Chapter-III

THE PUTTER-INNER: TIME AND EXISTENTIAL ALIENATION

PART-I

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past,
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.


These lines from Eliot’s *Four Quartets* present a view of time that is circular and is in perpetual flux. However, what is invisible and significant in these lines is the concept that time divided or continuous is integral to itself. It is thus self-contained and humanly determined and divided. Although we are not conscious of the dimension of time, it is, however, the most important factor in our understanding of experiential reality. If experience is the touchstone and guide to the understanding of time, it also inspires our longing to go beyond time; to reach out the Eliotian stillpoint. Philosophers over the centuries have speculated on life in time and beyond in explicating the concept of being and exploring the means of becoming. There are meditations on eternity; the lived life in time inevitably comes to
an end in the form of death while living man seeks salvation, and a life beyond.

From Plato to Plotinus, Augustine to Heidegger, time has been the subject of central concern. Not only does Augustine, like Aristotle, look at the aporias and the skepticism on time, but others also have explored its psychological dimension. Augustine has struggled with measurement of time as he maintains that we speak of time that will come, that is past, and that is passing by. The paradox of measuring time is a direct result of the paradox of the being and the non-being of time. Some of the philosophers have felt that time cannot be put into rational understanding. It can only be grasped through intuition. This attitude bears upon the fact that time always mysteriously slips away from us. However, it is an important component of our consciousness as well as our growth that cannot be denied.

Augustine’s problem with time is theological. In trying to define what is time, he comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to provide an explicit definition of time. He maintains: “We cannot give an explicit definition, but we can do things that explain how to tell that one thing is
longer than another and how to measure length. In the same way we can give an account of our use of the word 'time,' even though we cannot do so by giving an explicit definition” (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vols. 7 & 8, 1967: 126). Measuring time was Augustine’s problem as he was looking for an analogy between spatial and temporal measurement. If for Augustine, the present time is measured on the count of experience, articulated by language and enlightened by intelligence, the skeptics have considered the present as an instant that cannot be divided.

Among the phenomenologists, Paul Ricoeur, in particular, finds the Augustinian theory unsatisfactory. He argues that Augustine’s attempt to measure time is unacceptable, for measurement is not a property of time. The phenomenologists have always privileged understanding of time as a subjective condition of consciousness. Aristotle’s thesis that without the being’s awareness of itself, time in the form of movement changes, may look meaningless. Aristotle differentiates between our conceptual understanding of being in time and time as an entity. However, the Aristotelian instant and the Augustinian present remain ambiguous to the extent that the past-future relation is beyond the principle of Physics.
Besides the phenomenologists, the existentialists underline the importance of time in its relation to being. To them, man's freedom and his quest for authentic personal being meet with resistance and frustration, for existence results in termination of life, in death. What is centralized in the existentialist philosophy from Kirkegaard to Heidegger to Sartre is the emotional life of man. Man's existential alienation is focused in the perpetual tension and tragic conflict with the cosmos and time.

The physical succession of time that the phenomenologists advocate creates the problem of explaining the emotional life of man. The Freudian unconscious does not recognize time. If we accept the Freudian unconscious as a fact of the human psyche that does not recognize the flow of time, how can we accept time in its physical progression? Therefore, the narrative style of stream of consciousness is an answer in a paradoxical context to the physical progression of time. Bergson draws attention to the continuous and broken character of time as it is known in consciousness, against the broken up series of instants that constitute clock-time. He further exposes the fallacies in the way of thinking of time as if it could be
apprehended spatially: events, he says, are imaginary spatial points in the
uninterruptible, indistinguishable flow of time.

For Baudelaire, as indeed for Kant, a sense of discontinuity of time
is a break with tradition that characterizes modernity. Baudelaire imagined
it, in high Romantic fashion — as the discovery of evermore-inventive
variations on the theme of aesthetic self-invention. And Foucault follows
Baudelaire, rather than Kant, in equating modernity with the spirit of
perpetual transformation, the feeling of novelty, or vertigo in the face of
the passing moment that alone enables us to grasp what is authentic in our
experience of contemporary art forms and life-styles alike. Foucault’s
histories typically begin from his perception that something is terribly
wrong in the present. His primary goal is not to understand the past but to
understand the present. For it is precisely in the ephemeral, the fleeting,
the contingent, that consciousness discovers its true vocation as a register.

In relating time to language one understands such expressions as
short time, long time and timelessness. These three categories defined by
language bear upon literature in the discursive articulation of life in its
contradictions. Although philosophers have speculated upon language and
time, what is important to language is that it also brings into life human experiences in that it is another instrument that brings together time and being. Paul Ricoeur maintains that speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond. A poetical transfiguration alone, not only of the solution but of the question itself, will free the aporia from the meaninglessness it skirts.

Ricoeur considers the worlds of fiction in counterpoint to the historical world relating to the resolution of the aporias of temporality brought to light by phenomenology. The most visible feature in the opposition between fictive time and historical time is the emancipation of the narrator to re-inscribe lived time upon cosmic time. In this sense, the time of fictional narrative has been freed from the constraints of referring back to the time of the universe. Each fictive temporal experience unfolds its world which is singular, incomparable and unique — as are Kant’s segments of a unique successive time — limitations belonging to a unique imaginary world.

Fictive experience of time relates in its own way lived temporality and time perceived in the world of fiction, yet often mix historical
characters, dateable events or geographical sites. But interestingly, all references to real events are divested of their referential paradigms and are set on par with the fictional status of other events, as Husserl uses to characterize the imaginary. Thus a segment of world events is incorporated within the temporal experience of the fictional characters. Fiction replies to this, as Ricoeur maintains, by unfolding the range of imaginative variations that respond to the major aporia of phenomenology. At the core of the opposition between the imaginative variations produced by fictions about time, like Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1923), Mann’s *Magic Mountain* (1924) and Proust’s *A Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), and the fixed time of the re-inscription by history of lived time upon world time, the major contribution of fiction to philosophy lies in the exploration of the non-linear features of phenomenological time that historical time conceals due to the fact that it is set within the great chronology of the universe.

