



Mainstream

THOMAS WOLFE'S AMERICA

Virginia Stevens

THE COMPANY

Thomas Wolfe

Dirk Struik

A MATHEMATICIAN'S
FAITH

Thomas McGrath

WINTER BIRTH

Henriette T. Rubinstein

JOHN OSBORNE'S PLAY

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THOMAS WOLFE'S AMERICA

VIRGINIA STEVENS

A NEW generation has grown up since Thomas Wolfe died in 1938 but with the exception of the few years immediately following his death there has been little comment on his work. The last two books of his vast saga were published posthumously and the criticism that appeared concerned these segments. Yet an accurate appraisal of Wolfe is not possible from a partial viewpoint: like Proust, he wrote one book which was a recreation of his past and a discovery of his America.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that they did not see his work whole, the critics who wrote about Wolfe during his lifetime all without exception recognized his stature. Comment ranged from Bernard De Voto's angry protest that genius was not enough, to those who like Carl Van Doren and Alfred Kazin put him in the great tradition of American literature with Melville, Whitman, Dreiser and Faulkner. In *The American Novel, 1789-1939*, Van Doren writes:

He was one of the most opulent of American novelists and the whole of America was his theme. There is body to his work as well as wings. His passion for fine words made him frequently verbose. He often strained his sentiments and ecstasies. Yet when his emotion was perfectly aroused 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.

And in *On Native Grounds*, classing him with Faulkner in his reaction against surface realism, his concern with the evil beneath the surface, Kazin states that he "brought a shattering intensity to studies of contemporary life. He enveloped and absorbed the life of his time as no social realist did. . . . He incorporated the best methods of American realism and passed beyond them. He is the richest in spirit of con-

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temporary novelists. He succeeded in making his 'I' equal to American

The criticisms of Wolfe emphasized his formlessness, his redundancy in his adolescence, and his direct use of autobiographical material. It was anathema to neat minds. He broke all their rules—as what work of genius has not? Wolfe was an experimenter, an innovator. He himself made the comment that most writers are surveyors or explorers . . .

our love of neat definitions in convenient forms, our fear of essential exploration may be the natural response of people who have to house themselves, wall themselves, give their lives some precise and formal definition. . . . Anyway, all of these things have seemed to me to be worth thinking of, and I know that we still have to fight to do our work the way we want to do it—not only against the accepted varieties of surveyorship but against even deadlier forms, deadlier because they set up as friends of exploration when they are really betrayers and enemies. . . .

Actually there is form to Wolfe's work, the living form of reality. For his deepest concern was to capture the truth on as many levels as possible. For example, the opening chapter of the train in *Of Time and the River* begins with the boy's stream of consciousness, his exultant sense of freedom with its mixture of homesickness, which slowly grows into an awareness of the train itself, the symbol, whirling through the darkness, through all the little towns, his own identification with the people seen so swiftly in passing, never to be seen again, and this a symbol too of man's own brevity in relation to the earth. The inner monologue continues as the boy seeks the smoker, sits down among a group of prominent politicians and businessmen and listens to their talk which he tries to change the content of his inner reverie with a satiric comment on the point of baseball and politics.

Wolfe was never adolescent in his perception of human nature or in his outlook that is young. Wolfe is the voice of the average American giant size; he is "the Paul Bunyan of his mind and heart," as John Daniels has called him. Moreover, Wolfe's struggle toward maturity is one of the most important aspects of his saga.

To call the massive chronicle pure autobiography is to distort the creative process: the essence was true but the detail was fictionalized, literal fact heightened, re-emphasized, shaped to his purpose. An interesting example is an incident related to his first book, *Look Homeward, Angel*. In the novel the stonecutter Gant had sold the angel to the "madam" as a monument to one of her "girls." After the book's publication the Asheville paper sent a photographer out to the cemetery to photograph it; the paper was sued by the family of the worthy

to whom the angel had been in reality a monument. The incident in the book is pure fiction *but the character of Gant is not*. William Oliver Wolfe, in life a stonecutter, would have been capable of exactly this incident. Wolfe used the events of his life and the life of his family as Melville used the experiences of his sailing days: relieved of the necessity for inventing background he spent his effort on the inner and outer truth of character, the meaning of situation. This was always his passionate concern.

He wrote to Maxwell Perkins at Scribners: "I shall wreak out my vision of this life, this way, this world and this America to the top of my bent, to the height of my ability but with an unswerving devotion, integrity and purity of purpose that shall not be menaced, altered or weakened by anyone." *Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, *The Web and the Rock*, and *You Can't Home Again* are the four sections of one epic book in which this vision is chronicled. The document is unique in American literature, for Wolfe loved this country with a determination to encompass it which has only been equalled by Walt Whitman. His relationship to it—as this changed from the intensely romantic passion of his youthful work to a realistic faith in its working people, parallels the gigantic struggle which he waged until his death to come to terms with his material.

Until the last few years of his life he was obsessed to recreate wholly on all the levels of experience not only the moments of his own life but the life of America that seemed significant to him.

"For what is the present after all," Whitman wrote, "but a growth out of the past."

"Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years," the young Wolfe wrote. "Each of us is all the sum he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas." The statement, true in the abstract, impossible in the concrete, drove him almost to madness.

"A heritage is not transmitted; it must be conquered," F. O. Matthiessen wrote in his introduction to *American Renaissance*. No American writer has, to my knowledge, made such an heroic struggle to conquer his heritage as Wolfe has done. The unity which binds together his work is the unity of this struggle. He used the material of his experience and background chronicle after chronicle, heightening, fictionalizing but keeping the essence of his own true experience. From a small American town on the edge of the south, the epic shuttles back and forth across the continent and to Europe, penetrating in the most sensuous

and vivid terms the sprawling, seeking, restless life of Americans. The first book, *Look Homeward, Angel*, defines his roots:

A destiny that leads the English to the Dutch is strange enough but one that leads from Epsom into Pennsylvania and thence into the hills that shut in Altamont over the proud coral cry of the cock, and the soft tone smile of an angel, is touched by the dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world.

The father of the book's protagonist, Oliver Gant, was the son of an improvident Englishman who came to Pennsylvania in 1837 and married a widow with a tidy farm who was charmed by his traveling air and grandiose speech. (He could recite *Hamlet* in the manner of Edmund Kean. "Everyone said he should have been an actor.") Oliver, as a small boy watched the straggling southern troops as they trudged by his mother's farm after the defeat at Gettysburg. Early he left home to wander; he became an apprentice to a stonemason in Baltimore. Here he stayed until he had learned his trade, going to the theater constantly, listening to Booth and Salvini, memorizing the "noble rant" and finally wandering South again: "a strange wild man of six feet five with cold uneasy eyes, a great blade of nose, and a rolling tide of rhetoric, a preposterous invective, as formalized as classical epithet, which he used seriously, but with a faint uneasy grin around the corners of his thin . . . mouth."

He married a spinster with a little money and an unshakeable will to matrimony. He drank away the money and the woman died. His own health was shaken by his drinking. He had a cough. He drifted on up into the mountains seeking health, to Asheville, the Altamont of this first novel.

He rented a shack, acquired a small stock of marbles and set up a business as a cutter of funeral stones. Soon Oliver met Eliza, the mother of Wolfe, the Eugene Gant of this book: "a trim neat woman . . . with white skin, black-brown eyes with their quaint child's stare and her black hair drawn back tightly from her high white forehead. She had a curious trick of pursing her lips reflectively before she spoke; she liked to take her time and come to the point after interminable divagations down all the lane-end of memory and overtone, feasting upon the golden pageant of all she had ever said, done, felt, thought, seen, or replied with egocentric delight." Eliza came from mountain stock, from an energetic superstitious clan; morbid people claiming the gift of prophecy, fascinated by the more livid aspects of life, given to detailing catastrophic phenomenal illness, portending doom.

Ironically, the restless wild Oliver wanted a home, whereas the woman who had rarely been out of her native hills had not the faintest notion of tranquility. The house Oliver Gant built for her with such pride was only a piece of property to her. Even Gant's wild energy was at last devoured by Eliza's acquisitive instinct. "The paradox: the deep restlessness was in the man with the love of order who wove into a pattern even his daily tirades of abuse, and the chaos was in the practical woman, the daily person." She collected string and old bottles, could not get herself to throw anything away. Early she began, dissatisfied with Gant's modest business, to acquire property and her trading grew famous in the town.

Gant took his fury at her acquisitiveness out in drink. He would come roaring home, cursing and howling at her until the neighborhood held its breath. These two warred through Eugene-Tom's childhood and the two drives "of wandering . . . and the earth" were the warring elements in his own soul from which one of his dominant themes sprang. He was the last of eleven children, five of whom are vividly recreated in *Look Homeward, Angel*. His childhood was spent shuttling between the boarding house which his mother insisted on running and the home which Oliver would not leave.

THE status of the family in the town was singular and had much to do with the sense of separation, of loneliness, that haunted all Wolfe's life. Oliver was respected for his craftsmanship, looked askance at for his gargantuan drinking bouts. Eliza fitted no pattern; she was far afield of and alien to the small town woman; masculine in her acquisitive drive and in the concentration she applied to it. She goaded the boys on to earn their own living as quickly as possible. ("Their poverty, the threat of the poorhouse, the lurid references to the pauper's grave, belonged to the insensate mythology of hoarding. . . .") Ten-year-old Eugene drove himself to equal his brother Luke's high voltage selling of the *Saturday Evening Post* while Ben, seven years his senior, worried about him, scolded him into some semblance of cleanliness, bought him ties and shirts and paid for haircuts. Eliza was blind to the facts the young Ben saw with agony:

What are you trying to do to your kid, mama. Do you want to make a tramp of him?

Why I don't know what you're talking about, boy. It's no disgrace for a boy to do a little honest work.

Oh, my God, Mama. You and the old man have never given a damn what we've done so long as you thought you might save a nickel by

it. . . . There are people in this town without a fifth of what we've got who get twice as much out of it. The rest of us have never had anything, but I don't want to see the kid made into a little tramp.

At seventeen, Ben was working the night-shift at the paper. Yet Eliza in property, rents, money in the bank was worth about \$100,000. She used Eugene constantly for errands about the boarding house—"Dixieland." When she went south on a vacation she took him with her and sent him into the streets of strange cities with "Dixieland" cards to drum up trade for her. His mother was mountain south, full of superstitions, an ignorant dislike of the Negroes, suspicion of the "Yankee" who seemed foreign and remote, and with a fascinated pride and total recall where family was concerned. On vacation it was always south she went. Of the South, Wolfe wrote in this first book:

His feeling for the South was not so much historic as it was of the core and desire of dark romanticism—that unlimited and inexplicable drunkenness, the magnetism of some men's blood that takes them into the heart of the heat and beyond that, into the polar and emerald cold of the South as swiftly as it took the heart of the incomparable romanticist who wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, beyond which there is nothing. And this desire of his was unquestionably enhanced by all he had read and visioned, by the romantic halo that his school history cast over the section, by the whole fantastic distortion of that period where people were said to live in mansions and slavery was a benevolent institution, conducted to a constant banjo-strumming, the strewn largesses of the colonel and the shuffle-dance of his happy dependents, where all women were pure, gentle, and beautiful, all men chivalrous and brave, and the Rebel hordes a company of swagger, death-mocking cavaliers. Years later, when he could no longer think of the barren spiritual wilderness, the hostile and murderous intrenchment against all new life—when their cheap mythology, their legend of the charm of their manner, the aristocratic culture of their lives, the quaint sweetness of the drawl made him writhe—when he could think of no return to their life . . . so great was his fear of the legend, his fear of their antagonism, that he still pretended the most fanatic devotion to them, excusing his Northern residence on grounds of necessity rather than desire. Finally, it occurred to him that these people had given him nothing, that he owed them nothing and he determined that he would say so . . . and he did.

Eugene, having come to the attention of the grammar school principal for an essay he wrote, was invited to join the private boy's school which the latter was starting and Eliza was flattered into sending him. In this way he came under the influence of Margaret Leonard, the prin-

principal's wife, who saved him from the chaos and waste that had been the lot of the rest of Eliza's brood. "The way through the passage to India," Wolfe wrote, "would now be charted for him." Margaret taught him poetry, a sense of the essential: "What she had to offer was a *feeling* that was profoundly right."

The child was acutely sensitive to all the hypocrisies and snobishness of the town which had been created by pioneer mountain farmers and which prided itself on its democracy. But it had begun to grow, to become a resort for the wealthy. In reality, money and social position were the criteria here as in any other American town. Its difference where the South was concerned lay in its lack of the slave-owning plantation tradition. The boarding house child could become familiar with all its aspects, from the Negro district of his paper route, the shabby and frequently sordid boarding house of his mother ("She defended blindly whatever brought her money."), to the private school and the Presbyterian Church. He became even as a child absorbed in the process of unmasking the difference between what seems and what is. "He found himself loathing that which bore the stamp of virtue . . . hurled against the torturing paradox of the ungenerous-generous, the selfish-unselfish, the noble-base, unable to define those deep springs of the human spirit that seek public gratification by virtuous pretension."

Loving the hour of midnight and getting up before dawn to deliver his papers in the heart of the colored district, at fifteen he managed to still be an exceptional student who knew, under Margaret's tutelage, almost every major lyric in the language. Of Shakespeare he loved Lear. For him it was

as vast as the elemental winds that howled down across the hills: he chanted it in the black hours of his labor, into the dark and the wind. . . . It was a call to the unclassed; it was a cry for rebel angels, and for all the men who are too tall.

Already Wolfe was a six foot five youngster in a five foot eight world. Already he knew all the stupidities of this predicament and it added greatly to the struggle he had to wage before he could accept himself.

In Eliza's helter-skelter boarding house the family's meals were taken on the wing. There was little to develop normal, strong bodies in her hectic menage. Knowledge of sex came early to the boys educated by a conglomerate stream of female boarders. It was an astonishing fact that Margaret Leonard could persuade Eliza to send Eugene to the State University. The family never let him forget it.

"You take every damn cent you can get out of them," Ben tells him savagely. . . . "I want to see you get all that's coming to you. Get all you can. You never had a chance to hold up your head in your own home town, so make the most of your chances when you get away."

That summer Eugene fell in love with all the ardor and illusion of a sixteen-year-old poet. She was twenty-one. He wanted her to wait for him. This moderately sensitive young boarder at his mother's house, momentarily hypnotized by his intensity, replied, "I will wait for you forever." When his mother, with a fierce unconscious jealousy, kept interrupting their tete-a-tetes Eugene finally cried, "Mama, what do you want? Are you going to strangle and drown us all? Do you want more string? Do you want more bottles?" She answered angrily that if she hadn't accumulated a little they wouldn't have a roof to call their own. "Good God, Mama," he yelled, "we haven't a bed to call our own! We haven't a quilt that might not be taken from us to warm the mob that rocks upon this porch."

