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A Cosmos of His Own: Loss, Ghosts, and Loneliness in Thomas Wolfe's Fiction

GÉRALD PRÉHER

But I knew that it could not come back—the cry of absence in the afternoon, the house that waited and the child that dreamed; and through the thicket of man's memory, from the enchanted wood, the dark eye and the quiet face,—poor child, life's stranger and life's exile, lost, like all of us, a cipher in blind mazes, long ago—my parent, friend, and brother, the lost boy, was gone forever and would not return.

Thomas Wolfe, *The Lost Boy* (77)

Like William Faulkner, who called his Yoknapatawpha his “little postage stamp of native soil” (255), Wolfe created a “cosmos of [his] own” (Faulkner 255) that is closely related to his identity as an individual, to his region and his country,¹ even though he felt, as the epigraph illustrates, that home was a place he could never really return to. In order to “[construct] a kind of geography of his universe, composed of these powerful and instinctive affections and dislikes” and thus re-create the world of home he evoked in *The Web and the Rock*, Wolfe turned to the past, to memories, for, like the novel's protagonist, “the feeling for specific locality that later became strong in him, came, he thought, from all these associations of his youth” (11). For Wolfe, the past and the present cannot be separated. Human life is like a river flowing from a definite source. Its course is not always straight, and its current might sometimes get diverted or blocked, but overcoming the obstacles is always formative and beneficial.

The metaphor of the river pervades Wolfe's fictional writings and his correspondence. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, for instance, it surfaces in the terms he uses to describe the ways in which he probes his mind for creativity and in his assessment of the difficulties over which he had to prevail:

. . . I have been faced with the problem of discovering for myself my own language, my own pattern, my own structure, my own design, my own universe and creation. . . .

In one sense, my whole effort for years might be described as an effort to fathom my own design, to explore my own channels, to discover my own ways. . . .

I get my material, I acquire my wealth, as every artist does from his own living, from his own experience, from his own observation. . . .

I have nothing to be afraid of. And my greatest duty, my deepest obligation now is to the completion of my own work. (576–95)

What also comes out in this passage is Wolfe's emphasis on his dedication to his work, through the superlative forms ("greatest," "deepest") and the repetition of the adjective *own*. His search for the best ways and means to make sense of his earthly experience and translate it into words is brought into relief, as well as his conviction that he will eventually come to an adequate formulation for his envisioned masterpiece. Everything emerges from the self and depends on its relation to place, on the outcome of its exploration of the world at hand.

Wolfe's 1935 novel, *Of Time and the River*, not only explicitly links the river with the passage of time in the title but uses the metaphor throughout. In this book, the river stands for America as Wolfe saw it—a place that is full of life, always on the move, always undergoing changes. Because it cannot be described in a consistent way, it crystallizes his search for coherence. Indeed, as C. Hugh Holman explains, "He was obsessed by the vastness and the complexity, the beauty and the terror, the loneliness and the crowded manswarm that went together in all their contradictory ways to make his native land" ("Thomas" 56–57). In other words, the restlessness of the America Wolfe was trying to portray crept into his books and gave them what he was aware was an unfinished feel; he was never totally satisfied with their final shape. However, even if Wolfe's correspondence suggests that he was sensitive to people's comments on his works, he never let them influence him to the point of changing his approach in any way, and his books are a fine illustration of Bertram Wyatt-Brown's perception that "The practice of art affords the chance for self-expression without the need to please others or conform to their wishes and sentiments" ("Desperate" 64). Wolfe came to be particularly wary of editors and did not want them to tamper with his texts, especially once he felt he had found his own voice—as this passage from the previously mentioned letter to Perkins makes clear:

. . . I have at last discovered my own America, I believe I

have found my language, I think I know my way. And I shall wreak out my vision of this life, this way, this world and this America, to the top of my bent, to the height of my ability, but with an unswerving devotion, integrity and purity of purpose that shall not be menaced, altered or weakened by any one. (587)

