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Title	Thomas Wolfe and the genre question: Beyond the "charge of autobiography"
Authors	Boyle, Gwendolen Aoife
Publication date	2013
Original Citation	Boyle, G. A. 2013. Thomas Wolfe and the genre question: Beyond the "charge of autobiography". PhD Thesis, University College Cork.
Type of publication	Doctoral thesis
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Download date	2026-11-04 20:36:57
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1401

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Thomas Wolfe and the Genre Question: Beyond the "charge of autobiography"

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Dissertation Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the National University of Ireland, University College Cork.

Research Conducted in the School of English, University College Cork, under the supervision of Dr. Alan Gibbs.

December 2013

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Declaration

This thesis is the candidate's own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

Signed,

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Gwendolen Aoife Boyle

Acknowledgements

I wish to sincerely thank Dr. Alan Gibbs for the wonderful help and guidance he has given me throughout the research and writing of this thesis. This work would not have been possible without his deeply appreciated and valuable support and advice.

I would like to thank the Irish Research Council for their award of funding under the Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme during the final year of my research, which was of great assistance in finishing this project.

I also wish to thank Dr. Heather Laird, for her excellent advice and encouragement as stand-in supervisor during the first year of my research.

I would like to express my gratitude to the staff of the School of English in University College Cork, for their support, suggestions and guidance. I also wish to thank the School of English for the award of a PhD Studentship for the second year of my research, which was of valuable financial assistance. I would like to particularly thank Anne Fitzgerald and the administrative staff of the School, for their help with practical matters throughout my research.

I wish to thank the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences at University College Cork for their support and their excellent workshops, masterclasses and conferences, which always provided new and interesting perspectives, and allowed me to share my research.

I would like to thank my fellow postgraduates in the School of English for their companionship, support and interesting discussions throughout my research. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Kirsty March, for her greatly sensible advice.

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Elisabeth Okasha, of the Language Centre at University College Cork, for encouraging me to continue with my studies a few years ago, and for her enduring interest in my progress.

I would like to thank Cork County Council and the Higher Education Grants scheme, without which I would not have been able to avail of third-level education without great difficulty.

Finally, I would very much like to thank Cathy Cook, Richard Miles and Dylan Fitzgerald, for their constant and deeply appreciated support in this endeavour.

Chapter One: Introduction

The North Carolinian author Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) has long suffered under the "charge of autobiography" (Wolfe, *Story* 20), which lingers to this day in critical assessments of his work. Wolfe's work is often described using terms such as "semi-autobiographical," "autobiographical fiction" or "based on his own life." These terms and their strangely negative connotations, seeming to mark a lesser form of fiction, have followed Wolfe since the publication of his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel,* in 1929. Consequently, criticism of Wolfe is frequently concerned with questions of generic classification. However, since the 1950s, some re-assessments of Wolfe's work, in terms of its form and underlying philosophy, have suggested that Wolfe's "autobiographical fiction" exhibits a complexity that merits further investigation. Strides in autobiographical and narrative theory, as well as advances in our understanding of the fallible nature of memory, have made evident the false dichotomy that exists between autobiography and fiction, prompting reconsiderations of texts that defy these artificial boundaries. This thesis follows in the footsteps of critics such as C. Hugh Holman and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who instigated the revival of Wolfe's work, and more recent work by those including Igina Tattoni and Steve Bourdeau, who focus on aspects of Wolfe's work that suggest that he was out of step with literary currents of his time in terms of the metafictional dimension of his work and his use of experimental narrative techniques. Wolfe has been somewhat neglected in the canon of American fiction of his era, but deserves to be reconsidered in terms of how he

engages with the challenges and contradictions of writing about or around the self, in light of his complex attitudes to the nature of autobiography and fiction.

Wolfe wants to write about everything, but is paradoxically convinced that one cannot write except from the self. While Wolfe's work is replete with contradictions and antitheses, it is this particular opposition that lies at the heart of his writing. In the preface to *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe expresses his conviction that "all serious work in fiction is autobiographical" ("To the Reader"), explaining that it is not possible to write from outside one's own experience. It is from this statement, which Wolfe professes in various forms throughout his lifetime, that this thesis takes its primary impetus. Wolfe desires to document and communicate to others the entirety of his experience and memory, encompassing the experiences of others that he has heard about, the books he has read, the ideas he has encountered and fictional worlds he has entered in his imagination. For Wolfe, writing is a process of assembly, combination and transformation, using the components of memory to produce new texts. Wolfe makes no distinction between text and world, and in this, as Tattoni argues in *The Unfound Door*, he displays what some might now call a postmodern sensibility.

This thesis investigates why Wolfe's work has been the source of considerable critical discomfort and confusion with regard to the relationship between Wolfe's life and his writing. Wolfe is convinced that he can only write from his own memory, and is often criticised for doing so, and yet scholars of Wolfe are reluctant to place his work within the category of autobiography. Nonetheless,

his work is often adjectivally described as "autobiographical." I explore this disjunction in Wolfe scholarship through an examination of elements of Wolfe's work that problematise categorisation. This thesis investigates Wolfe's approach to writing in terms of how he encounters and describes the contradictions and complexities inherent in transforming his memory into narrative, and certain narrative strategies that are manifested in his work as a result. In particular, I focus on the unusual effects produced by Wolfe's experimentation with narrative time and the material of his memory, and the ways in which these affect critical interpretations of genre.

In responding to these questions, this project takes a variety of approaches, which are based around close analysis of the mechanics of Wolfe's writing. It is important to note here that I approach Wolfe's work as a whole, incorporating both his work published as fiction and non-fiction, in light of his attitude toward generic boundaries. Firstly, I investigate the concept of Wolfe as "storyteller," and the possibility that he can be aligned with oral storytelling traditions, as suggested by Richard S. Kennedy and Paschal Reeves, among others. This chapter explores the motivations and philosophies, conscious or unconscious, that underpin Wolfe's work and his concept of himself as a teller of tales, a communicator. In particular, it focusses on aspects of Wolfe's writing process that have their roots in medieval traditions of the memorisation and recitation of tales. Following on from this, I conduct a detailed examination of how Wolfe describes the process of transforming his memory into narrative through writing, in his works published as fiction and non-fiction. This chapter analyses the metaphors, analogies and rhetoric that Wolfe employs in relation to the

creative process, focussing on his intense awareness of the limitations of language, as well as his delight in its possibilities. The latter half of this project examines, in detail, narrative techniques used by Wolfe, firstly analysing his extensive use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, and then his unusual deployment of narrators and focalization.[1] These two chapters demonstrate the complexity apparent in Wolfe's work, and explore the implications of these narrative features, which suggest that Wolfe engaged in a relentless project of experimentation with the material of his memory. This thesis sheds light on elements of Wolfe's approach to writing and certain narrative strategies he employs that have previously been overlooked, and that have created considerable critical confusion with regard to the supposedly "autobiographical" genesis of his work. I suggest that a preoccupation with categorisation is irrelevant in light of Wolfe's idiosyncratic exploration of the borderlines of his life and his fiction, which observes no distinction between these two spheres.

The "charge of autobiography"

During Wolfe's lifetime, the New York publishing house Charles Scribner's Sons (Scribner's) published two of his full-length novels, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935), both of which trace the life of the same protagonist, Eugene Gant. A number of his short stories were published separately in magazines and periodicals, and Scribner's published a collection

[1] A note on spelling: generally, this thesis employs UK English spelling ("-ise" instead of "-ize," for instance). The exception to this is "focalize" and its derivatives "focalizing" and "focalization." Here, I preserve the spelling that is generally used in theoretical texts on the topic. American spellings of other words are also preserved in quotations.

of some of these (*From Death to Morning*) in 1935. Apart from these works that were published as fiction, Wolfe's account of writing *Look Homeward, Angel* was published by Scribner's as *The Story of a Novel*, in 1936. Later that year, in the face of significant criticism regarding the perceived heavy influence of his editor, Maxwell Perkins, on the structure of his books, Wolfe broke off his arrangement with Scribner's.[2] Following Wolfe's death in 1938, Edward Aswell edited the mass of manuscript he left behind into two further novels, *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), which featured a different protagonist, George Webber. A further collection of short stories, including a section of an unfinished novel that was to have been titled "The Hills Beyond," was published in one volume as *The Hills Beyond* in 1941.

Wolfe's work has enjoyed a significant afterlife, with writing that was left unpublished during his lifetime providing a fertile ground for scholars of his work. Wolfe's early plays, letters and notebooks have been edited and published in various forms. Of note here are *The Letters of Thomas Wolfe* (1956) and the more concise *Selected Letters of Thomas Wolfe* (1958), edited by Wolfe's literary agent, Elizabeth Nowell, as well as *Thomas Wolfe's Letters to his Mother* (1943, edited by John Scally Terry), and a 1970 two-volume edition of *The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe,* edited by Richard S. Kennedy and Paschal Reeves. The text of a speech of Wolfe's to students at Purdue University in 1938 entitled "Writing and Living" was edited and published by William Braswell and Leslie A. Field in 1964, and was placed alongside *The Story of a Novel* in one volume by

[2] A detailed account of the working relationship and friendship between Wolfe and Perkins, as well as their eventual disagreement, can be found in A. Scott Berg's 1997 biography *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius.*

Leslie A. Field in 1983 to create the controversially titled *The Autobiography of an American Novelist*. In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in recovering portions of Wolfe's work that were deemed to have been lost or altered in the editing process. This trend is exemplified by the Thomas Wolfe Society's publication of *K-19: Salvaged Pieces* (1983) and *The Hound of Darkness* (1986), which aim to reconstruct planned novels of Wolfe's that never came to fruition within his lifetime. Even more ambitious are Lucy Conniff and Richard Kennedy's *The Autobiographical Outline for* Look Homeward, Angel, which collates and reconstructs Wolfe's early notes for his first novel, and Matthew and Arlyn Bruccoli's reconstruction of the so-called original version of *Look Homeward, Angel*, published as *O Lost* for Wolfe's centennial in 2000. Francis Skipp compiled a *Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* in 1989, including a number of previously unpublished elements of Wolfe's work. Wolfe's work is of a nature that lends itself to segmentation and fragmentation, and portions of Wolfe's lengthy novels have been extracted and published in isolation.[3]