For the nineteenth century novelist, time is the medium in which people grow, individually and collectively: hopes and ambitions come to fruition or are dismayed. Events mark the critical points of change, in
which cause and effect, character and event move together not as a natural process but by the play of chance. For example, in *War and Peace* (1869), Natasha at the opera is the logical descendant of the girl who teases Boris Drubetskoy in the first chapter; chance may have brought her there, but her response to Kuragin obeys delicate laws of latent possibility in her character.

None of these assumptions is shared by Modernist novelists. Even in the apparently conventional *Buddenbrooks* (1902), Mann treats ironically the consul’s gilt-edged notebook in which he chronicles the family’s developments with an understanding that an individual’s life makes coherent sense with/without the disruptive chance factor. Three decades later, in Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938), the notion of coherent human growth in time is considered as bourgeois bad faith, a piece of cowardice in the face of the surrounding contingency.

Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), combines a general sense of relevance with an acquaintance with the particular distinctive nature of literature. He takes literary form, especially in the arrangements of beginnings, middles and ends, as a reflector of ideas about
time and history. Because there is something irremediably temporal about literary form, he argues that Modernist writing does not forsake sequential arrangement entirely; rather, it uses our temporal expectations and then frustrates or complicates them. Kermode thus takes up a position contrary to that critical orthodoxy, which sees spatial form as the norm of Modernist writing. This idea, most clearly promulgated by Joseph Frank in 1945, depends on the Imagist aesthetic in assuming that novels like Ulysses (1922) are designed as single, static images outside time, to be simultaneously apprehended. In its cruder forms the idea tends to suggest that Modernism escaped the tyranny of logical sequence in order to embrace the tyranny of spatial form. For Michael Hollington, the keynote of Modernism is liberation, an ironic distrust of all absolutes, including those of temporal or spatial form.

In his preface to The Awkward Age (1893), James remarks: “We are shut up wholly to cross-relations all within the action itself, no part of which is related to anything but some other part — save of course by the relation of the total to life” (in Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976: 397). The characters belong less to a world being imitated than to a process, and they
seem to participate in the act of their own creation. They are part of the technical plot; and as in many modern novels they seem to assert against their author the right to greater freedom, to profounder psychological depth, or to life that reaches freely backward and forward in time, as in some of Virginia Woolf's novels. The form is not simply an enabling means of handling the content, but in some sense it is the content; experience generates form but form generates experience, and it is in the delicate intersections between the claims of formal wholeness and human contingency that some of the central aesthetics of Modernist fiction is found. The contemporary symbolist wholeness presides over the modern novel; the world beyond the contingent details and haphazard reality acquires that luminosity which Virginia Woolf sought in fiction. One result is a progressive fading of that realism, which has long been associated with the novel; language or rhetoric ceases to be what we see through, and becomes what we see. The novel hangs on the border between the mimetic and the autotelic species of literature, between an art made by imitating things outside itself, and an art that is of an internally coherent making.
It is in the possibility of such an art of fiction that constitutes the aesthetic subject matter of Marcel Proust’s multi-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* [(*A Remembrance of Things Past*) (1913-27)]. Proust wrote a few other things, but the novel was his essential life work, a vastly ambitious enterprise, into which went the bulk of his own personal experience and the full depth of his aesthetic perceptions. The book is a voyage into the complexity of consciousness, instinctual and aesthetic as well as a realist document of a life and a society. In the last volume, the narrator, Marcel, returns after many years in sanatoria to the high Parisian circles of which he was once an assiduous member. Among the guests at a reception, he is astonished to find how old his friends appear; and it only gradually dawns on him that this is because he, too, has grown old. Many of his acquaintances are dead; some are dying. The novel extends beyond the world of social or historical time. It is a Symbolist’s quest for the lost reality of the past, and a search for the artistic means for its recreation. Man, says Proust, is a giant standing on the living stilts of his years; and it is possible, in rare and therefore joyous moments of illumination, to span the intervening decades and relive, in all its perfectly natural reality, a fragment of our past. For most of us the joy of such isolated instants is
short-lived; but for the artist they have the resonance of symbols or revelations, since they carry the command to preserve and hold the vision in words. Art is thus the central illumination; it alone can give pattern or form which in turn make significance out of what would otherwise be a contingent sequence. *A la recherche du temps perdu*, therefore, primarily is a story of the birth of a literary vocation, of a sense of the relation between reality and art, and of the disciplined and sacramental power it can accrue, as well as a structure devoted to the recapturing the past as a joy. The becoming of the book is also the becoming of the writer as many Modernist novels stand witness to such a happening. Proust maintains: “the true life, life at last discovered and illuminated, the only life really lived, is that of the writer” (quoted in Bradbury & Mcfarlane, 1976: 404).
PART-II

Thomas Clayton Wolfe is troubled by time and baffled by the mystery of life. The irreversible rush of time makes him hysterical, for passage of time and passage of life are synonymous to him. The hunger to see all, know all and express all comes into conflict with the uncontrollable passage of time. He seethed in frustration and alienation. His all-embracing intentions are not humanly feasible. And being human, he is under the regulation of time. While time allows Wolfe some space in attempting to actualize his massive programmes, time suddenly, would irrevocably terminate that space. Time and Death are brothers enjoined by fate to delimit man. Thus Wolfe, in a maddening frenzy, tried to be a putter-inner, to experience more, often ignoring the capacity of mere mortal life. In communicating his experiences of life he attempted to defeat time. He suffered the frustrating anxiety of existence — the crisis of being there, and unable to find a route to freedom except through the life-negating process of death. Wolfe’s writings are packed in his typical explosive abundance with his anguish over his situation, his sense of tragic incommunicability, of alienation, and his frenzied response to the crisis.
Alienation is a key component in the complex philosophy of existentialism. It originates and manifests in the irony of Sartre’s statement that man is condemned to freedom. Alienation as an inevitable factor in the process of becoming, underlines the connection between ‘being’ and ‘time’. A host of philosophers among them, Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre and creative writers, have been obsessed with alienation.