Wolfe felt that his discovery was too precious to be meddled with by anyone: not only was the America he had found the America he thought he had lost when he went away,² but it was, as he states it himself, his own America. He wanted to tell about America as a country of the mind, that is to say, America as it appeared to him—a purpose which he felt was that of any American artist and “derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of American life” (87). Wolfe was convinced that every artist has his own way of doing things; as he put it in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, “what a man is really doing is simply rationalizing his own way of doing something, the way he has to do it, the way given him by his talent and nature . . .” (643). Unfortunately, Wolfe’s desire to encompass the whole American experience in the space of a sentence, a paragraph, or a book,³ to “rationalize” his style and understanding of America, led him to write an often awkward and repetitive prose, which his editors altered before they agreed to publish it. In a way, these editorial objections missed the point Wolfe was making, for repetition was meant to expound his idea that the human mind is shaped by events of the past that are constantly translated into the present.

The idea of “going back” is a central motif in Wolfe’s fiction; but because he felt that his attempts to do so were in vain the notion of return, emotional or physical, is closely related to nostalgia, the passing of time, and death. The mental re-creation of place necessitates the conjuring up of “the voices of the lost people in the darkness” (*Web* 31), “the voices—near, strange, haunting, lonely, most familiar—of the people sitting on their porches in the Summer darkness” (*Web* 31). Grouping and setting off the adjectives between dashes allows Wolfe to bring into relief “the uncanniness of the ordinary.”⁴ As the people cannot be seen, either because they are dead or simply because their outlines are swallowed by the darkness, their voices are disembodied; they are like ghosts, forever lost in time, separated from human experience and therefore “strange.” Simultaneously, they are part and parcel of the present due to their “haunting” and fluctuating quality: they are “near” and “most familiar.” One

adjective stands out in the list of five and seems to apply more to the focalizer than to the voices themselves: *lonely*, placed at the center of the group, effectively illustrates what C. Hugh Holman has called “the loneliness at the core.” Wolfe thus appears to be stranded in a kind of no-man’s-land, a borderland where past and present, death and life, constantly intermingle and cannot be really told apart. Such an awkward position gives rise to what he describes in the autobiographical sketch “God’s Lonely Man”⁵: “the lonely man will feel that all the evidence of his own senses has betrayed him, and that nothing really lives and moves on earth but creatures of the death-in-life” (188).

In Wolfe’s aesthetics, loneliness figures as “the central and inevitable fact of human existence” (“God’s” 186). All his fiction consists in variegated “portraits of the artist,” a gallery of lonesome characters looking for a light in their lives, which exposes his melancholy and frustration that what has been lost can never be regained. In particular, Wolfe never managed to get over the deaths of his brothers, Grover and Ben, and he kept trying to bring them back to life in his fiction—the best examples being his novella *The Lost Boy*, which focuses on Grover’s death,⁶ and chapter 40 in *Look Homeward, Angel*, featuring Ben’s ghostly return. Because Wolfe spent his life struggling against the impossibility of freezing time, against the ebb and flow of the past into the present, his works invite the reader to reconsider them from an ever-renewed perspective. His anatomy of loneliness, “God’s Lonely Man,” for instance, resonates through his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, and epitomizes his vision of the plight of Man. For Wolfe, human emotion is born out of loss; that is why love and loneliness are closely related. Going home again is impossible, for the loved ones have changed or are dead. The dying scenes and the “ghost” episode in *Look Homeward, Angel*, as well as the stories “No Door: A Story of Time and the Wanderer” and “Return,” might thus be read as representing the artist’s will to conjure up the past and make it part of the present.

In “Loneliness . . . an American Malady,” Carson McCullers comes to the conclusion that the nature of loneliness may be “essentially . . . a quest for identity” (259). She also suggests that in order to carry out this quest one must leave the lonely self behind and project oneself into the future and toward others. In other words, there comes a time when people must find love. Even though Wolfe’s views on love and loneliness are close to those of McCullers, his argument strikes a slightly different note:

. . . I have found the constant, everlasting weather of man's life to be, not love, but loneliness. Love itself is not the weather of our lives. It is the rare, the precious flower. Sometimes it is the flower that gives us life, that breaches the dark walls of all our loneliness and restores us to the fellowship of life, the family of the earth, the brotherhood of man. But sometimes love is the flower that brings us death; and from it we get pain and darkness; and the mutilations of the soul, the maddening of the brain, may be in it. ("God's" 196)