Much of Thomas Wolfe's fiction is, at first glance, related to incidents and characters encountered in his early life in Asheville, North Carolina, his travels across America and around Europe, and the period he spent living in New York. For the biographer who wishes to investigate the parallels between the lives of Wolfe's protagonists and that of Wolfe himself, there are many interesting correlations, and many have travelled this road.[4] As C. Hugh Holman says, it is

[3] For instance, a portion of *The Web and the Rock* has been published as *The Web and the Root* (2009), and books two and three of *Of Time and the River* have been published as *Of Time and the River: Young Faustus and Telemachus* (1965).
[4] See for instance Hayden Norwood's *The Marble Man's Wife: Thomas Wolfe's Mother* (1947), which traces the connections between Wolfe's mother, Julia Wolfe, the character Eliza Gant,

"practically impossible" for biographers of Wolfe to avoid referring to the autobiographical aspect of his novels, so closely are they intertwined with his life (*Bibliographical Study* 432). From a critical point of view, some have dismissed Wolfe as an American novelist of any worth because of his overt reliance on what Wolfe calls the "clay of his life" ("To the Reader") in his fiction. The "charge of autobiography" (Wolfe, *Story* 20) has dogged him since initial reviews of his first novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, which, although generally well received, was greeted by an uncomfortable reaction in his home town, where the "Altamont" of the novel was treated as a factual representation of Asheville. The local paper proclaimed that, "Most of the Asheville people who appear in the novel wear their most unpleasant guises. If there attaches to them any scandal which has enjoyed only a subterranean circulation, it is dragged forth into the light" (Adams 131). While the reaction from the people of Asheville was a source of personal grief for Wolfe, escalating into personal threats and insults that he details thoroughly in *The Story of a Novel*, it was after the 1935 publication of *Of Time and the River* that critical attacks on the form, origin and purpose of Wolfe's work began in earnest.

Although some early reviewers lauded Wolfe's inventive use of autobiographical material, with the London *Times Literary Supplement* arguing that he was "genuinely extending the boundaries of the novel" ("Rev. of *Of Time*

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who features in *Look Homeward Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, and the narrator of the short story "The Web of Earth;" *Thomas Wolfe's Characters: Portraits from Life*, by Floyd C. Watkins (1957), which details Wolfe's use of characters and incidents from his time growing up in Asheville; and more recent work such as the 2006 *Thomas Wolfe: An Illustrated Biography* (ed. Ted Mitchell), which mingles extracts from Wolfe's novels with an exhaustive collection of photographs, articles, reviews, essays and reproductions of documents to build up a picture of the places and people of Wolfe's life.

and the River"), the tone of certain reviews of *Of Time and the River* set the scene for much criticism of Wolfe. Henry Seidel Canby, lambasting Wolfe for his perceived egotism and the novel's "impotence" of expression (529), concludes that his work represents "spiritual autobiography," and due to its apparent lack of plot and structure, is "an artistic failure" because of Wolfe's inability to control his material and sublimate his ego to imagination (530). Accusations of formlessness and lack of control are echoed by Robert Penn Warren, who laments Wolfe's "thin and slovenly" (206) pretense of fiction and deficit of structure, and concludes, "Probably all of these defects, or most of them, are inherent in fiction which derives so innocently from the autobiographical impulse" (215). Warren's use of "innocently" here denotes another common thread in criticism of Wolfe: that he is naïve, thoughtless or unaware of literary conventions. Bernard DeVoto's 1936 review of *The Story of a Novel*, entitled "Genius is Not Enough" echoes many of these complaints and drives them home in a sustained attack from which, as Terry Roberts argues in a 2000 article, Wolfe scholarship has never fully recovered. DeVoto accuses Wolfe of a complete lack of control over his means of expression, denouncing portions of his writing as,

> long, whirling discharges of words, unabsorbed in the novel, unrelated to the proper business of fiction, badly if not altogether unacceptably written, raw gobs of emotion, aimless and quite meaningless jabber, claptrap, belches, grunts and Tarzanlike screams. (132)

DeVoto's claims that Wolfe's initial editor, Maxwell Perkins, was instrumental in assembling Wolfe's texts from fragmented manuscripts, and that Wolfe displays

a “shocking contempt of the medium” of the novel in his uncontrolled use of “raw” and “placental” (132) material from his memory have proved to be highly influential, whether as contentions that Wolfe scholars must address and argue against, or as facets of Wolfe’s work that are unconsciously taken for granted by other critics.

To trace just some instances of DeVoto’s influence, Mark Schorer, writing in 1948, decried Wolfe’s “disgorging of the raw material of his experience,” claiming that he has “hardly written novels at all” (80-81). Martin Maloney, in 1955, describes Wolfe’s obsession with writing about the self as a “Faustian sickness,” although he magnanimously concludes, “It is possible, although not highly probable, that Wolfe might have developed as a technician, and might have come to dominate his materials instead of being possessed by them” (175). Despite reassessments of Wolfe that have occurred since the 1960s, these initial criticisms of Wolfe persist. Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, dismisses Wolfe’s work as entirely self-obsessed, relegating it to “the high school department, on the shelf of masturbatory dreams” (470), while Harold Bloom, reviewing David Herbert Donald’s biography of Wolfe, repeats accusations that Wolfe’s editor’s “greatly improved” his work, and claims that “there is no possibility for critical dispute about Wolfe’s literary merits: he has none whatsoever” (13-14).

Despite these criticisms, others have not seen the autobiographical aspect of Wolfe’s work as a failing. William Faulkner repeatedly named Wolfe as the greatest American writer of his generation (the other authors on his list

changed over the years, but usually included himself, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell and Ernest Hemingway). Often asked to explain his choice, in a 1955 interview he justified it as follows:

> We were all failures. All of us had failed to match the dream of perfection and I rated the authors on the basis of their splendid failure to do the impossible. I believed Wolfe tried to do the greatest of the impossible, that he tried to reduce all human experience to literature. (81)

In another interview two years later Faulkner appeared to retract his high praise of Wolfe with the flippant comment "He bores me," refusing to say more on the subject (268). Despite Faulkner's wavering opinion, as Joseph Bentz argues in a recent article analysing Faulkner's statements, his concept of "splendid failure" is key to understanding Wolfe's work. Bentz suggests that for Wolfe, "the agony, the overshooting, the setting of the bar impossibly high, the splendid failure were not faults that he stumbled into - they were the artist's duty" (97).

These prevailing strands of negative criticism, which focus on the supposedly autobiographical basis of Wolfe's work and the perceived formlessness or chaos of his writing, have contributed to an ongoing issue of classification in relation to Wolfe. In particular, debates persist over whether Wolfe's work can be called "fiction," or whether it deserves another generic classification. Often, this debate occurs implicitly in the terms used to describe Wolfe's work. Taking Wolfe's "fiction" as a whole, encompassing the two novels published during his

lifetime, his two posthumously published novels, and his short stories,[5] a variety of terms and classifications can be found in Wolfe criticism. Examining some early classifications of Wolfe, we find the previously mentioned "spiritual autobiography" (Canby 530), the dismissive "journals" (Schorer 81) and "imaginative autobiography" (Bates 521-22). Joseph Sagmaster, in a critical 1940 review of *The Web and the Rock*, goes for straightforward "autobiography" (117), accusing Wolfe of "egomania" (116). Monroe M. Stearns, similarly writing of Wolfe's "egocentricity," classes his work as "autobiographical novels" (194). However, Thomas Lyle Collins, in a favourable 1942 article on whether Wolfe approaches the "Great American Novel," argues that generic classification is immaterial to the quality of Wolfe's work, and that the "use of genres should be for description, not judgement" (501).

Moving on to later assessments of Wolfe, we find prominent scholars of Wolfe still in disagreement over how to classify his work. Louis D. Rubin Jr., writing in 1955, firmly asserts that "these are autobiographical novels" (*Weather* 165), in that Wolfe's work takes its substance from the events of his life, but also interestingly notes that the novels themselves manifest Wolfe's process: "What we have in Thomas Wolfe's fiction is the problem of the shape of autobiographical fiction, and of the steps in working it out" (*Weather* 27). Richard S. Kennedy, in a discussion of Wolfe and genre, notes the autobiographical genesis of his writing but also explores Wolfe's all-

[5] Wolfe's early plays are excluded for the purpose of this investigation, but are generally agreed to have an autobiographical aspect similar to his other works. Wolfe's "non-fiction" work includes *The Story of a Novel* and his published speeches, letters and notebooks. As shall be discussed, this distinction is somewhat arbitrary, in light of Wolfe's attitudes toward autobiography and fiction.

encompassing desire to write about the world, emphasising the loosely associative principle of Wolfe's writing and broadly calling it "lyric fiction" ("Thomas Wolfe's Fiction" 27). He more specifically settles on the term "fictional thesaurus" to describe Wolfe's novels, using *Of Time and the River* as an example of this concept: "a long literary work made up of short units in prose or verse in which the parts are joined together by association of ideas rather than by probable and necessary development" (28).[6] From these discussions this thesis takes up two important strands: the metafictional aspect of Wolfe's work, and his tendency to work through a process of loose association of ideas.

To take a few more modern examples, implicit disagreement still persists among Wolfe scholars regarding the classification of his work. Albrecht B. Strauss, in a 1999 article comparing Wolfe with Samuel Johnson, lauds Wolfe's work as "so intensely, so movingly autobiographical" (10). In the proceedings of a conference on Wolfe in Rome in 2001, published in 2003, we find classifications ranging from the no-nonsense "fiction" (Idol 191), to the more nuanced "autobiographical narrative" (Faraone 205). Some prefer to avoid the question of classification altogether: Paula Gallant Eckard, in her excellent article on grief in Wolfe's short story "The Lost Boy" (which was also published as a novella), remarks that, "Whether as fiction or autobiography, *The Lost Boy* serves as a vehicle for remembering and mourning" (11). Remembering and

[6] Earlier work on Wolfe tends to focus on his novels, rather than his short stories. However, in recent decades the critical focus has tended to encompass these as well.

mourning, as shall be discussed further in the course of this thesis, are important aspects of Wolfe's approach to time and memory.

