

THOMAS WOLFE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Ernest Hemingway was pretty much on the mark when he wrote his editor and Thomas Wolfe's—Maxwell Perkins—"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." Wolfe's hometown, Asheville, figures prominently in his work, beginning with a play that came close to launching him as a dramatist, *Welcome to Our City*. Here, Asheville became Altamont, a city caught up in land speculation, boosterism, tourism and urban renewal. It is the Asheville of the early 1920s, but the Asheville most alive in Wolfe's work appears in *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), which both pleased and angered his fellow citizens. In short stories, novellas and novels following this work, Wolfe returned time and again to Asheville and environs for material. A mere listing of the most substantial of them reveals how important Wolfe's native soil was: *The Web of Earth*, which in an unsurpassable way captures his mother's narrative of events in her colorful life; the death of his father as narrated in *Of Time and the River*, a fictional dramatization rivaling the death of his brother Ben in *Look Homeward, Angel*; the days of boom and bust in Asheville's economy as presented in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1941); the graphically realistic narration of a battle story related to him by a kinsman, "Chickamauga," and the myth-making episodes involving, among others, Zebulon Vance, a native of western North Carolina who won fame as a Tar Heel governor and senator. In the guise of Zebulon Joyner, Vance and his fictional siblings move energetically and revealingly into *The Hills Beyond* (1941).

The roots of Wolfe's mother's side ran deep into Blue Ridge Mountain soil. Julia Elizabeth Westall came from English-Scots stock in Yancey County, North Carolina, not very distant from the loftiest peak in Eastern America, Mount Mitchell. Presbyterian in religion, determined to overcome the blight of the War Between

the States and Reconstruction, and ambitious to better its economic standing, many of her family settled in Asheville, the largest of Blue Ridge urban areas. One of her brothers, William, was to become a prosperous lumber dealer, who, for a time shared a building with William Oliver Wolfe, a Pennsylvania stonecutter and widower whom Julia was to marry, a somewhat surprising event for her and a shock to some of her friends because she looked upon Mr. Wolfe as an “old man,” who indeed was her senior by nine years. More than years separated them: he delighted in abundance, spouted poetry and favorite lines from plays, considered many of her mountain kin as cranks and “grill” and, at times, lifted far too many cups. Julia was parsimonious, cautious, superstitious, practical, teetotaling and determined to acquire wealth. Mismatched though they were in many ways, they were nonetheless fruitful, Julia giving birth to eight children, the last of whom was Thomas Clayton Wolfe, born October 3, 1900. Although dysfunctional in many respects, the family had a firm commitment to education, nowhere more evident than in the decision that resulted in their youngest son’s removal from Orange Street Elementary School to study under John and Margaret Roberts at North State Fitting School, a preparatory institution recently opened in Asheville.

Life-changing though his studies at North State Fitting School proved to be, an event much more far-reaching in its impact was Julia’s decision to leave the family home on Woodfin Street to buy and operate a boardinghouse nearby on Spruce Street. Older siblings remained with their father, but Julia insisted on taking her baby with her. When beds were filled with boarders, Tom shared his mother’s. She kept him in dresses and curled his hair long after other Asheville lads donned trousers and sported trimmed heads. Separated as he was from family and neighborhood friends, the lad naturally felt alienated, different, outcast. These feelings were eventually to be powerfully expressed in a moving personal essay entitled “God’s Lonely Man,” though Wolfe was to date his loneliness as beginning in his fifteenth year. Clearly, the roots are in his childhood years at the boardinghouse.

Tom’s studies at North State Fitting School brought him under the influence of its co-founder, Margaret Roberts, whose love of

literature struck responsive chords in him. So much value did he attach to her passionate involvement with literature, especially poetry, that he considered her “the mother of his spirit.” While it is true that her influence was profound, it would be critically naïve to discount the influence of his father’s oratorical flights upon Wolfe’s style, especially his early fiction. Words heap upon words, dramatic moments upon dramatic moments, effect upon effect, Renaissance richness over neo-classical restraint. The unabashed Anglophile schoolmarm who heavily red-penciled young Wolfe’s composition notebooks would never have understood, appreciated or condoned Wolfe’s Rabelaisian spirit, but W. O. Wolfe would have.

His preparatory studies behind him, Wolfe, bowing to his father’s wishes, enrolled at the University of North Carolina in the fall of 1916. Wolfe would have liked the University of Virginia or Princeton, but his father, visualizing his son as a lawyer with political office as a goal, insisted that it was the state university or no support. Although Wolfe’s autobiographical surrogate, Eugene Gant, is fictionally presented as a kind of misfit, Wolfe quickly won admiration for his humor, writing ability, and school spirit, and by his sophomore year became an active participant and leader in journalistic and literary activities, later serving as editor of the college newspaper, contributing to a literary magazine and signing up for a course in playwriting under Frederick H. Koch, whose advocacy of folk-drama influenced Wolfe’s first one-act play, *The Return of Buck Gavin*, in which Wolfe played the lead role. Other one-act plays were to follow and, in their wake, acceptance into George Pierce Baker’s widely respected course in playwriting at Harvard, English 47.