Alienation is a term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology and the social sciences, usually having the emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation or self-estrangement. “Alienation (or estrangement) is the act, or result of the act, through which something, or somebody, becomes (or has become) alien (or strange) to something, or somebody, else” (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vols.1 & 2, 1967: 76).

In everyday usage alienation often means turning away or keeping away from former friends or associates. In contemporary psychology and sociology it is often used to name an individual’s feeling of alienness toward society, nature, other people, or himself. To some philosophers, alienation means self-alienation (self-estrangement): the process, or result
of the process, by which a self (God or man) through itself (through its own action) becomes alien (strange) to itself (to its own nature).

The roots of the idea of alienation can be found in the work of Plotinus and in the theology of St. Augustine and Martin Luther (expressed in the struggle to dissociate — or alienate — oneself from one’s own imperfections by identifying with a transcendental perfect Being). The concept of alienation was first philosophically elaborated by Hegel. The Christian doctrine of original sin and redemption can be regarded as the first version of Hegel’s doctrine of alienation and de-alienation. Some maintain that the source of Hegel’s view of nature as a self-alienated form of Absolute Mind bears upon Plato’s view of the natural world as an imperfect picture of the sublime world of ideas. For Hegel, alienation was an ontological fact, rooted in the nature of man’s existence in the world. There was an inherent dissociation between man as a subject and man as an object (i.e. between man as a creative subject seeking to be and to realize himself and man as an object influenced and manipulated by others), so that man’s own creations (his art, language, science, etc.) stand
outside him as alien objects — as objectifications of what is essential and prior, namely mind and individual consciousness.

This view rooted in German idealism and in a metaphysical perspective, became the basis for a radical critique of society and its institutions by those philosophers who received Hegel's ideas. Feuerbach accepted Hegel's view that man can be alienated from himself, but he rejected the views that nature is a self-alienated form of Absolute Mind and man is Absolute Mind in the process of delineation. Man is not self-alienated God. On the contrary, God is self-alienated man: he is man's essence absolutized and estranged from man. And man is not alienated from himself when he refuses to recognize nature as a self-alienated form of God; man is alienated from himself when he creates and puts above himself an imagined, alien higher being and bows before that being as a slave. The de-alienation of man consists in the abolition of that estranged picture of man, which is God.

Like Kant, Kierkegaard argued that existence is not a property and that no concept of a given object entails the existence of that object. Also, Kierkegaard anticipated some modern writers in arguing that action and
choice can be understood only if viewed from the standpoint of the agent rather than from that of the spectator.

Existentialists may be regarded as disappointed rationalists. When they announce that reality cannot be comprehended within a conceptual system, or, that individual existence cannot be so comprehended, they identify the role of a conceptual system with the notion of an all-embracing set of necessary truths derived by deduction from some axiomatic starting point.

Heidegger took up Leibniz’ question: why are there things that are rather than nothing? For Heidegger, the question itself is misleading, because the posing of it relies upon an inadequate analysis of the notions of being and nothingness.

In Sartre, too, there is an implicit relation to metaphysical rationalism. The thesis that existence is absurd, which is especially important in French existentialism, turns out to be a denial of the principles of sufficient reason. There is no ultimate explanation of why things are as they are and not otherwise. It is curious, on the one hand, that this is so is seen as a flaw in the nature of things. It belongs to what
Heidegger calls their fallenness; the experience of it arouses in us anxiety and perplexity. Yet on the other hand, it is so is the guarantee of human freedom. For existentialism, all the important possibilities of human life are bound up with the fact of human freedom, so that to lament the absurdity of existence is in a way odd. But what this lament does reflect is the ambiguous attitude of existentialists to human freedom.

If any single thesis could be said to constitute the doctrine of existentialism, it would be that the possibility of choice is central to human nature. Even the thesis that existence precedes essence often means no more than that men do not have fixed natures that limit or determine their choices, but rather it is their choices that bring whatever nature they have into being.

Kierkegaard argued that in certain psychologically defined moments truths about human nature are grasped. One such moment would be when we realize that we do not just fear specific objects but experience a generalized dread. Heidegger sees it as an ontological constituent of the universe; Sartre sees it as a confrontation with the fact of freedom, of our unmade future. Heidegger gives a very special place to the continuous
awareness of one’s own future death. Jaspers lays a more generalized stress on a range of situations in which the fragility of our existence is brought home to us.

To Jean-Paul Sartre, the concept of choice, which for Kierkegaard was a decision between fundamentally different ways of life has become an ubiquitous presence behind every human action, and the being of people, which Heidegger has distinguished from the being of things, is now defined essentially in terms of such choices.

Sartre employs psychological analyses similar to Kierkegaard’s analysis of dread but sets them out in terms borrowed from phenomenology. Of parallel psychological interest are the novels of Albert Camus, but the atheism that for Sartre is a consequence of his view of human nature and the world was basic to the thought of Camus. Human life is represented in the myth of Sisyphos, who was doomed eternally to roll up a hill a vast stone that would always falls back just as he was about to reach the top. The dignity of life derives from mankind’s continual perseverance in projects for which the universe affords no encouragement.
Marx took from Hegel the word alienation and placed the idea behind it in a secular context. For him, alienation of man from his true being was grasped by neither Hegel’s existential duality nor Feuerbach’s religious projection. It was man’s nature, Marx held, to realize himself in work, but the possibility of doing so was denied to him by the economic system.