Definitions of Wolfe's work have shifted, but changes have also occurred in the terms used to describe autobiographical writing, and in the validity of autobiography as an area of research. "Life-writing," in particular, which encompasses a broader variety of work than the more restrictive term "autobiography," has become a significant area of study. Steve Bourdeau, in a 2005 discussion on Wolfe's canonicity, concludes that he should rightfully be considered in the canon of "life-writing," and that,

> by resituating the critical assessments that have been repetitively made about Wolfe's fiction within the genre of literary autobiography, we would realize that his works have greater value as autobiographies than they have as novels. This move would situate Wolfe's canon within a thriving and critically challenging research program, namely life-writing; it would serve also to recover Wolfe's works as valuable social, historical, and cultural documents that constitute a unique record of their time and place (62).

This conceptual shift in discussions of Wolfe, which acknowledges his so-called autobiographical element by placing his work within the much broader scope of "life-writing" is a useful place from which to proceed in discussing Wolfe's work, particularly in terms of his interest in how the life experiences of an individual relate to wider experiences, of community, nation and humanity. As discussed in the following section, Wolfe sees no distinction between

autobiography and fiction. While avoiding definitive classifications, to consider his work in terms of "life-writing" is appropriate, considering his refusal to create artificial barriers between art and life.

Reconsidering Wolfe

Collections of articles on Wolfe began to appear from the 1950s onward, such as Richard Walser's *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe: Biographical and Critical Selections* (1953), Leslie Field's *Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism* (1968) and Paschal Reeves' *Thomas Wolfe and the Glass of Time* (1971). The tide of Wolfe criticism turned somewhat during these years, when scholars such as Holman, Reeves, Rubin and Kennedy began to reconsider Wolfe's significance, and to address some of the negative associations Wolfe's work had continued to attract since his death in 1938. As Holman remarks in his 1959 bibliography of Wolfe criticism, work on Wolfe up until then had generally been marked by "great heat and comparatively little light" (436). Holman's own work on Wolfe is singled out for praise by a 1963 *Sewanee Review* article, which notes the resurgence of Wolfe criticism, and Holman's particular efforts to restore the "battered giant" as an "object of serious literary study" (Spiller 658).

Two large-scale works from this era, in particular, are invaluable to this project. Rubin's *Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of His Youth* (1955), which Holman's 1959 bibliography names as "the best critical guide yet written for Wolfe's works" (442), crucially addresses the autobiographical aspect of Wolfe's work. Rubin examines this not as a shortcoming, but as the basis of the form of his work, and also highlights Wolfe's preoccupation with time and change, arguing that, like

Wordsworth, Wolfe methodically uses his memory as the basis for his writing. Kennedy's *The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe* (1962) details the origin and publication of each piece of Wolfe's writing, but is far from a simple biographical account. Kennedy analyses Wolfe's novels and short stories in detail, exploring Wolfe's concern with language, his literary influences, and experimental aspects of his work, arguing that the label of "novels" should be allowed to stick to Wolfe, because of his ability to create an immersive world (412). As previously mentioned, Kennedy later refines his discussions of Wolfe and genre, employing terms such as "lyric fiction" and "fictional thesaurus" in reference to his "novels" ("Thomas Wolfe's Fiction" 28).

Renewed critical interest in Wolfe's work resulted in the founding of the Thomas Wolfe Society in 1979, whose periodical publication *The Thomas Wolfe Review* continues to be the most valuable source of Wolfe criticism. Wolfe scholarship from the 1970s until the 1990s, in the most general sense, focusses on the origins or sources of Wolfe's work, whether in terms of his literary influences, the content of his notebooks, reconstructions of so-called original versions of his work, the role of his editors in shaping his published texts, and the autobiographical aspect of his writing. Interest in the details of Wolfe's life showed no signs of abating during this period, with the publication of David Herbert Donald's biography of Wolfe in 1987. In 1981, controversy erupted over the role of Wolfe's editors in the letters pages of the *New York Review of Books*, when John Halberstadt claimed to have "discovered" that Wolfe's posthumous novels were essentially "written" by Edward Aswell, a claim that was strongly and powerfully refuted by Richard S. Kennedy, who cited his own

extensive work on the production of each of Wolfe's literary works in *The Window of Memory*. Kennedy crucially made it clear that "Wolfe's methods of composition during his last years involved writing and rewriting his autobiographical episodes and then interweaving these varying versions," and that "Aswell's editorial practice of interweaving various portions of the material was similar to Wolfe's own procedure and to some extent dictated by the material itself" ("Crying Wolfe").

Wolfe study during this time went through a necessary stage of collating, collecting, organising and publishing material which was previously scattered or unavailable. Aldo P. Magi's exhaustive collection of Wolfeana, for example, is the source of *Thomas Wolfe Interviewed, 1929-1938* (1985), as well as several bibliographies and chronologies produced by Magi to aid scholars of Wolfe's work. As previously mentioned, Kennedy and Reeves produced an edition of Wolfe's notebooks during this period, while John L. Idol, Jr. and the Thomas Wolfe Society were instrumental in reconstructing segments of Wolfe's work. With this flood of new material came renewed analysis of these new additions to the text of Wolfe's work, in terms of themes, philosophies, literary movements and insights into Wolfe's creative process. Of note here is Igina Tattoni's *The Unfound Door* (1992), which suggests that Wolfe anticipates many concerns of postmodern poetics, and argues that a critical reorientation of Wolfe scholarship is needed, as few critics recognise the novelty of his writing (155).

Tattoni's work is indicative of a new direction in Wolfe criticism, focussing on Wolfe's use of language, his concern with oppositions and contradictions, his dissolution of generic boundaries, the mechanics of his work and the creative processes involved in his writing. It also reflects a burgeoning interest in Wolfe in Italy, where a conference on Wolfe, in part organised by Tattoni, was held in 2001. The proceedings of this conference suggest some of the primary directions in current Wolfe scholarship: papers abound on Wolfe's use of language, voices and sound in his work, structural aspects of Wolfe's style, the borders of autobiographical and fictional narrative, Wolfe's motivations and intentions, his use of memory, and his relationship to literary movements and trends. Similar directions can be found on the other side of the Atlantic in the *Thomas Wolfe Review*. To briefly mention some key texts, Steve Bourdeau's work on the operation of autobiographical desire in Wolfe's fiction and the question of Wolfe's canonicity are particularly pertinent to this investigation, as are explorations of the mythology surrounding Wolfe, including work by Bentz (2006) and Holliday (2006).

This movement away from the tired "charge of autobiography," the obsession with origins and questions of definitive generic categorisation is reflected in a renewed interest in Wolfe studies. As the *New York Times* suggests in 2003, Wolfe scholarship "may be experiencing an upswing," reporting that Matthew Bruccoli, a prominent scholar of Wolfe has "sensed a turnaround" in Wolfe's fortunes (Blumenthal). Terry Roberts, in a 2000 article, asks "who killed Thomas Wolfe?," suggesting that Wolfe's poor reputation among critics is due not just to the "usual suspects" such as DeVoto, but to the persistent confusion

of genre produced by Wolfe's "autobiographical monster" (28). Asserting that Wolfe, like Victor Frankenstein, has been "murdered by his own brainchild," Roberts places the blame for Wolfe's literary reputation at the feet of Wolfe himself (28). Roberts maintains the negative connotations attached by some critics to so-called autobiographical fiction, in the language he uses to describe Wolfe's creative process. He argues that in later life Wolfe "held his own against the autobiographical monster," particularly in his short work, and that consequently it is "high time that we, as readers, resurrect his reputation" (29).

Roberts recognises and lauds the work of postmodernist critics such as Tattoni, who "are seeing in Wolfe a type of metafiction: literature that examines its own power and structure as it unfolds" (40). While much of Roberts's argument harks back to older criticisms of Wolfe, particularly in the highly charged and moralistic terms in which it distinguishes fiction from autobiography, and the way in which it discards *Look Homeward, Angel* in favour of Wolfe's "mature work" (40), it is significant in that it represents a "call to arms" that anticipates the renaissance of Wolfe criticism in the past decade. This is reflected in the recent publication of two new biographies of Wolfe. Joanne Marshall Mauldin's *Thomas Wolfe: When Do the Atrocities Begin?* (2007) takes an uncompromising look at the controversies surrounding Wolfe during his life and since his death, while Ted Mitchell's *Thomas Wolfe: An Illustrated Biography* (2009) contains an invaluable collection of documents and images relating to Wolfe's life, works and posthumous reputation. A common thread in recent scholarship on Wolfe is a concern with who, or what, is responsible for Wolfe's reputation, and whether his work needs to be considered in a new light.

Although it is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt to situate Wolfe definitively within a literary tradition, or to align him with particular literary and cultural movements, it is useful at this point to sketch out some comparisons with other authors that have been made by Wolfe scholars. This type of research is valuable in that it helps to understand the inspiration for some of Wolfe's ideas about writing, as well as some influences on his style. However, it must also be noted, as shall be seen, that attempts to definitively describe Wolfe's sources somewhat miss the point of Wolfe's work: Wolfe is the ultimate literary magpie, who recognises what we would now call "intertextuality" in the production of any text, and consciously pioneers the incorporation of elements from every text that he has encountered, written or otherwise. Nonetheless, some key strands emerge in Wolfe criticism with regard to his literary influences. Wolfe's debt to the English Romantic poets, particularly Coleridge and Wordsworth, is most widely recognised. As Igina Tattoni contends in *The Unfound Door*, "there is evidence both in criticism and in Wolfe's own writing that they represent his deepest, most imbedded poetic experience" (24).

Wolfe's studies of Coleridge under the direction of John Livingston Lowes at Harvard had an enormous effect on his ideas about the creative process, a connection which is significantly established and explored by Kennedy in *The Window of Memory*, Holman in "Thomas Wolfe and America" and Donald in *Look Homeward*. This connection has been investigated further in a recent article by Yoder, which argues that Coleridge's influence lies not so much in elements of

style, or in direct borrowings, as in the passions expressed through Wolfe's protagonists (90), and that Wolfe differs from Coleridge in that he writes primarily from experience, rather than from material that he has read and absorbed (91). However, Wolfe himself sees no difference between these spheres. Stearns, in 1945, discusses the influence of both Coleridge and Wordsworth on Wolfe's work, arguing that he turned to them in search of a guide or model for the sublimation of identity he sought in writing his "fiction," but that this could not be a simple process for him (194). Rubin provides the lengthiest and most detailed discussion of Wordsworth's influence on Wolfe, particularly in the third chapter of *The Weather of His Youth*, entitled "Intimations of Immortality," in which he argues that Wolfe is closer to Wordsworth than Coleridge, particularly in his quest for moments of transcendence or escape from mortal time, and his "instinctive mysticism" (67). Wolfe has also attracted comparisons with P. B. Shelley (Burgum) and Byron (H. Bloom), and it is indisputable that elements of "Romantic organicism" permeate the text of his work, as Herbert Muller contends in his 1947 work on Wolfe.