In Boston and Cambridge, Wolfe quickly recognized how provincial his upbringing in Asheville and his education in Chapel Hill had been, yet, for artistic purposes, he chose to treat subjects about life in the mountains of North Carolina and in Asheville. “The Mountains,” staged by the English 47 Workshop in 1921, revealed no promise in creative plotting, resting as it does on the cliché of a family feud, but gave hints of the novelist to be by exploring the hold mountains have on people who live in them. Far more prophetic of the writer he became was *Welcome to Our City*. Bursting with themes, crowded with characters, weighty in issues addressed, costly

in production and much too long for the usual fare in American theater, the play failed to find a production beyond the staging of it at Radcliffe College by the 47 Workshop. It might well have been staged in New York City if Wolfe had been willing to trim it. (A trimmed version had a successful run at an off-Broadway theater, the Mint, in 2000.) But Wolfe could not bring himself to wield scissors. He turned his attention to another play, variously called "The Heirs," "The Wasters" and "The House of Belmont" before ending up entitled "Mannerhouse." The play is important presently because Wolfe began his examination in it of loneliness and how it influences behavior. Of course, being a product of Wolfe's hand, it too has multiple themes, many characters, and repeated allusions to William Shakespeare's plays, references to playwrights, echoes of plays by Anton Chekov and Edmund Rostand and generous sprinklings of satire.

More by happenstance than by design, Wolfe earned enough credits during his studies at Harvard to receive an M. A. The degree opened opportunities for teaching and led to his taking a position as an English instructor in 1924 at the Washington Square College of New York University, where he taught intermittently until 1930. As he accepted appointment there, he still had dreams of becoming a successful dramatist. Life in New York City was expensive, more costly than an instructor's salary could bear. He had heard that writers could live more economically in Europe. Much as that thought prompted him, he was no doubt far more driven by wanderlust as his first semester at Washington Square College ended. In October, 1924, he made the first of his seven trips to Europe. During that first sojourn he kept a journal, tried his hand at short fiction and wrote another version of *Mannerhouse*, after someone in Paris stole his luggage, which contained a draft of the play he had worked on following his departure from Harvard.

A kind of Faustian hunger for experience and an eagerness to absorb as much of a rich culture as he could led to his second trip to Europe in 1925. He attended many plays, visited museums studiously, and haunted bookstalls. Rich and varied as his exposure to European culture was, he began to discover his own America by recalling scenes of his homeland, finding them more tangible than present European surroundings. His discovery had significant results, since, in time,

Wolfe would embark upon a mission to become both a bardic celebrator of his homeland and one of its most insightful social critics. This second voyage had another life-changing event: his meeting Aline Bernstein, a successful stage designer and artist, who, though Wolfe's senior by almost nineteen years, became a Helen to his Faust. She gave love, financial support, encouragement and, ultimately, became one of his finest drawn characters, but difference in age, cultural, social tastes and Wolfe's sense that Aline had become too possessive drove them apart.

During their tour of England in 1926, Aline encouraged Wolfe to turn from drama to fiction, the first step of which resulted in *The Autobiographical Outline for Look Homeward, Angel*, a virtual storehouse of experiences, narrative passages, notes on characters and musings later transmuted into fiction. When Aline returned to New York City, Wolfe remained behind to start his novel, first called "The Building of a Wall," a work that became "O Lost" and, following trimming and renaming, appeared as *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1929.

Instrumental in trimming close to 66,000 words from Wolfe's manuscript was Maxwell Perkins, a justly celebrated editor at Scribner's who chose to focus on the story of Eugene Gant, Wolfe's autobiographical surrogate. A widely read and knowledgeable editor, Perkins realized that Wolfe owed, by his own admission, much to James Joyce and that Wolfe wished to dramatize the struggles of a lad and young man whose dream was to become a writer. Not only trimming was being carried out, as Wolfe discovered when Perkins encouraged him to revise his scene of W. O. Gant's sale of an angel for the grave of a prostitute. The reworked extract from the novel, "An Angel on the Porch," became Wolfe's first published work for money.

The publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, retitled from "O Lost," enjoyed, generally, a favorable reception around the nation, but readers in Asheville were split in their views, some viewing it as an important contribution to American literature, others outraged by Wolfe's unflattering treatment of local residents. Asheville's mixed response kept Wolfe from returning to Asheville for seven years.

Meanwhile, he tried to move forward, attempting to prove that he was not merely an autobiographical novelist in his next projected work, "The River People," a novel he intended to base, loosely, on the family

and acquaintances of Olin Dows, the son of a wealthy Hudson River family. When that project faltered, he undertook to fictionalize the travel of a group of men from New York City to Asheville by rail. The work would take its title from a coach, K-19, on the rail line. Scribner's went so far as to announce the forthcoming publication of the novel, but Perkins convinced Wolfe to withdraw it when a long, essentially digressive episode entitled "The Man at the Wheel" effectively wrecked Wolfe's conceptional design. That something better than "K-19" should follow *Look Homeward, Angel* was Perkins' advice.

