional evocation and a sprawling unrestrained formlessness. His prose is sometimes highly lyrical, but there are many passages characterized by swollen, frenzied rhetoric. His books cling always to the story of his life; however, he rises above egocentricity in his mystical, patriotic belief that there is something great in America that haunts and kindles the imagination of its young men."

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

"Wolfe wrote *great* American novels, he wrote great *American* novels, and, loosely speaking, he wrote great American *novels*. But he fails to measure up in the fourth respect: He did not write *the* great American novel.... Wolfe was not of the artistic temperament to write such a work. The author of *The Great American Novel* must be dramatic and omnipresent; Thomas Wolfe was lyrical and uni-present. For him there was only one world and he was at the center of it.... But his...gravest limitation was his genius.... The genius of Thomas Wolfe was too much. He was driven by a restlessness which kept him from achieving that cool perfection which often comes easy to lesser men."

Thomas Lyle Collins  
*Sewanee Review*  
(Fall 1942) 504

"The career of Thomas Wolfe is the spectacle of a novelist who began with the sole concern to transfer to others his fascination with his own family as material for fiction, who turned thereafter in the same simplicity of intention to his own relationship with persons outside his family, but who poured into these relationships all the disorders of the contemporary world until he was forced at the end to attempt their solution in a letter to his editor on social views, in which his work as a writer culminated and, it may be said, his life concluded."

Edwin Berry Burgum  
*Virginia Quarterly Review*  
(Summer 1946) 421

“Even among the most famous representatives of the more serious contemporary literature that I know, Thomas Wolfe, it seems to me, is the only one endowed with the prophetic Ethos and the poetic Pathos of the true genius. He is the only one consciously transmuting his own discovery of life and of the world into a message of religious intensity. He had consented to be ‘God’s lonely man.’ He knew from the start that ‘genius can bring death.’ There must have been in him from his very youth this feeling of being consecrated, fated, and inevitable. Even beyond his own artistic testimony, it is a most poignant human experience to witness this Pilgrim’s Progress from the exalted rhapsodic lyricism, the youthful turmoil and ecstasy of his first book to the manly composure, the profound ethical awareness of his ‘Credo’ in the last chapter of *You Can’t Go Home Again*.”

Franz Schoenberger  
*New York Times*  
(4 August 1946) 1

“*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) deals with the early life of the Southern protagonist. *Of Time and the River* (1935) deals with his Northern adventures and first contact with the life of wealth and culture and sensibility: that life ‘so beautiful and right and good’ toward which, as the young Wolfe felt, ‘all the myriads of the earth aspire’--or at least all the myriads of the American earth. For this was also the vision of a Mark Twain in Boston, and a Henry James in London, of Dreiser in New York, Cather in Nebraska, and Scott Fitzgerald on Long Island: This is the perennial fable in the national letters of the Provincial and the Magic City. And both *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940) deal with the realization of this vision--and its final inadequacy--and with still another and a new beginning....

Moreover, this huge novel, multiformed and sometimes inchoate as it was, with its alterations always in progress, formed a central document of the period. Just as Dos Passos reinvigorated the naturalistic novel by means of symbolist techniques, so Wolfe regenerated the whole tradition of native realism through the electric charge of curiosity, of lyricism, of anger and protest, and perhaps even of pure excitement which he put into it. In fact, he probably carried sheer energy to its highest pitch in the national letters, and this energy became matter.

The emotional force of *Look Homeward, Angel*, for example, was materialized in its panorama of the general Southern scene, and, for all the obvious adolescent excesses and limitations of Wolfe’s first novel, in the notable central portraits of the novel: those of Oliver Gant and Eliza Gant. Characters: that was one of Wolfe’s plain contributions to the American novel--characters who, for all their idiosyncrasies, were by no means merely ‘eccentrics.’ It is interesting, too, that the weakest point of a national tradition based on ‘individualism’ and the democratic character should be its indifference to individuals who are neither tycoons nor criminal cases--its indifference, in short, to character. Furthermore, the central conflict of the Gants, between Eliza’s outrageous lust for property and Oliver’s insatiable hunger for experience--a conflict that is not lacking in the American mind itself--became the central theme of the tetralogy.

The ‘Fame’ which is sought by the artist-hero in *Of Time and the River* is nothing more than a barely sublimated form of Eliza’s materialism. And the remarkable quality of Wolfe’s unending evocations, descriptions, and evaluations of New York in *The Web and the Rock* is that he catches at once the fascination of the ‘Enfabled Rock’ for the provincial mind, and the provincial’s realization that this is not enough. Perhaps no other American has done so well with the first enchantments and terrors of the city. Both here and in *You Can’t Go Home Again* Wolfe went, as Scott Fitzgerald never quite could go, beyond the whole glamorous pageantry of ‘that distant Babylon, cloud-wrapped and rosy-hued there in the smoke of his imagination....