Though Sartre is the point of confluence of three post-Hegelian streams of thought — the Marxist, the Existentialist and the Phenomenological — and a product of traditional European thinking on aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics and politics, he is profoundly and self-consciously individualistic in his interpretation of the human situation. The central experience of Kafka’s life was manifold alienation. The compelling gnostic vision of the world which is fashioned from Kafka’s works has become one of the major literary influences of our age. In Kafka’s work the existentialists’ conception of absurdity and dread are explored.

John Macquarrie maintains: “The existentialist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems to be aware of a crisis, a threat, a fragmentation and alienation that are new in their chilling intensity” (Macquarrie, 1986:
Writing of this sense of crisis, William Barrett has remarked: “The image of modern man lies in T.S. Eliot’s line – ‘Men are bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind’” (Ibid., 263).

Existence is contingent and absurd, and all human beings are supernumerary and superfluous, dispensable and replaceable. The individual alone is the measure of all things, particularly of all values. Life is a continuous process of making choices, and all choices are personal and individual. Man has freedom, total freedom, even dreadful freedom. In this contingent universe, there is absence of certainty. Anything can happen to anybody. Random chance is all.

In an existential world, man makes his commitments and initiates his projects in full awareness that he is imprisoned by a universe which is infinite in time, space, and indifference to his existence. This imprisonment pricks him – being trapped in time, and having nothing to relate. Man is alienated from himself also. The coherence or wholeness and meaningfulness of life breaks down due to the threat of immutable time. An awareness of time, far from giving a solution, is the source of
frustration. When Thomas Wolfe wants to embrace all experience, he is frustrated because time is fleeting. He would not have time to integrate all.

This is the modernist dilemma: how to master time. One proposed solution is through art. Aesthetic time appears to be eternal. But since alienation is part of life, then with Sartre we are condemned to freedom. To Kafka, freedom is an imprisonment, and he sees the inevitability of living which does not grant choice of living. That the universe does not make sense, that there are no rational patterns discernible in it, is a theme central, for example, to Dostoyevsky’s Notes from the Underground (1864). Dostoyevsky is often cited as a forerunner of existentialism precisely because in his disillusionment with rational humanism he stressed the unpredictable character of the universe, for his characters appear face to face with pure contingency. Any established connection between things may break down at any moment. Order is a deceptive mask that the universe, especially the social universe, wears. The individual thus confronts the universe with no rational scheme by means of which he can hope to master it. Reason will lead him to generalizations, if he relies upon them, they may let him down. The problems Wolfe faces are those of
Dostoyevsky for whose characters there are no options, no route to escape compulsions and no way to escape time. One’s aloneness is one’s truth.

In *The Story of a Novel* (1936), Thomas Wolfe brings the concepts of alienation and time into sharp focus. He maintains:

... I was being baffled by a certain time element in the book, by a time relation which could not be escaped, and for which I was now desperately seeking some structural channel. There were three time elements inherent in the material. The first and most obvious was an element of actual present time, an element which carried the narrative forward, which represented characters and events as living in the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man’s experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man’s life, the bitter briefness of his day. It was the tremendous problem of these three time elements that almost defeated me and that cost me countless hours of anguish in the years that were to follow. (1936: 51-52)

The Wolfean protagonist is a victim of time and alienation. He struggles in vain to communicate from the prison of circumstances, of being, of existence and Wolfe’s philosophical concern seems to veer
around time. He attempts to explore it as past and present, and as time immutable. In his fictional works, he mingles the past into the present through memory and both time present and past are set against the backdrop of eternity. Time as an entity is for Wolfe a great factor in life and art. Attempting to understand life as conditioned by time, Wolfe has struggled throughout his career to give an adequate understanding of time and alienation.

The first and most obvious element of time, according to Wolfe, is that of simple chronology, the element that carries a narrative forward. This may be called clock-time. The second element is past time, the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of his life is conditioned not only by what he experiences in that moment, but by all that he has experienced up to that moment. The past time exists in the present principally through the action of memory being triggered by a concrete sensory impression which in some ways recalls the past. However, as Margaret Church points out, "memory in Wolfe merely recalls the past, it does not recreate it or actually asserts its continued
existence, as Bergson’s and Proust’s theories of time tend to do” (in Holman, 1975: 27).

Of Time and the River (1935), is arguably Wolfe’s epic excursion into time. This work abounds in examples that elucidate the point. Eugene, the protagonist, is travelling by train when some fellow-passengers enquire after Eugene’s brother Ben, who is already dead. The dead brother’s memory comes to the protagonist as a reverie contrapunctally alienating him from others. In the second reference time in the form of memory does the act. Diverse responses occur in the consciousness of the protagonist following the conversation. The watch on Eugene’s wrist, gifted by Ben on Eugene’s twelfth birthday, triggers a flood of remembrance, and Ben appear in a hallucination. We visualize in dramatic actuality what had happened eight years ago. Ben was the brother most loved by Wolfe, and his untimely death had left an indelible scar on Wolfe’s mind. The heartlessness and unreasonableness of death strikes Wolfe with the force or existential inevitability. Like in a Kafkaian world, life, to Wolfe, seemed to be a cage, and man is imprisoned in it without his consent. Wolfe always refers to the chance meeting of his father and mother in a dusty hill
town as central to his concept of *bitter mystery* of his life. No one gets the choice to be or not to be, an existential dilemma for one desperately tries to find ways to escape the stranglehold of time in vain. Instead, like Kafka’s Joseph K. in *The Trial* (1925), Wolfe’s man is arrested — by random chance — in a flux of time. This inexorability of fate, this desperate struggle to live life to its full but being frustrated in every step, colours Wolfe’s robust love for life with an existential veneer. Thus the disparate emotions of love of life, hatred of death, the uncontrollable flow of time ... all combined make Wolfe’s fictional outpourings an intensely ambivalent orchestra blaring all disparate notes at the same time. This interferes with readers trying to understand the writings of Wolfe, and this is exactly why Wolfe has proved to be a daunting literary exercise for decades.

