CHAPTER – II

LIFE AS ART - THE WOLFEAN EGO ON TRIAL

Drawing upon Edward Said’s observation that the novel is a discreet analogy of the mechanism of the writer’s life, Nadine Gordimer maintains that “Broken up piece meal or not, mechanism or not, the author’s life is the ‘actual event’ of the making of the book. On this premise, not only the writer embalmed in his words, his work is seen as determined by the limits of his own life” (1996: 13). Herself a creative writer, Gordimer’s understanding of the intricate and inevitable relation between life and art is true of all creative writers. As an intense writer deeply involved in life, Thomas Clayton Wolfe, makes similar claims.

At Purdue University’s annual Literary Awards Banquet in May 1938, Wolfe has said:

... If the artist is not first and foremost a living man - and by this I mean a man of life, a man who belongs to life, who is connected with it, and who draws the sources of his strength from it - then what kind of man is he? (1964: 43)

Wolfe’s has been an attempt, in his works, to grapple with the insoluble mystery of life. In case of Wolfe, the fine line between life and art gets blurred. However, the essence of art as dialectical matches
with the contradictions of life. It is in opposition of things as they are that both life and art become meaningful. The self in the act of creativity becomes the central focus.

The word ‘self’ is sometimes used to mean the whole series of a person’s inner mental states and sometimes the spiritual substance to which they belong. The use of the word ‘self’ has the effect of confining the question to the unity of the mind and of preventing the answer from relying on the temporal persistence of the body. This has made the unity problem seem intractable, especially when the fluidity of mental images, feelings, and the like is contrasted with the temporal persistence their owner needs.

In Augustine’s *Confessions*, there are two distinct selves in the book - *what I once was* and *what I now am* - and between these two identities lies the crucial occasion when Augustine’s “past sins” (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 84) were “forgiven and covered up, giving me joy in You, changing my life by faith and Your sacrament” (*Ibid.*, 84). Throughout the book, Augustine evokes his life explicitly as the present recollection of the past, in which Augustine as he was is co-present with Augustine as he is.
The devices of the double authorship, the-work-within-the-work, and the paper-bags provide Carlyle with the literary excuse to violate calendar time in the life of Teufelsdroeckh by leaps and returns which seem random but in fact bring out its immanent and evolving design. Through the shifting perspectives, the temporal oscillations, and the tenebrous rhetoric, we make out a familiar romantic metaphysic and life history. An I confronts the not-I: “You are alone with the universe, and silently commune with it, as one mysterious Presence with another” (Ibid., 130 - 31). In this subject-object negotiation/transaction, the mind is primary and prepotent, and is sometimes represented as the sole ground of experience.

John Stuart Mill relied largely on Wordsworth’s Preface to the Lyrical Ballads and supported the expression or uttering forth of feeling. Poetry, maintains Mill, anticipating T.E. Hulme and laying the theoretical groundwork for the practice of symbolists from Baudelaire through T.S. Eliot, embodies itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind.

Abrams indicates the degree to which the innovations of the romantics persist in anti-romantic theorists, as in a famous comment by
T.S. Eliot: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (quoted in Abrams, 1966: 25).

Psychoanalysis by its very nature encompasses all human mental and emotional phenomena. The lives of creative writers abound in episodes of inhibition, despair, restlessness, moodiness - alternating with episodes of creativity. This is very much true of Thomas Wolfe. As disequilibria have been assumed to be intrinsic to genius, the artist becomes an enigmatic person. Art, as Freud maintains, lives because of the power of psychologic truth and for its transformed and transcendent beauty. “Since the arts deal with truth and beauty as they portray and stimulate people, it would seem self-evident that the truth about people - about human nature mirrored in and forced by and reacting upon world nature is basic” (Schneider, 1950: 18). Various theories of psychology put the author at the centre of the creative act. Whether he brings into the work slices of his own life to transcend some of his pain and suffering, may or may not be important to critics. But the fact
remains that all works of art are subjective. "Literature primarily registers and arouses conflicts, and no theoretical preparation can spare the critic the necessity of submitting himself to that conflict". (Crews, 1970: 19)

