CHAPTER III
OF TIME AND THE RIVER

Thomas Wolfe was an important American novelist of the 20th century. He wrote four lengthy novels, many short stories, dramatic works, and novel fragments. He is known for mixing highly original, poetic, rhapsodically, and impressionistic prose with autobiographical writing. His books, written during the Great Depression, depict the variety and diversity of American culture, Though part of Of Time and The River, was written before the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, and the book, as we have it, was largely written between July, 1932, and July, 1934.

Perkins, not Mrs. Bernstein, was now the adviser. The solitude of Wolfe’s Brooklyn apartment was not interrupted by classes at Washington Square. These changed conditions and a desire to develop as a writer led to a novel very different in kind from Look Homeward, Angel despite the fact that it continued the story of Eugene Gant.

To begin with, there is proves of romantic escape from what is too distasteful in actual experience of the author. Eugene Gant as a boy, when thwarted or wounded by life, could make the usual
excursions into the world of romance and fantasy. And on the pattern of the boy’s books of the time, he would invent long tales of adventure, bravery and love in which he was the leading actor.

Lifted by his fantasy into a high interior world, he scored off briefly and entirely all the grim smudges of life: he existed nobly in a heroic world with lovely and virtuous creatures. Or, steeping himself in ancient myths, where the will and the deed were not thought darkly on, he spent himself, quilted in golden meadows, or in the green light of woods, in pagan love. The attraction of Francis Star Wick for him was that he lived not in the world of real things but in the fictitious world of the imagination. Star Wick brought him a life forever good, forever warm and beautiful, forever flashing with the forces of passion, poetry and joy, forever filled with the swelling and triumphant confidence of youth, its belief in new lands, morning, and a shining city, its hope of voyages, its conviction of a fortunate good and happy life an imperishable happiness and joy that was impending, that would be here at any moment. ¹

In the same way the life of the father of Eugene Gant spoke to him exultant prophecies of escape and victory. In the contrast of mother and father themes, the mother stands here for what Freud calls reality that is the disagreeable and unavoidable in
experience while the father stands for escape from reality into all the realms of the imaginative and ideal. As time goes on, however, Wolfe’s hero more and more realizes that his satisfaction is not to be gained outside of reality but within it. And as all the strength and passion of his life turned more and more away from its childhood thoughts of aerial flight and escape into some magic and unvisited domain it seemed to him that the magic and unvisited domain, was the earth itself and all the life around him impulse to find the ideal in the real, which leads Eugene to turn from the fairy like beauty of the life of the rich to seek his satisfactions in dark streets where poverty makes closer contact with the primary facts of the earth.

Another form of psychic adjustment is that associated with the images of the rock and of the rover of time. He has a passion for countless multitudes, a craving to know them all and to absorb them all into his being, and out of the entirety of human experience to distill the magic portion. It is a similar need to identify himself with the whole of life that leads him to brood so much on the rover of time, flowing forever out of the immense and populous past, carrying all ages, all races, in solution in its waters; flowing steadily on into the future as into traces out the common
destiny of men. His appetite is insatiable. He can be content with nothing less than the whole of this eternal river to absorb it all into himself to drown himself in it to lose his personal identity in the vast anonymous flow of time. It is a titanic and impossible undertaking, and more than once the author records his failure. Evans presented the situation:

What have we taken from you, protean and phantasmal shape of time? What have we remembered of our million images, of your billion weavings out of accident and number, of the mindless fury of our dateless days, the brutal stupefaction of our thousand streets and payments? What have we seen and known that is ours forever? Gigantic city, we have taken nothing not even a handful of your trampled dust we have made no image on your iron breast and left not even the print of a heel upon your stony hearted pavements. The possession of all things, even the air we breathed, was held from us, and the river of life and time flowed through the grasp of our hands forever, and we held nothing for our hunger and desire except the proud and trembling moment, one by one. Over the trodden and forgotten words, the rust and dusty burials of yesterday, we were born again into a thousand lives and deaths, and we were left forever with only the substance of our waning flesh, and the haunting of an accidental memory, with all its various
freight of great and little things which passed and vanished instantly and cools never be forgotten...

There are intimations as the story progresses that Wolfe is coming to seek the solution not in the piling up of experience but in sorting it out. In his dreams Eugene Gant begins to strain towards some more classic view of life. “Even human grief, pain and trouble took on a color of classical perfection, of tragic grandeur, and the tortured and distressful skein of human life, with all that is ugly, trivial, and disgusting in it, too on the logical pattern of design and ordered destiny.”