In the summer of 1918 Eugene worked on the docks at Norfolk, wildly eager to be part of the war excitement and to break away from Eliza, to be independent, but without the faintest notion how to take care of himself; spending money on spree, then suffering near starvation, unable to tell anyone of his plight. A checker who found him unconscious one day for lack of food literally saved his life. He was also acutely sensitive to his height, his small young face atop his huge body. He bought love that summer for three dollars and clothed it with his own fable. He loaded TNT into convoy ships; he earned \$130. But his war ended before he could enlist.

The following October Ben died of pneumonia. If the book has a wild inchoate quality in the Norfolk days tending to self-pity, intense egocentric, it rises to one of the finest passages of Wolfe's work in the death of Ben. There is a wholeness in the rendering, a deep true feeling. Here are the elements of Wolfe at his best: universal significance out of the homely sordid aspect of family tragedy; out of the mixture of bungling stupidities, cruelties, good intentions, unawareness, animal love, the tragic compassion for all humanity.

"Now I tell you, son," said Eliza, with a white tremulous smile, "when you go in there to see him, don't make out as if you knew he was sick. If I were you, I'd make a big joke of it all. I'd laugh just as big as you please and say, 'See here, I thought I was coming to see a sick man. Why, pshaw! (I'd say) there's nothing wrong with you. Half of it's only imagination.'"

He saw the terror in her heart.

"Look who's come to see you," Helen said too heartedly to Ben, "It's Highpockets."

When they think that Ben is breathing his last the family gathers at the bedside: old Gant, dying himself of cancer; Helen, quieting her hysteria, joined with her hated mother in the crisis; Luke, Eugene. But even here their unity is only for a moment. Gant begins a moan of self-pity incredible under the circumstances: "I don't know where the money's coming from." Helen yells at Eliza, "You've done this to him. If you hadn't pinched every penny, he'd never have been like this. Yes and Ben would be here too."

Then over the ugly dawn of their dissension, over the rasp and snarl of their nerves, they heard the low mutter of Ben's expiring breath. The light had been re-shaded: he lay, like his own shadow, in all his fierce, gray lonely beauty. . . . The dark rich miracle of his life surged over them, its enormous loneliness. They grew quiet and calm, they plunged below all the splintered wreckage of their lives, they drew together in a superb communion of love and valiance, beyond horror and confusion, beyond death.

Eliza sits at last by his side, holding his hand. "Eugene saw that she was watching her own death, that the unloosening grip of her hand on Ben's was an act of union with her own flesh, that, for her, Ben was not dying—but that a part of her life, her blood, her body was dying."

Then suddenly . . . as if his resurrection and rebirth had come upon him, Ben drew upon the air in a long and powerful respiration; his gray eyes opened. Filled with a terrible vision, all life in the one moment, he seemed to rise forward bodilessly from his pillows without support—a flame, a light, a glory—and casting the fierce sword of his glance with utter and final comprehension upon the room haunted with its gray pageantry of cheap loves and dull consciences and on all those uncertain mummers of waste and confusion fading now from the bright window of his eyes, he passed instantly, scornful and unafraid, as he had lived, into the shades of death.

We can believe in the nothingness, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death—but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben? Like Apollo, who did his penance to the high god in the sad house of King Admetus, he came, a god with broken feet, into the gray hovel of this world. And he lived here a stranger. . . .

O Artemidorus, farewell!

AFTER Ben's death, Eugene has to get away from Eliza—from "Dixie-land"—from the suffocating, magnetic pull of family. He takes his inheritance to go North despite the family's clamor. And so he starts the long voyage that is chronicled in the next three books, the voyage of himself.

Of Time and the River, the second large segment of this epic, is "the legend of man's hunger in his youth," the next five years in the life of this same proud, passionately-seeking, acutely sensitive young man. He is twenty years old when he starts his journey, emotionally immature but precociously perceptive to people. On the train going North, he listens as the politicians from Altamont hash over the state of the nation in the club car.

"The people want to forget about the war. [The time is 1920.] They want to forget all their sacrifices and suffering," said the little man who had sacrificed and suffered nothing. "They sense a boom on the way; they are all buying real estate. From now on you're going to see a period of rising prices and high wages, increased production, a boom . . . such as you never saw before and never hoped to see."

"And where is it going to stop?"

"Stop! It's not going to stop! Not during our lifetime, anyway. This thing is different. We have reached a stage in our development that no other country has ever known—a stage that is beyond booms, depressions, good times, hard times—anything. . . ."

But Mr. Flood the opulent publisher of the Altamont paper put it differently: "We're tired of hearin' bunk that doesn't pay an' we want to hear some bunk that does—an' we're goin' to vote for the crook that gives it to us. . . ."

Eugene joins "Professor Hatcher's" famous drama workshop at Harvard—and suffers slow disillusion among its devotees: he writes about the members of the workshop:

They belonged to that huge tribe of all

the damned and lost who feel that everything is going to be all right with them if they can only take a trip, or learn a rule, or meet a person. . . . Few of the plays had any intrinsic reality, for most of these people were lacking in the first, the last, the foremost quality of the artist, without which he is lost: the ability to get out of his own life the power to live and work by, to derive from his own experience—as a fruit of all his seeing, feeling, living, joy and . . . anguish—the palpable and living substance of his art.

Eugene-Wolfe's own father was dying and he transferred to P

essor Hatcher (George Pierce Baker) all the need of a young uncertain artist for an older, wiser, more experienced adviser and friend—in short, father figure. Throwing himself too completely and trustfully upon the professor's discernment, his disillusionment here too is inevitable. The professor was strong in his praise of Eugene's talent but totally lacking when it came to any practical help. Apparently he could only reiterate that the young artist should devote himself completely to writing. This attitude which caused the break in their close association is more clearly brought out in Wolfe's letters to him than in the novel:

If anyone in the future should manifest enough interest in my life to ask you what I am doing, I hope you will not lift your shoulders and with a twisted little smile, impart the information that I am selling pickles, or laundry soap, or real-estate as the case may be, nor that you will add: "I did my best, but it was no use. He would see things that way." Rather I hope you will say something like this: "Tom Wolfe who was a poet and a dramatist, has begun to face life boldly and with courage. He was faced with the necessity of earning his own living, and he is doing well, representing the famous Katzenjammer Pickle People. Everybody had free and copious advice for Tom Wolfe except advice on the very simple matter of how he was to sustain the breath of life in his body. As we failed there, where the Katzenjammer Pickle Company has so splendidly succeeded, Tom Wolfe has quite properly rejected all our former exhortations as pretentious and windy bunkum. . . . What I take it you were after was a thoroughly respectable, thoroughly balanced, thoroughly canny person, with artistic proclivities, who, upon demand would turn on the spirit and let the energy run out and express itself in three acts and a prologue. Drop a penny in the slot and I would turn out a golden sunset; for a five or ten cent piece, romantic love, or a tragedy of the soil; for a quarter (my top price) a bit of lashing satire.

. . . Life does not come to me evenly or gently. Do not deceive yourself. You can teach me no balance, equipoise, or moderation. Nothing will be gained by putting a fence around me: I will but burst forth the more intemperately at the end. My life is a rude, rash gamble. . . . I shall see presently if something useful may not be done with it. My affections were all too strong, my aversions too fierce . . . odi et amo—tells the whole of it.

IN A similar mood of fierce rebellion and rejection Eugene of the novel comes to New York to take a position as instructor of English at the university—this after an interlude at home, an interlude during which he received the rejection of his play by the Theatre Guild. In a frenzy of despair and desire to escape his family's skepticism he starts

south to see his older sister and falls in with some young men from Altamont who are drinking heavily. He joins them and the four are arrested for drunken driving. He spends a few hours in the jail of a small Georgia town.

It was the first time in his life that he had ever been arrested and locked up, and for the first time now, he felt and understood the meaning of an immense and brutal authority in life, which he had never seen before, but to which he had always believed himself to be immune. Until that day, he had had all the pride and arrogance a young man knows. Since childhood no one had ever compelled him to do anything by force, and although he had seen the million evidences of force, privilege, and compulsion applied to the lives of people around him, so that like every other native of the land in which he lived, he had in his heart no belief in law whatever, and knew that legal justice, where it was achieved, was achieved by fortuitous accident rather than by intent; he had believed, as every young man believes, that his own life and body were fiercely immune to every indignity of force and compulsion.

Now this feeling was gone forever. And having lost it irrecoverably, he had gained something of more value. For now, he was conscious, even at the moment he came out of the cell, of a more earthly, common, and familiar union with the lives of other men than he had ever known. . . . it seemed to him—that he must escape not out of life but into it. Looking through walls he had never seen before.

Nevertheless it is as a small town southerner himself, insecure, full of prejudices, that he takes up his teaching life at the university.* He is hostile to the strange and alien, bitterly resentful and suspicious of the more successful, yet keenly discerning, with a passionate desire to express the truth of experience, an honest eye. If the reader is repelled by his use of such terms as man-swarms, man-cipher to express his impression of the masses of people on the New York streets, he nevertheless includes himself as merely one of the ciphers too. And as he describes in terms of the outsider, the Gentile, his predominantly Jewish students, he embodi-

* Wolfe's prejudiced reaction to his Jewish students in his first teaching days at New York is recreated in *Of Time and The River*, has been responsible for a great deal of resentment and misunderstanding which has distorted an accurate evaluation of him. The truth is simply that Wolfe was a product of a small town environment with all its ignorance and prejudice. This was exacerbated by his own uncertainty, "the fear of failure and disgrace." However, Wolfe was an artist of unusual perception and compassion and even the worst tirades in this book are broken by humor, self-awareness of his own subjective state. The change in attitudes toward Jews and the self-confidence gained by Eugene's relationship to Abe Jones: see pp. 441-442, 454-468; 491-497. He was never a snob; he was romantic, subjective, super-sensitive, provincial. His struggle toward maturity was a struggle against these characteristics. His opinion in his analysis of his students as a group in this book is highly subjective, where the picture of Abe and Abe's family is specific, vivid, accurate. The first is concerned with fantasy, the second with reality.

Abe Jones in an unforgettable portrait as a young man whom he comes thoroughly to admire and cherish. The same eye penetrates the snobbish emptiness of the lives of Harvard classmates whom he visits and he identifies himself not with them but with the man-swarm, the ciphers.

When the mother of his friend, Joel Pierce, with friendly condescension asks him what he does with his leisure in New York, he mumbles awkwardly that he walks. When she asks him where, he tells her on the East Side mostly, although he goes everywhere. She thinks it sounds very dreary, sordid, and asks, "What kind of people do you find in those places?"

"Kind? He stared at her foolishly with gaping jaw . . . and could not find a word to say to her. Kind? Great God, the kind of all the earth, the kind of the whole world, the unnumbered, nameless, swarming and illimitable kind that make all living!"

LIKE all young artists from Stendhal and Balzac to Dickens and Melville, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, he dreamed of wealth, beauty, love, success among glamorous people and it is hard for him to face his painful disillusionment but face it he does and much sooner than many of them. After this episode he reflects that "he must strike water from the common stone of life." He recognizes that "his own America lay in the grimy jungles of the cities, half-mad with hunger in the barren land, befouled and smutted with the rust and grime of its vast factories, warped and scarred and twisted, stunned, bewildered by the huge multitude of its errors and blind gropings, yet still fierce with life."

His play rejected again, the school term being over, he goes to Europe and here, out of intense homesickness and loneliness, he begins to write about America. Here he meets the closest friend of his Harvard days, Starwick, the aesthete, who to the romantic Eugene has symbolized the artist. Starwick is now traveling about Europe as the guest of two wealthy New England women, both of whom are in love with him. This episode holds one of the great disillusionments of the artist's adolescence for he is forced to see his ideal friend in the devastating light of reality. Starwick is a homosexual, two-thirds bogus, without a spark of belief in his own talent, hating his inversion, unable to establish a faith that would lead him to self-respect. This would-be artist in Europe, hoping to find in a Paris apartment the inspiration he cannot muster in himself, is the first of a number of dilettantes whom Wolfe depicts with merciless pity.

The Starwick episode is also revealing of Eugene-Tom's relation-

ship to women: dependent still in a way he never realized upon mother image, he has known, with the exception of his brief adolescent love for Laura James, only the sex he has paid for. With Anne, beautiful, reserved, inarticulate New England girl, he is abruptly, acutely aware of class distinctions. He is embarrassed before her; he is not fit to make love to her; he is vulgar, clumsy, crude. Nevertheless he loves her and suffers harshly her rejection. It makes his disillusion with Swedenwick all the more overwhelming. What saves him is the emotion channelled to his writing.

At the end of this chronicle he meets Esther Jack, well known the designer and wife of a successful business man, the mature woman who is to be his mistress for the next five years. She possesses mother's vitality with an artist's sensitivity and, more important, direction, clarity, discipline. She is a crucial influence in his development. She is down-to-earth, vivid, humorous, the equal of his spirit.

It is disturbing to pick up the third segment of this epic, *The Wanderer And The Rock* and to find the chronicle returning to childhood. Eugene Gant has now become George Webber. The artist's acute sense of difference, hitherto emphasized by his height, is now typified by a small body and face. The family picture is altered and Altamont is now Libya Hill. Wolfe, after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, had become acutely sensitive to the criticism of his use of autobiographical material. He was yet not mature enough to insist on what he intuitively knew—that his strength lay in the use he made of this disformed by his imagination. These new outer symbols were not needed; in fact were a discordant break in the flow of the saga. However, Wolfe felt that this book must be an affirmation rather than a rebellion against his experience. In the incidents of George Webber's boyhood there were close friends Eugene Gant never had. He lives with a great-aunt who feeds him the legends of his ancestors. Thus the Joyners of the Civil War are brought alive and the superstitious fabled pioneers imposed upon the mastery of his heritage. Here too is a much greater feeling for the South with its guilt and evil. The episode, *The Child by Tiger*, in which a Negro whom the boys admire goes berserk with jealousy, drink and kills and is lynched by a white mob—holds all the tragic elements. And when young Webber comes North—this time not alone but with other young Southerners—Wolfe relates their frantic need to succeed to the southern inheritance of guilt and defeat, whereas in his first book he had denied all connection with it. Perhaps it would have been impossible for him to do this with the old symbol of Eugene

though George Webber is simply another stage of his growth.

The second half of the book takes up the chronicle of Esther Jack (where Eugene laid it down at the end of *Of Time and The River*). The flaw in their intense relationship is her complete acceptance of the privileged world in which she moves. While he respects her for her craftsmanship, her discipline, he can't understand her very real enjoyment of this world. He goes to Europe to escape from her—and cannot. In Germany which he responds to eagerly with a Pentland-Joyner mysticism as his father's land, he is repulsed by the grossness of the Germans whom he meets at the *Octoberfest* in Munich, and in a beerhouse brawl acts out his feeling and is badly injured. As he lies in an alien hospital, alone, for the first time he comes to a mature introspection, an acceptance of himself as a member of the family of man:

But now he had learned . . . that a spirit which thinks itself too fine for the rough uses of the world is too young and callow, or else too centered on itself, too inward-turning, too enamored of the beauties of its own artistic soul and worth to find itself by losing self in something larger than itself, and thus to find its place and do a man's work in the world. . . .