In any period, the theory of mind and the theory of art tend to be integrally related. For the representative eighteenth century critic, the perceiving mind is a reflector of the external world; the inventive process consisted in a reassembly of ideas which are literal images, or replicas of sensations; and the resulting art work is itself comparable to a mirror presenting a selected and ordered image of life. By substituting a projective and creative mind and, consonantly, an expressive and creative theory of art, various Romantic critics reversed the basic orientation of all aesthetic philosophy. Through the allusion to the archetypal plant, Coleridge sees the mind as growing into precepts, conceived of the activity of the poetic imagination as differing from this vital, self-determining, assimilative process in degree rather than kind, and thus is able to envision the product of artistic genius as exhibiting the mode of development and the internal relations of an organic whole. His concept of poetic creativity, the self-organizing process, assimilating disparate materials by an inherent lawfulness into an
integral whole – borrows many of its characteristic features from the conceptual model of organic growth. It is Coleridge’s exploitation of this new aesthetics of organicism that he, more than Wordsworth, has contributed significantly to the theory of creativity and aesthetics. Dwelling on a poem as a poem, and on a poem as a process of mind, Coleridge is able to make use of the pregnant concept of a poem as a quasi-natural organism. Coleridge’s interest is persistently genetic - in the process as well as in the product, in becoming no less than in being. That is why Coleridge rarely discusses a finished poem without looking toward the mental process which evolves it; this is what makes all his criticism so characteristically psychological. The plant evolves spontaneously from an internal source of energy – “effectuates its own secret growth and organizes itself into its proper form” (quoted in Abrams, 1966: 172). An artifact needs to be made, but a plant makes itself. “The unity... is produced ‘ab intra’, but in mechanism, ‘ab extra’” (Ibid., 172). The organic form is innate. It shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. An organism is thus inherently teleological – since its form is endogenous and automotive.
Schiller emphasizes the primary split in the mind’s unity with itself, which converts unself-consciousness into self-consciousness – the awareness of the self as a subject distinct from the object it perceives, and the intervention of reflection and choice between instinct and desire. Thus the naïve poet, who is pure nature, composes not by reflection and rule but by an inner necessity, as “an undivided sensuous unity, and as a harmonizing whole” (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 214). The sentimental, or characteristically modern poet, on the other hand, is self-divided because he is self-conscious, and so composes in an awareness of multiple alternatives, and represents not the object in itself, but the object in the subject.

Nietzsche cites Schiller’s views on man’s self-division and the reintegrative function of art no less often than does Schopenhauer, his immediate predecessor in metaphysics. But Nietzsche is an archetypal myth-critic, and in this one aspect his theory of art is closer in outline to Blake and Shelley than to Schiller. In true Greek tragedy, he says, “Dionysus never once ceased to be the tragic hero” (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 318), for all tragic protagonists are “but masks of this original hero” (Ibid., 318). And the poet in creating the tragedy, the actors in performing it, and the audience in observing it, all lose their own
identities in a participation with the Dionysian – Apollonian synthesis of a “dissolution of the individual and his unification with primordial experience” (ibid., 318) which is at the same time a redemption of the individual in appearance. But it is the Dionysian intoxication, which is at the heart of the mystery of reintegration in that ultimate state – not, as in Marx, a social state, but a psychic state – in which man is reunited into a higher community, not only with other men, but also with alienated nature.

Critics from Sidney to Leavis have concerned themselves with the subtle connection between literature and life. The aesthetic movement seems to be a deviation from traditional concerns. Kant’s description of aesthetic judgment as an entirely disinterested satisfaction impressed critics during 1890–1920. But moralists agree with aesthetes in rejecting tendentiousness and moralizing. They all consider that literature does not work by directly expressing ideas or attitudes, but by embodying an experience of life in a form and diction necessary and suitable. James insists that the richness of a novel’s representation of life will depend on the writer’s ability to burst the technical conventions of the genre. Leavis believes that standards of judgment are intuitive and interpersonal. An important poem realizes
human experience more concretely and with a greater degree of actualization than an inferior one.

The term life is central to the criticism of Mathew Arnold, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence. Arnold maintains: “A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life” (quoted in Selden, 1988: 493). But to define what is life-enhancing is not easy. James feels that the value of a novel relates to that intensity of the impression of life it gives, but there can be no rule or guide to correctness: there must be freedom to explore life in all its bewildering complexity. The dynamic flow of life can be grasped only if fiction gives us life without rearrangement. The moral quality of a novel depends on its power to create the illusion of life. Lawrence is even more radical in his demand for immediacy of life. James recognizes that much hidden artistry is required to create the illusion of life, but Lawrence wants poetry to be “direct utterance from the instant, whole man” (Ibid., 493). Life itself has no finality, no finished crystallization, and so free verse should also be “instantaneous like plasm” (Ibid., 493). Lawrence appears to believe that it is possible to find a verbal form which exactly corresponds to the form of life, which is the soul and the mind and body
surging at once, nothing left out, utterance rushing out without artificial
form or smoothness.

Henry James, in *The Art of Fiction* (1884) says that a novel is in
its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to
begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to
the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and
therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.

An approach to the expressive orientation of literature is to be
found as early as Longinus’ discussion of the sublime style as having its
main sources in the thought and emotions of the speaker. Bacon
analyses poetry as accommodating the shows of things to the desires of
the mind.