In terms of American literary influences, Wolfe is recognised as having a close kinship with Whitman, a comparison that has persisted since early assessments of Wolfe's work. Alfred Kazin, in 1942, writes of Wolfe's "need to set all of America down on paper, as Whitman had done" (475). However, he claims that Wolfe differs from Whitman in his inability to escape his own identity: "He was not 'celebrating' America, as Whitman had done; he was trying to record it, to assimilate it, to echo it in himself" (476). More favourable comparisons are found in Kennedy's *The Window of Memory* and Holman's "Thomas Wolfe and

America," among others. Holman's article argues that it is Whitman whom Wolfe most resembles, citing the "intensity of his feeling for America and the degree to which he used the jealously hoarded sensory responses of an individual American to describe the nation" (67). Emerson is also recognised as a source of inspiration for Wolfe, particularly, as Bruce McElderry notes, in his incorporation of the idea of "flow," which Emerson used to refer to imagination, into his concept of time. Bartholomew (2004) suggests that Wolfe's project was "to answer Emerson's challenge in 'Literary Ethics': to 'go into the forest' and describe the undescribed" (24).

Other American influences that are sometimes mentioned in relation to Wolfe include Poe (Cargill) and Melville (Muller). Bates, in 1937, describes Wolfe's literary family as follows: "Mr. Wolfe *is* his world. So were Melville and Walt Whitman; so Byron, Blake and Shelley" (524). To briefly refer to a few more literary sources from further afield, we can find credible comparisons with Samuel Johnson (Strauss), Jonathan Swift (Idol, 1975) and Laurence Sterne; Holman, writing in 1955, likens *Look Homeward, Angel* to *Tristram Shandy*, referring in particular to Wolfe's use of humour and to the manner in which both books "defy formal analysis" (137). Wolfe's lengthy, wide-ranging novels and powers of characterisation have also drawn comparisons with Cervantes (Kennedy, "Thomas Wolfe's Don Quixote"), Dostoevsky (Bloshteyn) and Dickens (Donald).

Wolfe's alignment with strands of modernism is particularly contested, given that Wolfe, though well-known for his distaste for certain tropes of literary

modernism and the intellectual scene of the 1920s and 1930s, frequently acknowledges the influence of writers such as Joyce and Proust. Wolfe's uneasy relationship to modernism hovers between homage and parody, particularly in the case of Eliot. George Reeves, recounting an interview in which Eliot had little to say on the subject of Wolfe (having never read his work), insists that it would be difficult to name two writers more disparate, but notes that Wolfe "seemed to have T. S. Eliot in his field of vision" throughout his career, and that "references and allusions to Eliot appear repeatedly in his works" (7). Idol, writing in 1981, refers to many instances in Wolfe's work where "Eliot's position is considered, his words mocked, and his thought pondered" (15). Arguing that Wolfe and Eliot are closer than Wolfe thought they were, Idol contends that Wolfe mistakenly associates Eliot's work with futility, death, and defeat, anathema to Wolfe's vitalism and "belief in a Life Force" (18), and finds similarities between Wolfe and Eliot in their thoughts on the relation of the artist to society (26).

Proust's influence on Wolfe, particularly in terms of his ideas about time, is explored by Rubin (among many others), who argues that, although Wolfe's work similarly "constitutes a search for lost time," his ideas about time were never worked out precisely: while Proust's novels are structured by his detailed theory of time, Wolfe "more or less stumbled into the time experience" (*Weather* 33). Church similarly does not believe that Wolfe worked out a conscious philosophy of time (629), arguing that Wolfe indiscriminately borrowed concepts of time from Proust, Joyce and Henri Bergson. Wolfe's admiration of Joyce and the effect of this on his style are discussed in early

criticism by Muller, focussing on Wolfe's use of Joycean techniques, and Rothman, who more broadly discusses Joyce's influence on Wolfe. More recently, Bartholomew notes Wolfe's use of stream-of-consciousness prose and the way in which his adoption of this narrative style and "free, unstructured language" (16) allows him to give greater "artistic fidelity" to the events of his novels (18).

Recent work which aims to fit Wolfe into the narrative of modernism includes Bentz's 1994 article on modernist structures in Wolfe's short stories, and Ensign's 2003 full length study, entitled *Lean Down Your Ear Upon the Earth, and Listen: Thomas Wolfe's Greener Modernism*, which emphasises Wolfe's love for the natural world and awareness of its impact on human life, aligning him with Steinbeck and Hemingway in particular. As previously mentioned, Tattoni and Bourdeau, among others, have placed Wolfe in a postmodernist frame; Tattoni in particular claims that Wolfe anticipates postmodern poetics and techniques. Wolfe is not easily categorised into one literary movement or another, due to his relentless, conscious borrowing and incorporation of sources from many times, places and authors, his disregard for trends in the literature of his time, his blurring of generic conventions, and the experimental nature of his writing. In this investigation, Wolfe is explored as a man "out of time" in many ways, displaying a mixture of techniques, philosophies and creative processes that reflect elements of literature and authorship from earlier as well as later ages. Wolfe's work finds its contemporary relevance in its borrowing, its incorporation, its refusal of categorisation. As Tattoni contends in her introduction to the proceedings of the Wolfe conference held in

Rome in 2001, "his complex literary approach, which continuously deals with the problematic space between fact and fiction so emblematic of our contemporary world, [thus] offers an impetus to delve into the past and to search for new rhythms and a new language" (1).

Individual and Universal Experience

The issue that lies at the heart of Wolfe's work, and of Wolfe scholarship, is that Wolfe is convinced that it is only possible to write from the self, and from one's own experience. However, he also wants to write about everything, to encapsulate the entirety of human experience within his writing. This paradoxical tension in Wolfe's approach to writing offers a clue to the widespread critical confusion with regard to the relationship between his life and his writing, and to the ongoing issues attached to categorising Wolfe's work. Wolfe wishes not just to understand and know everything about the world, but also to communicate what he has learned to others. We can find ample evidence of this impulse in his writing, particularly in his letters, notebooks, *The Story of a Novel* and "Writing and Living." In *The Story of a Novel* Wolfe readily admits to this, describing it as:

> a quality of intemperate excess, an almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human experience, to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold, or than the limits of a single work of art can well define. (46)

However, Wolfe then recounts that on further reflection he has realised that "the unlimited extent of human experience is not as important for [the artist] as the depth and intensity with which he [sic] experiences things" (47). In Wolfe's

explanation of this shift in consciousness we find the basis of his conviction that, through deeply understanding and communicating the entirety of the experiences of an individual, it would be possible to extrapolate, to describe all human experience. The central relationship in Wolfe's work is one of microcosm to macrocosm, of the individual experience to communal, national and universal human experience.

Wolfe's belief in the possibility of communicating all human experience through fully understanding and describing the experiences of an individual is frequently recognised and discussed in Wolfe criticism. Holman, for instance, relates this "desire to express the elements of a universal experience" directly to Wolfe's expression of the American experience, contending that Wolfe is "using himself to describe and define both this universal experience and his native land, to produce the American epic, to create the egalitarian and generic hero" ("Dark, Ruined Helen" 21). More recently, Faraone also relates Wolfe's tendency toward universality to the American experience, writing of the way his "personal autobiographical experience is transferred onto the screen of the great American scene" (217). However, as shall be discussed, Wolfe's desire to use the individual to represent the general goes beyond the concept of an American "hero," or of an idea of the universal that is bounded by nationality. Wolfe is certainly concerned with American life during his lifetime in its particulars and its generalities, but his work also ranges across Europe, far back into times beyond his own, and into the minds and voices of consciousnesses other than those of the "heroes" of his tales.

Wolfe's concept of the individual representing the universal is crucially bound up with his ideas about the relationship between autobiography and fiction. Wolfe's well-known statement in the preface to *Look Homeward, Angel* provides a starting point for this particular investigation of Wolfe, his motivations and his methods:

> If any reader . . . should say that the book is "autobiographical" the writer has no answer for him: it seems to him that all serious work in fiction is autobiographical – that, for instance, a more autobiographical work than "Gulliver's Travels" cannot easily be imagined. ("To the Reader")

Wolfe's proposal that all fiction is essentially autobiographical is an intriguing position, and offers Wolfe's own defence against the "charge of autobiography" which is so often attached to his work. It is worth considering whether this is a disingenuous comment, a throwaway defensive backlash against critical attacks. Against this, Wolfe continues to express similar positions throughout his lifetime, expanding upon and developing his theories regarding the false distinction between autobiography and fiction. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins defending his decision to break with Scribner's in 1936, he staunchly defends this argument again, rejecting the legitimacy of the term "autobiographical novel" altogether:

> You can either say that there is no such thing as autobiographical writing, or you can say that all writing is autobiographical, a statement with which I would be inclined to agree. But you cannot say, you must not say, that one man is an autobiographical writer and another man is not an autobiographical writer. You cannot

> and must not say that one novel is an autobiographical novel and another is not an autobiographical novel. Because if you say these things, you are uttering falsehood and palpable nonsense. It has no meaning. (qtd. in Nowell 360)

In "Writing and Living," almost ten years after the publication of his first novel, Wolfe speaks again of *Look Homeward, Angel*, maintaining that, "It is what is called an autobiographical novel - a definition with which I have never agreed, simply because it seems to me every novel, every piece of creative writing that anyone can do, is autobiographical" (120). Crucially, he distinguishes his concept of "autobiographical" in this sense from "autobiographical in the personal and special sense" (120), by which he means using specific biographical details and literal instances from the life of an identifiable individual. Wolfe's idea of the wider implications of "autobiographical" is connected to his belief in the potential of individual experience to encompass all human experience. The crux of so much misunderstanding of Wolfe's work and purpose may be a simple matter of linguistic difference, based on Wolfe's personal understanding of the term "autobiographical," which embraces the diversity of experiences an individual can have and convey to others, versus that of his critics, who take his ready acceptance of the term "autobiographical" as an admission of some kind of literary guilt, a failing on his part. The implications of Wolfe's refusal to distinguish between autobiography and fiction will be returned to in the following section, which elaborates on Wolfe's alignment with some contemporary theorists of autobiography and narrative.