They had discovered the earth together, this flesh and he, they had discovered it alone. . . . Alone, by their hard labor, they got the cup into their hands and drank it. . . . And now, for all their sweat and agony, what did they know? This: that they loved life and their fellow men and hated the death-in-life, and that it was better to live than die . . . although the bleared and battered face might seem to be the visage of a madman, the spirit that dwelt behind this ruined mask now looked calmly and sanely forth upon the earth for the first time in ten years.

It is a major step which grows into the objective and compassionate final phase of Wolfe's epic chronicle, the book *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Here George Webber takes up his life once more with Esther Jack. But the depression is beginning; the distinction between the life of privilege and the average life is increasingly obvious. His awareness of this comes to a climax at a large party given by the Jacks where the social world and the successful artists, actors, painters, writers are lavishly mingled. Wolfe creates broad and ruthless satire out of the entertainment given by the puppeteer, Piggy Logan, the season's rage, the darling of young cafe society. Like *The Emperor's New Clothes* the episode dramatizes the fuss and fury over nothing. The entertainment is a circus performed by little wire figures of animals and circus riders, acrobats, clowns:

. . . the procession of wire elephants gained particular applause because of the clever way in which Mr. Logan made the figures imitate the swaying ponderous lurch of elephants—and also because people were not always sure what each act meant, and when they were able to identify something, a pleasant little laugh of recognition would sweep the crowd and they would clap their hands to show they had got it . . . at last the trapeze performers were brought on. It took a little while to get this act going because Mr. Logan, with his punctilious fidelity to reality, had first to string up a little net below the trapezes. And when the act did begin it was unconscionably long, chiefly because Mr. Logan was not able to make it work.

. . . It was a curious spectacle and would have furnished interesting material for the speculations of a thoughtful historian of life and customs in this golden age. It was astounding to see so many intelligent men and women—people who had had every high and rare advantage of travel, reading, music, and aesthetic cultivation, . . . patiently assembled here to give their respectful attention to Mr. Piggy Logan's exhibition.

Disgusted, feeling that he cannot work in the circle of shallow fame to which his first book has opened the door, he retires to Brooklyn where he works in loneliness, surrounded by the victims of the depression. The action shuttles back and forth between the home town that has suffered the collapse of a terrific boom to the destitute of New York where he sees clearly the structure of the society that has created the debacle. In contrast to the Jacks, there is his schoolboy friend Randy Shepperton who has been the sales manager of a large corporation. He is visited by the director for the territory who radiates a jovial bonhomie, an open hearted approval of his fellow man.* But behind this success-façade the man has a brutal and ruthless drive; he pressures Randy to step up his sales or else. As he puts heat on Randy so he too is pressured from the top. Here Wolfe is stating with objectivity his deep concern that the structure of capitalism will obliterate the promise of America.

In New York it was his custom almost every night to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge and during the depths of the depression he would meet the derelicts, the "unwanted male population of America." There was a public latrine in front of City Hall where they huddled on winter nights

. . . drawn into a common stew of rest and warmth. George had never before witnessed anything to equal the indignity and sheer animal horror of the scene. There was even a kind of devil's comedy in the sight of all these filthy men squatting upon those open, doorless stools. Arguments

* This episode was published first in somewhat different form as a short story, "The Company," in *The New Masses*, Jan. 11, 1938. *Mainstream* reprints it in this issue.

and savage disputes and fights would sometimes break out among them over the possession of these stools which all of them wanted more for rest than for necessity. The sight was revolting, disgusting enough to render a man forever speechless with very pity. The Woolworth Building was not fifty yards away and a little farther down were the silvery spires and needles of Wall Street, great fortresses of stone and steel that housed enormous banks. The blind injustice of this contrast seemed the most brutal part of the whole experience, for there, all around him in the cold moonlight, only a few blocks away from this abyss of human wretchedness and misery, blazed the pinacles of power where a large portion of the entire world's wealth was locked in mighty valuts.

But George Webber is still operating within his personal quest when he returns to Germany eager for the fame which awaits him there after the great reception given the translation of his two novels. Only slowly he becomes aware of the corruption and the terror and then he equates it, in a way, with what has been happening in America. Franz Heilig, the German scholar says to him:

It is bad here, of gourse, but I sink it will be soon no better wiz you. Zese bloody fools—you find zem everywhere. Zey are ze same wiz you, only in a different vay. . . . You sink zat you are free in America. . . . I do not sink so. Ze only free ones are zeze dret-ful people. Here, zey are free to tell you vhat you must read, vhat you must believe, and I sink zat is also true in America. You must sink and feel ze vay zey do—you must say ze sings zey vant you to say—or zey kill you. Ze only difference is zat here zey haf ze power to do it. In America zey do not haf it yet, but just vait—zey will get it. Ve Chermans haf shown zem ze vay.

His increasing awareness leads Webber finally to sever his close tie with his editor, Foxhall Edwards, who has worked with him patiently during all the lonely years of self discovery. "Edwards" is, of course, Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's editor at Scribner's. In the long letter that ends this book he calls Foxhall Edwards Ecclesiasticus, charging him with fatalism, the belief that man will never change, that one set of problems simply supercedes another:

. . . you and the Preacher may be right: for there is no greater wisdom than the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, no acceptance finally so true as the stern fatalism of the rock. Man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot. There is no denying this in the final end. But we must, dear Fox, deny it all along the way. . . .

. . . man's greatest enemies in the form in which they now exist, the forms we see on every hand of fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty,

and need—can be conquered and destroyed. But to conquer and destroy them will mean nothing less than the complete revision of the structure of society as we know it. . . .

I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. And this belief, which mounts now to the catharsis of knowledge and conviction, is for me—and I think for all of us—not only our own hope but America's everlasting, living dream. I think the life which we have fashioned in America, and which has fashioned us—the forms we made, the cells that grew, the honeycomb that was created—was self-destructive in its nature, and must be destroyed. I think these forms are dying, and must die, just as I know that America and the people in it are deathless, undiscovered, and immortal and must live.

I think the true discovery of America is before us. . . . I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. . . . I think the enemy is here before us too. . . . I think the enemy is single selfishness and compulsive greed. . . . I do not think the enemy was born yesterday, or that he grew to manhood forty years ago, or that he suffered sickness and collapse in 1929, or that we began without the enemy, and that our vision faltered, that we lost the way, and suddenly were in his camp. I think the enemy is old as Time, and evil as Hell, and that he has been with us from the beginning.

I think the enemy comes to us with the face of innocence and says to us:

"I am your friend."

. . . "See I am one of you—I am one of your children, your son, your brother, and your friend. Behold how sleek and fat I have become—all because I am one of you—shaped in your way of life, of thinking, of accomplishment. . . . Will you destroy this thing? I assure you that it is the most precious thing you have. It is yourselves, the protection of each of you, the triumph of your individual lives, the thing that is rooted in your blood, and native to your stock, and inherent in the traditions of America. It is the thing that all of you may hope to be. . . ."

He lies! And now we know he lies. He is not gloriously, or in any other way, ourselves. He is not our friend, our son, our brother. And he is not American! For although he has a thousand familiar and convenient faces, his own true face is old as Hell.

Look about you and see what he has done.

WHEN WOLFE commenced the book which was to occupy the of his life, he began with memory-impressions as he himself related in *The Story of A Novel*. He wrote out of the fabric of memory, feeling the "bitter ache of homelessness, a desperate longing for America. .

I would be sitting, for example, on the terrace of a cafe watching the flash and play of life before me . . . and suddenly I would remember the iron railing that goes along the boardwalk at Atlantic City. I could see it instantly just the way it was, the heavy iron pipe; its raw galvanized look; the way the joints were fitted together. It was all so vivid and concrete that I could feel my hand upon it and know the exact dimensions, its size and weight and shape. . . . Or again, it would be a bridge, the look of an old iron bridge across an American river, the sound the train makes as it goes across it; the spoke-and-hollow rumble of the ties below; the look of the muddy banks; the slow, thick yellow wash of an American river; or it would be, most lonely and haunting of all the sounds I know, the sound of a milk wagon as it entered an American street just at the first gray of the morning, the slow and lonely clopping of the hoof upon the street, the jink of bottles. . . .

With such impressions he began to fill the first of the famous ledgers in which for the next five years he recorded every impression, covering thousands of pages with his swift scrawl. These notebooks and later the two packing cases of ms. were Wolfe's sole possessions in the itinerant life he was to lead. He spoke jokingly of this business of being a vagabond writer with two tons of ms. Eliza's son could never throw any of it away. From Eliza too came the total recall, though scarcely the awareness of every sensuous impression, every emotion and the insight that accompanied it.

Of his way of working Edward Aswell, his last editor at Harper's has written:

His ways were his very own, borrowed from nowhere. If I had known what they were without also knowing what they produced, I would not have believed it possible that anyone could write the way he did and achieve anything but hopeless confusion. They seemed so utterly without purpose or direction. But they were not. The purpose was clear in his head right along, and that is why his methods worked. . . . He never threw anything away, never lost anything. If he could not use it in one form, he would try to use it in some other, and very often he succeeded. Parts of a book he had planned about a train (K 19), for example, were taken out, condensed, and made into the opening section of *Of Time and the River*. Still other parts were recast and woven into later sections of the same book. . . . Here was the basic idea of the abandoned novel—worked out afresh, and altogether successfully, with wholly different characters. I discovered, too, that many of the consecutive chapters in *The Web and The Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again* were not written consecutively. Some of them were written weeks, months, or even years apart. And yet when they were put together they fitted. How is this mystery to be ex-

plained? The answer lay in Tom's strange plan of writing, the unique system he was forced to invent to meet his unique need. He often said that he never learned anything except by . . . trial and error, by finding out for himself. . . . He had to do everything the hard way. To understand what was happening with Tom when he was writing one needs to remember all the years through which his experience and observation had slowly accumulated. One also needs to be reminded of his acute self-torture of thought and feeling about everything he had experienced and observed. He could not put anything . . . out of his consciousness until he had rehearsed it in memory a thousand times, going back over it again and again in every detail until he had got at the core of it and had extracted the last shred of meaning out of it on every level. One needs to be told, too, of his ingenious experiments with different ways of saying what he wanted to say, sometimes only worked out in his head, sometimes roughly sketched on paper. All of this preceded the moment of spate-writing and made it possible. Beyond this, one needs to know . . . Tom had become a tireless reviser and rewriter. Far more often than not . . . there would be at least two different versions of the same episode, sometimes . . . four or five. When he was dissatisfied with a scene or character he would not, as a result, simply revise his draft and get it recopied: he would put it aside and rewrite it some different way from start to finish . . . small fragments became integral parts of larger fragments. Then they were salted away again to await the day when they would again be dug out and fitted into still larger continuities. The process was, I imagine, something like that by which mosaics are constructed: first each individual bead or jewel was fashioned; then, where there were enough of them to work with, they were sorted out and put together to form a part of the pattern for which they had been designed.

When Scribner's read and accepted *Look Homeward, Angel*, it was over 200,000 words. Maxwell Perkins cut the first part of the book which related much of Gant's early life and which he felt lacked the warmth and reality of the story as soon as it related to Eugene and the family. This early part, completely revised, formed the basis of the unfinished *The Hills Beyond*—again Wolfe intended nothing to be lost.

It took him another year to cut *Look Homeward, Angel* down to 620 pages. Getting it in shape he wrote was "like putting corsets on an elephant." But it was finely done and received a remarkable reception for a first novel. Sinclair Lewis wrote to Wolfe: "I wish there hadn't been quite so many blurb-writers these past twenty years, using up every once respectable phrase of literary criticism so that I might have some fresh phrase with which to express my profound delight. There is, you needn't be told, authentic greatness in it. It and *Farewell to Arms* seem

to me to have more spacious power in them than any books for years, American OR foreign. . . ." And that same year before he sailed to Europe to accept the Nobel Prize, Lewis gave an interview to the *New York Times* in which he expressed again his admiration: "If Mr. Wolfe keeps up the standard which he has set in this work, he may have a chance to be the greatest American writer. In fact, I don't see why he should not be one of the greatest world writers. His first book is so deep and spacious that it deals with the whole of life."

Asheville, however, was in a turmoil. The book had a phenomenal sale as everybody rushed to see who was who, then to vent their wrath not only in letters to the local paper but in personal diatribes to Wolfe. He was innocently shocked and so hurt that the affair left an indelible scar. He had thought to give an honest picture of the town, the evil and the good. Moreover, it was not a naturalistic portrait. As he wrote in the introduction to the book: "Fiction is not fact, but fiction is fact selected and understood, fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose." But he had wounded a number of people dear to him and when he returned to the subject of his native town it was to create characters of pure fiction—such as Randy Shepperton, Judge Rumford Bland, Nebraska Crane. (In the course of time, however—such is human nature—the only townfolk who resented Wolfe were those he had omitted!)

In writing Aswell about *The Web and the Rock* he said that the protagonist should be "a kind of polar instrument round which the events of life are grouped, by means of which they are touched, explained, and apprehended, by means of which they are seen and ordered."

His hero was always just that, the circle of his consciousness gradually widening out until, as Alfred Kazin commented, the "I" was equal to America. The focus is never continuous on Eugene-George. There are countless detailed characterizations which, with his visual and sensuous capacity for bringing his people instantly to life, spring up varied, tragic, grotesque, satiric.

WHAT WERE the influences that shaped his style? Probably the earliest, the worst, and the best, was his father's "noble rant." At his worst this creates a diffuse and generalized poetic style in which meaning is sacrificed to sound. At its best—old Gant loved Shakespeare and recited passages constantly to his children—it soars into the realm of genuine poetry. There are passages in Wolfe where the Shakespearean influence is near paraphrase. Wolfe himself acknowledged the influence of *Ulysses* upon his first book. He wrote that it had opened his eyes to new possibilities. The influence would seem much greater in Wolfe's mind than

in the result. He read constantly from the Old Testament—his favorite books were Job and Ecclesiastes; and the poets, Milton, Donne, Coleridge, Whitman. These influences are much more evident in his style.

Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's was far more of a spiritual father to Wolfe than Baker had been. Until the last two years of Wolfe's life he worked closely with him over the vast collection of material. It was only on his insistence that Wolfe finally let go the pages that made the second book *Of Time and The River*. He was a patient man, and one of sensitive and critical perception. He understood the way Wolfe had to work and what he was trying to do. It was the rarest good fortune that this gargantuan and sprawling talent should work with "the last of the great paternal editors," as Thornton Wilder called him. Wolfe's growing concern with social problems came into conflict with Perkin's conservatism with the result that he went to Harpers in 1937. The break was exceedingly painful but did not destroy their friendship. The last letter Wolfe wrote a month before his death was to Perkins—as the final words of *You Can't Go Home Again* are to Foxhall Edwards:

Something has spoken in the night, burning the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where. Saying "To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth—Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending—a wind is rising, and the river flows."

The beautiful passage is the crescendo of Wolfe's expression and a most perfect ending to the epic.

