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THOMAS WOLFE AND THE ART OF LEGEND

by

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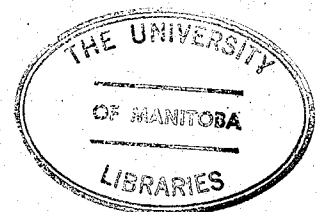
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#### PREFACE

Special thanks go to Dr. John J. Teunissen, who supervised the writing of this thesis, and whose graduate course in Myth Criticism and American Primitivism provided the background and stimulus for many of my ideas.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much has been made of Thomas Wolfe's famous statement, in The Story of a Novel, that "man's search to find a father" was "the central legend that I wished my book [Of Time and the River] to express."<sup>1</sup> In all the discussion of this theme, the important word "legend" has tended to become lost. But if this particular theme may be expressed as the "search to find a father", then it would appear that the vehicle or mode for that theme is "legend". And Wolfe, whether speaking about trains or about literary criticism, would no doubt agree that the vehicle is as important as the passenger.

In an early description of Of Time and the River, contained in a letter to Max Perkins, Wolfe states that the first part of the book will tell, not about the protagonist, but "about his country, the seed that produced him, etc." Furthermore, "I want to construct my story on the model of the old folk epic: 'Beowulf', for example." In the same letter he talks of creating "fables and legends", of his use of ancient myths, and of his belief that "man's greatness comes in knowing [that he is lost] and then making myths."<sup>2</sup>

References to this plan, or to the endless variations upon it, are sprinkled throughout Wolfe's letters and notebooks, and the scheme has left what might best be called a giant glacial scar upon the continent of the novelist's fictional output. And the ear that is attuned to that little word "legend" will hear it leaping out from Wolfe's pages in an astounding variety of contexts, connotations, and tones, but somehow always carrying the same elusively unified thrust of meanings and imports. Wolfe's use of the word always contains a kind of wild and epic force, held within the highly complex and filigreed structure of a literary mode or technique. It is the contention of this thesis that Wolfe had a coherent theory or idea of legend, as sophisticated and as significant as any concept of metaphor, narrative technique, or characterization.

Chapters Two and Three of the thesis deal with specific works by Wolfe. Chapter Two will use Look Homeward, Angel to show how Wolfe developed his theory of legend through a fictional protagonist, distinguishing meanwhile between the popular and literary concepts of legend. The final chapter will examine The Hills Beyond, not as Wolfe's most stunning achievement, but as a clearly-defined and fascinating exploration of legend both in theory and in fictional practice.

But since Wolfe made it his task to describe what it is that is distinctively American about America, it is part of the critic's job to define also what is distinctly American about Wolfe. So, Chapter One of the thesis will explore the world of Wolfe's thought (with the idea of legend as touchstone) against the background of the American literary tradition. The purpose of this chapter is manifold, as it attempts to draw together, under a common heading, several strains in American thought and literature, all of which are facets of "legend" as understood by Wolfe. Basically, Wolfe's idea of legend has its roots in the symbolic mode of nineteenth-century American literature, and this in turn, it is suggested, springs from American transcendentalism and idealism--not only as expounded by Emerson, but as embraced on a general and fundamental level by the American mind. The nature of the railroad is explored briefly as an example of a traditional and legendary symbol in American literature, and Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" is cited as representative of a widespread, mythic view that Americans have of their own development and character. Chapter One also shows that Wolfe's critics have dealt inadequately, if at all, with his uses of symbolism. The idea of "the enchanted city" is taken as characteristic of this aspect of his technique, suggesting at the same time Wolfe's belief that these symbolic concepts

have their origin in a state of pre-existence, or in the very structure of the American psyche. Legend, in fact, while not the same thing as symbol, may be thought of as a symbol that derives, and takes its force from, the national culture.

In all of these respects, Henry David Thoreau wrote a much better introduction to my thesis than I ever could. In his essay entitled "Walking",<sup>3</sup> Thoreau holds, like Wolfe, that "There is a truer account of [America] in mythology than in any history of America, so called, that I have seen" (p. 604). The essay, written some thirty years before Turner, contains a concise statement of the Turner thesis: "Ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness. I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving..." (p. 608). The notion of pre-existence is there, too (p. 599), and the title of the essay is also its central image, becoming Thoreau's Ideal or symbol of the American adventure: the individual walker consents "in his pettiest walk with the general movement of the race" (p. 608). Indeed, Wolfe would have little quarrel with the passage Thoreau quotes from the journals of Sir Francis Head: "The heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold is intenser, the moon looks larger, the stars are brighter, the thunder is louder, the lightning is vivider, the wind is stronger, the rain is heavier, the mountains are higher, the rivers longer, the forests bigger, the plains broader" (p. 611). Truly, America "is a fabulous country, the only fabulous country; it is the one place where miracles not only happen, but where they happen all the time."<sup>4</sup>