The mature Wolfe was no longer primarily concerned with one young man, however gifted, but with all young men; and not merely with his own experiences of society but with society’s experience; not with the ‘superior individual’ of Mencken and Fitzgerald but with Sherwood Anderson’s ‘the general.’ So it was necessary to return and reevaluate his hero’s youth and education--in fact to create a new youth and education.... Still, was it now claimed that he had lost his lyrical gift, by some of those who had earlier claimed that his only gift was the lyric?... If he was ignorant and superstitious as the hill folks were, and

stumbled into many gargantuan pitfalls--some those of his own making too--he had the persistence and cunning as well as the long legs of the hill people, and he walked with the mountain walk.”

Maxwell Geismar  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1309-11

“Wolfe’s poetry is not calmly and quietly intense; his main theme is the theme of being lost in America, and it is treated by a poet who is still lost. His perspective of America itself is out of joint: distances and spaces are magnified, a trip from New York to North Carolina becomes a journey ‘down the continent’; much of his America is an abstraction. He has some of the Naturalistic pantheism, the feeling that man and soil are intensely bound together in essence which marks so much Western literature since Zola and which makes him sound occasionally like Jena Giono, just as he shows at times some of the enthusiasm for being American, if not the faith democratic, of Walt Whitman. Now and again he reveals a feeling for, though not much knowledge of, the history of our people--the feeling that this land is something apart because the dust of his ancestors is mixed with its dust. But mostly his complaint is that these things do not mean more to him than they do, that he really has no place and ‘no door where he can enter,’ and that meanwhile he is being swept along by the stream of life. The answer to his eternal question is not the answer of Whitman and Crane... The one thing that he can be sure of, the one door that must open for him, is death.”

W. M. Frohock  
*Southwest Review*  
(Autumn 1948) 357

“Disillusionment, the hindsight of the self-deluded and the half-blind, was not one of Thomas Wolfe’s qualities. No one ever accused him of being blind to any degree. His fault, if fault it was, was that he saw too much. Till the day he died he retained that luminous gift which all bright children seem to possess up to a certain age: the ability to look at life and see it as it really is, with all its many and ever-changing faces, its mystery and wonder, its exhilaration and stark terror, its endless contrasts of beauty and ugliness, its haunting interplay of good and evil, its flashing colors and subtly shifting shadows.”

Edward C. Aswell  
*Saturday Review*  
(27 November 1948) 34

“In the style of Wolfe is his essence. It is for this that we read him--not for his narrative, nor for philosophy, not for the desire to study more intently the nature of human thought and behavior. The narrative is dictated by the circumstances of his own life, and he runs wild as an unsheared hedge. The philosophy is half-baked--a sequence of ideas held today because of yesterday’s impressions, and just as likely to be altered tomorrow.... We read Wolfe primarily for his rhetorical poetry, which he delivers from his great height with the authority of a prophet who has seen the clouds open to reveal a calligraphy of fire upon the white spaces of the air.”

Pamela Hansford-Johnson  
*Hungry Gulliver*  
(Scribner 1948) 20

“It is largely through his effort to find permanence in flux that the novels of Thomas Wolfe may be considered ‘modern’ in their treatment of time. In Wolfe’s novels time becomes a rushing all-erosive river, which, nevertheless, may be arrested or turned back by the memory. Like Proust, Wolfe seeks to recapture the past through memory including unconscious memory, and to show the sensations and moods that recollections of the past evoke in the present. Or again, like Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake*, he opposes a linear conception of time with a cyclical one, wherein the eternal is repeated through apparent change.”

W. P. Albrecht  
*New Mexico Quarterly*  
(Autumn 1949) 320

“The four novels of Wolfe’s tetralogy echo the voice of time. Like the great railroad sheds, they harbor its sound. For Wolfe was secure only when he was in motion and never so sure of himself as when he was on a moving train. His books came from the huge railroad stations of his mind where ‘the voice of time remained aloof and imperturbed, a drowsy and eternal murmur,’ and where the train whistle ‘evoked for him a million images: old songs, old faces, and forgotten memories.’ Involved with Proustian metaphysics Wolfe was not, but as the taster of life and time his experience was much the same as Proust’s. And for both of them the sudden and vivid resurrection of the lost moment, through a present sensory impression, was the central time-experience.”

Margaret Church  
*PMLA*  
(September 1949) 638

“His aim was to set down America as far as it can belong to the experience of one man. Wolfe came early on what was for him the one available truth about this continent--that it was contained in himself.... He could--and it is the source of what is most authentic in himself--displace the present so completely by the past that its sights and sounds all but destroyed surrounding circumstances. He then lost the sense of time. For Wolfe, sitting at a table on a terrace in Paris, contained within himself not only the America he had known he also held, within his body, both his parents. They were there, not only in his memory, but ore portentously in the make-up of his mind. They loomed so enormous to him that their shadows fell across the Atlantic, their shade was on the café table under which he stretched his long American legs.”