Wolfe's vision of the ambivalence of love finds an apt illustration in *Look Homeward, Angel*, which was originally titled *O Lost*. Eugene Gant falls in love with Laura James without knowing about her impending wedding; he feels "trapped in the tender cruelty of her clear green eyes, caught in the subtle net of her smile" (427), and she encourages his feelings by telling him that she loves him too (434). The oxymoron ("tender cruelty") and the alliteration ("subtle/smile") point out Laura's role-playing and duplicity, while the images of entrapment ("trapped," "caught," "net") stress Eugene's helplessness and his inability to find a way out. After Laura has left and news of her marriage reaches him (459), Eugene understands that the flower of love is lethal for the heart. Before her departure, he was "blind with love and desire" (451) and no matter how hard she tried to explain that their age difference should be taken into account, he would not admit it. Once she is gone, he feels his life has been shattered and he expresses his distress in a letter to her, saying "I'm lost now and I'll never find the way again" (461). No return is possible and Eugene finds himself in the same posture as the lover McCullers describes in "The Ballad of the Sad Café": he, too, "feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He [has come] to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer" (216). Estrangement from women is, more than solitude, at the core of Eugene's experience: two of the women whose presence he most values, Helen, his sister, and Eliza, his mother, make fun of him (460–61), and only his brother Ben seems willing to rescue him from the depths of his despair (464–66). Eugene comes to understand that "all pilgrimage across the world was loss" (473).

From that point onward, the "moment of taking away" (473) seems to multiply and the narrative becomes bleaker. Two tragic events occur that further expose Eugene's loneliness: his roommate, Bob Sterling, dies, and Ben contracts pneumonia and

passes away. Eugene understands, like Wolfe himself, that “nothing really lives and moves on earth but creatures of the death-in-life” (“God’s” 188). Although Bob Sterling makes only a brief appearance in *Look Homeward, Angel*, he plays an important role in Eugene’s growing understanding that there is “a time for everything” and that since no one can escape death, one has to “[keep] track of the time” (480). Everything in Bob’s characterization hints at the shortness of his time on earth. He is first introduced in the narrative as “the son of a widow” (480) and his “pleasant face” is described as “dead white” (481). The description of his failing health signals the narrator’s reluctance to tell about his death; the moment is postponed, even though every detail foreshadows the tragic outcome: “He was taken to the College Infirmary, where he lay for several weeks, apparently not very ill, but with lips constantly blue, a slow pulse, and a sub-normal temperature. Nothing could be done about it” (481). The presence of death in life is palpable in the depiction of Bob’s lips, whose color is the visual proof of his coming end. The categorical tone of the last sentence makes it resonate like a death knell and fulfill its function as a concluding statement: Bob will never survive his condition. The shortness of the next paragraph stands as another illustration of the brevity of Bob’s existence: “His mother came and took him home. Eugene wrote him regularly twice a week, getting in return short but cheerful messages. Then one day he died” (481). When Bob’s mother comes to get his belongings after his death, she is not referred to by her last name, only as “the widow”; as the term associates her with death, it seems in retrospect that when she comes to take her son home, she is the incarnation of death itself. Seeing her on this occasion makes Eugene realize, “She’s alone now” (481).

Because in Wolfe’s world the lonely man “is united to no image save that which he creates himself, he is bolstered by no other knowledge save that which he can gather for himself with the vision of his own eyes and brain” (“God’s” 189), the loss Eugene experiences with Bob’s passing away makes him want to escape from a room that is now linked with death: “I cannot stay here, he thought, where he has been. We were here together. Always I should see him on the landing with the hissing valve and the blue lips, or hear him mumbling his lessons. Then, at night, the other cot would be empty. I think I shall room alone hereafter” (434). Here again the reader understands the weight and the haunting quality of the images: Bob is not named, but his living presence is obvious in Eugene’s use of the present perfect in “where he has been.” Eugene sees the once-shared room as