The above statements, and the variations on them expressed throughout Wolfe's lifetime, have inevitably attracted the attention of critics, particularly since the reorientation in Wolfe scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s. Rubin, in particular, addresses Wolfe's preface to *Look Homeward, Angel*, interpreting it as follows: while the details may not be exactly the same, "What is always autobiographical is what the protagonist and the narrator, who are one and the same, think and feel about various situations" (*Weather* 15). This interpretation, while importantly noting the emotional aspect of Wolfe's particular variety of life-writing, is quite narrow in its concept of autobiography. It is still focussed on drawing correlations between the lives of the author and the protagonist, even though these correlations relate to mental and emotional states rather than biographical details. In his refusal to separate the protagonist from the narrator, Rubin's analysis ignores the presence of the narrator as a distinct personality in Wolfe's writing, as well as significant switches in the characters through which the narrative is focalized in his novels and short stories.[7] Steve Bourdeau, in a more recent analysis of Wolfe's statement relating to *Look Homeward, Angel*, approaches Wolfe's convictions from a postmodern perspective, arguing that Wolfe, in common with Paul de Man, "suggests that all texts inevitably share a common autobiographical foundation," and, in his use of a preface, consciously "breaks down the boundary between fiction and autobiographical 'reality' before the reader has the chance to judge or categorise the book" ("Welcome" 7). Bourdeau's perceptive analysis relates Wolfe's broad definition of "autobiography" to a "quest for profound identity" and an "attempt at getting at the real self" (9). While Wolfe certainly aims to

[7] These points are discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

deeply understand his innermost experiences and convey them to others, it shall be seen in this exploration of his approach to writing that Wolfe looks outside himself to a great degree, always focussed on how his own identity relates to communal identities and experiences.

Wolfe desires to record and communicate the entirety of human experience, from the perspective of his own individual experience. To Wolfe, all creative work is engaged in a project of this nature, and he cannot see how it would be otherwise. As Roberts argues, he is intent on "the deep excavation of the inner reality of a human being" ("Words" 237). Wolfe employs similar language in "Writing and Living," describing his need to record his memories:

> I was crystallizing for myself the whole material picture of the world around me - the great job now was just to dig it up and get it down - somehow record it, transform it into the objective record of manuscript - even upon thousands and thousands of pages that would never be printed, that no reader would ever see, that would never be framed into the sequence of a narrative - but at any rate would be *there* at last upon the record - worth all the effort just so long as I could get it down, get it down. (135-6)

Wolfe, while conscious of his motivations in recording his memories and experiences, frequently describes his writing in terms of an impulse, as something inevitable and unstoppable, "not only a physical and emotional necessity . . . much more than that, a spiritual one" ("Writing and Living" 100). The impulsive nature of Wolfe's work lends itself to accusations that Wolfe lacked an awareness of the implications of his manner of writing, or that his

theories about autobiography and fiction are incompletely thought out, retrospective justifications for his inability to write from a position outside his own. As this thesis shall demonstrate, Wolfe not only displays a fully formed position on the blurred boundaries of autobiography and fiction, but an understanding of the ways in which his impulse to document can be transformed into narrative.

Discussion of Wolfe's philosophies, his motivations and intentions abounds in Wolfe criticism, as well as debates over whether or not he has any kind of philosophy at all. Pamela Johnson, in an early assessment of Wolfe, insists that he has none, and that "all his life he was given to saying nothing nobly" (qtd. in Holman, *Bibliographical Study* 440). Margaret Church, although more complimentary of Wolfe, also notes that "there is a danger in attempting to formulate in terms of philosophy Wolfe's theories of time, for in such an attempt the critic tends to move far away from the works themselves and from Wolfe himself" (100). Wolfe himself is not given to claiming that he has a philosophy of time, of memory, of autobiography or of anything else, generally disdaining the demands of critics that he explain himself in this regard. Nonetheless, in typically contradictory fashion, his work, both that published as fiction and non-fiction, is interwoven with the working out of ideas and theories relating to the use of memory in creative work, the purpose of the artist and the relationship of the individual to the universal. His texts published as non-fiction, *The Story of a Novel* and "Writing and Living," provide ample justification and explanation for the basis of his work, and often reiterate his belief that autobiography and fiction are one and the same.

In *The Unfound Door*, Tattoni finds a philosophy in the contradictory nature of Wolfe's work, which to her is built on paradoxes and oxymora: she regards these dynamic oppositions as the key to understanding Wolfe, and finds in Wolfe's oft-reiterated search for "a *new language*, for a *lost key*, and for an *open door*" a "statement of purpose" (130; emphasis orig.), which is a quest to reconcile the opposition between his desire for a unified work and the fragmented nature of experience (152). Holman similarly identifies in Wolfe's work a "semilogical application to life of the Hegelian dialectic," manifested in his "need to define a thing's opposite before he could comprehend the thing" ("Dark, Ruined Helen" 29). Bentz, in a 2006 article, contends that "splendid failure" is at the heart of Wolfe's literary project. Bentz's line of argument regarding Wolfe's "splendid failure" is relevant to discussions of the language that Wolfe uses to describe the work of writing, which is a topic examined in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Faraone, in 2003, notes that Wolfe does not feel the need to justify his approach to writing, but that he strongly defends its legitimacy (209), and writes of Wolfe's keen awareness of the difficulties involved in creative production: "The transformation of the autobiographical material in the framework of the novel is perceived . . . as a delicate alchemical procedure which very often escapes from the hands of the artist" (212). Field similarly writes in the preface to *The Autobiography of an American Novelist* of Wolfe's purpose as "translating *fact* into what he considered *truth*" (viii). Kennedy, discussing Wolfe's intellectual development and change over the course of his lifetime (*Window* 2), notes that

Wolfe's view of life could be deemed "vitalism, or the philosophy of emergent evolution or creative evolution, although nowhere in his writing does he use terms of this sort," expressed in his work as "an enjoyment of life in all its aspects, dark or bright, bloody or peaceful" (9). Rubin takes a different approach to the question of Wolfe's philosophy, focussing on Wolfe's relationship with his nation and arguing that his purpose is "to get the 'essence' of his country into an art form" (*Weather* 6).

In Rubin's analysis can be found a common narrative thread in discussions of Wolfe's "philosophy," which rests on a distinction between the younger, self-obsessed Wolfe, and the more mature Wolfe, who develops a social conscience and an awareness of national issues that is reflected in a broadening of perspective and a movement away from "autobiographical" writing. As Rubin argues:

> The "form" of the Wolfe novels is, therefore, the principle of development that carries the autobiographical protagonist from immaturity toward maturity, from rebellion toward acceptance, from romanticism toward realism . . . . A progression, in other words, away from autobiography, through autobiography. (*Weather* 25)

Some make a distinction between Wolfe's first two novels and his posthumously published work, arguing that Wolfe became more objective in later life, moving from personal experience toward social criticism. George Hovis, following in the tradition of Holman and Kennedy, argues that *You Can't Go Home Again* represents Wolfe's turning outward toward the world, and the

development of a social consciousness. Hovis contends that Wolfe's ambivalence about the values of the "Lost Generation" and their assumptions about the relation of the artist to the community provide early lessons that Wolfe must outgrow, leading him to create work "which, if not superior, is more mature" (34). Terry Roberts's "Resurrecting Thomas Wolfe" focusses on Wolfe's short work, arguing that it is here that we find the more "mature" Wolfe, moving away from personal experience toward a broader view of humanity.

While it is the case that Wolfe incorporates a greater degree of social criticism in his later work, and his short work more obviously experiments with viewpoints other than his own, it is difficult to make a definite distinction between Wolfe's earlier and later work, as well as between his short stories and his novels. Criticism that is based on the idea of a more mature Wolfe fails to take fully into account the fragmented nature of his work, which often reuses segments written many years previously. This is partly because of the considerable editing, recombining and reshuffling of fragments of manuscript that took place both during Wolfe's lifetime and after his death in order to construct his novels, as well as the fact that his short stories were often parts of a larger body of text, or are to be found in slightly altered forms as episodes in his novels. Crucially, throughout his lifetime Wolfe consistently expresses his position on the relationship of the autobiography to fiction and the potential of individual experience to represent universal experience. While his work changes in content between individually published texts, as shall be explained at greater length in the next section I propose to consider Wolfe's work as a whole, in line with Edward Aswell's claim in "A Note on Thomas Wolfe" that

Wolfe was destined to write "one book," encompassing his entire experience as transformed by his creative imagination.

"Writing about or around the self"

Wolfe's refusal to recognise boundaries between autobiography and fiction anticipates more recent debates and developments in our understanding of the nature of narrative, and questions of from where the artist derives their material. As previously mentioned, Bourdeau's 2004 article on Wolfe and autobiographical desire emphasises the similarities between Wolfe's ideas and those of Paul de Man, who contends that, "Any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical" (922). Wolfe maintains consistently that *all* fiction is autobiographical, in the sense that every author produces fiction by rearranging their experiences, their knowledge of the world, the books they have read, the people they have met, the stories of others' experiences that they have heard, and so forth. In light of this position, one must consider why the autobiographical aspect of Wolfe's work is considered to be a failing by some. Many of Wolfe's contemporaries who have attracted greater critical attention consciously and explicitly relied heavily on their own life experiences to create their work. Steinbeck's fiction was shaped by his upbringing in the Salinas Valley, just as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County is a version of Lafayette County, Mississippi, where he spent much of his early life, and Hemingway's fiction is indebted to the time that he spent as a foreign correspondent in France and Spain. However, Wolfe has been singled out for criticism on the basis of his supposed reliance upon autobiographical detail in his literature. This begs the question of why this is the case, and what it is about Wolfe's work

that problematises categorisation, irritating and intriguing critics in equal measure. Wolfe's work belongs at the "margins of self-representation" (Gilmore 10), in a nebulous space that demands further description, definition and critical analysis.