A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting
from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and
embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts
and feelings. “Thus the poetry” Wordsworth writes, “proceeds whence
it ought to do, from the soul of Man, communicating its creative
energies to the images of the eternal world” (quoted in Abrams, 1966:
22). The paramount cause of poetry is not, as in Aristotle, a formal
cause, determined primarily by the human actions and qualities
imitated; nor as in neo-classic criticism, a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause - the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression, or the compulsion of the creative imagination which, like God the Creator, has its internal inertia of motion. The exploitation of literature as an index to personality first manifests itself in the early nineteenth century; it is the inevitable consequence of the expressive point of view.

As a young undergraduate at Harvard, Wolfe is influenced by John Livingstone Lowes. Lowes’ view of the nature of Coleridge’s imagination remained for Wolfe a truthful picture of the workings of the artist’s mind. Inspired by Lowes, he goes on to attempt to fill his well of unconscious cerebration with the materials from which his art is to flow: experiences, sights, sounds, people, books, and all the materials of art, both immediate and vicarious. Like Keats and other romantics, the life of sensory experiences become very crucial to Wolfe as an artist.

Wolfe is steeped in the romantic ethos of the expressive theory of art, and has followed the Coleridgean concept of organicity. But his striking particularity is his tendency to see and to express things in terms of oppositions or binaries. A typical native of the Southern states
of America, he, according to Holman, is fascinated by paradox, enamoured of ambiguity, devoted to the particular and the concrete; and although a dreamer of grandiose dreams, seldom the articulator of effective larger structures.

As a genius with a difference, Wolfe’s opulent language and unique literary style have elevated his fictional works to legendary status. It is difficult to speak of Wolfe but in extreme terms, in superlatives, for his friends, reviewers, and the public have used Hollywood adjectives – stupendous, gigantic, immense. Interestingly, Wolfe started thinking of himself in the same way and, in a sense, these qualifiers are appropriate to explain his genius. He is as hungry for experience as for food, for he is on a mission to explore life “with an encyclopaedic thoroughness” (Moser, 1967: 225). It is often difficult to separate the author from his writing, to distinguish the dancer from the dance:

He was driven by a hunger so literal, cruel and physical that it wanted to devour the earth and all the things and people in it ... He read insanely, by the hundreds, the thousands, the ten thousands.... It would now seem to him that ... at this moment something precious, irrecoverable was happening in the streets, and that if he could only get to it in time and see it, he would somehow get the knowledge of the whole thing in him – the source, the
well, the spring from which all men and words and actions, 
and every design upon this earth proceeds. (1935: 91-92)

Few writers have immersed themselves in the turbulent stream of 
experience more thoroughly than Wolfe; few writers have tried to touch 
more segments of America and know them with greater sensory surety. 
However, Wolfe is an exception, for he lives through the variegated 
experiences of life, attempting to articulate those experiences in his 
works. Like Whitman, Wolfe’s mission is to “celebrate myself, and 
sing myself” (Whitman, 1975: 63). Wolfe stands witness to this 
predicament of the author in the story “The Wolfe at the Door” 
(Fadiman, 1955, quoted in Holman, 1962: 37): the author himself 
knocking at the door of imagination. This story bears on the truth about 
Wolfe as an artist. The protagonist Uncle Habbakuk welcomes and asks 
the youth Beep the following questions:

“Where have you been, youth? Have you touched, tasted, 
heard, and seen everything? Have you smelled everything? 
Have you come out of the wilderness, the buried past ...? 
Have you embraced life and devoured it? Tell me! Open 
the adyts of your soul, Beep. (Ibid., 1962: 37)

The questions asked by Uncle Habbakuk to Beep were the 
questions Wolfe the man asks Wolfe the artist. He knocks at the doors 
of experience to embrace it in all possible forms and devour it. This
devourer of an artist continues to be an enigma, for he is in a quest to find answers to some fundamental problems of life that converged into art: "What is it that we know so well and cannot speak?" (*Ibid.*, 1962: 39)

Beep, like the artist, is trapped in his own confusion and asks, "What is it that we speak so well and cannot know?" (*Ibid.*, 1962: 39)

Beep's enquiries are those of Wolfe's, and his knowing mind continues to ponder over the insoluble contradictions that life unfolds before us.

Thus, embracing and devouring all experience becomes the only way to know the truth about the paradoxes of life for which Wolfe the artist knocks at the door. The reader expects the door to open to him. If it does open, seeing becomes problematic because the ways of seeing determine the essence of art.

We may venture to see Wolfe's writings as a dialectics or discourse of binaries. His vision of himself carries the same pattern of oppositions; in *The Web and the Rock* (1939), Esther Jack sums up the autobiographical protagonist:

He has the face of a demented angel ... and there is madness and darkness and evil in his brain. He is more cruel than death, and more lovely than a flower. His heart was made for love, and it is full of hate and darkness. (1939: 683)
Torn apart by contradictions, Wolfe develops into a schizophrenic personality, and his articulations bear testimony to that. However, his desire is to typify the American experience, but contradictorily, his theme has become loneliness and alienation of the incommunicable self. His subject matter was himself, his self-discovery and his groping towards self-knowledge. A recurrent twentieth century protagonist has been the novelist-hero engaged in a search for meaning that he finally discovers in the artistic process itself—a kind of aesthetic solipsism.