Besides dealing with Wolfe's own idiosyncratic use of the term "legend",

the thesis should also contribute towards filling the gap indicated by Richard Dorson's perhaps exaggerated, but nonetheless considerable, complaint that "We have as yet no studies demonstrating the influence of legendry on American literature."<sup>5</sup>



NOTES

1. The Story of a Novel (London: William Heinemann, 1936), p. 39.
2. Elizabeth Nowell, ed., Selected Letters of Thomas Wolfe (London: William Heinemann, 1958), pp. 131-34. (Hereafter, SL).
3. Brooks Atkinson, ed., Walden and Other Writings by Henry David Thoreau (Modern Library College ed.; New York: 1937), pp. 595-632.
4. Of Time and the River (New York: Scribner's, 1935), p. 153.
5. Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore and the Historian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 193.

CHAPTER I

THOMAS WOLFE: THE REACH AND THE GRASP

My concern in this study is with the grandest dream of one of America's most puzzling and eccentric novelists. And because the concern is the dream, we must consider not only its realization, but the plan or theory which gave rise to its fruition. We must evaluate process as well as product, and if the two are farther apart in Thomas Wolfe than in many another artist, then that is all the more reason to consider them individually. Paschal Reeves notes that "Wolfe's fiction, whatever its shortcomings may be, would have merited the approval of Browning's Andrea del Sarto in at least one particular: his reach exceeded his grasp."<sup>1</sup> One of the central themes of his work is that man envisions far more than he can ever grasp, and the value of a person's life is not measured by what he in fact achieves, but by what he hopes for--by how ardently he seeks "the unfound door" and "the great forgotten language." Wolfe, perhaps more than any other American novelist, must be evaluated in the light of his vision, not just in the light of that infamously sprawling mass of manuscript he left behind as his achievement.

This critical approach--tending toward the theoretical more than the practical--finds itself in good company, for William Faulkner said that "among his and my contemporaries, I rated Wolfe first because we had all failed but Wolfe had made the best failure because he had tried to say the most."<sup>2</sup> A lesser man, Henry Seidel Canby, has denigrated Wolfe for this same reason. Speaking of Look Homeward, Angel, he writes, "So much for the purpose of this novel. Its achievement is less. With all its richness of detail, its passion, its poetry, and its intense realism of contemporary life, there is an impotence in this book like the impotence Wolfe ascribes to his America."<sup>3</sup>

Certainly the record of Wolfe's books is one of search and journey, and not of discovery or arrival; and surely a novelist is entitled to match his style and content to his theme. As Pamela Hansford Johnson expresses it, "His work was left in chaos, he had seen the world as chaos,"<sup>4</sup> and as Wolfe himself told John Hall Wheelock, "You want to make a perfect thing, but I want to get the whole wilderness of the American continent into my work."<sup>5</sup> If this be "impotence", it is an impotence which stylistically reproduces the phenomenon about which Wolfe is writing. If Wolfe's novels are formless and sprawling (and finally not "novels" at all), it is because he is writing about a formless and sprawling nation, and it is precisely these qualities which he is trying to define.

That Wolfe viewed these traits of impossible conception and restless, formless wandering as being essentially American, may be seen in the following passage from the story "Dark In the Forest, Strange as Time":

The scene was one of richness, power and luxury, evoking as it did the feeling of travel in a crack European express, which is different from the feeling one has when he rides on an American train. In America, the train gives one a feeling of wild and lonely joy, a sense of the savage, unfenced, and illimitable wilderness of the country through which the train is rushing, a wordless and unutterable hope as one thinks of the enchanted city toward which he is speeding; the unknown and fabulous promise of the life he is to find there.

In Europe, the feeling of joy and pleasure is more actual, ever present. The luxurious trains, the rich furnishings, the deep maroons, dark blues, the fresh, well-groomed vivid colors of the cars, the good food and the sparkling, heady wine, and the worldly, wealthy, cosmopolitan look of the travellers--all of this fills one with a powerful sensual joy, a sense of expectancy about to be realized. In a few hours' time one goes from country to country, through centuries of history, a world of crowded culture and whole nations swarming with people, from one famous pleasure-city to another.