The last two books were put together by Edward Aswell after Wolfe's death. All this material Wolfe had conceived as one work to be known as *The October Fair*. He had planned, after a chronicle of the early Joyners—*The Hills Beyond*—two more: *The Death of The Enemy* and *Pacific End*. Harper's published the fragment of *The Hills Beyond*, with some of the best short pieces. In 1943 Scribner's issued his letters to his mother and in 1956 a volume of letters which covered his life from childhood to his final letter to Perkins in August, 1938. It is fascinating to follow this literal autobiography after its recreation in fiction. The unity is a close one. Perhaps not since Rousseau has the life of a genius been so revealed. This is what gives the work its immensity: the reader is plunged directly into Wolfe's world: he communicates swiftly, deeply, out of things passionately his concern and because of his identification with the broad stream of American life.

his world is ours and we react to it with poignant recognition.

His central legend, according to Wolfe himself, was "Man's search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his life could be united."* But it is more than this; it is the restless going to and fro between the father and the mother—the spiritual struggle of Wolfe's childhood—raised to the widest implication: "Of wandering forever and the earth again." This restlessness he finds in all Americans—eternal seeking and the need of roots. Around this main theme is woven the theme of time. Wolfe was obsessed with it: present time, past time, the immutable time of the earth itself, the transience of man's time upon it, his struggle against the briefness of his day, his ability to suffer and survive.

His search to grasp and define the essence of this vast country, to describe its quality, the characteristics of its energy, the reasons for its frenetic activity, its restlessness, was one with his own search for method, his own particular way of work. He wrote in *The Story of a Novel*:

The life of the artist at any epoch of man's history has not been an easy one. And here in America, it has often seemed to me, it may well be the hardest life that man has ever known. I am not speaking of some frustration of our native life, some barrenness of spirit, some arid Philistinism which contends against the artist's life and which prevents his growth. I do not speak of these things because I do not put the same belief in them that I once did. I am speaking . . . of the nature of the physical task before him. It seems to me that the task is one whose physical proportions are vaster and more difficult here than in any other nation on the earth. It is not merely that in the cultures of Europe and of the Orient the American artist can find no antecedent scheme, no structural plan, no body of tradition that can give his own work the validity and truth that it must have. It is not merely that he must make somehow a new tradition for himself, derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of American life, the structure of his own design; it is not merely that he is confronted by these problems; it is even more than this, that the labor of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him. . . . Out of

* If Wolfe had lived no doubt he would have found this strength and wisdom, as Robert Forsythe suggested, in the people's struggle. Forsythe wrote at his death: "He could have been the great radical writer and I think he was tending that way." In a letter to Perkins Wolfe himself stated: ". . . this system that we have is evil. . . . It brings misery and injustice not only to the lives of the privileged classes who are supported by it . . . this system . . . must be changed; men must have a new faith, a new heroism, a new belief, if life is to be made better. And that life can be made better . . . is the heart and core of my own faith and my own conviction, the end toward which I believe I must henceforth direct every energy of my life and talent."

the million forms of America, out of the savage violence and the dense complexity of all its swarming life . . . must we draw the power and energy of our own life, the articulation of our speech, the substance of our art.

This is a statement that would have rejoiced Walt Whitman. Wolfe has frequently been compared to Whitman. Extravagance and rhetoric, the sound and the fury as well as the large beauty, their language has in common. But Wolfe lived in a time of even greater complexity; he lacked Whitman's ubiquitous optimism. He is concerned with levels of experience in human beings that Walt Whitman never plumbed. Both were healthy-minded essentially, both were eloquent concerning the promise of America but Wolfe was more threatened and therefore more immediate in his awareness. To Wolfe as to Whitman the promise meant "to every man, regardless of his birth, his opportunity—to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him."*

The criticisms that have been levelled at Wolfe's work are not unlike those suffered by Melville of whom it was said that he was excessive and inaccurate. Wolfe was acutely aware of his own faults, struggling with them but, as Aswell points out, he had to come to these things in his own way. Both Aswell and Perkins found, that in spite of repetition and redundancy, Wolfe could only be cut in the large. There was a rhythm which to break "produced monstrosities." Like Melville too Wolfe was concerned with the immensely varied range of experience, as Melville also affirms Melville's feeling that the deepest need for rapaciously individualistic America was a radical affirmation of the heart: the heart that Wolfe knew first. Melville's place in American literature has been confirmed by time as Wolfe's will be. In this period of conformity and meager art, his fearless passion and creative energy are a challenge and a reminder of the vital tradition of American literature.

* *You Can't Go Home Again.*

SEE PAGE 59 FOR IMPORTANT NOTICE

THE COMPANY

THOMAS WOLFE

The story which follows is published both for its intrinsic merit and for its literary interest. It was first printed in the January 11, 1938 *New Masses*, as Wolfe's contribution to the literary section of that issue. Those familiar with his *You can't Go Home Again* will recognize it as forming the basis for Chapter 8, "The Company," from Book I, "The Native Returns," of that novel.

WHEN JOE went home that year he found that Mr. Merrit also was in town. Almost before the first greetings at the station were over, Jim told him. The two brothers stood there grinning at each other. Jim with his lean, thin, deeply furrowed face, that somehow always reminded Joe so curiously and so poignantly of Lincoln, and that also somehow made him feel a bit ashamed, looked older and more worn than he had the last time Joe had seen him. He always looked a little older and a little more worn; the years like the slow gray ash of time wore at his temples and the corners of his eyes. His hair, already sparse, had thinned back and receded from his temples and there were little webbings of fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. The two brothers stood there looking at each other, grinning, a little awkward, but delighted. In Jim's naked worn eyes Joe could see how proud the older brother was of him, and something caught him in the throat.

But Jim just grinned at him, and in a moment said: "I guess we'll have to sleep you out in the garage. Bob Merrit is in town, you, you—or if you like, there's a nice room at Mrs. Parker's right across the street, and she'd be glad to have you."

Joe looked rather uncomfortable at the mention of Mrs. Parker's name. She was a worthy lady, but of a literary turn of mind, and a pillar of the Woman's Club. Kate saw his expression and laughed, poking him in the ribs with her big finger: "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho! You see what you're

in for, don't you? The prodigal son comes home and we give him his choice of Mrs. Parker or the garage! Now is that life, or not?"

Jim Doaks, as was his wont, took this observation in very slowly. One could see him deliberating on it, and then as it broke slowly on him, it sort of spread all over his seamed face; he bared his teeth in a craggy grin; a kind of rusty and almost unwilling chuckle came from him; he turned his head sideways, and said "Hi—I," an expletive that with him was always indicative of mirth.

"I don't mind a bit," protested Joe. "I think the garage is swell. And then"—they all grinned at each other again with the affection of people who know each other so well that they are long past knowledge—"if I get to helling around at night, I won't feel that I am disturbing you when I come in. . . . And how is Mr. Merritt, anyway?"

"Why, just fine," Jim answered with that air of thoughtful deliberation which accompanied most of his remarks. "He's just fine, I think. And he's been asking about you," said Jim seriously. "He wants to see you."

"And we knew you wouldn't mind," Kate said more seriously. "You know, it's business; he's with the Company, and of course it's good policy to be as nice to them as you can."

But in a moment, because such designing was really alien to her own hospitable and wholehearted spirit, she added: "Mr. Merritt is a nice fellow. I like him. We're glad to have him anyway."

"Bob's all right, said Jim. "And I know he wants to see you. Well," he said, "if we're all ready, let's get going. I'm due back at the office now. Merrit's coming in. If you'd like to fool around uptown until one o'clock and see your friends, you could come by then, and I'll run you out. Why don't you do that? Merrit's coming out to dinner, too."

It was agreed to do this, and a few minutes later Joe got out of the car upon the Public Square of the town that he had not seen for a year.

The truth of the matter was that Joe not only felt perfectly content at the prospect of sleeping in the garage, but he also felt a pleasant glow at the knowledge that Mr. Robert Merritt was in town, and staying in his brother's house.

Joe had never known exactly just what Mr. Robert Merritt did. In Jim's spacious but rather indefinite phrase, he was referred to as "the Company's man." And Joe did not know exactly what the duties of "Company's man" were, but Mr. Merritt made them seem mighty pleasant. He turned up ruddy, plump, well-kept, full of jokes, and immensely agreeable, every two or three months, with a pocket that seemed perpetually full, and like the Jovian pitcher of milk of Baucis and Philemon perpetually replenished, in some miraculous way, with big fat savors.

cigars, which he was always handing out to people.

Joe understood, of course, that there was some business connection in the mysterious ramifications of "the Company" between his brother Jim and Robert Merritt. But he had never heard them "talk business" together, nor did he know just what the business was. Mr. Merritt would "turn up" every two or three months like a benevolent and ruddy Santa Claus, making his jolly little jokes, passing out his fat cigars, putting his arm around people's shoulders—in general, making everyone feel good. In his own words, "I've got to turn up now and then just to see that the boys are behaving themselves, and not taking any wooden nickels." Here he would wink at you in such an infectious way that you had to grin. Then he would give you a fat cigar.

His functions did seem to be ambassadorial. Really, save for an occasional visit to the office, he seemed to spend a good deal of his time in inaugurating an area of good living every time he came to town. He was always taking the salesmen out to dinner and to lunch. He was always "coming out to the house," and when he did come, one knew that Kate would have one of her best meals ready, and that there would be some good drinks. Mr. Merritt usually brought the drinks. Every time he came to town he always seemed to bring along with him a plentiful stock of high-grade beverages. In other words, the man really did carry about with him an aura of good fellowship and good living, and that was why it was so pleasant now to know that Mr. Merritt was in town and "staying out at the house."

Mr. Merritt was not only a nice fellow. He was also with "the Company." And, since Jim was also a member of "the Company," that made everything all right. Because "the Company," Joe knew, was somehow a vital, mysterious force in all their lives. Jim had begun to work for it when he was sixteen years old—as a machinist's helper in the shops at Akron. Since then he had steadily worked his way up through all the states until now, "well-fixed" apparently, he was a district manager—an important member of "the sales organization."

"The Company," "the sales organization"—mysterious titles, both of them. But most comforting.

II

The sales organization—or, to use a word that at this time was coming into common speech, the functional operation—of the Federal Weight, Scale & Computing Co., while imposing in its ramified complexity of amount and number, was in its essence so beautifully simple

that to a future age, at least, the system of enfeoffments in the Middle Ages, the relation between the liege lord and his serf, may well seem complex by comparison.

The organization of the sales system was briefly just this, and nothing more: the entire country was divided into districts and over each district an agent was appointed. This agent, in turn, employed salesmen to cover the various portions of his district. In addition to these salesmen there was also an "office man" whose function, as his name implies, was to look after the office, attend to any business that might come up while the agent and his salesmen were away, take care of any spare sheep which might stray in of their own volition without having been enticed thither by the persuasive herdings of the salesmen and their hypnotic words, and a "repair man" whose business it was to repair damaged or broken down machines.

Although in the familiar conversation of the agents, a fellow agent was said to be the agent for a certain town—Smith, for example, was "the Knoxville man," Jones, the Charleston one, Robinson, the one for Richmond, etc., these agencies, signified by the name of the town in which the agent had his office, comprised the district that surrounded them.

In Catawba there were six agencies and six agents. The population of the state was about three million. In other words, each agent had a district of approximately one-half million people. Not that the distribution worked out invariably in this way. There was no set rule for the limitation of an agency, some agencies were larger than others and considerably more profitable, depending upon the amount of business in commercial enterprise that was done in any given district. But the method of one agent to a half-million people was, in probability, a fairly accurate one for the whole country.

Now, as to the higher purposes of this great institution, which the agent almost never referred to by name, as who should not speak of deity with coarse directness, but almost always with a just perceptible lowering and huskiness of the voice, as "the Company"—these higher purposes were also, when seen in their essential purity, characterized by the same noble directness and simplicity as marked the operations of the entire enterprise. This higher purpose, in the famous utterance of the great man himself, invariably repeated every year as a sort of climactic peroration to his hour-long harangue to his adoring disciples at the national convention, was—sweeping his arm in a gesture of magnificent grandiloquent command toward the map of the entire United States—America—"There is your market. Go out and sell them."

What could be simpler or more beautiful than this? What could

be more eloquently indicative of that quality of noble directness, mighty sweep, and far-seeing imagination, which has been celebrated in the annals of modern literature under the name of "vision"? "There is your market. Go out and sell them."

Who says the age of romance is dead? Who says there are no longer giants on the earth in these days? It is Napoleon speaking to his troops before the pyramids. "Soldiers, forty centuries are looking down on you." It is John Paul Jones: "We have met the enemy and they are ours." It is Dewey, on the bridge deck of the *Oregon*: "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley." It is General Grant before the works of Petersburg: "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer."

"There's your market. Go out and sell them." The words had the same spacious sweep and noble simplicity that have always characterized the utterances of the great leaders at every age and epoch of man's history.

It is true that there had been a time when the aims and aspirations of "the Company" had been more modest ones. There had been a time when the founder of the institution, the father of the present governor, John S. Appleton, had confined his ambitions to these modest words: "I should like to see one of my machines in every store, shop, or business in the United States that needs one, and that can afford to pay for one."

The high aims expressed in these splendid words would seem to the inexperienced observer to be far-reaching enough, but as any agent upon the company's roster could now tell you, they were so conventional in their modest pretensions as to be practically mid-Victorian. Or, as the agent himself might put it: "That's old stuff now—we've gone way beyond that. Why, if you wanted to sell a machine to someone who *needs* one, you'd get nowhere. Don't wait until he *needs* one—make him buy one now. Suppose he doesn't *need* one; all right, we'll make him see the need of one. If he has no need of one, why we'll create the need." In a more technical phrase, this was known as "creating the market," and this beautiful and poetic invention was the inspired work of one man, the fruit of the vision of none other than the great John S. Appleton, Jr., himself.

In fact, in one impassioned flight of oratory before his assembled parliaments, John S. Appleton, Jr., had become so intoxicated with the grandeur of his own vision that he is said to have paused, gazed dreamily into unknown vistas of magic Canaan, and suddenly to have given utterance in a voice quivering with surcharged emotion to these words: "My friends, the possibilities of the market, now that we have created it, are practically unlimited." Here he was silent for a moment, and those who were present on that historic occasion say that for a moment the

great man paled, and then he seemed to stagger as the full impact of his vision smote him with its vistas. His voice is said to have trembled when he tried to speak that for a moment he could not control himself. It is said that when he uttered those memorable words, which from that moment on were engraved upon the hearts of every agent there, his voice faltered, sunk to an almost inaudible whisper, as if he himself could hardly comprehend the magnitude of his own conception.

"My friends," he muttered thickly, and was seen to reel and clutch the rostrum for support, "my friends, seen properly . . ." he whispered and moistened his dry lips, but here, those who are present say, his voice grew stronger and the clarion words blared forth ". . . seen properly with the market we have created, there is no reason why one of our machines should not be in the possession of every man, woman, and child in the United States of America."

Then came the grand, familiar gesture to the great map of these assembled states: "There's your market, boys, Go out and sell them."