This thesis aims to contribute to the body of work that, while not ignoring the criticisms of Wolfe's reliance on "autobiographical" material, finds them to be indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding of Wolfe's project and underlying motivations, which often contributes to a dismissal of his work purely because of its refusal to conform to the expectations of "fiction." Discussion of Wolfe is often marked by a focus on the extent to which his work is autobiographical, which obscures more interesting aspects of his writing. It is important to accept that Wolfe writes from himself, and from his own experience. However, fiction and autobiography are meaningless categories to Wolfe, and unlike those who write supposedly conventional autobiographies, Wolfe does not make any claims to accuracy. As Annette Kuhn writes in her discussion of memory work, reflecting what is now a commonplace in any discussion of autobiography and life-writing, "The linear narrative of conventional autobiography, its production of the narrator as unitary ego, is the outcome of a considerable reworking of the rough raw materials of an identity and a life story" (149). There are echoes of Wolfe's language here, in the metaphors of mining and sculpting, of working and re-working, but more generally there are direct correlations with Wolfe's own understanding of the project of writing about the self, which necessarily draws on models of fictional narrative, and the futility of making claims to truth.

Wolfe recognises that the only material available to him is contained within his own memory, but also sees the fictions necessarily contained in writing any narrative. Jacques Derrida, in *The Ear of the Other*, speaks of the determinism of the genre of autobiography, which depends on a restrictive structure, leading authors to "only come along and fill in a trellis or a grid which is already in place" (84). In Wolfe's work we find a relentless experimentation, a keen awareness of these structures and an effort to avoid them: Wolfe's project is always to find a new language, a new way of communicating experience. He understands that, in the words of one theorist of autobiography, those who set out to write the story of their own life are "both artists and historians, negotiating a narrative passage between the freedoms of imaginative creation on one hand and the constraints of biographical fact on the other" (Eakin 3). It seems that Wolfe resolves, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid making claims of truth or veracity; to avoid the restrictive structures of autobiographical writing; to recognise that the basis of his work is his experience, his memory, but that the material at his disposal can be subjected to endless reconsideration, transformation and assembly in different forms.

While absolute categorisation is counter-productive and inappropriate to Wolfe's work, as previously discussed, the application of terms such as "life-writing" provides a useful basis from which to consider Wolfe's work. Scholarship which focusses on genre is valuable in its description of elements of Wolfe's work that *could* place it in one category or another, and it falls to any scholar of Wolfe to decide what terms are most appropriate to Wolfe's writing. For the purposes of this thesis, I propose to add James Olney's explication of the

term “periautographical” into the mixture, as an interesting description of what Wolfe’s work does, and how it relates to what might be called “conventional” autobiography. Olney, in his work on the life-writing of Saint Augustine, Rousseau and Beckett, defines “periautography” as “writing about or around the self” and commends it as a term for “precisely its *in*definition and lack of generic rigour, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability” (xv). The prefix “peri-,” with its Latinate connotations of walking, circularity, wandering, meandering, perhaps contemplating, is an appropriate term to attach to Wolfe’s work, which is so thematically concerned with physical and mental travel, and which refuses to follow either a linear narrative chronology or maintain a singular perspective despite its supposedly autobiographical origin. So to the collection of terms used to describe Wolfe’s work I propose to add “periautographical;” however, it is important to keep in mind that classification of Wolfe’s work is something of a red herring. While “periautography” provides a reasonable description of what Wolfe does, it is more important to consider how and why he does it, and the effect that his motivations and creative process have on the interpretation of his work.

Wolfe’s awareness of the fallibility of language and memory have recently become of greater concern among scholars. Early discussions of Wolfe’s awareness of the possibilities and restrictions of language include Carl A. Bredahl’s 1973 article on Eugene’s discovery of the potential of language in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and its implications regarding the identity of the narrator, who Bredahl sees as a metamorphosis of the protagonist. Tattoni, in particular, takes up this thread in Wolfe criticism and expands it greatly,

providing much evidence of Wolfe's "emphasis on what postmodernists would refer to as the metafictional dimension of writing" (*Unfound Door* 70). Recent work that addresses the metafictional aspect of Wolfe's work includes Bourdeau's aforementioned article on autobiographical desire, which refers to the commentary of the narrator in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Kristina Bobo's 2005 article on linguistic inadequacy in *O Lost*, the recently "recovered" version of *Look Homeward, Angel*, discusses Wolfe's exploration of the "potential and limitations of language through the imaginings of a fictional version of himself, Eugene Gant" (37-38). While the concept of Eugene Gant as a fictional version of Wolfe reiterates divisions between "fact" and "fiction" that have long dogged Wolfe criticism, Bobo recognises that Wolfe's concern with language and the process of writing is of deep importance to any understanding of his work.

As Rubin argues convincingly throughout *Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of His Youth*, Wolfe's method arises out of a preoccupation with time and change, and he consciously uses his memory as the source and substance of his work. His writing reflects his struggle to understand the role of memory in the creative process. Elizabeth Nowell explains in her biography of Wolfe that his impulse is to pour out the history of his experience (13). A significant issue throughout this discussion is how Wolfe tries to control this impulse, to direct it into narrative, and to what extent he understands and meets the challenges involved in writing about and around the self, which to him is the only possible mode of writing. Discussions of Wolfe's creative process often focus on physical aspects of his writing: the legendary crates of manuscript, his methods of listing and cataloguing experiences, his use of dictation, his habit of standing or walking

while composing, or the role of editors in assembling fragments of his writing. These insights are interesting in themselves, but more so in how they relate to Wolfe's mental processes of assembly, combination and transformation, the depth of his awareness about his own creative methods, and how these processes are manifested in the substance of his fiction.

Edward Aswell, in his note on Wolfe, observes a "cohesive unity" in his four published novels and his unfinished book, *The Hills Beyond*, leading him to conclude that Wolfe's work, though published as individual books, deserves to be considered as a single, enormous text:

> Anyone who reads the books will see that they are not separate entities, not "books" in the usual sense. Tom really only wrote one book, and that runs to the 4000 printed pages comprising the total of his works. The individual titles that bear his name are only so many volumes of this master book. (364)

Wolfe's editors tend to agree on this subject; Perkins, claiming that "as his own physical dimensions were huge so was his conception of a book," writes of how Wolfe had "one book to write about a vast, sprawling, turbulent land - America - as perceived by Eugene Gant" (145).[8] Similar arguments are now commonplace in Wolfe criticism. Alfred Kazin similarly refers to the "one long novel he wrote all his life" (*On Native Grounds* 468). Holman describes the way in which Wolfe's novels and short stories were "carved out of a vast and complex outpouring of words" ("Dark, Ruined Helen" 20). On the subject of Wolfe's short stories, it is

[8] Perkins sees Wolfe's later novels as a distortion of the Gant stories, which he considers to be the basis of Wolfe's original schema for his works.

worth noting that many of them were originally meant to be part of longer works, were excerpted from Wolfe's novels, or were incorporated into them, which lends further credence to the "one book" argument.[9] In more recent scholarship on Wolfe, Monica Melloni describes his work as a "macro text," with parts existing in various versions, cut up to suit publishing needs (176). This thesis considers not only the work of Wolfe's published as fiction, but his "non-fiction" writings, his letters and notebooks as part of this macro text, taking the "one book" idea to its natural conclusion.

Wolfe himself observes no distinction between autobiography and fiction, between writing about the self and writing in general. Tattoni, who also erases this "arbitrary" division between Wolfe's fiction and non-fiction, argues convincingly that "everything Wolfe wrote is inextricably mingled with his life as a writer" (*Unfound Door* 42). Tattoni argues that Wolfe anticipates postmodern poetics in his refusal to recognise a distinction between art and life. While it is not the purpose of this thesis to align Wolfe with one literary movement of another, there are similarities between Wolfe's ideas and more recent theoretical understandings of texts:

> 'The text and the world', then, names a false opposition. . . . to talk about texts as 'representing' reality simply overlooks ways in which texts are already part of that reality, and ways in which literary texts *produce* our reality, make our worlds. There is no world without text. But there is also no text without, outside of,

[9] Nowell's biography of Wolfe contains some excellent detail on the provenance of certain of Wolfe's short stories and the manner in which they were intended to be part of longer works, but were frequently sold to magazines in short form as a matter of financial necessity (214; 379).

> the world, no way to separate the two, no sense, finally, in talking about 'the text and the world'. (Bennett and Royle 32)

While it is ambitious to suggest that Wolfe anticipates the development of postmodernist literature or presents a fully constructed philosophical argument regarding the relation of art to life, his convictions are certainly in accord with Derrida's oft-quoted statement that "There is nothing outside of the text" (*Of Grammatology* 158).

Wolfe comes to this knowledge instinctively, recognising that for him,

> living and working are so close together with me that it seems to me they are damned near the same thing. . . . I guess many a row or quarrel or dispute in some joint with a sanded floor began somewhere hours or days or weeks before upon a page of manuscript, but I hope some of my better moments started there as well. ("To Sherwood Anderson" 284)

For Wolfe, Tattoni explains, there is no distinction between "writing and living" (47), quoting the phrase that provides the title for Wolfe's Purdue speech. Wolfe passionately speaks of writing as "living work," inseparable from day-to day life: "if the work a man does is living work - work in which his mind, his spirit and his life are centred - then it seems to me that his work may also be a window through which one looks at the whole world" ("Writing and Living" 101). Once again, Wolfe's universalism comes to the fore in his conviction that it is possible, through the "living work" of an individual, to observe the entire world. Critical work on Wolfe's use of memory in his work often focusses on Wolfe's inability to "get beyond himself" (Rubin, *Weather* 163), or to escape "the

confines of his own experience" (Bourdeau, "Welcome" 10), but fails to recognise Wolfe's omnivorous approach to his material, his refusal to distinguish between his own experiences and those of people he had met in his day-to-day life or read about in novels or newspapers, his all-encompassing idea of what his own experience and memory could include.

This widespread critical misunderstanding of Wolfe's approach to writing is a starting point for the questions that motivate this thesis. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, significant disagreement still exists in the categorisation of Wolfe's writing, and the negative connotations of the "charge of autobiography" persist in relation to Wolfe's work. This thesis does not seek to refute this line of criticism, but rather aims to demonstrate that it is based on a distinction that Wolfe himself does not recognise, and shows an under-estimation of the complexity of Wolfe's ideas regarding autobiography and fiction, and the ways in which these are manifested in his writing. The primary question that I consider in the following pages is broad, and as follows: what elements of Wolfe's work are the source of such critical discomfort and confusion? In order to answer this question, I consider how Wolfe engages with the challenges of writing, which to him is inextricable from writing about or around the self. Examining the *how* of Wolfe's work involves an investigation of his creative processes, his theories and attitudes with regard to writing, his beliefs regarding individual and universal experience, the literary trends and traditions from which his work draws inspiration, and the ways in which Wolfe employs narrative techniques and formal features. Running throughout this discussion is the issue of to what extent Wolfe's ideas about writing are

consciously thought out and applied, or instinctively manifested in his text. In this investigation of Wolfe's processes, I illuminate features of Wolfe's creative processes and narrative techniques that indicate the complexity of Wolfe's approach, and suggest why these features have been the cause of confusion with regard to Wolfe's project and motivations. I contend that much misunderstanding of Wolfe's work arises from a distinction between genres that Wolfe himself does not recognise.