the location of the past in the present, a place where Bob's spirit is still alive in spite of the void his absence has created. At that specific moment, "The huge, dark wall of loneliness is around him" ("God's" 189) and Eugene is pictured facing his loneliness with the feeling that it "encloses and presses in upon him, and he cannot escape" ("God's" 189). In "God's Lonely Man," Wolfe sheds retrospective light on Eugene's emotional state in that he, like his creator, comes to understand that "the best and worst that the human heart can know are merely different aspects of the same thing, and are interwoven, both together, into the tragic web of life" ("God's" 192). The impact Bob's death has on Eugene brings to mind the way he had reacted to his father's serious illness and the shadow it had cast over the family: coming so close to death has revealed to him the importance of life. That is why, after Bob's death, "Eugene flourished amazingly . . . He was happier than he had ever been in his life, and more care-less. His physical loneliness was more complete and more de-lightful" (487–88). Eugene, the lonely man, now realizes that, no matter how tragic he might be, he is "invariably the man who loves life dearly" ("God's" 190).

At the end of her essay on American loneliness, Carson McCullers notes that ". . . Thomas Wolfe turned to the city, and in his wanderings around New York, he continued his frenetic and lifelong search for the lost brother, the magic door" (261). *The Lost Boy*, together with the fifth and the last chapters of *Look Homeward, Angel*, would seem to prove McCullers right. One must bear in mind, however, that what is at stake is a search not for one, but two brothers: Grover died in 1904 and Ben, Grover's twin, in 1918. Wolfe wrote to Margaret Roberts that he meant to title his first novel "The Building of a Wall," and to "[tell] the story of a powerful creative element trying to work its way toward an essential isolation; a creative solitude; a secret life" (111). These words suggest Wolfe's awareness of his need to express the loneliness he felt welling up within his heart; his aim in fiction is therefore not far from Walker Percy's, for whom, according to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "writing fiction would prove briefly liberating from the scourge of melancholy by transferring personal pain into imagined situations" (*Literary* 59). Just like Wolfe, Percy experienced the loss of family members at an early age and used his acute sensitivity to matters of life and death throughout his fiction in order to overcome his fear of dying young because of what he felt was a family curse.

Fear is central to Eugene Gant's first experience with death.

When, in chapter 5 of *Look Homeward, Angel*, his sister Helen wakes him up to tell him Grover has died and is now on the “cooling board,” he feels that “the house [is] full of menace.” For one thing, he does not know what a cooling board is, and second, as he enters the room, he witnesses his mother’s pain at the sight of Grover’s lifeless body: “Eliza sat heavily on a chair, her face bent sideways on her rested hand. She was weeping, her face contorted by the comical and ugly grimace that is far more terrible than any quiet beatitude of sorrow” (58). The depiction of the scene brings to mind the grotesque mode, as the traits are exaggerated; yet the reader can contend that the narrator’s purpose is to emphasize Eugene’s feeling of loss. Indeed, looking at his brother’s dead body is such a shock for him that he feels “horror swarm[ing] like poison through his blood” (58)—an image implying that a part of him has died as well. In spite of its brevity, the scene is essential to understand the presence of death in Eugene’s life—a conclusion to which Wolfe leads the reader by repeating words from the opening proem, “O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again” (58).

The composition of *The Lost Boy*, several years after *Look Homeward, Angel*, shows that Wolfe had not completely unburdened his heart in his first novel. James D. Boyer’s study of the revisions Wolfe made to the story is particularly enlightening in this respect. He explains that *The Lost Boy* took Wolfe a tremendous amount of time to write because his initial goal was to “recapture the past,” to “give an eternal present to that past through its recreation in art” (8). The story’s history proves that Wolfe was haunted by his brother Grover’s death (his ordeal was further aggravated when Ben passed away fourteen years later, severing the last connection he had with Grover). In the end, as Boyer observes, Wolfe “as a writer can’t bring back the boy, can’t recapture the past and make it coexist with the present, can’t give eternity to anything” (9). However, one might argue that the existence of the story makes Grover live on. It does not, of course, resurrect the boy, but the power of words helps the reader to understand Eugene’s trauma better and, to a certain extent, Wolfe’s. Indeed, the author and the focalizer seem to merge at times, and it becomes apparent that the written word allows for a return that would be impossible in the real world.