Such, then, were the sky-soaring aims and aspirations of the Federal Weight, Scale & Computing Co. in the third decade of the century, and such, reduced to its naked and essential simplicity, was the practical effort, the concrete purpose of every agent in the company. Gone were the days forever, as they thought, when their operations must be confined and limited merely to those business enterprises who needed, they thought they needed, a weight scale or computing machine. The sky was the limit, and for any agent to have even hinted that anything less or lower than the sky was possibly the limit, would have been an act of such impious sacrilege as to have merited his instant expulsion from the true church and the living faith—the church and faith of John Appleton, Jr., which was called "the Company."

In the pursuit and furtherance and consummation of this grand and elemental aim, the organization of the company worked with the natural drive, the beautiful precision of a locomotive piston. Over the salesman was the agent, and over the agent was the district supervisor, and over the district supervisor was the district manager, and over the district manager was the general manager, and over the general manager was . . . God himself, or, as the agents more properly referred to him in voices that fell naturally to the hush of reverence, "the Old Man."

The operation of this beautiful and powerful machine can perhaps best be described to the lay reader by a series of concrete and powerful images. Those readers, for example, with an interest in painting, who are familiar with some of the terrific drawings of old Pieter Breughel, will recall a certain gigantic product of his genius which bears the title

Big Fish Eating Up the Little Ones, and which portrays just that. The great whales and monster leviathans of the vasty deep swallowing the sharks, the sharks swallowing the swordfish, the swordfish swallowing the great bass, the great bass eating up the herrings, the herrings gulping down the minnows, and so on down the whole swarming and fantastic world that throngs the sea-floors of the earth, until you get down to the tadpoles, who, it is to be feared, have nothing smaller than themselves to swallow.

Or, to a reader interested in history, the following illustration may make the operation of the system plain. At the end of a long line that stretches from the pyramids until the very portals of his house, the great Pharaoh, with a thonged whip in his hands, which he vigorously and unmercifully applies to the bare back and shoulders of the man ahead of him, who is great Pharaoh's great chief overseer, and in the hand of Pharaoh's great chief overseer likewise a whip of many tails which the great chief overseer unstintedly applies to the quivering back and shoulders of the wretch before him, who is the great chief overseer's chief lieutenant, and in the lieutenant's hand a whip of many tails which he applies to the suffering hide of his head sergeant, and in the head sergeant's hand a wicked flail with which he belabors the pelt of a whole company of groaning corporals, and in the hands of every corporal, a wicked whip with which they lash and whack the bodies of a whole regiment of grunting slaves, who toil and sweat and bear burdens and pull and haul and build the towering structure of the pyramid.

Or, finally, for those readers with an interest in simple mechanics, the following illustration may suffice. Conceive an enormous flight of stairs with many landings, and at the very top of it, supreme and masterful, a man, who kicks another man in front of him quite solemnly in the seat of the pants, this man turns a somersault and comes erect upon the first and nearest landing and immediately, and with great decision, kicks the man in front of him down two more landings of these enormous stairs, who, on arriving, kicks the next incumbent down three landing flights, and so on to the bottom, where there is no one left to kick.

Now these, in their various ways, and by the tokens of their various imagery, fairly describe the simple but effective operations of the Company. Four times a year, at the beginning of each quarter, John S. Appleton called his general manager before him and kicked him down one flight of stairs, saying, "You're not getting the business. The market is there. You know what you can do about it—or else. . . ."

And the general manager repeated the master's words and operations on his chief assistant managers, and they in turn upon the district managers, and they in turn upon the district supervisors, and they in turn upon the district agents, and they in turn upon the lowly salesmen, and they in turn, at long and final last, upon the final recipient of all swift kicks—the general public, the amalgamated Doakses of the earth.

It is true that to the lay observer the operation did not appear so brutally severe as has been described. It is true that the iron hand was cunningly concealed in the velvet glove, but there was no mistaking the fact, as those who had once felt its brutal grip could testify, that the iron hand was there and could be put to ruthless use at any moment. It is true that the constant menace of that iron hand was craftily disguised by words of cheer, by talk of fair rewards and bonuses, but these plums of service could turn bitter in the mouth, the plums themselves were just a threat of stern reprisal to those who were not strong or tall enough to seize them. One was not given his choice of having plums or of not having plums. It is no exaggeration to say that one was told he must have plums, that he must get plums, that if he failed to gather plums another picker would be put into his place.

And of all the many wonderful and beautiful inventions which the great brain of Mr. John S. Appleton had created and conceived, this noble invention of plum-picking was the simplest and most cunning of the lot. For be it understood that these emoluments of luscious fruit were not wholly free. For every plum the picker took unto himself, two more were added to the plenteous store of Mr. Appleton. And the way this agricultural triumph was achieved was as follows:

Mr. Appleton was the founder of a great social organization known as the Hundred Club. The membership of the Hundred Club was limited exclusively to Mr. Appleton himself and the agents, salesmen, and district managers of his vast organization. The advantages of belonging to the Hundred Club were quickly apparent to everyone. Although it was asserted that membership in the Hundred Club was not compulsory, if one did not belong to it the time was not far distant when one would not belong to Mr. Appleton. The club, therefore, like all the nobler Appleton inventions, was contrived cunningly of the familiar ingredients of simplicity and devilish craft, of free will and predestination.

The club had the extraordinary distinction of compelling people to join it while at the same time giving them, through its membership, the proud prestige of social distinction. Not to belong to the Hundred Club, for an agent or a salesman, was equivalent to living on the other side of the road tracks. If one did not get it, if one could not reach high

enough to make it, he faded quickly from the picture, his fellows spoke of him infrequently. When someone said, "What's Bob Klutz doing now?" the answers would be sparse and definitely vague, and, in course of time, Bob Klutz would be spoken of no more. He would fade out in oblivion. He was "no longer with the Company."

Now, the purpose and the meaning of the Hundred Club was this. Each agent and each salesman in the company, of no matter what position or what rank, had what was called a "quota"—that is to say, a certain fixed amount of business which was established as the normal average of his district and capacity. A man's quota differed according to the size of his territory, its wealth, its business, and his own experience and potentiality. If he was a district agent, his personal quota would be higher than that of a mere salesman in a district. One man's quota would be sixty, another's eighty, another's ninety or one hundred. Each of these men, however, no matter how small or large his quota, might be, was eligible for membership in the Hundred Club, provided he could average 100 percent of his quota—hence the name. If he averaged more, if he got 120 percent of his quota, or 150 percent, or 200 percent, there were appropriate honors and rewards, not only of a social but of a financial nature. One could be high up in the Hundred Club or low down in the Hundred Club: it had almost as many degrees of honor and of merit as the great Masonic order. But of one thing, one could be certain: one must belong to the Hundred Club if one wanted to continue to belong to "the Company."

The unit of the quota system was "the point." If a salesman or an agent stated that his personal quota was eighty, it was understood that his quota was eighty points a month, that this was the desired goal, the average, toward which he should strive, which he should not fall below, and which, if possible, he should try to better. If a salesman's quota was eighty points a month, and he averaged eighty points a month throughout the year, he became automatically a member of the Hundred Club. And if he surpassed this quota, he received distinction, promotion, and reward in the Hundred Club, in proportion to the degree of his increase. The unit of the point itself was fixed at forty dollars. Therefore, if a salesman's quota was eighty points a month and he achieved it, he must sell the products of the Federal Weight, Scale & Computing Co. to the amount of more than three thousand dollars every month, and almost forty thousand dollars in the year.

The rewards were high. A salesman's commission averaged from 15 to 20 percent of his total sales; an agent's, from 20 to 25 percent, in addition to the bonuses he could earn by achieving or surpassing his full

quota. Thus, it was entirely possible for an ordinary salesman in an average district to earn from six to eight thousand dollars a year, and for an agent to earn from twelve to fifteen thousand dollars, and even more if his district was an exceptionally good one.

So far, so good. The rewards, it is now apparent, were high, the inducements great. Where does the iron hand come in? It came in in many devious and subtle ways, of which the principal and most direct was this: once a man's quota had been fixed at any given point, the Company did not reduce it. On the contrary, if a salesman's quota was eighty points in any given year and he achieved it, he must be prepared at the beginning of the new year to find that his quota had been increased to ninety points. In other words, the plums were there, but always, year by year, upon a somewhat higher bough. "June Was the Greatest Month in Federal History"—so read the gigantic posters which the Company was constantly sending out to all its district offices—"Make July a Greater One! The Market's There, Mr. Agent, the Rest Is Up to You," etc.

In other words, this practice as applied to salesmanship resembled closely the one that has since been known in the cotton mills as the stretch-out system. June was the greatest month in federal history, but July must be a bigger one, and one must never look back on forgotten Junes with satisfaction. One must go on and upward constantly, the race was to the swift. The pace was even faster and the road more steep.

The result of this on plain humanity may be inferred. It was shocking and revolting. If the spectacle of the average Federal man at work was an alarming one, the spectacle of that same man at play was simply tragic. No more devastating comment could be made on the merits of that vaunted system, which indeed in its essence was the vaunted system at that time of all business, of all America, than the astounding picture of the assembled cohorts of the Hundred Club gathered together for their yearly congress for a "Week of Play." For, be it known, one of the chief rewards of membership in this distinguished body, in addition to the bonuses and social distinctions, was a kind of grandiose yearly outing which lasted for a week and which was conducted "at the Company expense." These yearly excursions of the fortunate group took various forms, but they were conducted on a lavish scale. The meeting place would be in New York, or in Philadelphia, or in Washington; sometimes the pleasure trip was to Bermuda, sometimes to Havana, sometimes across the continent to California and back again, sometimes to Florida to the tropic opulence of Miami and Palm Beach; but wherever the voyage led, whatever the scheme might be, it was always grandiose, no expense was spared, everything was done on the grand scale, and the Company

the immortal Company, the paternal, noble, and great-hearted Company—"paid for everything."

If the journey was to be by sea, to Bermuda or to Cuba's shores, the Company chartered a transatlantic liner—one of the smaller but luxurious twenty-thousand tonners of the Cunard, the German Lloyd, or the Holland-American lines. From this time on, the Hundred Club was given a free sweep. The ship was theirs and all the minions of the ship were theirs, to do their bidding. All the liquor in the world was theirs, if they could drink it. And Bermuda's coral isles, the most unlicensed privilege of gay Havana. For one short week, for one brief gaudy week of riot, everything on earth was theirs that money could buy or that the Company could command. It was, theirs for the asking—and the Company paid for all.

It was, as we have said, a tragic spectacle: the spectacle of twelve or fifteen hundred men, for on these pilgrimages, by general consent, women—or their wives at any rate—were disbarred—the spectacle of twelve or fifteen hundred men, Americans, of middle years, in the third decade of this century, exhausted, overwrought, their nerves frayed down and stretched to breaking point, met from all quarters of the continent "at the Company's expense" upon a greyhound of the sea for one wild week of pleasure. That spectacle had in its essential elements connotations of such general and tragic force in its relation and its reference to the entire scheme of things and the plan of life that had produced it that a thoughtful Martian, had he been vouchsafed but thirty minutes on this earth and could he have spent those thirty minutes on one of the crack liners that bore the Hundred Club to tropic shores, might have formed conclusions about the life of this tormented little cinder where we live that would have made him sorrowful that he had ever come and eager for the moment when his thirty-minute sojourn would be ended.

III

It was a few minutes before one o'clock when Joe entered his brother's office. The outer sales room, with its glittering stock of weights, scales, and computing machines, imposingly arranged on walnut pedestals, was deserted. From the little partitioned space behind, which served Jim as an office, he heard the sound of voices.

He recognized Jim's voice—low, grave, and hesitant, deeply troubled—at once. The other voice he had never heard before.

But as he heard that voice, he began to tremble and grow white about

the lips. For that voice was a foul insult to human life, an ugly sneer whipped across the face of decent humanity, and as it came to him that this voice, these words were being used against his brother, he had a sudden blind feeling of murder in his heart.

And what was, in the midst of this horror, so perplexing and so troubling, was that this devil's voice had in it as well a curiously human note, as of someone he had known.

Then it came to him in a flash—it was Merrit speaking. The owner of that voice, incredible as it seemed, was none other than that plump, well-kept, jolly looking man, who had always been so full of cheerful and good-hearted spirits every time he had see him.

Now, behind that evil little partition of glazed glass and varnished wood, this man's voice had suddenly become fiendish. It was inconceivable and, as Joe listened, he grew sick with horror, as a man does in some awful nightmare when suddenly he envisions someone familiar doing some perverse and abominable act. And what was most dreadful of all was the voice of his brother, humble, low, submissive, modestly entreating. He could hear Merrit's voice cutting across the air like a gob of rasping phlegm, and then Jim's low voice—gentle, hesitant, deeply troubled—coming in from time to time by way of answer.

"Well, what's the matter? Don't you want the job?"

"Why—why, yes, you know I do, Bob," and Jim's voice lifted a little in a troubled and protesting laugh.

"What's the matter that you're not getting the business?"

"Why—why . . ." Again the troubled and protesting little laugh. "I *thought* I was . . . !"

"Well, you're not!" That rasping voice fell harsh upon the air with the brutal nakedness of a knife. "This district ought to deliver 30 percent more business than you're getting from it, and the Company is going to have it, too—or else! You deliver or you go right out upon your can! See? The Company doesn't give a damn about you. It's after the business. You've been around a long time, but you don't mean a damn bit more to the Company than anybody else. And you know what's happened to a lot of other guys who got to feeling they were too big for their job, don't you?"

"Why—why, yes, Bob. . . ." Again the troubled and protesting laugh. "But—honestly, I never thought. . . ."

"We don't give a damn what you never thought!" the brutal voice ripped in. "I've given you fair warning now. You get the business or out you go!"

Merrit came out of the little partition-cage into the cleaner light of

the outer room. When he saw Joe, he looked startled for a moment. Then he was instantly transformed. His plump and ruddy face was instantly wreathed in smiles, he cried out in a hearty tone: "Well, well, well! Look who's here! If it's not the old boy himself!"

He shook hands with Joe, and as he did so, turned and winked humorously at Jim, in the manner of older men when they are carrying on a little bantering by-play in the presence of a younger one.

"Jim, I believe he gets better-looking every time I see him. Has he broken any hearts yet?"

Jim tried to smile, gray-faced and haggard.

"I hear you're burning them up in the big town," said Merrit, turning to the younger man. "Great stuff, son, we're proud of you."

And with another friendly pressure of the hand, he turned away with an air of jaunty readiness, picked up his hat, and said cheerfully: "Well, what d'ya say, folks? Didn't I hear somebody say something about one of the madam's famous meals, out at the old homestead. Well, you can't hurt my feelings. I'm ready if you are. Let's go."

And smiling, ruddy, plump, cheerful, a perverted picture of amiable goodwill to all the world, he sauntered through the door. And for a moment the two brothers just stood there looking at each other, drawn and haggard, with a bewildered expression in their eyes.

In Jim's decent eyes, also, there was a look of shame. In a moment, with that instinct for loyalty which was one of the roots of his soul, he said: "Bob's a good fellow. . . . You . . . you see, he's got to do these things. . . . He's . . . he's with the Company."