John Peale Bishop  
*Kenyon Critics*, ed. John Crowe Ransom  
(World 1951) 3-4

“The fiction of Thomas Wolfe has its own persuasive rhetoric. It is more ambitious, more voluminous, and more nakedly and powerfully eccentric than any other in the history of the American novel. Wolfe believed firmly in the art of ‘inclusion’; and, although he worried throughout his career about the problem of establishing an objective surveillance over his creations, he cannot, even with the help of his good-willed editors, be said to have solved that problem.

One of the most significant documents for the theoretical view of modern fiction is a letter Wolfe wrote (1937) to F. Scott Fitzgerald, in answer to Fitzgerald’s rather too primly severe objections to Wolfe’s writing... There is no doubt that Wolfe was the great ‘putter-inner’ of contemporary American fiction. No writer had greater difficulty with the formal problems of the art of fiction, and no writer was so compulsively driven to ‘put in’.... This product, put together in four principal books, constituted an overflowing of Wolfe’s experience into a reckless and super-abundant review of one American’s search for spiritual definition. The whole of it was autobiographical to an excessive degree and in an obsessively peculiar way....

The first egocentricity of his long narrative is called Eugene Gant. *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) is the story of his parents, his boyhood, and of the initial phase of the revolt against the world of Altamont, Catawba. The father and mother make supplementary contributions to his development; and the turmoil of the Gant family dissensions serves roughly to form his early view. He moves from them to the state university, after having enjoyed an enthusiastic if scarcely disciplined introduction to literature and language at ‘The Altamont Fitting School,’ the Leonards’ private school. At the end of the novel, Eugene has broken with his family in a violent scene of bitter recrimination, and sets out on his pilgrimage.

The search is, above all, for a literary resolution of the tortures of adolescent experience. The obvious place to go is Harvard; *Of Time and the River* (1935) takes him there. He devours the library and absorbs learning as he had earlier assimilated physical experience. In the classes of Professor Hatcher (Baker’s ‘47 Workshop’), he struggles with the disciplines of playwriting; outside the halls of learning, he makes several friends and exploits his relationship with the fabulous and absurd Uncle Bascom Pentland. He returns to Altamont for the funeral of his father, then starts his brief career as an instructor of English in a night school branch of a New York University. At the conclusion of this novel, he makes a tour of Europe, where

he learns more about himself than about the world he visits. As the novel closes, he is once more on his way to America, his funds exhausted.

At this point in the narrative, Wolfe decided that he needed to shift his ground. In the hope that he might achieve greater objectivity in his narrative, he abandoned Eugene Gant, returned to the North Carolina of his youth, and once more took up the narrative of his life. The entire manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel* had in the beginning been written in the first person; the 'I' changed to 'Eugene,' then to 'George.' But the pattern, once resumed, was not substantially altered, and after a recapitulation of the North Carolina themes, Gant-Webber resumes his career in New York from the point of the end of the second novel. *The Web and the Rock* (1939) thus retraces in part the matter of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and continues the narrative of *Of Time and the River*.

The fourth and concluding book, *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) brings the career of Gant-Webber almost up to date; Webber's success as a novelist, his relationship with Foxhall Edwards, his editor, and the break from him, the return to his home town, now in the throes of calamitous depression, and the final trip to Germany--these are all a recapitulation of Wolfe's own life and career. Though the last two volumes were published posthumously and by a different publisher, it is obvious that the major effort at objectivity in their account is Wolfe's own. Webber is an uglier Gant, and a less egotistically regarded character. The natural excesses of Eugene's figure are exaggerated still further in Webber's. The hatefulness of Eugene's self-absorption is accentuated in the riotously ugly love affair that Webber has with Esther Jack in *The Web and the Rock*. These are the measure of Wolfe's efforts to provide more objective treatment. The objectivity is discernible only at isolated points, in shifts of Wolfe's attitude toward the characters, and in the more subdued treatment of Webber's boyhood.

Aside from this question (and it is, after all, the major one, whatever protests Wolfe may have made to his critics and editors), there is the matter of what he actually wanted to do with these materials. He wished, energetically and vainly, to make from quantity a qualitative assertion concerning the meaning of life in its American cultural setting. It was a difficult thing to do, and Wolfe was especially handicapped by the almost incredible energy of raw creation which resisted formulation and ordering. Far from addressing himself to the task of composition, he submitted the responsibilities of such a task to his editors, especially to Maxwell Perkins. 'For the crucial act of the artist,' says Mark Schorer, 'the unique act which is composition, a sympathetic editorial pencil and scissors were substituted.'

It is not that Wolfe was unaware of the necessities involved in that act; we all know that he wrestled violently with them. Rather, he was temperamentally incapable of controlling his verbal energy and was as much liable to further expansion as he was to cutting in his maneuvers at revision. Over and above all of this, the act of composition should have occurred, at least in its initial, disciplinary stages, at the time of the writing itself; it should not have been forced upon him afterward but should have come from an inner compulsion toward form. Similarly, his imitative excursions into the possibilities of Joyce's form and themes were scarcely rewarding, but merely added on to his own abundant inventiveness a specious and strangely intrusive element.