In the final chapter of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene experiences an uncanny encounter: he meets the ghost of his brother Ben. The latter’s reappearance had in a way been adumbrated in chapters 32 to 35. Indeed, when Eugene comes back from the university to celebrate Christmas with his family, Ben

is portrayed as “a familiar ghost” and, in typical Wolfean fashion, appears as a wanderer, “[prowling] through the house” (491). That Christmas is decisive for the two brothers because it witnesses the beginning of a new bond between them. At Easter, Eugene visits Ben in the tobacco town where he works, and that fall he shares a room with him at their mother’s boardinghouse (chapters 33 and 34). Several weeks after Eugene’s return to college, Ben contracts pneumonia and dies (chapter 35). Throughout the novel Ben appears as a lost soul, “his fierce eyes . . . desperate and lonely” (508), and whenever Eugene thinks about him, it is in relation to his ghostliness: “Ben—the ghost, the stranger, prowling at this moment in another town, going up and down the thousands streets of life, and finding no doors” (519). As pointed out earlier, the absence of open doors is a recurring feature in Wolfe’s fiction; in this particular case it illustrates Ben’s plight, that of a pilgrim in vain search of meaning.

Ghosts bear a close relation to home and are very often associated to the things of the past. When, in chapter 33, Eugene feels useless and lost, stranded in a foreign place (Norfolk, Virginia), images of death hover around him:

He was like a man who had died, and had been re-born. All that had gone before lived in a ghostly world. He thought of his family, of Ben, of Laura James, as if they were ghosts. The world itself turned ghost. . . . Everything was old. Everything was dying. . . . He had known birth. He had known pain and love. He had known hunger. Almost he had known death. (521)

Eugene’s recalling Ben and Laura—the two persons he feels closest to—as well as his family testifies to his homesickness. He knows that Laura is not very far from him geographically, yet he will never see her, even though he manages to find her house. He is haunted by images of a past he cannot grasp and seems to be aware, like the speaker in “God’s Lonely Man,” that “joy gains its glory out of sorrow, bitter sorrow, and man’s loneliness, and that it is haunted always with the certainty of death, dark death. . .” (192). Eugene is nowhere near death, as shown by the syntactic disruption introduced by “almost” in the above quotation from *Look Homeward, Angel*. Ben, on the contrary, feels that his time is near, which is why he assesses his life: “I’ve had nothing out of life. I’ve been a failure” (532), he tells his brother, knowing he will never be drafted because of his health. Ben’s declaration can be read as a foreshadowing of his imminent death.

The harrowing scene of Ben's death stages an attempted return of the repressed memory of Grover's death, but the narrator makes only a quick comparison that does not lead anywhere (545). Ben is the center of attention and the "ugliness" of the situation is the focal point. His demise is paradoxically an occasion for his family to reflect upon his life: "They remembered the strange flitting loneliness of his life, they thought of a thousand forgotten acts and moments—and always there was something that now seemed unearthly and strange: he walked through their lives like a shadow. . ." (554). The numerous alliterations suggest not only loss but confusion as well; Ben has become the unreachable part of a group he never belonged to though he was there all the time. In this respect, Eliza's reaction is the most striking: "for her, Ben was not dying—but . . . a part of *her*, of *her* life, *her* blood, *her* body was dying" (556; emphasis in orig.). The emphasis placed on the possessive pronoun exposes the devastating effect of the situation on Eliza. Eugene is the helpless observer of his mother's metamorphosis into another of the family's shadows. Deprived of everything that has made her the woman she is, Eliza becomes totally passive, "unmoving," until she is ready to look at her son's body and to witness, like Eugene, an unbelievable scene: "suddenly, marvellously, as if his resurrection and rebirth had come upon him, Ben drew upon the air in a long and powerful respiration; his gray eyes opened. . . he passed instantly, scornful and unafraid, as he had lived, into the shades of death" (557).