Joe didn't say anything. He couldn't. He had just found out something about life he hadn't known before.

And it was all so strange, so different from what he thought it would be.

SEE PAGE 59 FOR IMPORTANT NOTICE!

A MATHEMATICIAN'S FAITH :

DIRK STRUIK

ARE the hopes and beliefs, expectations and tenets of a mathematician any different from those of anybody else? There is on the whole not much difference in the general course of life. But every profession has its own problems, and with them its own hopes, its own worries, its own values, and that of the mathematician makes no exception. Some of these values have been the subject of wide discussion both now and in the past, even the remote past, such as the human value of rigorous thinking, or the intellectual and plastic beauty inherent in fields of arithmetic and geometry.

Let me begin with what we may call the faith of Galilei. Galilei, you may remember, was one of the founders of modern natural science. He also was a first-class mathematical thinker. We find him writing in his "Assayer" of 1623: "Philosophy is written in that great book which always lies opened before our eyes, the universe. But it cannot be understood unless one learns to understand the language and to know the letters in which it is written. It is written in mathematical language and its letters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures. Without these means it is humanly impossible to understand a word of it, and it remains but an idle roaming through an obscure labyrinth."

This was the expression of a faith. Nature, said Galilei, could be understood, and it could only be understood mathematically. The great mathematical science of nature, known to us, was at that time only in its infancy. True, there already existed one glorious and quite elaborated example of a successful explanation of nature in terms of "triangles, circles and other geometrical figures," and that was the theory of the motion of sun, moon and planets. However, the prevalent philosophy was still Aristotelian, and the Aristotelian doctrine of nature was qualitative rather than quantitative. Natural phenomena were explained in terms of hot and cold, dry and wet, higher and lower, gravity and levity.

Even such a concept as velocity was only defined in the elementary case of uniform motion. A consistent mathematical theory of nature was still in the future, concepts as mass, acceleration, calory, degrees or temperature, amperes and atom weights had either to be given precision or still to be invented. Galilei could only express his conviction that nature submits to mathematical treatment as an expression of faith, of passionate faith.

Faith, indeed, but a faith already based on a good deal of reason and fact. We already mentioned astronomy, but by 1623 many other successful mathematical applications, scattered but convincing, had been made to natural phenomena—in mechanics, surveying, cartography and navigation. In accordance with the modern spirit, evoked by the Renaissance, Galilei's faith was not based on authority or revelation, but was an extrapolation from the facts, from personal experience, from philosophic insight. He was perfectly clear about it in his own brilliant Tuscan way. It was the type of faith which came to underlie all scientific progress, a faith that demands strengthening by constant rational verification.

The effects have been cumulative. The whole history of natural science has since vindicated Galilei's belief. Qualitative science has made ever more room for quantitative science until we can hardly think otherwise. We are quite accustomed to have a problem worked out on paper with computations and formulas and then find our tools and instruments, our bodies, liquids, gases, our atoms and molecules, projectiles and planets dance to our tune. And, if they don't, we know that there must be another explanation, not in terms of hobgoblins or even qualities alone, but in terms of mathematics.

Has faith thus entirely been replaced by reason based on facts? Is it old-fashioned to say that one of the mathematician's articles of faith is the conviction that nature obeys laws, and that these laws can be formulated mathematically? Is this correspondence of scribbles on a piece of paper with the events of nature still a mystery, only to be approached by an act of faith? Descartes, only shortly after Galilei, needed God's intervention for confirmation of his faith, he could not believe that God's goodness would allow such deception as giving us the feeling of having grasped certainty and then taking it away from us. Some modern scientific writers let their thoughts move along a similar path. We read in D'Abro's book on "The Evolution of Scientific Thought" that "However mysterious it may seem, nature appears to be amenable to mathematical investigation and to be governed by rigid mathematical laws, at least to a first approximation." To this author, who justly or unjustly proclaims that he expounds the ideas held by most modern natural

scientists, the applicability of mathematics to nature is still a mystery. Substitute mystery for God, and we return to Descartes, but with a much poorer concept of the Deity, because where Descartes' God was the Master of the Universe, this modern mystery-God is only an expression of man's ignorance.

We, who prefer to anchor our faith neither in the supernatural nor in mystery, but in reason, may prefer to look at Galilei's faith in another way. Let us look at our science as an evolution in history. It began millennia ago as a study of space and of number: already at an early period men measured with rope and stick, counted sheep and watched the stars. Gradually man's mind began to move along more daring paths, mathematical knowledge increased, study extended to regular bodies, complicated equations and logical systems. From the finite man moved to the infinite, from concepts directly representative of the world around him to the lofty structures of his abstractions, to fractions that never end, to line segments infinitely divisible. Ever more profound were his constructions, until at present we hardly recognize the ancient origin of mathematics in space and number, and rather see this science as the study of order and relation. But this does not mean that we have broken loose from space and number, and with it from nature and the world around us; our knowledge of it has rather been refined. We can understand more and more; we have found a key not only to the crude aspects of nature, but are allowed a look into its more intimate workings.

Mathematics is thus not so much a pure exercise of the human mind as a study of the relations existing in our world. Not only the law that five times five is twenty-five is an expression of certain relations occurring in nature, but also the more subtle laws of geometry, of algebra, of analysis, of topology and of all divisions of the mathematical sciences.

In this statement, I confess, still remains an element of faith. To some minds it is heresy, as abhorrent as the doctrine of the Trinity is to the Unitarian mind. Many mathematicians do pride themselves in the freedom of creation offered in their field. Modern mathematics especially is, or seems to be, the domain of liberty, with its discard of ancient conventions: space need not be three dimensional, numbers need not be real, axioms need not be expressions of direct experience. However, this freedom still does not lead us out of the universe: the new, the free mathematics does find its often unexpected realization in newly opened fields of physics, chemistry and biology. This trend goes so far that mathematics simply cannot keep up with the demands made on it by other sciences. At present the difference between pure and applied mathematics has become so narrow that only the subjective interest of the

researcher determines the label placed upon the field in which he is engaged. What seems weird mathematics may well represent some very definite set of relations in some field of applied research. Especially when a mathematical theory is well balanced, logically impeccable and aesthetically pleasing can we freely accept that its realization in some aspect of nature—or society—is assured.

Take the example of the theory of complex numbers, based on the square root of—1. This number appeared first in the sixteenth century as a free invention of the human mind, a symbol in the abstract theory of equations. It was called the imaginary unit, to indicate that it was made on the stuff that dreams are made of. Today we know of its close connection with rotation in the plane, and large fields of application exist. The whole theory of alternating currents in electricity can be based on it, and every electrical engineer is advised to study the theory of complex numbers—by the way, one of the most elegant of mathematical theories.

Understand me well, the freedom of the mathematician is not illusory—it is a real one, and one of the most fascinating aspects of our science. But its freedom is the freedom of which the philosopher speaks: the freedom based on understanding of the laws. The laws of the mathematical game are strict: logical consistency is one of the most important. Experience teaches that in following these laws the mathematician never strays very far out of the world around him. After all, man and his mind are also part of the universe.

MANY mathematicians are not particularly impressed by the utility, or potential utility, of their field. Useful mathematics, said the late Professor Hardy, is on the whole rather dull, the “real” mathematics of the “real” mathematicians, of Fermat, Euler, Gauss, is almost wholly “useless.” What “use” is it indeed to know that the number of prime numbers is infinite? We shall leave aside here the difference between usefulness, applicability or realization, though it is pertinent. We shall ask what it is that attracts these “real” mathematicians, the great as well as the smaller ones. Professor Hardy—who was among the great ones—also gave the answer to this question. What attracts the productive mind, he wrote, is the challenge of the problem, its depth, its seriousness and the beauty of its pattern. We now must ask what this challenge, this depth, consists of.

Let us take, as an example, some of the problems concerning those famous characters A and B, moving on a road of 100 miles at speeds of, say, five and eight miles per hour, meeting perhaps that not less fabulous character, C, also moving at some speed. When do they meet?

In the regular course of things, this problem of our books or arithmetic is solved with the aid of some elementary addition, subtraction or division. But a modification of approach can lead us easily into deep water. Let A and B move in the same direction, say A at 100, B at 5 miles an hour, and let their initial distance be 50 miles. When will A overtake B? In order to overtake B, A has first to arrive at the place where B was at the beginning. However, at that moment B has already moved forward. Now A has to reach the place where B is now, but when A has reached this place, B has again advanced. This can go on indefinitely. Does this mean that A can never reach B? Such a conclusion would clearly be nonsense. Then, where is the error? This so-called paradox of Zeno has become a challenge ever since and many have tried to reason it out. It has shown itself a profound problem; out of it and of similar difficulties our differential and integral calculus has originated. Such a problem leads to an analysis, and eventually to a mastery, of not one, but of many relationships. In our example of Zeno's paradox investigations concerning area and volume, number and space, the finite and the infinite have been affected.

Or take the so-called parallel postulate of Euclid, for two millennia thought to be of the nature of a theorem, which could and should be proved. In some way or another it resisted all attempts at demonstration. What a challenge! Could nobody prove this "postulate," that through a point in a plane outside a line only one parallel line can be drawn? It seemed so easy, and every attempt at proof always turned out to be a failure. Do not touch this problem, said old Bolyai, a Hungarian teacher, to his son, "detest it, its abysmal darkness might perhaps devour a thousand towering Newtons." That was in 1820. However, the son refused to listen to his discouraged father, and tackled the problem—but in a new way. He rejected the parallel axiom and built a geometry based on the proposition that more than one parallel can be drawn in a plane through a point to a line. And, marvelously enough, the theory stood up under criticism and turned out to be logically as consistent as the older geometry of Euclid. It is now known as a Non-Euclidean geometry. This new insight into the structure of geometry has led to many other and equally legitimate mathematical structures; moreover, the whole process has influenced methodology in several domains of science. And it is a remarkable, but by no means mysterious, fact that these new mathematical structures have again shown their use in fields of applied science, physics, chemistry, biology and other branches of knowledge. We could not have our present theories of electronic machines, of nuclear behavior, of hydrodynamic flow and many other theories without the wide choice—this freedom—in our mathematics.

With considerations of beauty we leave the domain of science proper and enter that of value. What can science have to do with value? Does not science confine itself to what is, what was and what will happen under certain conditions, while value deals with such intangibles as appreciation and with the question of what ought to be? This discrimination plays a not unimportant role in modern thought, and our academic world has the tendency to divide itself into specialists in what is, was and shall be, the scientists, and specialists in what ought to be, the latter being philosophers and religious thinkers. Carried into our field, this means that the mathematician deals with theorems and their logical coherence, and not with their esthetical or ethical desirability. Whether his science is useful or useless, beautiful or dismal, whether it contributes to human comfort or to human misery is indifferent to him as a scientist, and will occupy him at most on Sunday between 11:00 a.m. and noon.

There are great objections to this point of view, which men of different philosophical approach have clearly pointed out. Mathematicians have had less trouble than other scientists in discovering values in their science. All the way back from Plato's day till the present the aesthetic value of the exact sciences has been recognized as well as their educational and truth value. There certainly is beauty in mathematics, both an intellectual and a plastic beauty—a beauty of reason and one of form. We can detect it in the subtle "reasoning" of modern computing machines, in the logical building of Euclidean and Non-Euclidean geometries, in the graceful shapes of the regular bodies, and in so many other domains of geometry and analysis. Take a look at the many symmetries of ornamentation, at Moorish mosaics, at the patterns of Indian rugs, all beauties revealed to the most unexact mind. Renaissance painters were untiring in their study and application of the rules of perspective, so that some of their pictures look like exercises in foreshortening rather than glorifications of the Madonna. Mathematics, some admirers have therefore said, is rather an art than a science. Better say that mathematics has artistic elements in it; exaggeration does not help understanding. Painters, architects, poets have recognized and do recognize it. It is the faith of many mathematicians that a well-balanced, well-constructed mathematical theory is also aesthetically pleasing. As in the case of a motor car, an airplane—or a well-groomed person—technical perfection is an aid to beauty.

It is my belief that there are possibilities for great art in our modern abstract painting and sculpture. Such art is not all snobbery and escapism, whatever friends or enemies may say. But I feel that the artist, having a feeling that mathematical concepts play an even more important role in our civilization, is often unable to express his thoughts convincingly in

his art, and the results may be utterly childish. Would it not be better if artist and mathematician once came together? Their collaboration might bring both parties closer to real life, the ultimate source of art as well as science. Let this meeting take place in a room draped with Navajo rugs, and let our architects sit in, many of whom have shown an understanding of how mathematical beauty can agree with functional structure.

MUCH HAS been said concerning the human worth of rigorous thinking. The mathematician is trained to accept, in his own field, nothing as true except after a careful check of the foundations of this reasoning. Truth is a hard taskmaster who takes little for granted. At the same time we find in mathematics an optimistic note, since it shows how man can reach truth, and a form of truth to which all can agree—which is not the case with religious or philosophical truths, or political and economic truths for that matter. It is indeed a good thing to introduce the young to some of this rigorous thinking. As a matter of fact, the human value of rigorous thinking has long been a kind of axiom in liberal education, and the curriculum of many a school and college has had its course in Euclid as a legacy from the time that arithmetica, geometria, astronomia, and music composed the "quadrivium" of the medieval schools. We praise the principle, since teaching should be primarily based on fundamentals. The result, however, has all too often been an aversion to mathematics bordering on disgust. Yale students expressed it a hundred odd years ago at the end of their sophomore year:

"We're free! Hurrah! We've got him fast,
Old Euk is nicely caged at last. . . ."

The ways of rigorous thinking can be made very thorny, and consciously or unconsciously men know that there are also other ways of approaching truth. It is rather a combination of faith and strict reasoning that leads us through life, brings men into action and stirs the mind to noble deeds. Stressing rigorous thinking beyond its legitimate bounds can easily lead to helplessness in the affairs of life or to that kind of scepticism or cynicism which is unwilling to commit itself because the great questions of love and hatred, good and evil, life and death cannot be cast in the form of axioms and theorems.

We can do something mathematical, though, with questions pertaining to the infinite and the finite, for a long time a favorite domain of the philosopher, the religious thinker, and theologian. Study of the infinite, either the infinitely large or the infinitely small, has also been for a long time an essential part of mathematics, so essential that Hermann Weyl, the Princeton mathematician, called mathematics the science

of the infinite. We may hesitate to go that far, but it has been of paramount importance in the development of mathematics that it is possible to make exact statements on the nature of the infinite. Theologians, logicians and mathematicians have met each other on the trail. Georg Cantor, the great 19th century mathematical investigator of the infinite, praised St. Augustine for his correct description of what we call the actually infinite—the infinite considered as achieved, as the line with all its points. Greek philosophers started a train of thought of which the paradox of Zeno is an example, a train of thought which eventually led to our present calculus, and which deals with what we call the potentially infinite—the infinite as process, as ever unachieved, as presented in the infinite series. Sometimes theology has expressed in its own deistic-mythological way questions to which modern mathematics can give a precise form, at any rate in part. I can even detect a reasonable mathematical problem behind the theological facade of Thomas Aquinas' question whether angels occupy space—a question which, it seems, sixteenth century Humanists have ridiculed by asking how many angels can dance on the point of a needle. And when in church the faithful sing of the infinite greatness of the Lord or try to express His timelessness by piling eons on eons, the mathematician can bring whatever quantitative sense there is in these paeans within the bounds of strict analysis.