The nature of Wolfe’s works closely resembles the *Bildungsroman* tradition, a vogue begun by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-1796) and includes Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*. *Bildungsroman* and *Erziehungsroman* are German terms signifying “novels of formation” (M.H. Abrams, 1978: 112) or “novels of education” (*Ibid.*, 112). The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, as he passes from childhood though varied experiences—and usually through a spiritual crisis—into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world. An important subtype of the *Bildungsroman* is the *Kunstler-roman* (artist
novel) which represents the development of the novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity in which he recognizes his artistic destiny and achieves mastery of his artistic craft. Instances of this type include some of the major twentieth century novels: Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Mann's *Tonio Kroger* and *Dr. Faustus* and Gide's *The Counterfeiters*. From Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the tradition of *Bildungsroman* has been followed both in romantic and modernist writings. Wolfe's writings, though, do not follow a typical *Bildungsroman* frame, we understand that most of his novels are part of his life, in a fragmented sense.

Wolfe's artistic method is a combination of realistic representation and romantic declaration. It structures a contradictory or ambivalent view of life and art. While he is committed to the accuracy and exactitude regarding the actual world he is also concerned with that he has not personally experienced. His view of the nature and function of art is essentially rooted in the lived experience of life. The marked romanticism of his aesthetic theory, with a distrust of intellectualism stands at a polar extreme to the view he develops later on as a novelist obligated to represent the social scene.
During Thomas’ childhood, his mother bought a boarding house and moved into it, taking him and his brother Ben with her. Wolfe’s childhood was thus spent in a divided family, with itenerant boarders as companions. He regarded himself in later life as God’s lonely man. In 1933, he wrote to his sister: “I think I learned about being alone when I was a child about eight years old and I think that I have known about it ever since”. (quoted in Holman, 1975: 9)

This sense of alienation and ambivalence institute his works. Most of the characters in his works are persons familiar to him thinly veiled under modified names. The aesthetic distance between an artist and his fictional characters is mostly lacking in Wolfe’s works. The characters evolve not as depersonalized figures, but from Wolfe’s own encounters with them. Although he consciously does not use the defamiliarization technique, but he attempts to make the familiar disfamiliar without the dramatic effect achieved by Brecht in his plays. Of central interest to the Wolfe-scholar are the different names and characteristics adopted by the autobiographical protagonist in different works. He thereby facilitates the expression of some particular state of mind through a new protagonist. According to the Encyclopedia of Psychology (Vol.1, 1972: 47-48), affective ambivalence is a general
characteristic of schizophrenia. Wolfe is such a split personality as evident in his works. It is conjectured that Wolfe’s origin in the South of America imbues him with a fascination for contradictions or binaries, as also affords him his exuberance. These qualities carry into his characters, many of whom are historically and geographically located in the South. Among other characters who are located in the North, Esther Jack demands mention for the explosively ambivalent relationship with the autobiographical protagonist under two different names: Eugene Gant in Of Time and the River (1935) and George Webber in The Web and the Rock (1939).

In 1924, Wolfe accepted an appointment of instructor in New York University. Around this period he visits several European countries. His violent and passionate affair with Mrs. Aline Bernstein, a scene and costume designer eighteen years his senior and a married woman with two grown up children, is dramatized. She is the Esther Jack of his later novels.

Wolfe’s Of Time and the River (1935) is a mammoth work, continuing the chronicle of Eugene Gant’s sensibility from Look Homeward, Angel (1929). Of Time and the River opens as he leaves Altamont for Harvard, follows him there, to New York where he
teaches in the School of Utility Cultures, to Europe, where he begins the writing of a novel and has a frustrating love affair with a girl called Ann. Although *Look Homeward, Angel* lacks the traditional novelistic structure, it has a certain unity through its concentration on a family, a mountain town, and a way of life. In reading it, one is caught up in the sharp impression of youth and its exuberance. *Of Time and the River* has a thin plot but more introspection, less structural cohesion but more rhetorical flourish. Large segments of the book exists without thematic or plot relevance; some of the best scenes and most effective portraits seem to be dramatic intrusions; and it is only when one knows the rest of the story in *The Web and the Rock* (1939), that one is able to appreciate the climactic significance of the meeting with Esther with which *Of Time and the River* closes.

In 1938, Wolfe selects George Webber as his protagonist and writes: “The protagonist becomes significant not as a tragic victim of circumstances, the romantic hero in conflict and revolt against his environment, but as 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” (quoted in Holman, 1975: 16)
After Wolfe's death, his editor Aswell extracted *The Web and the Rock* (1939) from the mass of manuscripts that Wolfe had left. The new protagonist, Webber, is surprisingly like Eugene Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel*, although his physical characteristics are changed, as also his family life. He proceeds through childhood to college and then to New York. There he meets Esther Jack and the novel becomes the record of a tempestuous love affair. Then, Webber goes to Germany, is badly beaten in the Oktoberfest in Munich, and through a monologue between his body and soul, understands that he must turn from his immersion in himself and his past.