Writing about Proust, Emmanuel Levinas explains that the death of other people. . . is central to the search for lost time. But the daily death—and the death of every instant—of other persons, as they withdraw into themselves, does not belong to an incommunicable solitude: that is precisely what nurtures love. (103)

This comment could well apply to the situation at hand, for Ben has been withdrawn into himself throughout the narrative and Eugene's brotherly love is so strong that he eventually denies the actuality of death: "We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death—but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben?" he asks (557). The rhetorical question, in the form of what could be called incomplete litotes—for the negation would be in the answer to the question—confirms how valuable Ben's presence is for Eugene and paves the way for Ben's appearance in the final chapter of the book.

In her study of ghost figures, Bernadette Bertrandias explains that the reason ghosts come back to the world of the living is that they have left something unsettled.⁷ Indeed, Ben has returned to tell Eugene something about his life, and to give more credit to his words, he keeps saying that he is not a ghost. His message is simple: “*You are your world*” (624); and Eugene understands that he needs to choose between past and present: “On the brink of the dark he stood, with only the dream of the cities, the million books, the spectral images of the people he had loved, who had loved him, whom he had known and lost. They will not come again. They never will come back again” (624–25). This passage seems to convey the novel’s message through the staging of Eugene’s coming to terms with himself. Love and loneliness are again associated, but what says it all is the position of *never* in “they never will come back again”: as it is placed before the auxiliary, the negation stresses the unwillingness of the figures of the past to set foot in the present and dictate the future. The past should be used as a prism allowing a new perspective on each present moment. Certainly, what is lost cannot be regained; but other things can be found for the self to find its place in the world.

Thomas Wolfe never stopped his exploration of loneliness, which he saw as “the essence of human tragedy” (“God’s” 190), illustrated in two shorter pieces from the 1930s, “No Door: A Story of Time and the Wanderer”⁸ and “Return.” The link between “God’s Lonely Man” and “No Door” stares the reader in the face, as some passages appear in both. Such is the case, for instance, with the beginning of the second section of “No Door” and the opening passage of “God’s Lonely Man”:

My life, more than the life of anyone I know, has been spent in solitude and wandering. Why this is true, or how it happened, I have never known; yet it is so. From my fifteenth year—save for a single interval—I have lived about as solitary a life as modern man can have. I mean by this that the number of hours, days, months, and years—the actual time that I have spent alone—has been immense and extraordinary. (“No Door” 76; “God’s” 186)

As is often the case with Wolfe, it is difficult to distinguish between autobiographical and fictitious elements. Here, if we take it that “God’s Lonely Man” is an autobiographical sketch and “No Door” is fiction, there is an obvious attempt at turning life

into fiction. Wolfe's slipping from one mode into the other is not surprising if we consider that autobiography is repetition and involves, in James Olney's words, "the formal device of 'recapitulation and recall'" (252). When, in "God's Lonely Man," Wolfe writes, "we who dwell in the heart of solitude are always the victims of self-doubt" (187), he is clearly echoing comments made in his 1937 letter to Fitzgerald, where he confesses, "one of my besetting sins, whether you know it or not, is a lack of confidence in what I do" (642). According to psychoanalysts, "the fragility of their self-esteem" is "a chief feature of artists with depressive tendencies" (Wyatt-Brown, "Desperate" 57).⁹ It may seem paradoxical to suffer from low self-esteem and yet to want one's works to appear in print, since writing and publishing is a way of exposing oneself naked to the world, of metaphorically meeting people one does not know and giving away a part of oneself. Not so with Wolfe, however, for in his case, reusing already published elements¹⁰ allows him to perform variations on the same theme, to improve his writing skills, and, through these two processes, to come to terms with the real world around him.