Consequently, his work has an incredible mixture of the most impressive with the worst possible writing. All of his characters are giants of appetite and behavior; they exaggerate each of their traits through an excess of rhetoric and an obsessive duplication. His descriptions are richly diverse and crowded with sensuous detail; lust for food, drink, and experience is fused with a 'yearning of the spirit.' The energy of Wolfe's expression contrasts sadly with the poverty of intellect with which he at crucial moments tries to give it a culminating significance...[through] the rich but confused rhetoric of which Wolfe is so often guilty."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 180-86

"One of the prime literary sensations of the 1930's, Thomas Wolfe was far from being a typical figure of his time. If he was marvelously free from the characteristic faults of twentieth-century aesthetes, he was also apparently unable to learn anything from their technical achievement. His imitations of Joyce have

somewhat obscured this fact, but his imitation of Joyce is all on the surface; even his so-called basic theme of the Search for the Father was more or less superimposed; so far from being the inspiring force behind his work, it was first suggested to him, as an unifying device, by his editor, Maxwell Perkins. In the same way, his chants and soliloquies and prose poems were less an attempt to go along with contemporary experiments in the novel-form than the fruit of a romantic, sentimental exuberance, pouring itself out through the means most immediately available.

Wolfe loathed the glib, decadent, eclectic, rootless intellectualism of the metropolitan sophisticates whose slimy trail sprawls across so much contemporary art. The Cambridge variety he castigated in his picture of Professor Hatcher's playwriting circle in *Of Time and the River*, and the more corrupt New York growth was finally rejected in George Webber's break with Mrs. Jack and her world in *You Can't Go Home Again*.... The most significant development is the growth of the hero's social consciousness, away from his earlier extreme individualism, through his contacts with the terrors of the Great Depression in America and with emergent fascism abroad....

His roots were in Longfellow's America...his rhetorical eloquence stemmed directly from his father's 'spouting' of the poetry that men loved in the nineteenth century.... He made as spectacular a pageant of his bleeding heart as any early romantic. If his vogue proved nothing else, it at least proved that a novel innocent of 'form,' a welter of details and images far beyond anything the early Victorians produced, could still enthrall the modern reader--at least if it had some four-letter words in it, a reasonable amount of profanity and physical horror, and a frank, even brutal, treatment of certain aspects of experience that the Victorians had ignored. The enthusiasm of this admirers did not always do much credit to the penetrating intelligence upon which they prided themselves, but it did show, reassuringly, that they still had more heart in them than one might have supposed...

Wolfe was the most autobiographical of all American novelists. In some cases he apparently could not substantially alter even the names of the persons who had inspired his characters; in writing of Eugene Gant he sometimes calls him 'he' and sometimes 'I.' He defends himself on this point by urging that all fiction is autobiography; so, in a sense, it is; but the very terms of the defense employed show that he never understood the difference between playing variations upon your own experiences and using the creative imagination to project yourself into other lives.... Indeed, Wolfe lacked selective power almost altogether. 'I do too much of everything....' His hunger for life went to the length of madness. He was a glutton for experience. He wanted to read all the books, eat all the food, drink all the liquor, know all the people, and love all the women in the world....

He uses all the words in the dictionary, but the one word he really needs often gets lost in the shuffle.... He created in a demonic frenzy...Talk rambles on in bald obviousness, as if writer and characters alike were not only saying and writing, quite without reflection, the first thoughts that occurred to them but all the others as well.... Consequently, his books are full of irrelevant material. Bascom Pentland's story, to take but one example, has no real connection with the theme of *Of Time and the River*, yet it is narrated at length. Even the people in Pentland's office must be described minutely, though we are never to see them again. What Eugene observes from the window of a train passing through small towns is developed as elaborately as if Eugene himself were involved in it--to say nothing of the fact that much of it he would not have been able to see at all.

Coupled with Wolfe's intensity, this abundance makes for a tension or violence so extreme that it destroys the meaning of all experience, for when eating one's breakfast is as intense a business as watching one's father die, one soon finds it impossible to be moved by either event. The critic who remarks that Wolfe alone has preserved in fiction the normal American family life of his time sets one wondering uncomfortably where he may have grown up. The truth is that the jungle is a peaceful place compared to Wolfe's domestic interiors. Even when Ben gives his brother a watch, he must do it violently, and there is so much power in old Gant's dying that it seems more vigorous than anybody else's life.