Anteus Earth Again chronicles minor episodes in provincial France, including meetings with a countess who runs a cheap boarding house and a marquise to whom Eugene is unwillingly introduced as a correspondent for the New York Times. *Kronos and Rhea: The Dream of Time* does not parallel the story of the Titans; but in terms of Eugene’s ramblings through Tours, Marseille, Dijon, and Arles there are suggestions of all periods of time since Homer, together with contacts of Europe and America. *Faust and Helen*, the ten-page concluding chapter and book, briefly sums up the voyage home and, at the dock in France, the meeting with Esther:

He turned, and saw her then, and so seeing her, saw for a fading moment only the pleasant image of the
woman that perhaps she was, and that life saw. He never knew: he only knew that from that moment his spirit was impaled upon the knife of love.\textsuperscript{4}

The sequence of development would be more clearly rendered by the bare geography of the huge novel: Alltamont, Harvard, New York, England, Paris, Southern France and the voyage home. In a sense, the book is all middle. In the Altamont section one is reminded at length of the banalities Eugene is fleeing from, but they would hardly be clear without previous knowledge of \textit{Look Homeward, Angel}. Harvard and New York represent a fuller knowledge of the world, and the conflict between the academic approach the reality and reality itself.

In order to strengthen the contrast, Wolfe omitted almost every favourable aspect of his university experience. George Pierce Baker may have had something of Hatcher’s snobbery: “You know, Barrie was saying the same thing to me the last time I saw him”\textsuperscript{5}; but Baker was also the man who welcomed the gangling boy from North Carolina, and of whom Wolfe wrote in 1923: “He is a wonderful friend and he believes in me.”\textsuperscript{6} After the presentation of \textit{Welcome to Our City} in May, 1923, Baker took Wolfe’s acquaintance with Baker, apparently, did not fit in with
the fictional scheme which governed *Of Time and the River*. The troubled friendship with Kenneth Raisbeek was strongly emphasized in this part of the novel because of its sequel in Europe. His concentration on Raisbeck (Starwick) led Wolfe to omit friendships, which seem to have been genial: Henry Carlton, Frederic L. Day, Robert Dow, Olin Dows, and George Wallace. Of Wolfe’s academic courses and professors no details whatever are given in the novel; yet his academic experience was almost wholly satisfying and stimulating. Professor Lowes was then in the midst of writing *The Road to Xanadu*, a seminal book on the ways of the imagination; Wolfe did well in the two courses (Romantic Poets, the Renaissance) with Lowes, and wrote appreciatively of him to a North Carolina friend. Even Kittredge, whose Shakespeare course Wolfe audited, was not turned into a fictional character. Harvard gave Wolfe a considerably greater respect for intellectual values, to judge from casual references in his letters; but emphasis on them did not fit the plan of the novel.

In a similar way, Wolfe’s treatment of his experience at New York University is fragmentary and highly selective. The period of the novel included only the spring and summer terms of 1924 as a basis for Eugene’s life as a teacher. Yet, since the novel was largely
written between 1930 and 1934, one might expect those early terms to be fictionally enriched by the perspective of Wolfe’s six-year association with the university. Actually, the reverse is true. After Book II, “Young Faustus,” there follows “Telemachus,” a section of nearly a hundred pages occupied with Eugene’s anxious waiting for the acceptance of his play and with aimless episode of being jailed in a South Carolina town with three drunken companions. Book IV, “Proteus,” combines Eugene’s teaching experience with his impressions of New York; the chaotic affairs of Robert Weaver, a college friend; and trips away from New York, especially a visit to the palatial home on the Hudson of a wealthy young friend. This latter episode occupies nearly a hundred pages.

Only five chapters deal directly with his teaching and more than half of the forty pages are devoted to Eugene’s relation with a single student of his first term. This student, Abe Jones, focuses the senses in his students. From the instructor’s rostrum Eugene looks down on “dark, ugly, grinning faces in their seats below him.” As he reads a Shakespearean sonnet, almost every one in the class of thirty people, in fact, as either engaged in conversation, or preparing to engage in conversation. Of one attentive student, Wolfe writers: “Mr. Boris Gorewitz always
remained faithful. He sat on the front row close, very close, ah fragrantly, odorously close, too, too close to his teacher! He took notes. When beauty was revealed he smiled murkily, showing large white wet-looking teeth.”

Abe Jone was also attentive after class, he waits for Eugene with questions and complaints. When Eugene can stand it no longer, he tells Abe that he will have him transferred to another section: “I’ve had all I can stand from you...Why you damned dull fellow...Sitting there and sneering at me day after day with your damned Jew’s face.” Abe protests:

Say! You’ve got the wrong idea...I don’t want to leave your class...why, that’s the best class I’ve got! Respect and friendship then follow. Eugene had not dreamed to find such a young man in New York, but he concludes, Abe was made of.

Later Eugene even goes to Abe’s home and acquires a certain puzzled interest in Abe’s tempestuous family. The treatment of Abe has been objected to as a smear. Judged as a literal and typical representative of the student body, Abe Jones may be a smear, but as a fictional episode combining the repulsions and attractions possible between a teacher and student of antithetic backgrounds, the passage is memorable. Wolfe’s
generalized charge of sexual aggressiveness in the women students has also been objected to: “they pressed upon him, breathing, soft and worm and full, as they cajoled, teased, seduced with lock or gesture, questioned trivial, aggressively, uselessly”¹¹. One man’s impressions of such students may differ from another man’s. Moreover, the emphasis in this passage may be intended as much to characterize Eugene— which it does—as to impart the literal truth about the coeds.