Mathematical studies are an example of the attainment of cumulative knowledge. Hardly anything thought throughout the ages is quite lost, and one generation knows more and usually better than the previous one. The possibility of such accumulation of knowledge, yea of wisdom, gives us a pride in the possibility of the human mind in finding truth. But this also means that mathematics, like all natural science, must be international.

No single class or nation has a monopoly to truth. One of the cardinal tenets of our faith as a mathematician is the belief in the collaboration of all men and women of good will, from whatever peoples or creeds they may hail. The boundaries of science are not those of nations, but only those of the human mind as it exists in a particular historical period, and these boundaries are highly elastic. Now, more than ever, the internationalism of science should be stressed, our creed that all countries should participate, that no secrets be kept, that full information can stream across the borders as in olden times. What needs pleading now in the middle of the 20th century was taken for granted by the scientists of the 17th century! Let us stress our points anew: the guarding of scientific truths by one group or another is not only duplication of efforts, but a stupid kind of pride. It does not promote that peaceful atmosphere in which our own knowledge—and wisdom—as well as that of

others, can best grow. We believe that peace is necessary for the full unfolding of our science; we also believe conversely that all attempts to promote this full unfolding will promote better understanding between the peoples. This holds the more with the importance our present civilization gives to the exact sciences. International scientific gatherings are not only what they used to be, exchanges of information. They have become testing grounds for peace.

If a scientist looks at his work as being actually or potentially useful and this mathematician for one believes this to be a healthy attitude, then the more he devotes time to the promotion of good will among nations and peoples, the better it is for all men. In this way he can come closer to the feeling that he is not only just a paid employee of some institution of learning, but a useful citizen of his country and of the world.

Another article of faith is that mathematics can be taught in an interesting way, and that most people can grasp its meaning and appreciate it, yes, enjoy it. Do I hear a chuckle in the audience? How often have I found myself introduced to a person as a teacher of mathematics and heard the friendly and encouraging reply: "Oh, mathematics, that is a field I never understood a word of in school!" My usual answer is: "Blame teaching or textbook, sir (or madam), not the science." If I am considered a fool in this article of faith, then I only share the lot of many others who confess to an unusual or unpopular faith. But if I am not a fool, I flatter myself to be that fool of the Lord of whom St. Paul speaks.

Think of it: here we have a field of study which can explain the motion of stars and atoms, the laws of electricity and of statistics, which has a haunting beauty which has through the ages enchanted the mind of artist and philosopher, which has taken a dominant place in the development of man's mind throughout history, and which possesses a technique all of its own with a remarkable power of expression. It has an appeal to the logical mind because of the way it reaches its conclusions, to the searcher for truth because of the compelling character of the theorems, to the student of living nature because of its application to the most varying structures, from the way leaves are planted along stems to the shape of the cells in the honeycomb and the distribution of trees in the forest. Many an inquisitive mind has found inspiration in the mathematician's study of the infinite, the infinite of actuality and of potentiality, of the large and of the small. Is it possible that nothing of this can be appreciated by the average pupil? Is it not rather an indictment of our instruction that so many fail, or have failed, to appreciate

ciate the teaching and study of mathematics?

The German professor Felix Klein was the most outstanding promoter of his day in pleading for a humanistic, and not only rigorous, approach to the teaching of mathematics. Such a teaching, he said, should take full cognizance of the present state of the subject, of its long history, of its rigor, of its applications, of its plastic beauty, of its appeal to the lovers of a powerful technique—in short, to all aspects of the subject. And in addressing teachers he ended with this admonition: "Ladies and gentlemen, never be absolutely tedious!" Teachers of mathematics, kindly sit up and take notice, Klein's advice may well be the supreme command of the profession.

Nowadays the neglect of mathematics in our educational system has been made the subject of alarms and lamentations. We hear that there are not enough teachers, that among those who teach, many are poorly qualified, that the qualified ones are often over-worked. This is true, too true, even though the setting for these complaints is not altogether a healthy one. The reason that we hear them nowadays is partly found in the exigencies of that most stupid of modern inventions, the cold war. However, the complaints are justified even if the cold war is not. The poverty of our teaching of the exact sciences is part of our general crisis in teaching. Who loves this country can only see with great misgivings how potentialities for the betterment of man's fate are not given a chance to realize. How many minds are prevented from participating in the great civilizing movements of today? What a contrast with the ease in which they can come in contact with the brutalizing influences! Mathematics is, I believe, as a whole one of these great civilizing forces in our midst and deserves a far more honored place in our curricula than it has. True, we must face it, throughout the ages exact science played the role of handmaiden to evil as well as to good. But I think that I can make this point: the good has predominated, and will predominate even more with the promise of permanent peace. Such permanent peace will do much to turn the study of our field into an unqualified social and intellectual boon. Prospects are now better than some years ago, though prospects are not enough, and the necessity of improving the status of mathematical studies in our schools remains even more urgent than before. I for one have the faith that the good this improvement will do will live after us, while the evil will be interred with our bones.

The foregoing article is substantially an address delivered at the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles by Dr. Struik. We are indebted to Dr. Stephen H. Fritchman, minister of that church, for permission to publish.—*The Editors.*

WINTER BIRTH

THOMAS MC GRATH

POEM AT THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Light falls slant on the long south slopes,

On the pheasant-covert willow, the hawk-nest dark and foxes hollow
As the year grows old.

Who will escape the cold?

These will endure

The scour of snow and the breakneck ice

Where the print-scar mouse tracks blur in the evergreen light
And the night hunting high birds whirl—

All engines of feather and fur,

These will endure.

But how shall our pride,

Man, Man's son in the bone-chilling black frost born,

Where host or hide

Who is whirled in his orbit between iron and gold

Robbed of his starry fire with the cold

Sewed in his side—

How shall he abide?

Bear him his gift,

To bless his work,

Who, farming the dark on the love-worn stony plot,

The heaven-turning stormy rock of this share-crop world

His only brother harms and warms;

Who, without feathers or fur,

Faces the gunfire cold of the old warring new year—

Bless, grant him gift and gear,

Against the night and riding of his need,

To seed the turning furrow of his light.

A CHRISTMAS FABLE

There is a tale of three men and a winter journey,
Of prophecy and a new star, and of gifts given
At the birth of a strange child.

It is said that the animals
Knelt all around him, that the air was filled with unearthly song—
And the light—the light brilliant over the snow fields
And the hunched sheep adream in the cold kirks of the hills
And peace and forgiveness at the center of the Light.

That is the tale, out of an old and barbarous time
Before the invention of passports made travel so difficult.
And we too—have we not climbed through the winter valleys
Going over our own dead as we followed a different star
Climbing toward Light?

And found what? A bare hill
Crowned with a circle of crows, and, on the crossed sticks, three
Broken scarecrow figures cawing their agony?

That's an old story too.

But still the dream persists,
An interglacial fable, sung between cold and cold,
Of an eternal Spring . . .

millennial April . . .

quantum of holy light . . .

The canticle of the healed and whole human creature
Singing his brotherhood . . .

This tale persists . . .

though it be a winter's tale.

NO LIVING ENEMY?

ANNETTE T. RUBINSTEIN

IN THE Thirties one of the pictures of ruined farmers, baffled by the impersonality of bank foreclosures, came to an unforgettable climax in the line, "Whom shall we learn to kill?" There was still usual strength and a desperate hope for action in the terrible anger with which they looked around them. But no such potential power or possible future appears in John Osborne's aptly titled "Look Back in Anger," now playing at the Lyceum.

Since there are few things more futile than looking back in anger at the irreversible past, the angry young man tries hard to believe in the corporeal ghost of an enemy. He repeatedly invokes the specter of those upper class snobs whose daughter he has married and whose kindness he holds responsible for the emptiness of his world. But if his noisy imprecations almost create a momentary illusion that the smug middle bourgeoisie he denounces still control the destiny of England, the brief appearance of his unhappy father-in-law, once a minor ruler in colonial India, forever lays that ghost. As Jimmy Porter's young wife Alison says, both her father and her husband perpetually look back to the lost world; the one with nostalgia for its vanished joys, the other with anger that these were never his and have left behind them nothing which is.

The entire play takes place in two rooms of a dreary furnished rooming house, shared by Jimmy and Alison Porter and their friend, Cliff Lewis. Both young men have grown up in poverty and now make a bare living by running a marginal candy store, but Jimmy's mother had well-to-do relatives and he is a university graduate.

Alison, whose marriage was violently opposed by her whole family, is, after four years of unhappiness, still deeply if miserably in love. Her husband's feeling is also genuine and profound, but that does not prevent him from abusing her passionately on all possible occasions. This is partly, as she herself says, because he considers her almost a hostage, a prisoner of war won from the enemy upper class. Partly, too, his denuded world is so dependent on a few personal relationships that he will not give up the attempt to force a total, uncontrolled response and un-

ditional adherence which her innate reserve, self-reliance and social values make her refuse to give.

Jimmy Porter is a thoroughly exasperating sentimental young egotist, but the impact of the play does not depend at all on our identification with him, or with his more interesting and credible wife. Its real achievement lies in the author's ability to convince us that this is the truth about a significant group of young Englishmen who have no illusions as to the system under which they live, and no faith in the possibility of a better one; little hope for personal success or happiness in the world they see, and less intention of trying to do anything to change it.

In other words, the play is not a psychological study of three or four young people, and those who take it as one can hardly fail to be intensely irritated. It is a report, true or false, of the cultural climate in which some part of a generation lives, and its value arises entirely out of the author's success in forcing us to share his conviction of its truth and meaning.

This is so despite the fact that its director, Tony Richardson, took sharp issue with those English critics who raised the vital question—which he calls "irrelevant and obscuring"—of "how typical was Jimmy Porter of his generation?" The author also somewhat belligerently declared, "Unfortunately we are suffering from an Ibsenite hangover that leads everyone to search frantically for a message. . . . If a play doesn't deal with recognizable human beings it is nothing and has no place on any stage."

Actually, however, this is rather a debating trick than a serious argument, for Osborne continues with a generalization as applicable to *The Wild Duck* as to *Look Back In Anger*: "You must work out the social, moral and political implications for yourself." And he later summarizes his theme far more explicitly than Ibsen ever did: "This is about two people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer and so retreat into an unholy priesthole and become little furry creatures with little furry brains, full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other."

Finally in his conclusion he answers the very question which his director berated the critics for raising: "This is not whimsy; it is a common pattern of behaviour among sensitive, intelligent people."

That pattern has of course appeared spasmodically in many times and places, and one could illustrate it with examples of behavior ranging from Epicureans in the disintegrating Athenian world to members of the "beat generation" in present day San Francisco. Fundamentally the problem is not *whether* this is common in post-war England, but *why* it should

be. And closely linked with this question is the further one of *how* the English writer has been able to make his account of the situation valid and disturbing, whereas all the volume of similar work by young Americans is a weariness and vexation of spirit.

This validity does not seem to me at all based on Porter's rather sentimental and unconvincing reference to a father who was mortally wounded fighting with the Spanish loyalists, or on his expressed resentment that even compelling causes to serve are among the things lacking in his plundered world. These elements have, for the best of reasons, been over-emphasized in many progressives' response to the play; but I think they are even more superficial and misleading in Osborne's work than the reference to the legal lynching of Willie McGee was in Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending* last year. I believe that essentially the comparative forcefulness and effectiveness of England's "angry young men" arise out of their conscious or unconscious expression of certain objective conditions which certainly do not obtain in the United States.

The loss of an enormous colonial empire; the literal impossibility that "this precious stone set in the silver sea" can ever maintain, without such an empire, anything of its historic pride of world leadership, or furnish the material basis for such a life as many of its educated sons had long enjoyed and more of them had anticipated; the increasing number of university graduates prepared to compete for a diminishing number of rewards; the drearily uninspired character of the British Labor Party often, despite the many concrete achievements of "gas and water socialism," more depressing in success than in failure; all these and many related circumstances add up to a background of narrowing horizons which explain the power of conviction that makes us respond so uneasily to Osborne's anger. (Cedric Belfrage's vivid report in *The National Guardian* of the long queues outside foreign consulates the week after the desperate Suez adventure last summer, and statistics on the marked increase in emigration and the kind and quality of those making inquiries about the possibilities of skilled employment or professional positions in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand as well as the United States, provide a dramatic factual gloss for the play.)

It is not that we are persuaded to feel much respect or even real sympathy for the loudly self-proclaimed "rebels without causes" on the stage. But we do come to feel that there may well be, for many of them at present, only the two alternatives of an extraordinarily informed and socialist dedication—an alternative which is, of course, not even remotely envisaged in the play—and such a "retreat into an unholy priesthood" as the playwright reports.

books in review

Humor and Hope

SIMPLE STAKES A CLAIM, by Langston Hughes. Rinehart and Company. \$2.50.

THE HIT, by Julian Mayfield, Vanguard Press. \$3.50.

FOR ONCE the jacket blurb isn't far wrong, and few readers will feel their arm has been twisted into agreeing that they have found, in Langston Hughes' Jesse B. Semple, a "contemporary Mr. Dooley."

If space allowed, it would be fascinating to analyze in detail the means Simple employed to sneak up on the American public, as he did, beginning so inconspicuously, even casually, as a character originated by Hughes to serve as a convenient stalking horse for his newspaper comments on topical events. These short pages were originally published in the *Chicago Defender*, and were intended as transient comments on the passing scene. Instead one of those exciting and baffling miracles of literature occurred: a human being was born—a permanent and characteristic American type, Negro in color and race, but excruciatingly American.

Excruciatingly . . . because the reader's mind and heart are accurately and sometimes painfully scored upon time after time by Jesse Semple (Simple), whose power to do so rises from convictions deeply shared by all Americans on the human side of Little Rock.

And characteristic, too, is the implicit sanity in even the "wildest" statements which Simple, the original race man, makes to his more-than-conventional bar-room friend, the "I" of these essays; for no matter how extreme Simple is, nor how serious he threatens to become, the situation is always rescued, sometimes at the last moment, with the saving grace of humor—humor that ranges from the subtle to the not-so-subtle day-dream of what one, Jesse B. Semple, American Negro, would do if he could fly over Mississippi!

Simple knows his own worth and will not concede an inch of his pride and integrity; but at the same time he is quite conscious of how ludicrous it also is to be Jesse B. Semple in Harlem, U.S.A., in the decade of hydrogen bombs and space travel. In fact, Langston devotes his introduction to a plea for greater humor in the Negro (he could have added, the whole) press, pointing out that few stuffed shirts survive a well-aimed barb, sharpened with wit.