In *Of Time and the River* (1935), the narrative action of the present, through a recollection of the past takes place against “time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man’s life, the bitter briefness of his day” (1936: 52). It is
this inexorable forward flow of time, pictured as a river or more often as a moving train, constantly carrying man away from his golden youth which is lost and can exist only in memory. Memory becomes the instrument for reactivating the past. Employing memory, Wolfe’s protagonist accounts for the narrator reporting present emotions as he remembers the past in sensuous detail.

Like Eliot, Wolfe is concerned and to a large measure, obsessed with time. Elaborating his concept of time, he observes that in a given situation, a man caught in a particular instant of time, has it enriched and rendered more meaningfully as the past impinges on him through memory. He receives through it a sense of the absolute time within which his days are painfully brief. Wolfe’s four-part story, “The Lost Boy”, is a fictional expression of this concept. Home is a symbol of the past that has been lost. For a believer in the Romantic view of childhood, this story, in particular, is an effective and revealing symbol. None of us, it says, can return to the lost childhood, the lost community, the fading glory of the pre-Lapsarian state of innocence, as in the case of Proust’s A Remembrance of Things Past (1913-27). Time carries away us all, for we cannot go home again.
In Wolfe’s works this vision of time is always associated with the sense of being alienated, or of being isolated, like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* (1916). In *Of Time and the River* (1935), Wolfe tries to enumerate concrete memories which, taken together, make up for the remembered past of America.

All of us are driven on forever and we have no home. Therefore, it is not the slow, the punctual sanded drip of the unnumbered days that we remember best, the ash of time; nor is it the huge monotone of the lost years, the unsweltering schedules of the lost life and the well-known faces that we remember best. It is a face seen once and lost forever in a crowd, an eye that looked, a face that smiled and vanished on a passing train. (1935: 155)

He describes the way in which the past almost forcibly enters the present:

“When that lost world would come back, it came at once, like a sword thrust through the entrails, in all its panoply of past time, living, whole, and magic as it had always been” (in Holman, 1975: 29). Wolfe describes this emotion of pain very effectively from which comes the sudden hunger for a lost and almost forgotten aspect of life. He succeeds in giving us this sense of the onward rush of time and the death of the morning’s golden joy, an awareness of the price that is paid before the years of philosophic calm can arrive. Since this feeling is very much a part of youth, its pain,
and inarticulate melancholy, it comes alive in Wolfe’s writing. Realising that there is no escape from time, he muses in *The Web and the Rock*:

> Time is a fable and a mystery ... it broods over all the images of earth. Time is collected in great clocks and hung in towers ... and each man has his own, a different time. (1939: 626)

Wolfe uses the river and ocean as large symbols of time immutable, yet his clearest figure for the ceaseless motion and the inexorable passage of time is the train. In *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940) George Webber feels this experience as he journeys by train. No American but Wolfe in the last century has been more a poet of trains. The train becomes an important symbol representing time. Their rushing across the face of the earth, the glimpses of life to be seen flashing past their speeding windows, the nostalgic and lonely wail of their whistles in the night to Wolfe is the very sound of time itself. He associates all these characteristics with alienation and isolation, and the sad but irreversible passage of time. It is a journey that is repeated like Sisyphos’ rolling of the stone, untiring and incessant. The classical myth underpins a modern life in which the ‘train’ comes to mean a repetition of the tedium of life, while reminding us of the passage of time.
Alienation is a central theme in Wolfe. Though he thinks in terms of the American experience, it is not difficult to relocate his concept of alienation in the universal context. Wolfe feels that to be an American is to be lonely and isolated and restless, moving beneath vast skies. The barriers that are erected around the individual effectively shut him off from all communication.

One of Wolfe’s most successful short stories is *No Door*, where the characters grow out from home and find that they cannot go home again. There is an obsessive search for communication that he repeatedly asserts is central to the American experience:

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother’s face: from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of the earth. (Prologue to *Look Homeward, Angel*, 1929)

For Wolfe, all human experience seeks “the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven” (in Holman, 1975: 26). Out of the transcendental glory of childhood, we are gradually hemmed in by the growing prison house of the existential world, the lustre and glory of life are gradually tarnished, and we are forced further away from communion.
Wolfe’s alienation is apparent from the series of broken relationships in his life. His broken family life in childhood had left a deep scar on his psyche. On the return trip from Europe in 1926, he met Aline Bernstein, a Jewish lady, and this is a momentous event in Wolfe’s life. He would later dedicate Look Homeward, Angel (1929) to her, who becomes the central human force in his life during the composition of the work. She was fifteen years older to Wolfe; she mothered him, fed him superbly, kept him in funds including money for a trip to Europe, listened to him, encouraged him, brought him into the New York literary circle, loved him and quarreled with him.

From the beginning to the end, it was a tempestuous affair, with idyllic moments and violent ruptures. Aline Berstein brought to the surface some of Wolfe’s most compulsive contradictions — his stupendous need for love and his remarkable capacity to bestow tenderness; his irrepressible cruelty; his need for direction and smouldering hatred of anyone who supplied the direction, his ambivalence towards Jews.