This concern for engaging the world finds an echo in "No Door," where the narrator expounds on the role that books played at a certain stage in his life and describes his attraction to them as "fury and despair [that] increased from what it fed upon" (77). Books are not only the receptacles of knowledge; they have been shaped by the real world, which, if he confronted it directly, would allow him to "get the knowledge of the whole thing in [him]" (77). Getting to know the world makes him realize, like all of Wolfe's main characters, that he "must go home again!" (79). It is worth pointing out, however, that the mere concept, the mere thought, of home triggers a reaction and a feeling that stand at odds with the title of the story: "one day I awoke at morning and thought of home. A lock-bolt was shot back in my memory, and a door was opened" (79). The possibility of a door opening when the reader has symbolically and pointedly been warned that there is no door and that this is "a story of time and the wanderer," is in itself intriguing. But as Amélie Moisy has explained, Wolfe readers should be aware that "going home again" refers to "a return to the harmonious, intensely close relationship with the beloved, all-powerful paternal figures of early childhood" (28). Going home again belongs to the realm of dream, as Moisy observes (37), and it is revealing that the character in "No Door" should awaken precisely as the idea of home takes hold of his mind. According to Freud, once

the dream is over, it “strikes us as something alien” (112). In “No Door,” the dream exposes the foreign nature of “home” for the narrator, who lost touch with it when he left. He has felt so distant from home emotionally that it seems “as if a curtain of dark sorcery had been lifted from my vision, I saw the earth I came from, and all the people I had known in shapes of deathless brightness. And instantly an intolerable desire to see them all again began to burn in me” (79).

In “No Door,” however, returning home turns out to be a disappointing experience, for once there the narrator becomes truly aware of his father’s death and embarks on an impossible search: “. . . I sought him everywhere, and could not believe that he was dead, and was sure that I would find him” (79). The situation is reminiscent of John Peale Bishop’s belief that Wolfe “continually sought for a door, and there was really none, or only one, the door of death” (13). The door that has opened is indeed a door of death, and the narrator himself comes to the conclusion that “the life that I had known there was strange and sorrowful as dreams” (“No Door” 79). Dreams again—maybe all one is likely to find in Wolfe’s texts is an attempt at fitting reality to the distorted perception provided by dreams. Coming home to a foreign land makes the narrator visualize himself as a ghostly figure (80); life as he knew it is now presented in the past tense, in sentences so lengthy that they bring out his refusal to see that life must come to an end. At the same time, he is aware that that part of his life is over and that only his father’s return could bring it—and him—back to life: “if only my father would come back to make it live, to give us life, again” (80). Wolfe’s text thus becomes a fine illustration of Roland Barthes’s statement that any narrative leads “back to Oedipus” for “If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? . . . Isn’t storytelling always a way of searching for one’s origin, speaking one’s conflicts with the Law . . .” (47). The narrator has come back to his place of origin, but the origin itself is missing and “again” is now synonymous with “no longer”:

October has come again, has come again. . . . I have come home again and found my father dead . . . and that was time . . . time . . . time. . . . Where shall I go now? What shall I do? For October has come again, but there has gone some richness from the life we knew, and we are lost. (“No Door” 80; ellipses in orig.)

The rhythm and the rhymes Wolfe uses to convey his character’s thoughts end abruptly once the conjunction *but* has been

introduced, thus furthering the idea of loss already introduced in the questions. Nevertheless, the narrator feels that “October is the season for returning” (83), and somehow the father does come back through the words of his son, who conjures up his spirit.

As the narrator of “No Door” recalls his home, he “suddenly” realizes that

every man who ever lived has looked, is looking, for his father, and that even when his father dies, his son will search furiously the streets of life to find him, and that he never loses hope but always feels that some day he will see his father’s face again. (85)

Implicit in this statement is the notion that only his father can bestow on him the recognition he has always been after, only his father can validate his success in life. “Return” offers an interesting variation on the same theme, with the narrator’s declaring—apparently beginning where “No Door” had left off:

. . . I have a thing that I must tell them; I’ll go home again, I’ll meet them and I’ll say my piece: I will lay bare my purposes, strip down the vision of my life until its bare soul’s nakedness . . . oh, some day I will go back and reveal my plan until no man living in the world can doubt it. . . . (297)

Wolfe’s narrator means to tell something that is not limited to the South: he wants to tell about the world outside, the America out there. Unfortunately, when he comes back home, he is tongue-tied, things do not turn out as he expected, and there does not seem to be anything for him to prove. Although things are different, the spirit of home is left untouched: “The wheel will turn, the immortal wheel of life will turn, but it will never change” (299). In the end, there is nothing to discover and the narrator no longer feels he has anything to teach his fellow men; he is content with finding his way, recognizing the streets, the smells, the atmosphere of home. No matter how much people think the place has changed, “the landscape of the heart,” to use Elizabeth Spencer’s expression, remains the same.