Of course this intensity was Wolfe's great gift, or would have been if he had ever learned to control it, as Dickens did, instead of being carried away by it. Again and again he was betrayed into the kind of rant that always lies treacherously in wait for eloquent writers. Of the glories and terrors of being young he

babbled as naively as any young nineteenth-century romantic... At his worst, he makes Ella Wheeler Wilcox sound like a very restrained and sophisticated writer. Women nearly always bring out the pulp-writer in him: 'The girl's beauty that night was almost unbelievable.' But how many pulp-writers have ever been guilty of writing 'She was a virgin, crisp like celery'?... I think it is fair to say, Wolfe observed women less than he smelled them. George Webber approaches Esther like a cannibal, and his apostrophes to the 'Boston bitch' Ann reveal a poverty of language and imagination that would shame a stevedore. Esther begins her nerve-wracking scenes with him on a level of dignity but soon descends to billingsgate and at last finds a rant to match his own.

Much of this Wolfe himself would have argued with, for as time went on he tried increasingly to be more objective as well as more representative and less inclusive. His own modest, yet dignified, statement of his aims and evaluation of his progress in *The Story of a Novel* (Scribners, 1926), is very winning, even though not particularly reassuring. His determination to drop Eugene Gant for George Webber was... arbitrary... For while Wolfe now began calling Eugene George, he was still thinking about himself, and as soon as he reached the love affair, he began to use Wolfe's own experiences, first written up as Gant's, without even troubling to change the name he had given the woman in the moment of Gant's meeting with her. There is no question that the awakening of Wolfe's social consciousness, especially as it is reflected in *You Can't Go Home Again*, is all to his honor as a man, and it is generally agreed that he did achieve a measure of objectivity... though some believe that he achieved it at the cost of considerable sacrifice of vitality.... And we shall never know whether, if he had lived, he would have found means to remedy the perceived shortcomings of his art. As it is, he was an undoubtedly fascinating writer whose aspiration far exceeded his achievement."

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:  
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 409-10, 412-14

"Poetic fire, rhetoric and romantic abandon gave his first two novels, and to a somewhat lesser extent his last two, much of their appeal. For Wolfe was essentially a Romantic genius with all the vitality, all the undisciplined ardor, which the name implies. His prose at its best has a lyrical exaltation recalling that of Whitman, whom he obviously emulated; at its worst, it is so unconfined as to verge on the bombastic. The editor of his first two novels, Maxwell Perkins, had to battle hard and long to bring about revisions, had to prune and to reshape them. In time the author himself strove to achieve greater objectivity and more meaningful orderings, but there was still ample work for the editor of his last two novels and a collection of his short stories and chapters of an unfinished novel...to perform.

Faulkner rated Wolfe first among all his contemporaries because he 'tried hardest to say the most.' What Wolfe attempted was nothing less than a synthesis and a definition of America. His aim, recalling that of Walt Whitman (whom he admired), was to express America subjectively and emotionally through his own life-experience. Little concerned with political and social problems, he chiefly attempted to crowd into every moment the maximum of vital experience. More stirringly than any American since Whitman, he restated the ancient American dream: the right of every individual 'to live, to work, to be himself, to become whatever his manhood and his vision can combine to make him'."

Walter Blair  
*The Literature of the United States 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*  
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1255-56

"An orderly and established civilization is always wary of Titans. Literary critics especially are inclined to condemn sheer, wild, and uncontrolled force and to admire control and technical perfection; for instance, Willa Cather, restrained, competent, a perfectionist in style, has generally been received more favorably by academic critics than Wolfe, who seems to defy standards of good writing. Wolfe as an author of incredible energy, power, creativity, and ego; he exhibits all the outward marks of genius. He has been criticized with justice for his naivete, for his egocentricity, and especially for his blundering and inchoate style. It is true he shows certain technical and personal limitations, but he surmounts them well enough with the sheer force of his creativity to be assured of a place as one of the great authors of the twentieth century.

Everything Wolfe wrote was personal and subjective; he had little interest in environments other than his own. His novels are constructed entirely out of the persons and things he encountered during his own lifetime: his home town of Asheville, his family, the town characters of his boyhood, the University of North Carolina, Harvard, and New York City. But although Wolfe writes in great detail about all these things, he is really interested only in one thing: himself. If he was sure of any one fact it was that he himself was a genius. His two principal autobiographical heroes, Eugene Gant and George Webber, are marked men who are somehow different from the rest of humanity; they have monstrous bodies, they eat, drink, fight, weep, and make love on a gigantic scale, and they rage furiously at the banality and indifference which surround them. When Eugene Gant or George Webber receives a rejection slip (an accident which happens frequently to all authors) it is a tragedy of cosmic proportions; all other human calamity palls beside it. When George Webber deserts his mistress the world is shaken to its foundations, and the thunder and lightning continue for a hundred pages. Wolfe conceived his heroes on a gigantic scale which he thought only proper to the subject, but he lacked the insight to see his own emotions in the proper proportions.

The major theme of Wolfe's books is the 'cult of genius,' the genius, of course, being Wolfe himself. The genius as a type is marked from his birth as different from other children; he is moody, unpredictable, spasmodically violent, and unhappy. He is misunderstood by his fellow men, who persecute him because they unconsciously sense his superiority. He is forever doomed to loneliness; his stature isolates him like an elephant among monkeys. He loves mankind in the abstract, but shrinks from contact with it at close quarters; the bestiality, the materialism, and the shallowness of ordinary men fill him with horror. He creates his tremendous masterpieces, all the time wracked by torment, and then dies, murdered by a complacent and unfeeling society. The remarkable thing is that Wolfe actually lived this legend in many respects; if he errs it is chiefly in overestimating the enmity of ordinary mankind toward the genius.