The second book which Aswell assembled is *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). It brings together in a narrative frame large units of material, which Wolfe had completed but only partially arranged at the time of his death. It continues the story of Webber, but in it what Wolfe means when he says that the protagonist is to be a "kind of polar instrument, round which the events of life are grouped" (quoted in Holman, 1975: 16), becomes clear. The work has the very loose narrative structure of Webber’s life: he returns from Europe, writes his book, goes to Libya hill for his aunt’s funeral, travels to Europe, sees the vacuity of fame in Lloyd Mcharg (Sinclair Lewis), travels in
Germany and comprehends the horror of the Nazi regime, and writes a long letter setting forth his credo.

Yet what gives the book vitality is not Webber and his experience, but the view of life, which is seen through him. Mr. Katamoto, Mr. Jack and the party at his house, Judge Rumford Bland and his usury, the satiric picture of the moral and material collapse of Libya Hill, Daisy Purvis, Lloyd McHarg, Foxhall Edwards and his family, Mr. C. Green, who jumps from the twelfth storey of a hotel, the frightened little Jew on the train out of Germany – it is in materials such as these that the dramatic strength of the book resides. You Can’t Go Home Again (1940) is freer than his other works of the rhapsodic assertion that so often replaces dramatic statement in Wolfe.

The third volume, which Aswell mines from the manuscripts, is The Hills Beyond (1941), a collection of fragments and sketches. In this fragment, Wolfe’s efforts at being an objective novelist has more immediate apparent success than they do elsewhere, and he seems to be moving much more toward the realism of the Southern frontier and away from the romanticism of his early career. With the publication of The Hills Beyond, most of Wolfe’s significant work has been in print, and, incomplete though it is as a record of his vast and ambitious
project, it is all that remains of his efforts to formulate in fiction a vision of himself and his world, which constitutes his life.

On the publication of *Of Time and the River* (1935), Wolfe writes: "I still sweat with anguish – with a sense of irremediable loss at the thought of what another six months would have done to that book – how much more whole and perfect it would have been. Then there would have been no criticism of its episodic character – for, by God, in purpose and in spirit, that book was not episodic, but a living whole and I could have made it so" (*Letters*, 1956; quoted in Holman, 1975: 21). The fact remains that only as a lyric recorder of his youth is Wolfe truly successful in the longer fictional forms. His great vision of being the critic of his society and the definer of his nation can be seen in fragments, but its large outline is shadowy and incomplete. It is for this reason that the central problems concerning Wolfe as a writer are as intimately tied up in his personality and his career as they are in his works. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., considers *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) as Wolfe’s only successful full length novel, and in his other works one almost has the feeling of an expense of talent in a waste of formlessness. Wolfe does not or may be cannot subject his ego to the discipline of his own creative imagination.
Wolfe always seems to feel that if the opposites are defined, the synthesis will result automatically. He is always stating a thing and its opposite and allowing the miracle of their co-existence to stand. In his works, the fact of his great talent and the fact of his ambitious projects are never submitted to the discipline of art which would have made a synthesis of them. They are allowed to co-exist without serious effort at fusion.

This aspect of Wolfe’s work points to its essential romanticism, to the extent to which it is embedded in the doctrine of self-expression and self-realization. His total work stands, as do so many other monuments of romantic art, as a group of fragments imperfectly bodying forth a seemingly ineffable cosmic vision in terms of the self of the artist. Although it contains large areas of poor and even bad writing, scenes that do not come off or that bear no relevance to what has gone before, rhapsodies that fail utterly to communicate, it also contains some of the best writing done by an American in the twentieth century, and it merits our examination.

One of Wolfe’s worlds is the very literal, immediate world of the 1920’s and 1930’s, a world presented in his fiction through objects, actions, persons and events apparently so directly drawn from life and
presented critically that their originals greeted them with angry recognition. The structure of his works seems to be the simple chronological pattern of his own life, their incidents reflecting those he participated in or witnessed. Exploring the close relationship of Wolfe’s work to his life, scholars have noted the use of direct experience and the representation of actual persons and events. Floyd C. Watkins comments: “There are many more than 300 characters and places mentioned by name or described in Look Homeward, Angel, and probably there is not an entirely fictitious person, place, or incident in the whole novel” (quoted in Holman, 1975: 5). The people of Ashville are merely represented under the thinnest and most transparent disguises, and the changes in name are as slight as Chapel Hill to Pulpit Hill, Releigh to Sidney, Woodfin Street to Woodson Street, or Reuben Rawls to Ralph Rolls. His father’s name is changed from W.O. Wolfe to W.O. Gant, his mother’s from Julia Elizabeth Westall Wolfe to Eliza Pentland Gant, and his brother’s from Ben Wolfe to Ben Gant.