And, instead of the wild joy and nameless hope one feels as he looks out the window of an American train, one feels here (in Europe) an incredible joy of realization, an immediate sensual gratification, a feeling that there is

nothing on earth but wealth, power, luxury, and love, and that one can live and enjoy this life, in all the infinite varieties of pleasure, forever.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, Wolfe takes one of his most important symbols of the American character,<sup>7</sup> and shows that, while the concrete basis for the symbol might be present in another cultural milieu, its significance is quite different for the American than for the European.

In substantiation of this theory, it is well to remember that both the symbol of the train, and the particular significance attached to it, are part of the American literary tradition. Hawthorne's story "The Celestial Railroad", for example, is the New World version of Bunyan's famous allegory, transferring the City of Destruction and the Celestial City to America, and portraying a trainload of Americans en route to the latter destination. The story is satirical, of course, for while Bunyan's pilgrim Christian may have made progress, Hawthorne's point is that in the one country which in modern times has seemed the embodiment of progress, real progress is but an illusion. As Mr. Stick-to-the-right, who eschews the comforts of rail travel in favour of the surer locomotion of his own feet, says of the "celestial" railroad, "You may travel on it all your lifetime, were you to live thousands of years, and yet never get beyond the limits of Vanity Fair." Still, the first person protagonist of the Hawthorne story has the sense that he is actually going somewhere: he does not doubt that he will arrive at his destination, and even at the end he continues to marvel, naïvely, at the iron-shod wonder of modern technology that has made such a journey at once so comfortable and so expeditious.

The similarity between Hawthorne's "Celestial City" and Wolfe's "enchanted city" (as the image is expressed in the passage above, and

throughout Wolfe's work) will be immediately apparent. The great city to which Wolfe's protagonists are always journeying on the train, which they always see in the form of a vision, which is the end of all strife and the realisation of the greatest happiness, love, fame, etc. that men can imagine, and which is never there when they arrive--this is no less than the Holy City, the Celestial Jerusalem: but with an American twist.

A famous passage in Walden provides a similar perspective on this phenomenon of the American Dream. Chapter IV, entitled "Sounds", is given over largely to a discussion of the train which regularly passed close to Thoreau's retreat. In one place, Thoreau's phrase "a celestial train" echoes Hawthorne. The phrase is, as in Hawthorne, ironic, for Thoreau is at this point describing not the train itself, but its clouds of smoke, "going to heaven while the cars are going to Boston." By comparison with its transcendent train of vapour, "the petty train of cars which hugs the earth is but the barb of the spear", and it is the barb which does the damage.<sup>8</sup>

Analogously, the dreams of Wolfe's and Hawthorne's protagonists are directed toward the celestial city, while their bodies are headed for disappointment, if not damnation--whether it be in the form of Boston, New York, or some other airy urban fantasy. Hawthorne, in fact, puts his story into the very form of a dream, from which his protagonist awakes upon receiving a cold shower from the waters of Death. Wolfe, too, maintains artistic distance from his protagonist, for we never accompany Eugene or George on a train without the knowledge that the illusion of stepped-up life which travel induces, and the fantasy of the distant city, will vanish the moment the train-wheels stop--or at least as soon as the traveller's inertia (a not inconsiderable factor in Wolfe) is arrested. In this connection, Louis Rubin aptly remarks that Wolfe's forte is "the

poetry of motion."<sup>9</sup>

All three of these American writers demonstrate a fascinated enthusiasm for the railroad. This is inherent in the highly-charged language with which they describe it, but it is belied by their common theme. For all three (and this may even be argued in the case of Thoreau) consciously betray a naïveté in their protagonist or persona. It is important that this should be naïveté and not sinfulness (even in Hawthorne), for if there is one predominant image of America in her literature and history, it is that of the nation as an adolescent, which does not sin in stumbling, but merely stumbles into sin.

This blind, driven, and yet wholly innocent quality of the American character is often represented in the image of the rails of destiny.<sup>10</sup> Thoreau says that although he suspects the train will return the way it has come, "its orbit does not look like a returning curve." That is, like Hawthorne's train, it gives the illusion of transcendence, while in fact it is going, ultimately, nowhere. Wolfe's work is full of this ironic tension between curves or arcs, and straight lines. In "Death the Proud Brother", for instance, he describes the scene after a construction worker has fallen to his death from a tall building: "The street, the people, the tall thin buildings: these were all plane lines and angles. There were no curves in the street--the only thing that curved had been that one rich cry." Immediately preceding the man's fall and his arcing cry of doom, the writer describes a vision of his "mistress's jolly, delicate, and rosy face of noble beauty": "And the image of that single face seemed to give a tongue to joy, a certitude to all the power and happiness I felt, to resume into its small circle, as into the petals of a flower, all of the glory, radiance, and variousness of life."<sup>11</sup>

The "rosy" face, with its empetalled circularity, suggestive of the Mystic Rose, is, like the curve of the death-cry, an attempt to escape from the empty, harsh linearity of the American reality into the transcendent comfort of the cyclical. (The construction worker's final word, incidentally, is "Christ!"--"that word so seldom used for love and mercy.") The contrast here between the ideal and the real, between the transcendent and the immanent, parallels that which Wolfe makes in the passage on European and American trains quoted above.