Methodology

Wolfe's work deserves to be approached from a multiplicity of perspectives, reflecting the complex nature of the texts in question. The work of a number of theorists from different eras and schools of thought informs my analysis of Wolfe's work. Primarily, this thesis considers why Wolfe's work is the source of such confusion, misunderstanding and discomfort regarding the relationship between autobiography and fiction, and between an author's life and their art. To explore this question, I examine how Wolfe approaches the challenge of transforming his memory into narrative, focussing on elements of Wolfe's writing that problematise generic categorisation. Crucially, to Wolfe, any form of writing is inseparable from writing about or around the self. Throughout Wolfe's work is a concern with how individual experience can represent universal experience, and I investigate how this is manifested in features of Wolfe's writing. It is important to note at this point that this thesis does not attempt to psychoanalyse Wolfe or to definitively explain his thought processes.[10] In so far as Wolfe's motivations are concerned, this

[10] Some works delve into Wolfe's psyche using evidence gathered from his writing, attempting to analyse whether he suffered from particular psychological disorders that may have had an

analysis is focussed on the text of Wolfe's work, and how his ideas about writing are expressed therein, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Kennedy, in his article on Wolfe and genre, warns against trying to fit Wolfe's work into "bags and boxes," advising that Wolfe's work should be approached analytically, working from the inside of the text (6). Aswell, similarly, mentions Wolfe's own disdain for categorisation:

> Tom had very little to say to those who believe they can understand a work of art by tying it up in a neat little packet, posting a label on it, and tucking it away in a pigeonhole. He did not write for them and was totally uninterested in them except as bizarre specimens of the human race, fascinating to study but unprofitable to listen to. (361)

My analysis does not describe Wolfe's approach to writing in terms of one schema alone or categorise his work as belonging to one genre or another, as it seeks to explain why a misguided preoccupation with categorisation persists in relation to Wolfe's work. Rather than asking *what* Wolfe's books and short stories are, it investigates the *how* and *why* behind Wolfe's creative process and the ways in which these motivations are manifested in the substance of his writing, in terms of the language Wolfe uses and certain unusual narrative features present in his work.

An obvious practical consideration, given the breadth of work produced by Wolfe during his short lifetime, both published and unpublished, is what texts should be

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effect on his work. Full-length studies include William U. Snyder's *Thomas Wolfe: Ulysses and Narcissus* (1971) and Richard Steele's *Thomas Wolfe: A Study in Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* (1977), while articles include D. Rosenthal's "Was Thomas Wolfe a Borderline?" (1979). This line of enquiry, though interesting, is not within the scope of this investigation.

used in any examination of his work. I analyse a broad selection taken from the "macro text" of the entirety of Wolfe's written work, encompassing both that published as fiction and as non-fiction. Wolfe's four published full-length novels (*Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, *The Web and the Rock*, and *You Can't Go Home Again*) are central to this investigation. I also examine a selection of Wolfe's short stories. Although a *Complete Short Stories* was published in 1989, given the constraints of this thesis and the fact that much criticism of Wolfe rests on work published during his lifetime and shortly afterwards, the short stories analysed here include those which were published in the collections *From Death to Morning* and *The Hills Beyond*, which also incorporates the fragmentary portion of Wolfe's unfinished book, "The Hills Beyond." For similar reasons, I do not examine the more recent reconstructions of parts of Wolfe's work, but focus on his work in the form in which it appeared to his early readers.

In terms of Wolfe's "non-fiction" writing, *The Story of a Novel* and "Writing and Living" are crucial in illuminating some of Wolfe's ideas, processes and motivations in relation to the work of writing. Although these two texts have been described as the only pieces of narrative theory produced by Wolfe (Faraone 206), this is a somewhat meaningless distinction given the extent to which Wolfe writes about writing, creativity and the role of the artist in his so-called fictional work. Wolfe's *Notebooks*, edited by Kennedy and Reeves, provide some extremely useful insights into Wolfe's mindset and creative process, and his letters (of which he wrote profuse amounts) also provide useful material in relation to his thoughts about writing. In this regard, this thesis analyses certain excerpts from the *Selected Letters* (ed. Nowell), and *Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother* (ed. Terry). As to the

thorny question of what to call Wolfe's work, his writings are generally referred to as "texts," but more specifically are referred to by the paratextual categorisation given to them upon publication ("novels," "short stories" etc). This is not a judgement on genre, but a way in which to distinguish the designated forms in which Wolfe's work reached his readers.

This thesis is concerned with how Wolfe approaches the challenge of writing, transforming the material of his memory and experience into narrative that he believes to be representative of universal or communal experience, and how this produces narrative effects that problematise the interpretation and categorisation of Wolfe's work. Chapter Two begins by investigating the argument, proposed by Kennedy, Melloni and others, that Wolfe's narrative style can be closely aligned with oral traditions. This chapter explores the concept of Wolfe as "storyteller," questioning whether he can be considered a "bard," in the sense that his work derives elements from traditions of oral storytelling, and examines the ways in which Wolfe utilises his memory in the creative process. While it is important to avoid trying to fit Wolfe into definitive categories, as previously mentioned, some schemas and terminology are necessary as starting points from which to begin describing Wolfe's work from the inside. To launch the discussion in this chapter, I consider Walter Benjamin's concept of the storyteller/novelist dichotomy and its application to Wolfe. Investigating whether Wolfe conforms to Benjamin's description of the figure of the storyteller, rather than the novelist, opens up avenues to view Wolfe's work in ways that cross the artificial divide between oral and literary culture. Moving on from Benjamin's analysis, I consider the role of memory in traditions of storytelling, employing the theories of Mary Carruthers,

whose work on the role of memory in medieval Western culture furnishes a surprising insight into the modern methods of authors such as Wolfe, for whom memory is such a central concern. In particular, Carruthers's distinction between memorial and documentary cultures, rather than oral and literary cultures, provides a novel framework from which to analyse Wolfe's work, leading to a fresh understanding of Wolfe's conflicts with the demands of print, the published novel form, and his critics.

The tensions in Wolfe's work that are brought to light in Chapter Two are analysed further in Chapter Three, which examines the ways in which Wolfe writes about writing. This chapter explores in great detail the metaphors, rhetoric and recurring imagery that Wolfe employs in relation to the creative process, writing, language and memory. This type of analysis has not previously been attempted on any large scale in relation to Wolfe's work. This chapter focusses on close analysis of the texts of Wolfe's four novels, certain of his short stories, and in particular, his statements on writing in his "non-fiction" work. Wolfe's keen awareness of both the potential and restrictions of language is central to this discussion, and this chapter explores the resulting tensions that are constantly manifested, explicitly or implicitly, in the substance of Wolfe's writing. This chapter questions how Wolfe understands, thinks about and ultimately writes about the creative process. Firstly, I examine Wolfe's concern with the inadequacy of language, moving on to a discussion of imagery of disease and corruption in relation to the creative mind, and the significance of these images. Wolfe's descriptions of memory, which often involve storms, floods and other natural forces, are analysed in terms of Wolfe's concern with the pressure to communicate his experience to others. Finally, this

chapter explores how Wolfe understands and describes the life and role of the artist, particularly in terms of the relationship of the individual to society, and his interrogation of the processes and practices of writing.

Moving on from how Wolfe writes about writing, this thesis investigates certain narrative features of Wolfe's work in a manner that, again, has not previously occurred on any large scale. Chapters Four and Five are linked in their approach, respectively examining Wolfe's frequent deployment of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, and his unusual use of narrators and focalization. Bearing in mind the complexity and tensions evident in Wolfe's work that emerge from Chapters Two and Three, these chapters explore how these aspects of Wolfe's approach to transforming his memory into narrative are manifested in formal features of his work. Chapter Four investigates how Wolfe's writing attempts to understand and experiment with the processes of time, through his use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes. In particular, it examines how his use of these modes relates to effects of timelessness and universality in Wolfe's work, as well as connections between the use of these modes and authorial or narratorial recollection, returning to the theories of memory developed by Carruthers which are discussed in Chapter Two. Chapter Five demonstrates Wolfe's complex and experimental approach to narration and focalization, exploring Wolfe's development of narrating figures which are distinct from his protagonists, and proposing the existence of a peculiarly "Wolfean" narrator. This chapter also examines Wolfe's use of multiple perspectives, and the implications of this in terms of how he incorporates the experiences of others into his own experience, and consequently into his writing.

Both of these chapters employ Gérard Genette's narratological theory and terminology in relation to the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, narrators, and focalization. However, it important to emphasise that these formal schemas are used as starting points, as springboards from which to approach Wolfe's work. As shall be seen, the narrative features of Wolfe's work are rarely a comfortable fit for any particular scheme of analysis. Wolfe's texts are self-consciously intertextual, deliberately incorporating and borrowing material from a huge variety of sources, and benefit from similarly eclectic analysis. Consequently, in these two chapters, as other areas of the thesis, the work of one theorist is employed in order to provide a broad survey of the elements of Wolfe's work under discussion, but the analysis gleaned from this initial approach is then investigated further according to a number of alternative paradigms, in order to find the most appropriate way in which to describe what Wolfe does, paving the way for the more interesting and complex questions of how and why he does it.