This world is a representation of the social context, described with great accuracy and directness. It is the world of his inner self, a world of consciousness, inspiration, impressions, emotions, nostalgic memories, brooded over by a sense of the inexorable passage of dark
time. Wolfe articulates his inner world in ways that proves to be powerfully effective and affective. These two worlds are in conflict: the self in its insulated dream of time is surrounded by, but finds no door by which to enter the social context that constitutes its milieu. In his early works, Wolfe seems to be content to let these two worlds co-exist, but in some of his later works he attempts to effect a reconciliation of both worlds through a democratic dream. Thus, the world of Thomas Wolfe is actually three worlds: self, society and nation. And the problem of his art is that of not successfully integrating the three into a unity. Even if the desire for unity and synthesis is a growing awareness, a careful study of his works reveals that a sense of ambivalence is evident in most of his works. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has all the characteristics of a romantic artist, who perceives his own self as a product of the available materials (here – his personal experiences of life), never remaining static at a fixed point of time. Wolfe always refers to his works as the book - indicating the intended unity and wholeness of his artistic enterprise. And the changing, developing self corresponds to the Coleridgean concept of organicity of art. Wolfe thus situates his self in an immanent teleology where mind comes to itself
through loss of itself being in this world. The sense of loss and recovery of the self has been placed in the perspective of time.

A sense of alienation is at the core of Wolfe's attitude. He is haunted and anguished by life. He is caught up and finds no route of release, except death, from the crisis of existence. Like Kafka's Joseph K., he finds no answer to why he is arrested in flesh and blood in a flux of irreversible time. This gives him a sense of passage of time and makes him feel defeated. His short and restless life and the immensity of his feelings do not move in one desired direction. Obviously, the finer realizations of art and life become problematic as they go berserk and remain scattered and dispersed. This creates the disjuncture between his critical statements and their practice. A Story of a Novel (1936) is an important theoretical works in which Wolfe delineates the process of the making of a novelist. However, this work is not a disciplined, objective treatise, but an account of a struggling artist caught up in his ambivalence. As his works have been intensely autobiographical, it might be said that the sense of ambivalence has been very much a part of his growing up, which he is never able to transcend. His attachment to his mother, his mother's rejection of his father, and his relationship with others both men and women, are
psychologically significant. Thus, any meaningful study of Wolfe cannot overlook the psychological dimension of his works.

While most of his distinguished contemporaries like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Lewis and others have praised him, the academic critics are critical of his achievements. Obviously, the ambivalence in his works has allowed such extreme responses. Among critics, Holman offers an objective critique of his genius:

His (Wolfe's), like almost everything about life and his art, had two elements that were in opposition and a third that tended to reconcile the opposites. (1962: 1)

Whether Wolfe is able to reconcile the opposite worlds into a synthesis or form the opposites into an integrated vision is debatable. But the pulls of opposite poles are too pronounced in his works to be overlooked. Like Whitman, Wolfe attempts to make his self a cosmic one to devour everything. In most cases, however, it has remained only an attempt. The disjuncture between the intended objective and the actual realization of it apparently points at the ambivalence at different levels of Wolfe's creative endeavour. This thesis can be supported by Wolfe's own statement in The Story of a Novel:

It may be objected, it has been objected already by certain critics, that ... I have an almost insane hunger to devour
the entire body of human experience to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold. (1936: 46)

To discipline the intemperate excess and translate those ravenous experiences into art have been a struggle between the man of feeling and the man of reason. Very often the man of feeling has overtaken the artist disrupting the intended form, while projecting his ambivalence. Wolfe's style is an example of the struggle operative at various levels. He is at the same time intensely lyrical and objectively realistic. The two strands evidently make the task of critics difficult to objectively assess his works. As style represents the man, Wolfe's style also represents his own ambivalent self.

In many passages of Wolfe's writing, both realistic and highly lyrical modes co-exist. His mixed style bothers a sensitive reader even if the rhetorical passages extend and universalize a particular incident. They are often effectively wedded to their final dramatic context. The stylistic inconsistency reveals the fact that contrary impulses are at work. While one impulse with the exuberance of the imaginative candour moves towards full flow, the other never unbinds itself from the real world. Although a work of art resembles day-to-day world, it is never identical with it. One may look at connections between the world
of our daily experiences (reality) and the artistic world of imagination (unreal, fantasy), but any narrative representation of either of these worlds must be coherent in style. The lack of coherence and consistency indicates a split personality, ambivalent and diasparactive.