The term "transcendent" has been used deliberately. For Wolfe was aware of the ironic tension inherent in the fact that while the dominant philosophy of nineteenth-century America was Transcendentalist, the country's practical stance has always been empirical. America hopes for the existence of the holy city at the end of its rail journey, but, like Hawthorne's protagonist in "The Celestial Railroad," it also expects to be able to return. It is only logical to assume that one can always go home again, and weekends and holidays may be reserved for jaunts to Jerusalem. The American railroad network does indeed form a circle despite the optical illusion of linearity it presents: but it is a circle which ends where it began (usually in the City of Destruction). The transcendent circle or cycle, on the other hand, begins where it ends. Or, if you will, does not end at all.

There is a danger here in becoming too involved with labels and terminology, and this is one trap that Wolfe, unlike some of his literary predecessors of the nineteenth-century, managed to avoid. Of course, he had read his Kant, Hegel, Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson, et al<sup>12</sup>--but he never seriously used any philosophical terminology. It may be worth recalling that Hawthorne, in the story we have been discussing, describes an encounter

with "a German by birth ... called Giant Trancendentalist", who "shouted after us, but in so strange a phraseology that we knew not what he meant, nor whether to be encouraged or affrighted." Wolfe, too, knew better than to discourage his readers by the use of heavy-handed terminology.

The purpose of these remarks, then, is not to label Wolfe as a frustrated "Transcendentalist", nor to explore the Scylla and Charybdis of Immanence and Transcendence, or Empiricism and Idealism. But there is a value in showing that Wolfe had certain things in common with American Transcendentalism, that he could not escape his heritage, and that he was conscious of it. For it is only in this light that Wolfe's theory of legend may properly be understood.

Charles Feidelson, in his valuable book on American symbolism, has demonstrated the relationship between Transcendentalism, as the nineteenth-century's characteristic cast of thought, and symbolism, as the basic mode of the century's literature. The repercussions of Transcendentalism were general, according to Feidelson, and "could not be escaped even by writers like Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe, who were hostile to its superficial features. As a method, the new philosophy extended beyond the provincial clique which was labeled 'transcendentalist' and which stated the theory most fully; for it arose as a function of American life and thought." Furthermore, Feidelson shows that "the new philosophy was thoroughly native, though not in a sense that cuts it off from contemporary thinking."<sup>13</sup>

There should be no need to re-harrow this already-broken ground, but a few words from Emerson may be enough to suggest the importance of the symbolic mode and the Transcendental vision to an understanding of Thomas Wolfe:



The Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant ... who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms.<sup>14</sup>

It is perhaps significant that Emerson uses the Platonic terminology-- "ideas" and "forms"--while Kant himself would have talked in terms of "categories" of thought and "modes" of perception. This may appear a meagre distinction, until we consider that Wolfe's "enchanted city" might very readily have found a place in Emerson's "class of ideas ... through which experience [is] acquired", where it would probably have been considered but an airy fantasy in Kant's much more sophisticated and abstract system of thought. This difference may stem merely from the fact that Emerson had a more poetic mind than Kant, or it may be that adolescent America has a penchant for pampering dreams. Whatever the case, Wolfe's fiction is full of what might be called "Transcendental forms", and these find their expression through the medium of symbol. Wolfe's "enchanted city" is just such a symbol, as are "the stone, the leaf, the unfound door", the web and the rock, the angel, the night, the river, the railroad itself, and many more.