Wolfe’s letters and the recollections of his friends suggest a much more complex and, on the whole, more satisfactory experience with students than was allotted to Eugene. “My little devils like me,”¹² he confided to Mrs. Roberts in May, 1924. “I tell them every week that I’m no teacher.”¹³ Henry Volkening, a colleague whom Wolfe liked and knew well, says that Wolfe enjoyed hugely the classroom works. In conducting his classes, he was apparently haphazard, depending a great deal on rendering aloud and floods of enthusiastic comment, which students hesitated to interrupt. He also assigned oral book reports, which gave him opportunity for impromptu comment. One colleague says that “Wolfe came to New York University, despite his achievements at North Carolina and at Harvard, with no real
discipline: he lacked both method and substance when he began to teach.”

Even at the end, according to the teacher who replaced him, he depended greatly on the sheer force of his personality to hold his students: “God! Men, that is poetry! That is poetry!” He said after reading aloud Ben Jonson’s apostrophe to Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, Wolfe was a severe marker, giving only there as to classes totaling over a hundred students in his first term. Moreover, he customarily appended long, elaborate comments to the themes he returned.

In offering Wolfe a position at New York University, Professor Homer A. Watt told him he would find his students rough but eager. To Mrs. Roberts, Wolfe wrote his satisfaction at the prospect of teaching in an institution where he would be given great liberty, and he added: “The students, moreover, mainly Jewish and Italian, have come up from the East Side; many are making sacrifices of a very considerable nature in order to get an education. They are, accordingly, not at all the conventional type of college student. I expect to establish contacts here, to get material in my seven months’ stay that may prove invaluable,”

In similar vein he wrote to a Harvard friend, commenting: “I came without racial sentimentality—indeed with strong racial
prejudice concerning the Jew, which I still retain.” There is some reflection of this prejudice in the treatment of Abe Jones, but one actual student is emphatic in denying that he ever saw a trace of anti-Semitism in Wolfe’s classes. He was sufficiently well liked by his summer students in 1924 that they gave him a Dunhill pipe at the end of the course. At various times Wolfe could write to teaching as “work for which I had to affection” and of being “forced back into teaching,” yet when he resigned in 1928 he said:

I think one of the chief reasons for my leaving now is not that I dislike teaching, and find it dull, but that I may like it too well. From such comments, one concludes that, like most teachers—and many such comments, one concludes that, like most teachers and many other people some-times liked his job and sometimes loathed it.  

In particular, he made no secret that writing was his primary interest and he quite naturally devoted the time to reading themes and doing other routine chores. There were real satisfactions, however, even if they are hardly suggested in Of Time and the River. Wolfe’s relationships with his colleagues are also little treated in the novel. Eugene’s securing of his position is
briefly and impersonally noted. His fear of being discharged gives no hint of the department, manifested in Wolfe himself from the first. The “creature employed to oversee the work and methods of the instructors are caricatured as having ‘a mind of the most obscene Puritanism.”20 Other colleagues are represented only as a group consumed with envy and fear. Hardly two pages are devoted to them.

Wolfe’s actual experience was quite different. He was offered a position three days after he applied, for his academic record and references were excellent. Most of the twenty or so members of the department were young, and at various times during Wolfe’s stay there were a number of others with recognized literary talent: Leonie Adams, E.B. Burgum, Vardis Fisher, Frederick Prokosch, Margaret Schlauch, William Troy. Of these, Wolfe became well acquainted only with Fisher. He also knew well John Terry, a North Carolina friend, and Henry Volkening, whose reminiscences best supplement the negative impressions gained of the Wolfe of this period from the novel. Though Wolfe seems usually to have held himself aloof, he introduced himself to Volkening and talked until three in the morning after their first meeting. With Fisher he was often similarly loquacious.
After Wolfe’s first teaching, in 1924, he was repeatedly offered the opportunity to teach, being virtually told that whenever he needed a job there would be one for him. His salary increased from $1,800 a year (two terms) in 1924, to $2,400 in 1929-30. Due consideration was given to his teaching schedule by Professor Watt, and during his absence in 1925-26 Professor James B. Munn showed similar interest. Later Munn read a draft of *Look Homeward, Angel* and made encouraging comments. In January, 1929, when Wolfe’s novel had been accepted, and he needed some employment to keep him going during the spring, Munn found some teaching for Wolfe in the College of Fine Arts just after the publication of the novel.