On Wolfe, William Faulkner has remarked: “I rated Wolfe first (among modern American writers) because we had all failed but Wolfe had made the best failure because he had tried hardest to say the most” (quoted in Holman, 1975: 20). Faulkner is also a Southerner and he has failed to see in the failure of Wolfe the seemingly uncontrolled and formless exuberance in his work. This aspect has become almost a critical truism that he possesses great talent but little control, a magnificent expertise over language, but a limited awareness of the demands of the plot, a sensuous recall that is nearly total but an almost shocking unwillingness to subject his material to critical elision.

Among the romantics, Keats talks about the artist’s self dissolving into multiple selves in order to create works of art in which the ego of the artist as I is not most pronounced. In this sense, his concept of Negative Capability stands opposed to Wordsworth’s concept of Egotistical Sublime. To Keats, art is a process of mapping differences and harmonizing them. He maintains: “But the minds of
mortals are so different and bent on such diverse journeys that it may at first appear impossible for any common taste and fellowship to exist between two or three under these suppositions. It is however quite the contrary – minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in Numberless points, and all (for at) last greet each other at the journey’s end” (Keats’ letter written to J.H. Reynolds on the 19th February, 1818, quoted from Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings, London: OUP, 1970: 66).

To Thomas Clayton Wolfe, any creative endeavour is nothing but an intense personal encounter with life. Such an encounter not only enlarges the creative writer’s understanding of life, but also helps him to understand the complexities of writing itself. Like art, the strange and bitter miracle of life exists for him as congeries of contradictions. He realizes that only through contradictions, both life and the art evolve, shape and progress. The meanings and workings of both become clearer only when their negations are brought forth. Wolfe presents binaries together, for his own life is fraught with binaries. He is intensely pre-occupied with his private self. He is convinced that “all serious work must be at bottom autobiographical, and that a man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create
anything that has substantial value” (1936: 21). Hence, for Wolfe, art seems to bear upon the vision of reality in life.

Creative writers tend to develop independent attitudes towards life and art, and attempt to make them coincide at the site of their works. Thomas Wolfe is unambiguous in his confession that he uses the experience of his life into shaping his art. In this realization, Wolfe echoes Marcel Proust who maintains: “Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life which in consequence can be said to be really lived – is literature” (quoted in Randall Stevenson, 1992: 155). Similar sentiments are experienced by the characters in D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*:

Art and Life, were to them the Reality and the Unreality. ‘Of course’, said Gudrun, ‘Life doesn’t really matter – it is one’s art which is central. (1920: 504)

It is not simply a matter of creative conviction but of pride to Wolfe, who considers himself a great “putter – inner” (Wolfe’s letter to Scott Fitzgerald, quoted in James Dickey’s “Foreword” to *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe*, 1987: XI).

Hegel divides all arts into three stages: symbolic, classic and romantic. According to him, it is only romantic art that “envelops matter in self – consciousness” (quoted in Wimsatt and Brooks,
1957: 369). To Schiller, “all art arises out of two impulses and balances these variously; the finite material impulse and the infinite impulse of idea. The reconciliation of the two is the free ‘play’ of the ‘whole human person’” (Ibid., 1957: 369-70) The English romantic writers imbued in the German ideology take for their goal, the assumption that highest art exists beyond finite human possibility. “Our destiny”, Wordsworth says in a moment of profound insight in the Prelude, “our being’s heart and home / Is with Infinitude” (Wordsworth, 1950: 278).

Central to the romantic vision is an endeavour to aspire for one life within and abroad and to contemplate a universe or society resolved into concord. Bringing the opposites together is a matter of ability in which Wolfe is not successful. However, his creative sensibility is deeply rooted in the romantic ethos. Wolfe fails for the same reason as all romantics fail to achieve organic unity. The obsession of romantics to harp on unity and harmony actually foregrounds their inability to achieve it. Life is undeniably fragmentary and diasparactive. The desire for unity may be termed a wish fulfillment dream.

Wolfe clearly echoes the creative process elucidated in Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan”. In his work The Story of a Novel (1936), Wolfe maintains that “I actually felt that I had a great river
thrusting for release inside of me and that I had to find a channel into which its floodlike power could pour” (1936: 52). Reflecting upon how Look Homeward, Angel (1929) came to be, Wolfe asserts: “The book took hold of me and possessed me. In a way, I think it shaped itself.” (1936: 8)

Moved with an intense romantic impulse, Wolfe advocates complete immersion and imaginative surrender to the demands of a situation or a memory - the sense of life submitted to and entered. In his writing, Wolfe tells us that we have settled, we are settling – for too little. We have not lived enough; we are capable of more. Wolfe places us where our lives, with all their million particularities and possibilities, surround us at every second. All we need to do is to feel what we actually feel, and go with it where it takes us, to the lowest depths of despair and hopelessness or to the heights of ecstasy. The risk is great, but as D.H. Lawrence says: “I will show you how not to be a dead man in life” (quoted in Dickey, “Foreword” to The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe, 1987: XV). Wolfe stands us in good stead here, in his stories and novels, soliciting us in bewildering and heartening plenty to open up entirely to our experiences, to possess it, to keep nothing back, to be cast on the flood. The marked romanticism of his aesthetic
attitude, with its pronounced distrust of almost all forms of intellectualism and its emphasis on the expression of the artist’s feelings as the highest objective of a work of art, is at a polar extreme from the view Wolfe later developed of the writer as national prophet obligated to represent the social scene. His works are caught between the opposing pulls of the representation of the nation and the expression of the self.