The explosion of contradictory feelings, however devastating for Aline Bernstein, seems to have been the source of the immense effort
which, by mid-1927, had produced more than 250,000 words of a novel called *O Lost*. When the progress faltered the following year and Wolfe suffered a period of literary stasis, he took out his frustrations on Mrs. Bernstein. Early in 1929, he came into the orbit of Maxwell Perkins, editor of *Scribners*, and as he worked under Perkins’ assuring guidance, the relationship with Aline once more became relatively calm and happy. It was only after the novel was published to no small acclaim that Wolfe turned against his mistress, and the relationship was fraught with existential ambivalence.


The publication of *Of Time and the River* (1935) brings to the fore not only the contradictions of life and its existential dilemma, but a measure of self-reflection. The self-reflection is a challenge not only to the man who writes but also the man who suffers:
Someday someone will write a book about a man who was too tall — who lived forever in a dimension that he did not fit, and for whom the proportion of everything — chairs, beds, doors, rooms, shoes, clothes, shirts, and socks, the berths of Pullman cars, and the bunks of transatlantic liners, together with the rations of food, drink, love and women, which most men on this earth have found sufficient to their measure — were too small. (1987: 241)

In that "strangest and most lonely world" (Ibid., 241) of six feet six, a curious wisdom of alienation could be achieved: "In an extraordinary way", he wrote, "a tall man comes to know things about the world as other people do not, cannot, know them" (Ibid., 243).

Wolfe's childhood experiences of fragmented family life and public jeer gave him a "lonely wisdom" (Ibid., 245) and he saw himself as "God's lonely man" (in Holman, 1975: 9), and the spokesperson of all the alienated souls of the world:

If my experience of loneliness has not been different in kind from that of other men, I suspect it has been sharper in intensity. This gives me the best authority in the world to write about this, our general complaint (in Brooks, Lewis, Penwarren, 1973: 1987).

Wolfe felt a terrible shame and self-abasement, a feeling of personal inferiority "that made him bitterly regret the accident of birth and nature
that had imprisoned a spirit fierce and proud and swift as flight and
burning as a flame in such a grotesque tenement" (1987: 244). “It is a
strange adventure, a hard but precious education, that a tall man knows”
(Ibid., 245) … “A tall man could not escape from life, or flee the world,
even if he desired it: he is at once life’s exile and life’s prisoner; wherever
he goes, life reaches out and pulls him to it, will not let him go” (1987:
245). He feels caught in an existential web of alienation from which there
is no escape, except death.

The French philosopher Diderot once remarked how contrary to
common sense it seems, in a world where time is always at work and
transience is the rule, to base marriage on the assumption that love is
eternal. Years later, Musset picked up the theme in a famous poem, “Le
Souvenir”, in which he added how sad and how poignant that the eternity
of the love we swear is, of necessity, an illusion. Diderot’s reflection was
prompted merely by the fact that he was having a certain amount of
trouble with his wife, whereas Musset, frustrated in his various attempts to
realize a completely satisfactory love, generalizes his predicament into an
essential aspect of man’s fate. This mood is echoed by Wolfe, leaving out
love or substituting for it the whole body of man’s complex emotions. It puts him in the tradition of Proust, and of Dos Passos, a very central and important tradition since it reflects in literature the great discovery of the relativity of all things which is our inescapable inheritance and existence.

When Eugene, Wolfe’s alter ego, goes to the state university, the bitterness of alienation grows. The goat-foot that always belongs to the followers of Joyce is shown. Eugene becomes morbidly conscious of his physique, and yet unnaturally neglectful of it. He does not have his teeth filled or his haircut; he does not bathe. He is naturally not popular, and he resents his want of popularity, in a way that is not far short of megalomania; he revolts against sanitation and cleanliness, declaring that health is for fools, and great men have always shown signs in their lined faces of the disease of genius. There are possible reasons for Eugene’s cult of dirt, ranging from a sub-conscious fear of impotence and a confused desire to be like the Horatian he-goat, to a rankling sense of social inferiority, perverted by a fierce pride into a resolve to emulate the fraternity row aristocracy in nothing, not even in cleanliness.
Just as Ulysses (1922) is the exploration of consciousness through the single day of Leopold Bloom, a moment in time, the novels of Wolfe begin with a dating in the action or a statement of the historicity of the theme. The beginning of Look Homeward, Angel (1929) is the clearest announcement of Wolfe's intentions. Each person, each event, each affair is a compressed cipher for which Wolfe's art is hermeneutic. The world of each man is a microcosm in which is pressured the totality of all that ever was, implied in an almost Hegelian trail of connections that return the moment to time, the event to process, the individual to the absolute. Wolfe's world is a world of moments, highly structured and individuated, yet caught up in the themes of a mutual destiny, a single attraction that gives them valence and defines their signification. The placement of meaning and insight in the moment is inescapable to any reader of his novels: the stranger seen in the street, on the train, from afar, glimpsed for that instant of recognition and then forever vanished back into the web of anonymity; the face at the window, the brief look at the bank teller, the sight of the salesman, the suddenly caught movement of the labourer, the craftsman, the stitch of the tailor, the trucker shifting heavy gears, the frosty face of the trainsman signalling in an early hour of winter, the soft
cry of a child — all these are familiar moments in the pages of the novels, and Wolfe is unimaginable without them. But these moments are usually described as far and lost, as instantly gone, as forever lost. They are instantaneous irruptions in consciousness which fill the hero with sadness and longing and despair and wonder; they are always sudden, always intense, and always remembered and thus externalised against the flux of time.