Watt arranged for Wolfe to give a woman’s club lecture in New Jersey and later supported his application for a Guggenheim fellowship. That Wolfe recognized he was something of a privileged person in the department is indicated by his defence against such an opinion, which he believed was current. In his letter of resignation to Watt written on April 1, 1928, he apologizes for having been “surly, ill-tempered, unable to join happily with other people”\(^{21}\). During the weeks of his final work on his novel, he insists that he has always done his work conscientiously. In the
same letter he expresses appreciation for the humane consideration of a colleague stricken with tuberculosis. He concludes:

Let me assure you that I will never forget your kindness, and your generous comprehension, and that if any good distinction ever attaches to my name, I shall be proud to acknowledge my connection with this place—if any bad one, I shall keep silent. 22

In the light of all this mutual good will during six years, it is not surprising that publication of Of Time and the River in 1935 dismayed Wolfe’s friends:

It was received with incredulity, astonishment, anger, and grief at Washington Square, how could he who had broken bread amongst you, who had shared our limited fare and small rewards, treat us as he had done? Had he no sense of the betrayal of an enterprise to which he had committed so much of himself—a measure, at least, of others’ commitment? Allowances were such allowances were cold comfort. 23

The Harvard and Washington Square episode of Of Time and the River illustrate the same principle already demonstrated in Look Homeward, Angel.
Of Time and the River, came when Wolfe’s productive powers were at their peak. So excessive was the flowering in fact, that he had difficulty controlling the unforced rush of the words. It is the most typically Wolfean of the four major novels, for it has all the qualities popularly associated with its author. Poetry is still abundantly present; a youth still looks with wonder and pain and elation as he seeks fulfillment in the world, the novel is pleasantly diffuse, and it is long.

In a general way Of Time and the River matches Wolfe from 1920 to 1925. The story-line is bare. The opening page picks up Eugene the day after his conversation with Ben’s Ghost in the last chapter of Look Homeward, Angel, with his family around him. Eugene is awaiting a train to go north. He attends Harvard as a graduate student, returns home briefly before going to New York, teaches at a metropolitan university, visits a wealthy friend at a Hudson River estate, goes to Europe, and on the voyage back meets a woman who is to have great influence on his life. Properly Of Time and the River has been called a Novel on Wheels. It was published in 1935. One of the set judgments about Wolfe that needs correction is that he was doomed by his temperament, by narrow range of his talent, wrote the same book over and over
again. But whatever his temperament, his talent was broad enough for him to write a second book that was a striking departure from the first. *Of Time and the River* still has Eugene Gant as its central figure, but there its resemblance to *Look Homeward, Angel* ends. Wolfe analogues pursuits of absolutes, his disengagements from conventional fiction began with *Of Time and the River* and continued without break to the end of his career.

Typical of Wolfe’s intention to represent rather than fictionalize was his passion to record what was transient and fleeting, what he could not possibly get to know intimately and from the inside. On a fast moving train passing through a small town, Eugene sees men eating a dinner. He sees them for an instant and will never see them again. Yet he is seized with an urge to describe that one evanescent moment, as somehow representative of what all the eaters in all the dinner in the country are doing. He is looking at them not as a pointer of sculpture, seeing in their posture something revealing and essential.

This is a tableau, a detail for his endlessly expanding moral not so much about men and women and the story of their lives as
about the nature, texture, and feel of experience. His impulse was to go beyond the unique and particular, and seize the representational, which was another way of allying himself with the permanent. A key to the difference, and indeed to Wolfe’s radical departure from the traditional novel, lay in a statement near the end of Look Homeward, Angel. To the author, the passions of life were greater than the actors. Henceforth, he is to deal more with the more passions, less and less concerned with the individual characters even the two heroes will often be seen standing about idly or disappearing altogether while the main business of the books goes on and more with the painting of impersonal matter-Social and Geographical and scopes; voyages by train or ship, psychological portraits of the souls not only of men but of cities New York, London, Munich, Paris; Projections of semi mythological figures like Bascom Pentland, Dick Drosser and Nebraska Crane, each of whom possesses some special passion or some particular genius that lifts him beyond the ordinary human.

In Of Time and River there is a persistent undertone away from him. The process goes on intermittently through the novel and is never completed, but the best thing in it are the scenes
where Eugene is only a stander or at most a convenient observing eye; indeed the most tiresome and prolix sections are those that centre on his private self. It is not a novel he is after but a tone symphony. Men and women are neither less important but nor does more so than engines, bridges, deserts, rivers. And the definite personality i.e. the traditional hero or anti hero is to be replaced by the omniscient author playing the role of an impersonal God.

*Of Time and the River* begins with Eugene on a railway platform, waiting to leave Altamont. This is a recognizable and authentic beginning, but there the expected sequence ends. With the start of the train journey carrying Eugene North, the book lurches away from its tie with *Look Homeward, Angel* and goes off on a direction of its own. From this moment forward, it steadily loses its capacity to be finished. Perkin’s arbitrary decision to end it at a certain point is not an aesthetic judgment but a commercial one. As the publisher, he wants to bring out a second book by Wolfe before the success of the first has utterly faded from view. The end he decides on Eugene’s meetings Mrs. Jack abroad ship is not satisfactory if the book is considered as a traditional novel.
It abruptly introduces a new character and a new relationship so that the end is not really the end but a new beginning. Almost six years after the appearance of *Look Homeward, Angel*, confronted with an author who moaned at the thought of finishing and pleaded on every occasion for just a six months more, Perkins was driven to extreme measures. What Perkins does not realize, what Wolfe himself is only vaguely consciousness of at this time is that he has slipped into a literary mode from which the orthodox milestones and landmarks have vanished a mode based on scene, passage, and bas-relief rather than on character, story, and sequence? Where the book ends does not really matter, one place is good or as bad –as another. In the complex misunderstanding and tensions of 1934-35, Wolfe suffered a special kind of authorial misery and there sprang up between him and Perkins a sore point that is never to be resolved.