If Wolfe's novels have any structure at all it is due to the efforts of his editors, Maxwell Perkins and later Edward C. Aswell. Wolfe himself was incapable of limiting the flow of words that steamed from his brain onto paper; it was a sort of compulsion. When the manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel* was first presented to the publisher it was twice as long as *War and Peace*, or about twelve times as long as the ordinary novel. His editors were forced to attack this material with scissors and pencil and somehow cut it down to publishable length, inserting transitional links where necessary. Wolfe evidently wished to record everything that had happened to him; he had to be persuaded to delete incidents which were intensely interesting to him but which had no organic connection to the novel.

In style Wolfe is inconsistent, awkward, and frequently inchoate. Some of his best passages are written in bare naturalistic narration. Other scenes are strongly influenced by Joyce; these are usually less successful, since Wolfe lacked Joyce's sensitivity for word values. The worst of his prose is to be found in the dithyrambic passages where he pulls out all the stops and loses himself in a tumult of adjectives; often these chapters degenerate into sheer nonsense. The same thing is true of his dialogue; it is best when it is simplest, and becomes mawkish as his characters grow passionate and lyrical. In his moments of greatest violence Wolfe's vocabulary fails him, and he retreats into such nebulosities as 'inexpressible,' 'indescribable,' 'unspeakable,' 'inconceivable,' 'transcendent,' 'inexorable,' and 'ineffable.'

He himself was aware of some of his faults; in "The Story of a Novel" he cites his addiction to adjectives, his Whitmanesque 'chants' which blunder on for pages in rhythmic but meaningless rhetoric, his long and tedious catalogues of things seen, of dimensions, textures, hues, architectural details, and countrysides, his fascination with the mere magnitude of experience, with 'Amount and Number,' his excessively explicit narrative, which could never leave anything to be inferred. He learned something from the critical reception of his first two novels, and became slightly more precise and objective in *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*. Yet the two later books lack the splendid energy of the Eugene Gant novels. In struggling for restraint Wolfe may have crippled the one irreplaceable gift he had: his titanic exuberance and creativity. His talent was essentially a Romantic one....

After the sheer force of the language itself, the quality that remains in the mind of Wolfe's reader is the color and vividness of its characterizations. It is perhaps not accurate to say that Wolfe has a 'skill in characterization'; his most convincing characters are drawn from life itself. Yet he is not without creative

imagination in this respect; when the Eugene Gant books were criticized for their subjectivity he went out of his way, in *The Web and the Rock*, to create believable characters out of whole cloth. The best of these is the athlete Nebraska Crane, a completely fictitious invention, who is nevertheless a striking and convincing character. It seems, therefore, that Wolfe's skill in characterization is a genuine one; it is merely that the people who interested him, and therefore the ones about whom he wanted to write, were those who had stimulated his imagination through intimate personal contact in real life. Luckily Wolfe came from a colorful family and encountered many fascinating people during his life. Yet the success of his novels is not due only to this; a lesser author might have made dull novels even out of such material....

Whatever his stature as a novelist, Wolfe is not a thinker. He has been hailed as a Whitmanesque champion of democracy, but...there is anti-Semitism in his work, as well as hostility to negroes, half-breeds, Southern Europeans, and non-Anglo-Saxons generally. He is capable of referring to 'the great Boob Public' in one paragraph and waxing eloquent over 'all the poor blind fumbling Creatures that inhabit this earth' in the next. He has likewise been typified as a regionalist. This label is somewhat more valid, since all his novels begin with the same characters living in the same narrow and circumscribed rural region of North Carolina. But Wolfe does not share the Cult of the Land of the Southern agrarians; he despises everything that is mundane and mean, the agricultural life included. He is a regionalist only because he wrote entirely about himself, and because he passed his formative years of his life in Asheville, North Carolina. He was as little at home there as he was later in New York or Paris, but he nevertheless felt a genuine affection for the region of his youth. Like most Titans, he is inconsistent; he belongs with Rabelais and Whitman rather than with Flaubert or Henry James. Wolfe is perhaps not the greatest novelist America has produced, but he is certainly among the most gigantic of America's literary personalities....

Although the tendency has been to view the Monk Webber novels [*The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*] merely as another version, or as a continuation, of the Eugene Gant sequence, there are essential differences. The background of the hero, in the first place, is not identical; for instance Monk is raised not by his mother but by an aunt, whose clan is described in some detail. More important, the literary approach of the second pair of novels is different; the Monk Webber material is more objective, and Wolfe makes a deliberate effort to stand farther off from his hero. In great measure he succeeds; Monk, although a less 'titanic' characters than Eugene, is better rounded and perhaps more believable.