The theme of all the novels and stories of Thomas Wolfe is man caught up in time, the manifestation of time in the world which is transient and changeable. Everything in Wolfe’s works keep changing: the narrator himself, his friends, the life going on around him, the towns and cities in which that life takes place in time; and man’s alienation comes to sharp focus.

From the beginning, Wolfe was pre-occupied with transience and change. In Look Homeward, Angel (1929), the members of the Gant family are shown in contrast with time, fighting against it. We see them as they are born, as they live, and as they die, and their finite careers and
time-circumscribed consciousness are contrasted with the earth around them, with the history of man, and with the eternity of time-space.

In both Eugene and his creator Thomas Wolfe, this takes the form of an intense awareness of and pre-occupation with time. Time, its various facets, its apparent contradictions, its limitations, its dimensions is one central motif in the Wolfe novels. Not only is it implicit in the fictional characters, it is frequently explicit in the writer. In *The Story of a Novel* (1936), Wolfe finds a contrast between past and present times, which exist chronologically and move into each other, and a kind of "time immutable" (1936:52), which does not change and which exists in a wry commentary on the changeability of the mortal. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe declares that "dreams of guilt and time" (*Ibid.*, 62) tormented his sleeping hours as well as plagued his waking days. He tells of one such dream in which the sum total of all his experience — "my daily conflict with Amount and Number, the huge accumulation of my years of struggle with the forms of life" (*Ibid.*, 62) — would present itself before him. It shows clearly how Wolfe thinks of chronological time as existing in ironic contrast to a much
greater kind of duration, which did not change and seemed to mock all of mortal existence, limited as that existence was by change and death.

In the final analysis, it is time and nature that provide a semblance of permanence to Thomas Wolfe's world, where man who lives in it is the victim of impermanence. The old Catawban living and dying in the wilderness is made and unmade briefly and quickly for "the immense and terrible American earth that makes no answer" (1987: 221). The earth is triumphant – over all of human history. Races come and go, and the seasons of the earth outlast them all. "Where now? Where after? Where then?" (1929: 223). It is the change that is so startling to Wolfe. The sudden look backward involves the momentary rediscovery of elapsed time, and thus a momentary respite from the inexorable wearing away of time.

In a very real sense, then, Wolfe's fiction constitutes a search for lost time, very much as did the work of Marcel Proust. Whereas Proust worked out a detailed theory of time and wrote his great novel according to the theory, consciously structured by it, Wolfe more or less stumbled into the time experience, and got entangled in the web, and never worked
out his ideas very precisely. His novels, reflecting this imprecision, thus assume the form which Edwin Muir calls chronicle novel. In *The Structure of the Novel* (1928), Muir discusses the chronicle novel in which time is not relative but absolute, and the characters and events are presented against a background of steadily elapsing time. Using *War and Peace* (1869) as an example of this kind of novel, Muir declares that the speed of time is not determined by the intensity of the action, but rather has a deadly regularity which is external to and unaffected by the characters and situations. The emphasis is on the ageing of the characters, on the fact that they are twenty now, that they will be thirty, then forty, then fifty, and that in essential respects they will then be like anybody else at twenty, thirty, forty and fifty. Muir reflects that change in *War and Peace* is inevitable and general, regular, arithmetical, and in a sense inhuman and featureless:

... everything may happen and everything does happen. The action on the human plane does not unfold inevitably; we do not see a drama contained within itself and building itself up on its own consequences; we see life in all its variety of accidents and inventions, marked off here and there by certain very important milestones, inscribed with different figures which designate the march of an eternal and universal process ...” (Muir, 1928: 98-100).
The novels of Thomas Wolfe, like *War and Peace*, are constructed in accordance with this scheme. Eugene and the other Gants change. The earth does go on unheeding. The difference, however, apart from questions of technique, seems to be that Tolstoy’s characters are seldom very much perturbed by the externality and deadly regularity of the time process. They proceed onward, as the present becomes the past, and the future becomes the present. Tolstoy’s characters exist inside the process, and they view time from within, whereas Wolfe’s novel centre around Eugene Gant/George Webber, who are not only aware of the corrosion of time but frequently stand outside of it and are horrified by its ravages.

Wolfe describes the process of recapturing the past in *The Web and the Rock* (1939). The coming of spring to New York seems to make him bitterly conscious of the contrast between mortal life and the time of the seasons, to touch off all his feelings of futility and failure. He also tells us something else of that time:

The first green of the year, and particularly the first green in the city, had a power not only of drawing all the swarming chaos and confusion of the city into one great lyrical harmony of life, it had also such a magical power over all his memories that the life that moved and passed around him became an instant part of all the moments of his life. So, too, the past
became as real as the present, and he lived in the events of twenty years ago with as much intensity and as great a sense of actuality as if they had just occurred. He felt that there was no temporal past or present, no now more living than any reality of then; the fiction of temporal continuity was destroyed, and his whole life became one piece with the indestructible unity of time and destiny. (1939: 541)

This supplanting of the present by the past, and the resultant erasure of the bounds of chronology, occurred at a time when George Webber was feeling thoroughly depressed and miserable, and we find that his woes increased rather than decreased. Relief, then, seemed to come only when this process of remembering the events of the past was taking place. To escape from the harsh and painful contemplation of the nature of present time and of his own place in it, Webber summoned up memory to remember his experience twenty years back, when he was a child in Libya Hill. “The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe,” Wolfe wrote in The Story of a Novel, “in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness” (1936: 31). The power of total recall of the past seems to permit Wolfe to subvert,
momentarily at least, the swift flowing passage of time, and to overcome mortal change.

Whether Wolfe was familiar with Proust's theories of time is questionable, but at one point in *Of Time and the River* (1935), he mentions Proust, but the chances are that if he really had appreciated Proust, it would have occasioned an excited rhapsody from Eugene.