To the questions asked in the prologue of “No Door,” “Where shall the weary rest? When shall the lonely of heart come home? What doors are open for the wanderer, and in what place, and in what land, and in what time?” (67), one might be tempted to answer that at home, the doors to the heart will always open. That is probably why, in Wolfe’s fiction, the ghosts

are always familiar ones, helping the homeless find their way back.

In Wolfe's works, going back home and coming to oneself are two sides of the same coin, for the two make it possible to comprehend what life really is about. In the letter to Perkins mentioned earlier, Wolfe is in the same situation as most of his characters: the perspective of going home leads him to ponder on his existence and that of his fellow southerners. He observes that, in the long run, reality never matches people's expectations: ". . . Life, I now begin to see, moves in a great wheel; the wheel swings and things and people that we knew are lost, but some day they come back again" (595). Events from the past and long-gone cherished people come back to life; it is not surprising that Wolfe composed *The Lost Boy* after going back to St. Louis, the place where Grover's tragic death had occurred. In the last paragraph of "God's Lonely Man," which encapsulates all that he wanted to convey in his writings, Wolfe encourages the reader to listen to the voices that resonate in him:

Loneliness forever and the earth again! Dark brother and stern friend, immortal face of darkness and of night, with whom the half part of my life was spent, and with whom I shall abide now till my death forever—what is there for me to fear as long as you are here with me? Heroic friend, blood-brother of my life, dark face—have we not gone together down a million ways, have we not coursed together the great and furious avenues of night, have we not crossed the stormy seas alone, and known strange lands, and come again to walk the continent of night and listen to the silence of earth? Have we not been brave and glorious when we were together, friend? Have we not known triumph, joy, and glory on this earth—and will it not be again with me as it was then, if you come back to me? Come to me, brother, in the watches of the night. Come to me in the secret and most silent heart of darkness. Come to me as you always came, bringing to me again the old invincible strength, the deathless hope, the triumphant joy and confidence that will storm the earth again. (197)

The "friend" Wolfe addresses here may well be Ben, in which case the passage could be read as a moving tribute to the lost brother whose presence was felt beyond the grave. Wolfe emphasizes the necessity to remember the dead, to include the past in the present in order to make it live always. He thus makes

the reader aware of the many facets that shape man's identity in relation to his place, puts into words universal truths that are sometimes difficult to formulate, and, ultimately, speaks the timeless voice of the lonely heart.

Notes

1. C. Hugh Holman makes a similar comparison in "The Dwarf on Thomas Wolfe's Shoulder" (150).
2. What Wolfe says in *The Story of a Novel* reveals his awareness that loss is a necessary part of the process: "I think I may say I discovered America during these years abroad out of my very need of her. I found her because I had left her. The huge gain of this discovery seemed to come directly from my sense of loss" (29).
3. Such an idea is reminiscent of Emerson's comments in "The Poet": "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right." (185).
4. I'm borrowing the expression from Stanley Cavell, who devotes a chapter to this concept in his book *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*.
5. In addition to the publication of "God's Lonely Man" in *The Hills Beyond* (1941), a shorter version of the sketch appears in the *American Mercury* (October 1941) under the title "The Anatomy of Loneliness." The latter version was reprinted in *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* (1987).
6. Wolfe had already dealt with that event in the fifth chapter of *Look Homeward, Angel*.
7. Bertrandias: "le fantôme est ce re-venant qui manifeste, pour le destinataire de l'apparition, que du passé en fait les comptes restent à solder" (1129).
8. "No Door" was first published in the July 1933 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*. I am using the expanded version appearing in *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* (1987).
9. Wyatt-Brown refers to observations by British psychoanalyst Anthony Storr.

10. See, for instance, C. Hugh Holman's introductory comments to the volume and to the individual stories he edited under the title *The Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe*.

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