It's interesting to note Hughes' method, which seems like simplicity itself. There are only two characters present, usually at a bar: Simple and his somewhat high-flown, conventional friend. They talk: that is, his friend supplies the thesis, there is an answer to it, and by the end of the piece there is a satisfying literary resolution. In this bare dialectics, which Plato used of course on rather similar themes, a

clash of opinion—of idea—takes place, and out of that clash arises a person. Writers ought to study this in Hughes a little more closely, for they will find proven here that at the core of every character there must be an intellectual content—an idea, a thesis.

Simple reacts sharply to life. He also reacts *upon* life: and in that exchange we have drawn for us the lineaments of a person, and the shape of the life—the world acted upon and acting. He is always in combat; he has a definite stake in life, he believes in something, and all this supplies him with a compass by which to measure the conflict-events of our fast-developing times.

He knows what he is: a Negro in Harlem, the eternal butt of the official American joke that all here enjoy democracy; his unrhetorical life includes an acute consciousness of high rents, high prices for food, an all-surrounding Jim Crow, and daily insults and woundings on a thousand fronts.

It's amazing to see how, with this reality constantly aching in him, he can set other matters into their more-or-less accurate place. Whereas some of the most subtle minds fainted away at the Hungarian episode last year, since events there didn't coincide with their imperatives so neatly arranged in their minds, Simple sees all this a bit differently: "I am not talking about what the USA is made of," said Simple, "I am talking about who runs this country. I am talking about who makes them cellophane bandannas they sell—even given out free—to any joker who can flimflam me. Negroes don't own no factories to make nothing, not even cellophane bandanas. Do they—Hugh? Do they? You know and I know they don't. But that man down there at the end of the bar has got a bandanna on

right now. And one trouble with him is, he's got too much education to know how to use it. His predilect is for the intellect. He has been standing in this bar for two hours over a ten-cent glass of beer arguing about what is going to happen to Hungary where he has *never* been, when he ought to be talking about what is going to happen in Harlem where he is."

"Isolationist!" I said. "Hungary is a powder keg that might upset the world."

"These high rents in Harlem upset me," declared Simple. . . . "I have come from Hungary to Harlem, that's all," said Simple, "which you and that joker at the end of the bar would understand if you would take off your cellophane bandannas."

He does not fail to note that the Hungarian escapees are given the red carpet treatment here, while he, a native-born American, but unfortunately black, is lucky to get into the back door of the places the Hungarians come in free!

So much for that hypocrisy. Look at how unerringly he cuts through another standard hypocrisy: "Ever since I were a wee small boy, I been hearing about Russia. Russia must of been here a long time. It looks like our white folks would be used to Russia being in the world by now. But come to think of it, Negroes have been here much longer, and they ain't used to us yet. . . ."

Simple is staggeringly unimpressed by largesse bestowed on his race to the tune of national self-congratulatory editorials in the newspapers—like the Supreme Court decision suggesting that segregation be eliminated from the nation's schools.

To this invitation to the dance,

Simple merely remarks: "It's about time."

"I love my race," he says, "But"—and he has a lot of *buts*. "I do wish my feet pointed straight instead of sideways."

The juiceless and conventional language of his interlocutor, which embodies all the hopes and illusions of handkerchief-headed and rising educated middle-class, contrasts deliciously with Simple's tasty idioms. Jesse B. Semple appals his friend for his outspokenness; he thinks Jesse B. is too race-conscious, too bigoted even, too irreverent, insensitive to the "finer things"; but worst of all, too belligerent.

"Take that chip off your shoulder," I said.

"I will not," said Simple."

And God help us and Langston—we hope Simple never does!

IT'S UNFAIR to follow an old pro like Langston Hughes. It's only the accident of publication that brings Julian Mayfield's talented *The Hit* to the public at approximately the same time as Hughes' book.

For comparisons become inevitable and invidious. Behind Langston Hughes is 50 years of "wondering" as he "wandered," and the times have taught him the enduring reality of optimism and struggle, tempered always with a laugh at one's self even in the middle of the most serious struggle. There is nothing of the "beat" generation about him and his works.

Julian Mayfield swims right out into the "beat" atmosphere. The book begins with a frontispiece poem, which, though refusing to be the "invisible" or on the "outside" nevertheless

like ourselves, searching in this

*hell of earth, consumed with doing,
enmeshed by my personal Me,
terribly afraid, painfully alone.*

Mayfield's *The Hit* is primarily concerned with the hope and dream of Hubert Cooley, building superintendent of four houses on 126th street in Harlem, his wife, his son's sweetheart . . . and Harlem. The dream has a number—417; and that number, if it "hits," and it does, represents the key to escape—escape from Harlem, from poverty and oppression. It is a personal dream, an individual hope, and it fails. Cooley is left to spend the rest of his life on the street in the Harlem to which he gave "my youth, gave it my strength. . . ."

The theme of an individual attempt to escape from oppression is not new, of course, but it persists. The social reasons for this stubborn illusion ought not to detain us; they ought to be obvious. What counts here is how deeply the writer takes us into the human beings involved in the particular illusion and with what scope he illuminates the social horizon against which that illusion and those people cast their shadow.

What is often characteristic of books by young Negro writers, particularly their first ones, is the atmosphere of suppressed violence and fury, of a desperate frustration which then often turns against one's self in self-hate, or in mockery of others caught in the same choked web. When there is no vision, and everyone is a victim helplessly and blindly struggling, often with each other, and especially with the ones one loves or tries to love, then very often all this is seen sordidly, with no pride, not even with despair but with contempt. The only answer is flight,

escape—no matter what kind of escape, or how, as long as it places time and space between the victim and his torment.

There's much of this in this book—in the tone of it, let's say, James Lee, Cooley's son, a Korean vet, and now a hackie, boils all day long with resentment. He resents his boss, his father, Harlem; he resents the thousand and one insults and mockeries which assail a Negro in the white world; and he turns all this against the woman he wants to love, only doesn't realize, until the end, that he can't get love from a victim, only fear, only the wish for flight.

However, James Lee reaches insight on a "suddenly-he-came-to-realize" basis—that he stood in danger of losing personal happiness, like his father, because he had the wrong—a supremacist's—attitude toward his girl; and this realization comes to him almost out of the blue, except to the extent that seeing his father lose the love of his wife for the dream of escape from Harlem, forces him to wonder what is happening to his own chance for personal happiness.

But this resolution is almost an arbitrary act on the writer's part. It's simply as if he just *chose* that this be so; he could as easily have chosen for it not to be so. Nothing in the book builds inevitably to an illumination, a crisis which breaking up old relationships gives an insight into the new ones.

The Numbers Man takes the train out of Harlem with Cooley's money which was never bet on 417; and Cooley sits and stares at the Harlem streets waiting for a future that will never come. James Lee at least decides to stay and try to love. And Harlem

remains the ghetto it is, a pretty hopeless and frightening place indeed if there were not for the fact that we know that in one of the corner bars which Mayfield's people pass so hopelessly by is a certain Jesse B. Semple discoursing on events far and wide, with shrewd wit and indomitable scorn and passion that sears ruthlessly through the hypocrisies of the white world and the illusions of the black!

And yet, regardless of the theme of the place, Negro writers in America have this advantage over their white contemporaries: they are closer to the varnished reality, to oppression and the struggle against it; and unless they crack their spines trying to run away from the truth, that truth gets its way into almost anything they write, and that makes all the difference between life in art and death.

What vitality *The Hit* may have owed to the not mysterious truth that behind it real people shed real tears in a real life filled with suffering and struggle. If we don't get a full vision of this, and aren't overwhelmed by its taste and its power, that is because so far Mr. Mayfield has limited his scope and his passion. Probably also because in this age of the fish the whole universe seems to have gone cold; and there is no exit.

I am not an advocate of the grinning school of literary optimism. My inspirational verses are faded long ago. But Harlem is not forever. Not even for long. I know this even though I write this I look down into Harlem from my window and watch the Columbia University students playing ball on the wide green field here, never stopping to wonder how it is, I'm sure, came about that they are enjoying such a pleasant life in their pleasant gar-

island set right in the middle of such unpleasant misery.

PHILLIP BONOSKY

Too Smooth

ON POETRY AND POETS, by T. S.

Eliot. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.
\$4.50.

JUST TWENTY years ago the British critic Alick West published a book entitled *Crisis and Criticism*. Among its chapters well worth attention is a deft estimate of T. S. Eliot's operating procedure. Mr. West reveals how with Eliot a seemingly dispassionate literary judgment, say of Wordsworth or Shelley, uttered with the gravity of age-old authority, often fronts for a social viewpoint which he is shy of subjecting to scrutiny. The present collection of workshop observations on general questions of poetry and poetic drama, and of pieces on individual poets, shows that Mr. Eliot has not abandoned his old habits. Or rather that they are now out of control so that he cannot help avoiding a major issue if there is the least chance of escaping by way of a minor one.

I do not want to be unfair. Reader and writer alike will find many valuable guides to appreciation and technical hints scattered throughout this book. Eliot is a canny practitioner whose sensibility cannot be ignored without loss. His admirers will also find some startling and salutary admissions, such as his confession that the hero of *Family Reunion* "now strikes me as an insufferable prig," and that, with regard to *The Cocktail Party*, "it is perhaps an open question whether there is any poetry in the play at all." Unfortunately, Mr. Eliot's prestige and

influence do not allow us to admire his sensibility while ignoring the pronouncements on traditional values, social-cultural stability, and the primacy of European Christian civilization, for which he is also renowned. Nor to accept these dicta as made of the finest cloth without examining how loosely they are stitched together. This being no more than a review, I shall not dispute his thought, but confine myself to his method of argument. My one example will show him at his most exasperating, but hardly at his least typical.

Mr. Eliot's most recent essay, delivered as an address at Hamburg University in 1955, proposes to discuss Goethe as a sage. Let us see whether he justifies his intriguing promise.

To begin with, we are told that a portrait of Goethe has graced Mr. Eliot's mantelpiece for fifteen years, surviving its violent displacement during a "disturbed time" some while back. This portrait, from the period of the Eckermann conversations, might well adorn the Discourse in Praise of Wisdom which is to follow, since it is the unity of wisdom and poetic speech which defines a great poet, one who belongs to the world as well as his own people. (The portrait also serves Mr. Eliot for comparison with one of Blake. Setting it on the same mantelpiece, "I thought I noticed a similar expression in the eyes.")

Baffled by the multitude of ways in which Goethe's genius might be considered, the speaker has narrowed his field to two inquiries, which he believes are facets of the same problem: what do all authors designated as Great Europeans have in common, and why does one become reconciled to certain writers to whom one was indifferent in one's youth?

The reader may observe that we have already changed tracks, that is, switched from title to subtitle. Those of Eliot's listeners who were familiar with Goethe's work must have wondered if, instead of learning of some novel facet of it, they might not hear considerably less than they knew themselves.

To proceed. First we are treated to a short and unremarkable account of three stages in the evolution of personal literary taste and judgment, followed by a recapitulation of Eliot's view that the English romantics would have been greater poets if their view of life had been more solid and their religious views not "insecure." The use of these adjectives is an old trick of his. Since to be solid is good and to be insecure, bad, we are to forget that we have been told nothing of the romantic's view of life nor what their religious outlook—or lack of it—might mean in any context whatsoever, except perhaps that of Mr. Eliot's High Churchianity. He is the hero of semantic victories.

Goethe's beliefs and behavior were necessary, however; though Eliot does not specify them nor tell us why in this respect Goethe differed from his frivolous contemporaries. In any case, Eliot was able to overcome the limitations of his antipathy to a figure "so great." Does this mean that one of the attributes of greatness is the ability to smooth Mr. Eliot's feathers, or that greatness is an attribute of the kind of reputation respected by him? If the question seems unduly malicious, what shall one think of this strangely worded modesty: "I began, some years ago, to think that I must eventually make the effort to reconcile myself to Goethe . . . because I would otherwise have neglected some opportunity of self development. . . . To entertain this feel-

ing, is already an important admission. It is, surely, the admission that Goethe is one of the Great Europeans."?

What have the Great Europeans—Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe—in common? *Permanence* and *Universality*. And what do we find in their work? *Abundance*, *Amplitude* and *Unity*. Eliot cannot vouch for Goethe's Unity, but "I sincerely believe that the better we know his work—every volume of the most voluminous edition—the more certain I would be of its unity."

These follows an interpolation respecting Goethe's scientific theories which Eliot has not studied, but which he is sure must have something to them because a disciple of Rudolf Steiner, Dr. Ernest Lehr, in the course of defending them, suggests their relation to Goethe's poetry, "and it is not reasonable to dismiss as utter nonsense in the field of scientific inquiry, what we accept as inspired wisdom in poetry." This logic leads Eliot to believe that Part II of *Faust* is a greater work than Part I. Q.E.D.

Here we shall skip over a number of tangential motifs which, whatever their purpose, sound like variations on a theme which has so far eluded us. When we get back to *Wisdom* (the italics are Mr. Eliot's), we are told that to understand what it is, is to know oneself, wiser at least than he was twenty years ago when he informed us that Goethe was a dabbler in poetry and philosophy, and, if a sage at all, one on the level of Rochefoucauld. (He confesses that he has always found it painful to re-read his prose writings.)

To resume. *Wisdom* "resides as much in silence as in speech." When it is put into words, it transcends the language in which it is expressed. Here Eliot takes up an old discussion: 1

ation of a work of literature to the philosophy imbedded therein, and the difference between such philosophy and the wisdom which works of quite diverse ideological content may have in common. Unhappily, wisdom being indefinable, its existence in a poet can only be testified to by those who say, "I am a wiser man because of the time that I have spent with him." And so with a prayer or two for a long life to European literature, Mr. Eliot returns "gaze at the features of Goethe on my mantelpiece."

What is one to make of this mixture of unobjectionable phrases, platitudes, irrelevancies, and prim humility? It is simply outside appraisal.

Whatever Mr. Eliot may think of either of his topics, Goethe or Wisdom, he has not committed himself to us on them, or else he has merely created the problem to which he believes he has found the solution. If one examines almost all his other essays on figures he admires or of whom he disapproves, one will find either traces or massive doses of the technique of criticism by indirection. Nothing and no one is fairly come to grips with; instead, a series of digressions, no matter how interesting or "correct," adds up to an ultimate and absolute evasion of the matter at hand.

CHARLES HUMBOLDT

READERS, TAKE NOTICE!

LAST MONTH, a financial crisis forced us to skip publication of the December, 1957 issue of *Mainstream*. We regret not having been able to inform our readers, many of whom have sent us inquiries, of the reason for the apparent delay in the magazine's arrival. We had hoped to solve this problem in time to put out the issue, but found it impossible to do so.

This, the January number, is evidence that we are determined to continue to come out. It should be obvious, though, that we must depend upon greater and more consistent support from our readers. How you can help, we will discuss in greater detail in the following issue. Meanwhile, we urge you to consider this the most serious appeal we have ever made and to come to our support at once.

All subscribers will be credited with an extra issue to compensate for the one they missed.

Since it is no longer feasible for us to meet skyrocketing publication costs, short of the Foundation and brokerage house subsidies that bolster other cultural journals, we are compelled to raise the price of individual copies to 50 cents, beginning with February. The yearly subscription will be \$5.00.

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