The remembrance of a minute released from the chronological order of time recreates for Proust the human being similarly released to enjoy the minute. For such a person, Proust declares, the word death would have no meaning: “situated outside the scope of time, what could he fear from the future?” (Vol.II, 1932: 996).

Being outside time is a strategy to overcome time in case of Wolfe. However, it is always problematic to overcome time whether one is inside or outside of it. This results in alienation in which time plays an important role. It was inevitable that the centrality of loneliness and separateness, or alienation, in Wolfe's experience and his writing, coupled with the social problems and the human suffering of the years of his active career, should have fostered in him a sense of all-pervading evil and gloom, and lent a
tragic quality to his writing. However, his very method of juxtaposing binaries led him to a diasparactive, fragmentary cosmic view. As Jaspars maintains:

We find existence as the unreflecting experience of our life in the world. It is immediate and unquestioning, the reality which everything must enter so as to be real for us ... (Macquarrie, 1986: 68)

Alienation and suffering, pain and death are the things man, frail, weak, mortal, can expect. Yet man, for Wolfe, is also a noble creature. The despair of the literary artist took a philosophic turn and Wolfe attempted to answer the question – What is man? – in his work *You Can’t Go Home Again*. To him, man is:

A foul, wretched, abominable creature ... It is impossible to say the worst of him ... this travesty of waste and sterile breath. (1940: 338-39)

Like the young, restless and philosophic Hamlet, Wolfe did visualize some goodness in man. Like evil, its opposite goodness is innate and they together constitute the sum total of ‘man’. The frail and petty physical animal that he is, man is also magnificent, for he is propelled by the aspiration of immortality, in a bid to outwit time. In the teeming, uneven pages of Wolfe’s works, this vision of man, possessed of tragic grandeur,
essentially a vision of the nineteenth century romantic creed, is presented with great intensity. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has sought in the varieties and complexities of his experiences, an understanding of life as well as of temporality that dominates this world. He realized that his own life is a product of the available materials and experiences, never an archaeological discovery at any fixed point of time. Wolfe writes of the city:

I heard, far-off, the deep and bee like murmur of its million-footed life, and all the mystery of the earth and time was in that sound ... I saw its thousand streets peopled with a flashing, beautiful, infinitely varied life. (1987: 13)

A direct extension of the inevitable flow of time is death, and it is another recurrent theme in Wolfe's works. Death seems always to hover over the mutable world from which there is no possibility of escape. In *Death the Proud Brother* (1987: 30-66), Wolfe affords us a share of his experiences of death in the city. The first incident is the death of a poor Italian Street Vendor, who is caught in an accident between two trucks. The second is the death of a vagabond, dying as a result of a fall on the icy pavement of Brooklyn, while a well-to-do pair joke about inviting him along to their party. Thirdly, a construction worker, working nine floors
above the ground, is hit and over balanced by a flaming rivet. His clothes burst into fire as he hurtles down to death. It is the fourth death, however, the least violent, which is climactic. As a man sits quietly on a bench in a subway station, his heart stops beating:

The man just sat there quietly at one end of the bench, leaned over slightly to his right with his elbow resting on the arm of the bench, his hat pulled down a little, and his face half lowered. At this moment, there was a slow, tranquil, hardly perceptible movement of his breath — a flutter, a faint sigh — and the man was dead. (1987: 46)

It is notable that all the deaths foreground lonely people, nameless atoms as Wolfe would say, who face the stark alienation of the existential world.

Death has always troubled Wolfe deeply even when it did not affect him directly. The lynching of a Negro by a predominantly white mob (The Child by Tiger, 1987); an incident of suicide in a Brooklyn street (The Hollow Men, 1987); a death in the Civil War (Chickamauga, 1987); the death of a Japanese sculptor (Katamoto, 1987); the death of an alienated husband on a train (Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time, 1987); the reported death of a young prostitute (An Angel on the Porch, 1987) — these are all death-related incidents which made him so much emotionally involved that they became dominant motifs in his work. Particularly, the
death of Ben in *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and the death of W.O. Gant in *Of Time and the River* (1935) are memorable for the appalling grief, and the pervasive feel of doom of existence which are suggested with extraordinary nakedness and raw force. Wolfe knows how to transform death in the family into art. His pre-occupation with death led Wolfe into contemplating his own death as well. *You Can’t Go Home Again* that appeared posthumously in 1940, ends with a startling premonition of approaching death:

Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where, Saying:

‘To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth

— ‘whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending — a wind is rising, and the rivers flow. (1940: 576)

Though a distinguishable and distinct theme in Wolfe’s writing, death cannot be isolated from the totality of experience that he wanted to project, and the ambivalence in that experience. Death is inextricably entwined with the passage of time; it is closely associated with the sense of
alienation. Death as a theme is often used to expose the callousness and hypocrisy of city dwellers as in *Death the Proud Brother* (1987); sometimes reflects mankind’s potentiality for barbarity (*Child by Tiger*, 1987); sometimes occurs as a result of a feeling of alienation leading to suicide (*The Hollow Men*, 1987); and reinforces a feeling of the dark mystery of the world, coming gently, quietly, in the guise of a messiah, allowing respite and reprieve, releasing alienated man from his existential suffering:

Proud Death, proud Death, whom I have seen by darkness, at so many times, and always when you came to nameless men, what have you ever touched that you have not touched with love and pity, Death? Proud Death, wherever we have seen your face, you came with mercy, love, and pity, Death, and brought to all of us your compassionate sentences of pardon and release. For have you not retrieved from exile the desperate lives of men who never found their home? Have you not opened your dark door for us who never yet found doors to enter and given us a room, who, roomless, doorless, unassuaged, were driven on forever through the streets of life? (1987: 64)

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