Wolfe’s short fictions represent the portion of his self in which he remembers, isolates, organizes and understands the event. Yet when he puts them in large books, there is a subtle but significant decentering of interest from the characters to the perceiving and remembering self. The inclusion of these short fictions in the long novels represent the perceiver’s attempt to absorb them into his total experience of the complexity of life and to use them as elements in his search for ultimate meaning. Wolfe’s problem is to find a large and flexible form competent enough to unify his explosive, disparate imaginative impulse. The large form that he seeks would not represent a series of dramatic moments in the life of his protagonist (and through him, of America), but an interweaving of these moments in a complex fabric of event, time and feeling, a totality of experienced life.
Wolfe perceives time - *dark time* - as being at the centre of the mystery of experience, and its representation on three complex levels (dealt with at length in Chapter III - "The Putter-Inner: Time and Existential Alienation") is a major concern of his works. The individual scene or person has little value to him for everything has to be placed in relation to time for being meaningful. To portray an incident or individual against the complex pattern of time, that incident or individual must be seen through a perceiving and remembering self. And that self-being psychologically independent, active and generative, acted as a catalyst, transforming actual experiences into the reality, which is true to his self. Hence Wolfe created Eugene Gant, George Webber, or David Hawke, the youth who can read the corrosion of time; Eliza Gant, whose fabric of memories in *The Web of Earth* is a record of the impact of time on her. The individual events of *No Door* assume their importance as portions of a personal history, as they are reflected in the narrator's memory. An event is thus an objective experience, which is perceived and recalled later by the self that first experiences it directly, then as fact and transformed memory, it becomes a part of the totality of experience that creates the web of meaning for that self.
Wolfe's whole career is an endless search for a language and form in which to communicate the web of meaning of life. As he declares in The Story of a Novel (1936):

I know the door is not yet open. I know the tongue, the speech, the language that I seek is not yet found, but I believe with all my heart that I have found the way, have made a channel, am started on my first beginning. And I believe with all my heart, also, that each man for himself and in his own way, each man who ever hopes to make a living thing out of the substances of his one life, must find that way, that language, and that door – must find it for himself as I have tried to do. (1936: 49)

The passion to find a mode of expression is coupled, for Wolfe, with a thoroughly organic view of art, that an articulation dictates the form in which it is uttered.

Wolfe's refusal to obey norms seems to be a deconstructionist's attitude to upset paradigms of standard writing norms. It is an attempt at liberty, with constant shifting of centres. Outwardly, Wolfe is a declared romantic. But his repressed unconscious subverts that position. Steiner Kvale maintains:

The focus on language implies a decentralization of the subject. The self no longer uses language to express itself; rather the language speaks through the person. The individual self becomes a medium for the culture and its language. (Kvale, Steiner in Anderson, W.T., 1996: 22)
This pluralism and heterogeneity, discontinuity and indeterminacy, are manifest in his works where the split personalities of the author become obvious.

Like Coleridge, Wolfe is convinced that everything is related to everything in an organic bond. His fictions acquire a formal excellence that reinforces the romantic position in which the flow of undirected energy creates its own form. The understanding and insight into characters and situations come straight from the inner consciousness. Wolfe once writes to Hamilton Basso that there is no accepted way, “there are as many art forms as there are forms of art, and the artist will continue to create new ones and to enrich life with new creations as long as there is either life or art” (quoted in Holman, 1973: 166). All diverse aspects of his writing are constructed as portions of a great and perpetually fragmented, diasparactive whole. It is an outgrowth of the same basic desire, that of the Whitmanesque attempt to put a person on record and through that person to represent America in its paradox of unity and diversity, while exploring the deep dimensions of the eternal and the intolerable alienation of the individual lost in the complex currents of time; who, like Hamlet, faces an existential crisis: to be or not to be. He who would have written the definition of his nation leaves
the definition of his self. He asserts that though we "are lost here in America ... we shall be found" (quoted in Holman, 1975: 36). He survives as a chronicler of a lost childhood, a vanished glory, the portrayer of an individual American's experience, which is felt as "a giant web in which I was caught, the product of my huge inheritance – the torrential recollectiveness, derived out of my mother's stock, which became a living, million-fibered integument that bound me to the past, not only of my own life, but of the very earth from which I came, so that nothing in the end escaped from its inrooted and all-feeling explorativeness" (Ibid., 1975: 36). Like Stephen Dedalus at the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Wolfe would say:

Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. (Joyce, 1977: 228)

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