His faults and the instances of his 'wrongness' are often frankly described; in his relations with Esther Jack, for example, he often seems wrong-headed and irrational and Mrs. Jack calm and reasonable. Yet this attempt at objectivity often weakens Wolfe's power; many passages in the Webber books are pedestrian, and the magnificent (although exasperating) ebullience of the Gant books is lacking. Muller convincingly argues in his volume on Wolfe that his death was perhaps not the great literary loss it seemed; he had written all he knew in *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, repeated himself less effectively in the second two novels, and would have found himself at a loss for something to express if he had gone on writing. Two novels of genius, however, are enough to demand of an author, and Wolfe's place of honor in American literature is assured."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 165-69, 173

"In general, Wolfe's novels have been received with great enthusiasm. Young readers continue to devour his books for their lyrical and expansive echoing of their own aspirations; and even the most hardened Jamesian must admit Wolfe's genius for satire. Hamilton Basso and others have stressed the way in which Wolfe refused to accept the Marxist disillusionment of the 1920's and 1930's and held to faith in America, as in his famous line in *You Can't Go Home Again*: 'I believe we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found,' and in his ecstatic delight in the grandeur of American scenery."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“Even in his lifetime he was a legend; friends, reviewers, and the public referred to him with Hollywood adjectives--stupendous, gigantic, immense.... *Look Homeward, Angel* has continued to be popular, more popular perhaps than any serious novel by a contemporary. Yet, except for Malcolm Cowley, leading literary critics, most of whom are academics, give it little recognition.... Readers over thirty find Thomas Wolfe difficult to appreciate--not to understand but to appreciate. He often writes very badly, even in *Look Homeward, Angel*, the most finished of his novels. As Faulkner said, Wolfe throws away style and coherence.... Although *Look Homeward, Angel* is his most unified novel, much of the unity is superficial, imposed gratuitously by the subject matter. A middle-class boy, growing up in a small American city, follows an almost predictable series of experiences.

Despite Wolfe's frequent assertions of connections, one feels very little sense of growth in the main character, of relations between characters, or of the impact of event upon character. Although the dramatized incidents are often utterly persuasive, even very moving, their effects upon the characters are not realized. Wolfe is a perfect example of Hemingway's famous statement: 'You'll lose it if you talk about it.' When Eugene argues with his mother, when he loses his girl friend, when his roommate dies--in each case Wolfe talks about the painful effects, and each time he loses much of the feeling created by the dramatized scene. The dialogue and the gestures are just right; the hero's thoughts and the author's comments are often wrong.

Failing so radically in the two crucial artistic requirements of style and coherence, surely Wolfe deserves our indifference. But he does not always fail in these matters, and he succeeds brilliantly in other ways. If we let his weaknesses obscure his strengths, the fault may lie, after all, within ourselves...To appreciate Wolfe older readers must be willing to recall their own youth sympathetically and to look again at the world with youthful eyes--eyes that, despite the distortions of sentimentality, may see in some ways more clearly than those of age.

Why do academic critics disapprove of Wolfe?... Although Wolfe deeply admired Conrad and Joyce, he wrote very old-fashioned novels, a melange of the picaresque--Fielding, Dickens, Twain--and of the spiritual autobiography--the English Romantics, Melville, Whitman. But if Wolfe's manner is old-fashioned, his matter belongs to our century... The youthful, romantic egoist is Wolfe's subject. The hero of *Look Homeward, Angel* has affinities, too, with Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby and with Faulkner's Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*. But there is an important difference. These other novelists keep their romantic heroes in check: Conrad and Fitzgerald through a subordinate, ironic narrator, Faulkner through the perspectives of other characters, other points of view. But Thomas Wolfe--Eugene Gant--simply expresses, expresses, expresses his Romantic emotions....

Like many Romantic tales...this is the story of a quest, a quest that can never be successfully completed. Just as Gatsby forever pursues the green light, so Eugene Gant's quest finds its symbol in the leaf, stone, and door. Eugene is full of 'desire and longing' for some vague perfection never precisely located. As a boy growing up in an isolated provincial town, Eugene often believes his 'happy land' lies outside the cup of the mountains, perhaps in the deep South, burning 'like Dark Helen in [his] blood,' or perhaps in some 'golden city.' Since the railroad train is his means of escape, train whistles have a special poignancy for him. More frequently, Eugene locates his happy land in the world of imagination, dreams, and artistic creation. He seems to place this in a wonderful cave, entered through an underground passage.

Again, Eugene's quest leads toward communication with another person, with his dearest brother, Ben, or with his beloved Laura James. Here, the door leads not to an underground faeryland but rather through the barrier separating personalities. Often, borrowing Wordsworth's notion of a prenatal paradise, Wolfe locates his goal in the past, either in some heave where he lived before birth or in the actual past of his childhood. Finally, at the very end of the novel, Eugene says that he has found his happy land 'in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul.' Self-knowledge, then, appears to be the key to the door. Or rather, the door seems to open upon the individual's inner, buried life. Although Wolfe asserts that the quest has ended, and although at times Eugene glimpses his goal, the prevailing mood of the hero is frustration. Note that the initial prose poem is less about the quiet than about loneliness and loss....