Eugene in 1920, is on the Altamont train platform, accompanied by his mother, his sister Helen and her husband waiting for the train that will take him away from the South to his mother’s country, to the North, his father’s.

At least the train arrives and with it *Of Time and the River* starts off its own town. The train is, of course, no ordinary train,
but a demonic apparition from some other kingdom that Wolfe conjures up with help from Dante. The fifty-page train Journey that follows lives up this advance billing. It is a brilliant demonstration of the new Wolfe and the first large scale example of where he is heading. Where he goes from the window of the speeding train or from depot platforms during stops is registered not through a novelist’s eye but a moralist.

Towns, streets, squares bathed in limpid moonlight moves on the side of hills, women standing in front of them with snuff sticks in their mouths and ragged urchins in their arms. The dazzling alternation of landscape between towering peaks and sudden flat plains—these do not feed the understanding or exposition of the characters observing them but are ends in themselves. Eugene and not they are more to serve him. He talks with people on the train; he visits his dying father in a Baltimore hospital. These moments are not used to advance our knowledge of Eugene. He does not grow or change, is not revealed during their course. They are interludes, breathing spells, while author and reader gather themselves for the next phase of the journey.

Later as Eugene watches the milling crowd at the Boston railroad station, a place suggests to him the theme and indirectly
the title of the novel as well. They streamed in and out of the portals of that enormous station in unceasing swarm; great trains steamed into empty them, and others steamed out loaded with their lives and all was moving, changing, swarming, on forever like a river, and as fixed unutterable in unceasing movement and in changeless change as the great river is and time itself. Again this moment in the station like the long train journey that precedes it, suggests the universal rather than the particular. All the scenes of the station everywhere in the world are like this one. And again there is no visible effect upon Eugene who is there to record it as Wolfe himself would, were it convenient for Wolfe to appear as himself. Eugene is present not as a character in the novel but as the author's willed and obedient surrogate. He records for more that he reacts.

After getting settled at Harvard, Eugene looks for his uncle Bascom Pentlant, who had migrated to Bascom years before and had undergone a startling change of life from preacher to real estate operator. Almost forty five pages are devoted to uncle Bascom; and his portrait, on the heels of the train journey, is the second extended section of the Trojan horse, Wolfe is building inside in the frame work of his novel. If Of Time and the River is
read as a novel about the further experiences of Eugene Gant, the lengthy appearance of uncle Bascom can only be taken as bizarre digression. Though he assaults his nephew with torrential advice on morality and provides him with priceless entertainment in his legal –theological harangues with motorists, clients, indeed anyone who happens to be around harangues as intricate, protracted and noisy as to arouse whole neighbors his effect on Eugene is zero. And if it is Eugene’s story we are anxious to get on with, Uncle Bascom’s prolonged presence must be regarded at catastrophic to the development of the novel at this point, if, however, we look upon the book as a sequence of sculptures and frescoes, the portrait of uncle Bascom is indeed more than a portrait, it is vibrant phenomenon, is an absolute marvel of energy and strength. He is one of the great clowns in the pantheon of the grotesque.

The search for the enduring essence of things locked inside their immediate existence is the aim of Wolfe’s tableau art. In this he is profoundly different from Plato who also searched for ideal essences but sought to purge them of their ties with the world of sense. Wolfe roots himself in the world of sense that is his jumping off place. In his pursuit of the representational, he does
not want to leave the sensory behind or get rid of it, but take it with him; it is the ground that feeds, sustains, and makes credible his drive for the ideal. It is because uncle Bascom exists in the flesh, because the locomotive on the train journey north exists in actuality that Wolfe can release them into the ultimate. The success of his art in its new direction begins with the accuracy and vividness of his sense perception. This is illustrated once again in the next great scene of the book, the death of old Gant. Perhaps the most celebrated account of death in modern literature appears in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. There is all darkness and terror, suffocating envelope into which the dying man sided by slow degrees, Oliver Gant dies in the opposite manner, in an ecstatic transfiguration that proves as powerful as the final fatal rush of hemorrhaging blood. Just before “a blind black fog swam up and closed above his head”, Just before “his brain faded into night”\(^24\), his own father appears to him in a blazing vision of immortality, bracing him with a surge of confidence at the very moment of death.