But what should that work be? Wolfe worried and wrestled with materials on hand even as he was busily, if confusedly, creating more. Most of the new stuff was autobiographical, a factor that eventually led Perkins to suggest that Wolfe return to Eugene Gant and his experiences following his enrollment at Harvard, his life in New York City as a teacher and his European travels. The result was *Of Time and the River* (1935), the writing and editing of which Wolfe narrates in *The Story of a Novel* (1936). *Of Time and the River* was the only Wolfe novel to make the best-seller list. His account of how it came into being provoked an infamous attack by critic Bernard De Voto, who blasted what he considered the Scribner's assembly-line method of producing novels.

Stung by De Voto's charge and chafing over Perkins' coolness toward his depiction of staff members at Scribner's in satiric material he was drafting to reveal the workings of a publishing house, Wolfe, pained to his very core to forsake his relationship with Perkins, left Scribner's and signed with Harper & Brothers, his new editor becoming Edward Aswell, like Wolfe, a southerner.

Before the break, however, Wolfe enjoyed his status as a literary lion in Berlin, where he found enthusiastic readers and party-loving admirers and discovered something dark, tyrannical and oppressive in Adolf Hitler's control of Germany. Wolfe's sense of the ills that German society was suffering under the Nazis bore fruit in one of his best stories, "I Have a Thing to Tell You." After the break and before he signed with Harper & Brothers, Wolfe came back to Asheville for the first time since *Look Homeward, Angel* appeared going not directly to his native birthplace but approaching it by way of Tennessee and Yancey County, North Carolina, where many members of his

mother's family still lived. One of them told him of the battle at Chickamauga in which he had fought. Wolfe soon transmuted his kinsman's tale into one of his most engaging pieces, "Chickamauga," which, alongside "The Web of Earth," an elaborate tale spun out by his mother, represents Wolfe's most accomplished handling of rural southern Appalachian culture.

Too lionized at home, Wolfe found himself unable to press forward with material he now wanted to treat, material that would eschew much of the romantic gesturing and posturing of what he now saw as "Eugene Gantiness," a kind of blend of a Byronic and Shelleyan figure crossed with James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus. He wanted to develop a new surrogate, one more truly and honestly autobiographical than posturing Eugene had been. He created a new character, George Webber, and gave him maternal ancestors steeped in the ways of Blue Ridge Mountain life. This character would leave the mountains, attend college, head for New York to establish himself as a writer, discover many things about himself and his country as a kind of Gulliver and make a pronouncement based on hard-won wisdom: "You Can't Go Home Again."

He settled to work on his new character and the circle of people his surrogate would encounter, laboring prodigiously to get something in the hands of Edward Aswell before heading to a section of the nation he had never seen, the Northwest. He went by way of Purdue University, where he gave an account of his life as a novelist, and traveled by rail to Portland, Oregon, there encountering two men with a mission, to see by motorcar the great parks of Western America in a matter of days. Wolfe found their goal appealing and set off with them.

The trip was exhausting, but Wolfe managed to keep a journal of the adventure, published posthumously as *A Western Journal*. Inveterate traveler that he was, he pushed himself to see Victoria, Canada, before relaxing with admirers in Seattle. On his return, he became seriously ill and sought treatment, the attending physician, Dr. E. C. Ruge, declaring that he had pneumonia. Further examination done in consultation with Dr. Charles Watts, who recommended X-rays of Wolfe's lungs, revealed a spot on the upper lobe of the right lung, perhaps an old tubercular lesion. Wolfe's brother, Fred, and sister, Mabel, rushed to his bedside. Treatment did not go well, but, in the

midst of his suffering, Wolfe did manage to write a letter to Perkins in which he recalled one of their happiest moments together. Mabel and Fred, dissatisfied with Wolfe's treatment, concluded that he should be examined by Dr. Walter Dandy of Johns Hopkins Hospital. Wolfe did survive the transcontinental trip, but Dandy could do nothing for him, having discovered Wolfe's brain covered with tubercles when he opened his skull to relieve his violent headaches. Wolfe died on September 15, 1938, his body being returned for burial in Riverside Cemetery in Asheville.

Out of the stacks and bundles of material left behind, Edward Aswell provided links and additional passages to publish *The Web and the Rock* (1939), *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), *The Hills Beyond* (1941) and *Mannerhouse* (1948). Among other works extracted or re-edited from that mass of materials by academic editors are *The Autobiographical Outline for Look Homeward, Angel*, *Good Child's River*, *The Lost Boy* and *The Party at Jack's*. A more ambitious re-editing, however, involves *Look Homeward, Angel*, which Arlyn and Matthew Brucoli jointly edited to present the novel as Wolfe submitted to Scribner's. *O Lost: A Story of the Buried Life* appeared in 2000.

Wolfe's national and international reputation does not position him in the forefront of American or world writers, although he is held in high esteem by authors who credit him with being the force that convinced them that a life in literature was possible. His standing as a regional writer is more assured, particularly when scholars assess his contributions to southern Appalachian literature. *The Web of Earth*, *The Lost Boy*, "Chickamauga," "Child by Tiger" and portions of *The Hills Beyond* give him firm footing in the literature of the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Wolfe in Santa Fe, August 1935