While Fitzgerald portrays Gatsby as a young man with an 'extraordinary gift for hope,' Eugene and Wolfe recognize that utter loneliness is man's lot and that ceaseless change, immutable Time, and Death inevitably frustrate longings for the happy land... Although the themes of loneliness and loss are enormously important to Wolfe, their mere expression does not contribute great significance to the novel. Aching so to be happy and knowing that he cannot, Eugene responds in an adolescent way: He feels sorry for himself. Moreover, the older he becomes the more naked is the self-pity and the less interesting the central character. When Wolfe writes badly, the subject is almost always Eugene. However, if Wolfe's sense of the inevitability of loss seriously tarnishes the central character of *Look Homeward, Angel*, it also inspires what is truly great in the novel....

Just as Wolfe's father carved stone monuments to the dead, so Wolfe memorializes his lost past: the earth at her most opulent, his home town in its variety, and his family in their frenetic activity. The Gant family is, of course, the Wolfe family, even to some of the names. In a court case involving real estate in Asheville, *Look Homeward, Angel* was admitted in testimony as a historical record... Whereas poetic accounts of Eugene's loneliness generally contain Wolfe's worst prose, the lyric evocations of the physical world often represent Wolfe's best. Even more than the earth and its plenty, Wolfe wanted to celebrate also the whole range of humanity in the town. Wherever Eugene goes through the streets of Altamont, he *sees* someone. When he glances up at the second story window of a dental building, a tiny breeze blows back the curtains, revealing Dr. H. M. Smathers....

Though Wolfe can be prolix, he brings to life an array of minor characters with a few striking details of speech, dress, or gesture and with a fine gift for comedy. There is the apparently endless series of predatory, middle-aged females who pass through Eliza's boardinghouse, 'Dixieland,' and have affairs with the Gant males, from W. O. in his sixties to Eugene in his middle teens. In his portraits of the two best doctors in town, Wolfe combines comedy with deep admiration.... Wolfe's greatest triumph in *Look Homeward, Angel* is, of course, the re-creation of his own family, the Gants. Although Eugene at some point hates every member of the family, Wolfe himself loves these creatures: 'to me...they were the greatest people I had ever known'...

Above all, there is their fantastic energy: They appear to live without need of sleep; they are all compulsive talkers, whether in the slow, deliberate utterances of Eliza, or the idiotic outbursts of Luke the engineering student: 'He was not an electrical engineer--he was electrical energy.' In Helen the 'hysteria of constant excitement' lurks. Like Eugene, they are all embarked on a quest though, except perhaps for old Gant, none of them seems quite aware of the fact. Helen instinctively gropes 'toward a center of life and purpose to which she [can] fasten her energy.' Ben, so ironic, disdainful, and independent, tries to get at life by reading the success sermons of millionaires in the *Post*.

Despite their consistent family resemblances, the Gants are all brilliantly defined, their differences made unmistakably sharp. The mother and father live vibrantly in their own right; at the same time, they unobtrusively symbolize the two central, conflicting forces in the novel: the human quest and its inevitable frustration. Wolfe draws W. O. Gant in wonderful broad strokes: the long frame, the large hands, the great blade of a nose, the cold, uneasy eyes, the faint, sly grin at the corners of the thin mouth. Gant, a Northerner in the South, married to a woman he does not understand, longing to carve an angel's head, but unable to, desiring to be a Far Wanderer but tied to his family and home. Gant is 'a stranger in a strange land.' Sporadically drunk and disorderly, he is nevertheless the artist striving to impose order on a changing world. Gant brings a kind of ritual to their wild family life. Combining Shakespearean rhetoric with Southern political oratory, he delivers to wife and children carefully rehearsed speeches, full of invective, at appointed hours of the day."

Thomas C. Moser  
"Thomas Wolfe: *Look Homeward, Angel*," *The American Novel*  
(Basic Books 1965) 206-15  
ed. Wallace Stegner

"Like Walt Whitman's poetry, Thomas Wolfe's fiction draws heavily on his ability to identify and exploit correlations between his sense of his own life and his sense of America. The story of his protagonists is characteristically a story of the search for a lost father, a lost home, a lost sense of certitude

and order.... Wolfe drew on his own experience and his own personality as directly and persistently as any other significant novelist of his time. There are clear risks and limitations in such a strategy, even for so shaggy a giant as Wolfe and for so prodigious a talent as he possessed: He is almost always criticized--even by his admirers--for his inflated descriptions, florid writing, lack of narrative detachment, and emotional excesses. But there were many times when his strategy led to powerful, creative achievement, as it did in *Look Homeward, Angel*.”

David Minter  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1394

Michael Hollister (2015)