Wolfe’s interest has shifted from character to scenes from psychology to panorama, from the exploration of ecology, both physical and social. In the change of focus, Eugene undergoes
radical surgery. The new one has been transformed into a fixed instrument, an acetylene torch that blows red-hot but whose function is to shape something other itself. Even in the personal sequence *Of Time and the River* our attention is drawn more readily to the brilliantly rendered passage on subjects having relatively little to do with Eugene – the slack, heavy, dangerous policeman in the small southern towns, the hills of North Carolina in October invoked with sonorous lyrical eloquence than to the sporadic invective and emotional flowing out of Eugene’s superheated self. The profound effect *Of Time and the River* had upon Wolfe himself is indicated by the striking fact that he was moved to write a book on how he wrote it of his four novels, this was the only one to rate that much separate attention from him.

*Of Time and the River* is a sustained attempt to turn the temporal into the eternal, to find some way of funneling the first two time categories into the massive permanence of the third. This aim is signaled formally by the mythological tags, both ancient and modern, given to the eight parts of the novel; these include the names of men like Orates, Jason, and Faust and Gods like Proteus and Antaeus; they go back to the parents of the Zeus himself. This is a deliberate effort to plug Eugene and the passing
flux of past and present time into an immortal and unchanging
circuit and Wolfe is willing to risk being thought pretentious in
order to announce and anchor his larger intention in the very
table of contents of his work.

In the years at Harvard, three personalities impressed him
eventually and made their way into Of Time and the River. One
was his uncle Henry Westall, Bascom Pentland in the novel, who
had migrated to Boston, gone to divinity school and had been
ordained as a Unitarian Minister, then he gave it up to become a
real estate operator. The grotesque fusion of God and Mammon in
this figure so closely related to him by blood aroused Wolfe’s
imagination, as the more extreme and extravagantly figure was, of
course, George pierce Baker, Professor Hatcher in the novel, one
of the reigning Gods in Wolfe’s private pantheon, not because of
any striking personal traits but for what appeared to be his
mysterious, indeed awesome power to release the genius of
budding awesome power to release the genius of budding play
wrights and midwife their careers. Baker extracted a number of
plays from his young Southern disciple, submitted them to
extensive commentary and criticism, got them produced at
Harvard, and encouraged Wolfe to try his luck on Broadway and
become a professional play-Wright. This was certainly over and beyond the call of duty, though well within Baker’s conception that grew close to Wolfe was Kenneth Raisbeck, Francies Starwick in the novel. Though only two years Wolfe’s senior, he was Professor Baker’s assistant and exercised a kind of authority over the younger man that was a reflection of Baker’s.

The image of the word is of peculiar importance because this is the record of an author’s life. His natural weapon and tool is the word. And his goal is inevitably conceived of in terms not merely of happiness, of experience, of possession, but in terms of understanding, of expression and their judgment of life. But in the case of the artist this often takes on the proportions of a major obsession. And it is perhaps even more the case in modern times since the virus of romanticism entered in the blood of our race, and since with growing knowledge and doubt, with growing sophistication- it has become so much more difficult to see our way clearly, to encompass experience in one comprehensive formula, to find some word of assurance and comfort for a soul distracted and torn as under. The French in the nineteenth century called this the maldusiecle, the sickness of the age. But they were largely content to utter their doubt and despair without
any strenuous effort to throw them off. In America today, when the occasion for doubt is perhaps even greater, but where there is still the determination to assert some faith it is an undertaking even more difficult, more maddening.

*Of Time and the River* follows the main sequence of Wolfe’s life September, 1920, when he wanted to Harvard, until August, 1925, when he met Mrs. Bernstein at the end of his homeward voyage from his first trip to Europe. There are, however, many omissions and shifts of emphasis. Wolfe’s experience at Harvard and at New York University, are of special interest and are well documented. People can, therefore, compare his fictional treatment with the facts. The Harvard period occupies the whole of Book II, *Young Faustus*, and two hundred and thirty five pages of the nine hundred page novel. Only a third of this space is devoted to Eugene’s university life, which is represented by these episodes: his mad delight in the library, Chapter VIII; his meeting with Starwick, professor, Hatcher’s assistant in the playwriting course, Chapter VIII; five chapters satirizing Hatcher and his students.

In a similar way, Wolfe’s treatment of his experience at New York University is fragmentary and highly selective. The period of
the novel included only the spring and summer terms of 1924 as a basis for Eugene’s life as a teacher. Yet, since the novel was largely written between 1930 and 1934, one might expect those early terms to be fictionally enriched by the perspective of Wolfe’s six year association with the university. Actually, the reverse is true. After book II, “Young Fautus”, there follows “Telemachus” a section of nearly a hundred pages occupied with Eugene’s, anxious waiting for the acceptance of his play and with the aimless episode of being jailed in a South Carolina town with three drunken companions. Book 4, “Proteus”, combines Eugene’s teaching experience with his impressions of New York; the chaotic affairs of Robert Weaver, a college friend who trips away from New York; especially a visit to the palatial home on the Hudson of a wealthy young friend. This latter episode occupies nearly a hundred pages.