Significantly, there is one large idea which, in one way or another, subsumes all these symbols, and it is one which several of Wolfe's critics have expounded: the notion of pre-existence.<sup>15</sup> This idea is central, and explicit, in Look Homeward, Angel, appearing first in the poetic epigraph on the opening page: "Remembering speechlessly we seek the forgotten language, the lost land-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door." Much has been made of the similarities between Wolfe and Proust,

but when Proust has the great artist Elstir say, "We are not provided with wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves",<sup>16</sup> this would seem to be directly contrary to the stance and direction which Wolfe's novels take. Wolfe's protagonists begin with an ideal--such as the city--which has no practical basis in their own, private experience. This ideal they carry perpetually with them, continually testing it against reality, usually finding it lacking, but nevertheless remaining stubbornly faithful to the original vision. It matters not how many disappointments, inhumanities, and banalities Eugene Gant or George Webber have to live through in New York: the shining city remains burning in their vision, with all its promise of glory, love, fame, wealth, and a hundred other Wolfean abstractions.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, these intuited symbols need not be "ideals" in the restricted sense of being desiderata. The symbols of the web and the rock, for example, or the ideas of South and North, are closer to being true Kantian "categories" of thought. Consider this remarkable passage from The Web and the Rock:

In every man there are two hemispheres of light and dark, two worlds discrete, two countries of his soul's adventure. And one of these is the dark land, the other half of his heart's home, the unvisited domain of his father's earth.

And this is the land he knows the best. It is the earth unvisited--and it is his, as nothing he has seen can ever be... It is the great world of his mind, his heart, his spirit, built there in his imagination, shaped by wonder and unclouded by the obscuring flaws of accident and actuality, the proud, unknown earth of the lost, the found, the neverhere, the ever-real America, unsullied, true, essential, built there in the brain, and shaped to glory by the proud and flaming vision of a child.<sup>18</sup>

The passage goes on to designate these two hemispheres by the terms "South" and "North", and an analysis of similar passages could reveal these to

correspond, respectively, to the "web" and the "rock". Although in the face of these pure, "essential", and "unsullied" categories, "actuality" is an "obscuring flaw", nevertheless there is a tendency for Wolfe and his protagonists to see the world in and through these terms, and to line up the objective things of experience under one heading or the other. It is often useless, however, for the reader to try and decide which things, places, and people belong in which category, for the categories remain inherent structures of the mind, mappings of the human psyche, and as such bear little relation to the external facts of reality or experience. They are not things perceived, but modes of perception. While in such a conceptual world the laws of thoughts are the laws of things, in Wolfe's novels things have a way of following their own laws, too, willy-nilly. And thus the conflict between idealism and naturalism<sup>19</sup> --a conflict that has found its way into the phrase "the iron horse",<sup>20</sup> and incidentally into the very marrow of American literature. Wolfe's grasp is not only less than his Transcendental reach: the two are locked in a basic conflict.

There need be no apology, then, for having quoted Emerson in an essay on Wolfe. In fact, one of Wolfe's most memorable characters bears a suspicious resemblance to the Concord philosopher himself. Eugene's Uncle Bascom, like Emerson, was educated at Harvard; studied theology and was ordained; wrote poetry; left the church because he could not accept its doctrine; read and admired Carlyle, Hegel, and Kant. In fact, Wolfe's original name for Bascom was "Uncle Emerson", and if this is not enough, we are told that Bascom had "a head that was high-browed, lean and lonely, a head that not only in its cast of thought but even in its physical contour, and in its profound and lonely earnestness, bore an astonishing resemblance to that of Emerson."<sup>21</sup> The fact that this physical resemblance

is confined to the head again suggests the conflict of idealism and naturalism: the sordid, confused details of Bascom's life, the frustration of his odd marriage, the pettiness of his career and the plainness of his office--all these are in direct contrast to his dignity of thought and his greatness of spirit. Wolfe's superb characters, his "great people", all have a reach that is infinitely greater than their grasp.

E.K. Brown, although he does not point out the similarities between Bascom and Emerson, does recognise Bascom as, "after Mr. Gant, the most demonic male figure in the novels", and a symbol of the lost past.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes, when Eugene "looked at the old man, he had a sense of union with the past."<sup>23</sup> Emerson, as the founder of the formal Transcendentalist school in America, really does represent America's past--and therefore an important aspect of the American character in the present century. In many ways, Wolfe's work is not "the moral history of the Young American"<sup>24</sup> so much as the moral history of Young America.

A recognition of the symbolic dimensions of Wolfe's characters is an important step, and one that inevitably leads to a much larger critical problem involving the whole of American literature. In his study of Faulkner, for example, William Van O'Connor contrasts the "new realism" of most of Faulkner's contemporaries (Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and John Dos Passos are his examples) with Faulkner's tendency towards the creation of "allegorical characters", the invention of "highly symbolic actions", and the writing of "poetic and richly rhetorical prose". He goes on to say: "Their kind of realism was an effort to reflect everyday experience or 'ordinary reality'. It was a period when many Americans were suspicious of rhetoric, elegance, style, even literary conventions."