These novels are, autobiographical in source but they are not autobiographical in treatment in any full sense. In neither book did Wolfe set down a fair or literal account of his experience. He selected those scenes and characters which would be useful in developing fictional themes. In Of Time and the River he was dealing with more recent experience, which in 1935 was not fully assimilated. The conflict between the provincial boy and the life of
Cambridge and New York is a valid Pattern. The conflict between the sensitive, creative mind and the great university on one hand and metropolitan life on the other is another valid pattern. Wolfe tried to combine the two, and in doing so seems to have over simplified his own experience. Despite the floods of words, the pattern remains too geometrical to be convincingly human. Academic life has been caricatured so long that a stereotype has been created. The first part of his second novel would be better if he had made bolder and richer use of his own unique passage through Harvard and New York University.

Lacking the opportunity to make such close comparisons between Wolfe’s European experiences and the latter part Of Time and the River, we suspect that there too, he was somewhat betrayed by his anxiety to convert his raw material into the approved modes of melodrama and sentiment, striking as are many of the European episodes – The Oxford romance, the abortive love affair with Ann, the quarrel with Starwick, the impoverished Countless. He insists that basically, all creative work is autobiographical, but he concedes that his use of his materials may have been “too naked and direct for the purpose of work of art”.

25
The picture he paints of the workshop in Of Time and the River is a satiric attack on pretension and lifeless aestheticism, although his portrait of Professor Baker as Professor Hatcher, while tainted with malice, is still drawn with respect. Wolfe taught at the university, satirically represented as the school of utility cultures in Of Time and the River, intermittently until the spring of 1930. During this period he made several European tours, met and had a violent love affair with Mrs. Aline Bernstein, a scene and costume designer, seventeen years his senior and a married woman with two children. She is the Esther Jack of his later novels. The frame work of travel, however, does not provide a sufficiently tight structure to give the novel unity and Robert Penn Warren’s 1935 assessment was in great measure true; What Wolfe had thus far produced was fine fragments, really voluminous notes from which a fine novel, or several fine novels, might be written. Years later William Styron echoed these sentiments, saying that in Wolfe’s last three novels many of the great set pieces hold up with their original force but also finding in them so much how that palls and irritates. Whether one calls Of Time and the River a fictional thesaurus or a literary anthology, no label completely describes this novel that Wolfe laboured over for years.
It contains a variety of literary forms: dithyrambic chant, catalogues, word play, exercises, declamations, meditations, parodies, sketches, essays, fantasies, journal notes. Certainly this Plethora of forms and digressions that often prevent the action form moving does not make up a conventional novel. *Anthology* probably is the best descriptive term for this gigantic work whose effect is that of a collection of related but disparate entities.

At first glance, *Of Time and the River* appears to be structured on a mythological foundation. Wolfe divides the novel into eight books: *Orestes*, *Flight before Fury*, *Young Faustus*, *Antaeus*, *Earth Again*, *Kronos and Rhea*, *The Dream of Time*, *and Faust and Helen*. While this mythological and literary association is not integral to the plot, they suggest a traditional heroic context for Eugene’s adventures. However, Wolfe’s that talent was for portraiture, not the creation of modern myth. He vividly portrays Eugene under the various circumstances and relationship of leaving home, arriving in the city, and discovering Europe under and he depicts Starwick with his small but finely appointed Cambridge apartment, his spectacles with thick old fashioned silver rims and silver handles, his spats and elegant light cane, and his dog named Tag. Other colourful minor
characters in the Boston sequence are professor Hatcher and members of his workshop, Ed Horton is from Iowa, and he and his wife Effec represent common life in contrast to Starwick refinement. Oswald Ten Eyck, a frail man who gave up his $8,000 job with the Hearst Syndicate to study playwriting, is doomed to failure just as Horton apparently is. Others are briefly but vividly sketched. Hugh Dodd has an earnest stammering eagerness; a man known only as wood prides himself in officious epigrams “Barrie is a stick of taffy, floating upon a Sea of molasses”26, Gray is a young patrician from Philadelphia, such people are vivid creatures but not suggestive of mythic counterparts.

When Wolfe returns the novel to Altamont, excellent characterization continues. He gives a detailed portrayal of Hugh McGuire, who spends long nights in his hospital office drinking corn liquor from a jug while he reads letters the woman he loves has written to another man. But in the end McGuire cannot save Gant, snatched by cancer. The reader, who has witnessed Wolfe’s escapades and who remembers the disruptive path of his marriage, has come to know that a name he had spoken only twice in forty years, her white face and her worn brown eyes turned
towards him with the quick and startled look of an animal “Eliza,” he said, “quietly, you have had a hard life with me, a hard time, I wasn’t to tell you that I am sorry”.  

Eliza’s response consists of a few broken words, and the narrative voice reveals her true emotion and suddenly these few simple words of regret and affection did what all the violence, abuse, drunkenness and injury of forty years has failed. “to digging her first into her closed eye quickly with the pathetic gesture of a child, she lowered her closed eye quickly with the Pathetic gesture of a child, she lowered her head and wept bitterly.” Such a scene shows Wolfe at his best, not only portraying convincing characters but also conveying emotion that goes to the heart. Quite a different character portrait is that of the Simpson family, whose daughter Genevieve is courted by Eugene. However, Eugene’s interest is not really in the daughters but in discovering the family secret.

In the section Proteous: The city, Eugene begins his teaching career. Among many his predominantly Jewish students is Abraham Jones, who, with his family, is another interesting minor character. Wolfe devotes nearly one hundred pages to another phase of Eugene’s life, his friendship with Joel Pierce and his
family, who live on their Hudson River estate. In particular, Wolfe recounts the night the hopeful young Eugene reads his play aloud to Joel and his sister whose attention and praise contrast sharply with the relative indifference of his own family. Memorable details are also given of Eugene’s fellow occupants of New York’s hotel Kopold. Although Mrs. Grey, Mrs. Martin, Doctor Withers, Mrs. Buckles and Doctor Thornton play only minor roles. Yet Wolfe makes them credible characters.

Once in Europe, Eugene finds innumerable people to meet ignore or retreat from. In the Jason’s Voyage section, Wolfe introduces not only the Coulson family and their boarders but also the Rhodes scholars who irritate Eugene with their presentations yet simultaneously arouse his envy. In Paris there are Elinor, Ann and Starwick, in or leans there is the incredible and outrageous countess Decaux, a guest at the grand Hotel Du Monde d Or leans, who when Eugene mentions that he is a writer, jumps to conclusion that it suits her schemes.

Wolfe’s hauntingly beautiful lyrical passages also add to the success of his style. Although some are too long, others are moving and effective. While these passages may not advance the plot, they provide moments of reflections and mediation just as
arias in an operas provide introspection. The *Talemachus* section for example, opens with W.O. Gant dead and as Eugene lies in a bed in his mother’s house, the narrative voice ruminates on the month of October and on the bittersweet emotions that come with the fail of the year and with death. Wolfe imagines October in Virginia, Maine, the Palisades, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and throughout America. His Whitmanesque sweep and penchant for the catalogue are especially effective in these seven pages. In almost every paragraph, concrete details have been carefully selected as Wolfe characterizes a month of the year. Even a brief sampling illustrates his seemingly inexhaustible responses to October and the chain of association the month holds demonstrates his poetic force.

One of the lyric passages opens the Kronos and Rhea section, in which Wolfe catalogues various scenes that occurred in different centuries. The motif, play us a tune on an unbroken spinet, introduces Mozart playing in a parlor. The scenes that follow show Athens in an average sitting with its back to the fire in the middle ages, Tobias Smollet passing the window, and voices throughout America, where people lead lives more dark and strange than the lives of the Saxon thanes. Wolfe continue this
indulgence in his dream of time, the last part of this section, which ranges across centuries and continents and ends with Eugene’s persistent cry. “Father, I know that you love, though I have never found you.”²⁹

This cry again emphasizes Wolfe’s innumerable debts to Joyce, since it echoes Stephen Dedaulds’s search for the father in *Ulysses*. Although Wolfe treats time in many ways throughout *Of Time and the River*, one of the most effective mediations, and one of the finest scenes in the entire novel, is the Ces Arbers passage in the Kronos and Rhea section. Eugene is in a French side walk café. The waiter, wearily piling up the chairs puzzles over this late customer who keeps muttering. “Ces arbress... Ces arbres Jai-Mais Je Les ai vu vu,”³⁰ when Eugene finally realizes that the waiter does not understand his words at all, he leaves. What had so perplexed him was his having looked from the café chair to the scene in front of him the great wraithed branches of trees that blended into a memory that he would not surface and trying to discover the meaning he knew was there.

Wolfe is successful in conveying the details of Van Gogh’s painting the Road menders, and he also succeeds in linking different periods of time. The present time links with the
past time. That memory triggers Eugene’s memory and calls up unfathomed memories of home, and something in his heart he could not utter. That which lies too deep for words is time immutable, that time of great mountains and rivers. This long and unconventional novel has many memorable parts. Of Time and the River still finds readers who will argue that it is, if nothing else, a book of magnificent fragments of his experience.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Ibid., p. 59.

3 Ibid., p. 68

4 Mcelderry, Bruce Robert, Anteus *Earth Again Chronicles*,


5 Ibid., p. 133.

6 Ibid., p. 138.

7 Ibid., p. 168.

8 Ibid., p. 426.

9 Ibid., p. 432.

10 Ibid., p. 429.

11 Ibid., p. 452.

12 Ibid., p. 423.

13 Ibid., p. 445.

14 Ibid., p. 452.

15 Ibid., p. 435.

16 Ibid., p. 449.

17 Ibid., p. 412.

18 Ibid., p. 412.