Throughout this thesis, I consider what elements of Wolfe's work are so problematic for critics, particularly in terms of categorisation, and how this is linked to Wolfe's awareness of the intricacies of language and the slipperiness of truth. Wolfe's work may be described using the broad terms of "life-writing," or "periautography," but fits uncomfortably in the category of autobiography, despite Wolfe's conviction that it was only possible to write about or around the self. To Wolfe, writing in any form is a challenge of transforming the material of his life, his memory and experiences, into narratives that encapsulate universal human experience. Wolfe recognises that no matter what he writes about, he is writing about the self and from his own memory, and that it is impossible to do otherwise,

as Saint Augustine observes centuries before him: “What is nearer to me than myself? And see, I am not able to understand the power of my memory, for I identify myself completely with it” (255). This thesis explores the many ways in which Wolfe directly and indirectly confronts an intractable problem: he wishes to write about everything, and yet recognises that he can only write from himself. I contend that the tensions arising from this paradoxical situation are manifested in Wolfe’s experimental and self-reflexive strategies of composition and narration, which constantly interrogate what it is to write, to be a writer, and to make one’s individual experience representative of universal experience. Through a variety of investigative methods, this thesis explores how Wolfe approaches the challenges of writing and ways in which this approach lends itself to critical misinterpretation.

Chapter Two: "An American Bard"

In *The Window of Memory*, Richard S. Kennedy identifies Thomas Wolfe with oral traditions of storytelling. Kennedy proposes that much criticism of Wolfe's work (regarding his supposedly formless and fragmentary style) results from his attempts to translate a style of reminiscence and mental narration that is rooted in oral traditions into written forms:

> He was an instinctive writer, a natural genius, a bard somehow left over from the days of spoken literature. One characteristic provides the key to all his virtues and his faults – his approach to his work was oral and not literary. He was a storyteller, like the scop or the minstrel, except that he sang not of traditional heroes but of his own life. (2)

Recent scholarship on Wolfe's association with oral storytelling focusses on the predominance of voices and sounds in his work. Monica Melloni describes oral narrative as "a basic feature of all of Wolfe's art," noting structural aspects of his style that reflect characteristics of spoken language (173). Igina Tattoni argues that Wolfe positions himself between oral and literary traditions, and that as a result, his language acquires "a new, 'thicker' quality as it partakes of the oral and the written dictions at the same time" (*Unfound Door* 85). Critical work on Wolfe in this vein tends to maintain a dualistic opposition between the oral and the literary, even when arguing that Wolfe crosses this boundary or creates a synthesis between the two spheres.

Wolfe is motivated by a desire to mine the depths of his memory in order to relate all that he has seen, felt and experienced. As Richard Walser explains, "Wolfe did not often think of himself as a novelist . . . . He wished, rather, to follow life with its seemingly patternless movements, and did not push for answers with which experience had not provided him" ("From *Thomas Wolfe"* 181). Wolfe intends not just to disseminate the experience of one person, but also to tell the stories of family, of community, and of nation through the prism of an individual consciousness. As numerous scholars have done, Kennedy compares Wolfe with Whitman, describing Wolfe as "an American bard" (*Window* 3). While Kennedy focusses on the notoriously torrential nature of both authors' writing, Holman outlines in greater detail in "Thomas Wolfe and America" how Wolfe's writing echoes Whitman's belief that the experience of the self could be representative of the experience of the nation (68-69). Wolfe's tendency to expand, mythologise and universalise the experience of an individual is reminiscent of ancient forms of narrative such as fables, which seek to offer universally applicable lessons or tropes to the audience of the storyteller.

In line with the central question of what elements of Wolfe's work problematise its categorisation and interpretation, this chapter explores how Wolfe employs processes of composition and concepts of communicating experience through narrative that are unusual, and even disconcerting, in the context of texts published in the form of novels or short stories. The idea of Wolfe as bard or storyteller is at the centre of this chapter, which focusses in particular on his

use of memory in the creative process and the manifestation of elements of oral literary forms in his work. The mythological and communal aspect of storytelling forms the basis of an investigation into Wolfe's understanding of his role as author. Wolfe's characters are often gargantuan, superhuman; they have insatiable appetites, hysterical emotions, and perhaps most significantly, prodigious memories. These mythic figures through which Wolfe's work is focalized are often storytellers themselves, from the central figures of Eugene Gant and George Webber to the Fate-like Eliza Gant, who appears in different forms as a weaver of tall tales and fount of family history. Writing of David Hawke,[11] an early version of the protagonist in *Of Time and the River*, Wolfe uses the word "bard" to describe his own aspirations: "He is part beast, part spirit - a mixture of the ape and the angel. There is a touch of the monster in him. But no matter about this - at first he is the bard and, I pray God, that is what I can be" ("To Maxwell E. Perkins" 134).

This chapter seeks to investigate whether Wolfe can be considered a "bard," in the sense that his work derives its style and process from traditions of oral storytelling, and how Wolfe employs memory in the creation of his work. Beginning with Walter Benjamin's discussion of what it means to be a storyteller, I explore whether the characteristics of Wolfe's work and his ideas about writing indicate Wolfe's position as an author rooted in traditions of non-literary storytelling, and how Wolfe himself conforms to Benjamin's description of the figure of the storyteller. Subsequently, I examine the position of

[11] The connection between the surnames based on animals is of note here ("Hawke" and "Wolfe"), as one of many examples of Wolfe's transmutation of details of his own life into his texts.

Benjamin's storyteller in relation to their community, in light of Wolfe's quest to make individual experience representative of universal experience. As previously mentioned, work on Wolfe's relationship with oral literature tends to uphold a strict conceptual division between the oral and the literary. Benjamin's analysis is particularly useful as a starting point for discussion because it exemplifies this dichotomy, and defends it in great detail. I investigate and question this division in relation to Wolfe's novels and short stories, examining its applicability to his work and the possibility that a different schema is needed to understand the processes at work in his texts.

Moving on from Benjamin's figure of the storyteller, this chapter turns to an investigation of the role of memory in oral traditions of storytelling, and the ways in which the workings of memory in storytelling are expressed and represented in Wolfe's work. Mary Carruthers's work on medieval memory provides an insight into the concept of the recitation and repetition of material as a way of committing narratives to memory in order that they might be internalised and transmitted orally, or recombined into new forms. Wolfe's use of recitative and repetitive forms of narration is of particular interest in this context, indicating his proclivity to translate his experiences into a narrative form through a process that has similarities to Carruthers's medieval *meditatio* and *ruminatio* (meditation and rumination). Carruthers refuses to divide narrative into the oral and the literary, arguing that we can instead understand it in terms of the cultural operation of different modes (the memorial and the documentary), which can occur simultaneously and to differing degrees in any text. I propose Carruthers's schema as a more nuanced way in which to

understand Wolfe's use of memory and peculiarly "oral" narrative techniques, casting aside the division of storytelling into the oral and literary which is maintained by Benjamin. Through the theories of two very different scholars, this chapter approaches the concept of Wolfe as storyteller with a focus on his narrative methods, his conceptual relationship with various communities, and his creative process. In doing so, I contend that Wolfe's work is best understood from a perspective that incorporates elements of storytelling and composition that are not usually associated with Wolfe's era, or with the published forms in which his work reached the reading public.

Benjamin's Storyteller

Wolfe's adherence or non-adherence to the characteristics of Benjamin's archetypal figure of the storyteller is the starting point for a consideration of what it means to be a "storyteller," and how Wolfe's writing relates to this concept. In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," Benjamin laments the decline of storytelling, blaming its slow death on the hyper-availability of information, the supposed fall in value of life experience, and the development of the novel as the most popular form of fiction. Benjamin, a contemporary of Wolfe, would perhaps have considered Wolfe's abundant prose and doorstopper novels to be anathema to the preservation of "storytelling," in the sense of a shared oral folk tradition and culture. Nonetheless, Benjamin's piece is relevant here in that it provides a platform to examine Wolfe as storyteller, through the vision of one contemporaneous cultural critic.

Benjamin's argument that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (83) is buttressed by his sensitivity to impending disaster in Europe:

> One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. (83-84)

Wolfe, on his 1930s trips to Germany, became aware of the rumblings of war and the increasingly despicable treatment of Jews and other minorities, documenting this most clearly in a piece which eventually comprised Book VI of *You Can't Go Home Again*. Wolfe's social conscience is increasingly evident in his later writing, much of which found a home in his posthumously published novels. His storytelling ability becomes more powerful and forceful with each atrocity encountered, rather than declining in the way that one might expect from Benjamin's heralding of the end of storytelling, in the face of a tide of new experiences.

In the aforementioned section of *You Can't Go Home Again*, entitled "I Have a Thing to Tell You" (subtitled in German as "Nun Will Ich Ihnen 'Was Sagen"), Wolfe graphically depicts the warning signs and incidents he has personally encountered in a polemical fashion, temporarily overriding the obscuring effect of his periautographical style:

> So the weeks, the months, the summer passed, and everywhere about him George saw the evidences of this dissolution, this

> shipwreck of a great spirit. The poisonous emanations of suppression, persecution, and fear permeated the air like miasmic and pestilential vapors, tainting, sickening, and blighting the lives of everyone he met. It was a plague of the spirit - invisible, but as unmistakable as death. (490)

The title of this piece of writing indicates the traces of oral storytelling culture to be found in Wolfe's writing. It is whispered, conspiratorial; establishing the narrator as storyteller and the reader as interlocutor, it invites us to listen.[12] The translation of the title into German signifies that Wolfe's desired audience is not solely American; it becomes evident that this piece of writing is intended to warn as well as entertain.

Wolfe's work does not damage or counteract the traditions that are supposedly unique to oral storytelling, but transforms them. When Benjamin discusses storytelling, he refers to oral traditions alone: those of verbally sharing experience with others, of telling a story on request. To Benjamin, that request is now accompanied by embarrassment and a dearth of the ability to "tell a tale properly" (83). To Wolfe, the request to tell what he knows does not come from an external source, but is an internal motivation. He feels an almost physically painful impulse to impart all of his experience to the world: "I don't know how I became a writer, but I think it was because of a certain force in me that had to write and that finally burst through and found a channel" (*Story* 4-5). This "certain force" is a storytelling instinct, which in Wolfe's case is

[12] The titles and subtitles of Wolfe's texts often suggest forms of literature more ancient than the novel, using phrases such as "The Story of . . ." or "A Legend of . . . ." Examples include *The Story of A Novel*, *Look Homeward Angel: A Story of the Buried Life*, and *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in his Youth*.

indistinguishable from a strong autobiographical instinct. The following explores Wolfe's transformation of characteristics associated with oral storytelling in the context of his impulse to write "about or around the self" (Olney xv). To begin, this analysis returns to Benjamin's attack on the dominant modern literary form - the novel.

The printed and widely distributed novel, Benjamin implies, is the antithesis of the oral telling of a tale, bound in space and time, heard only by a select few, and only reproducible by telling the tale again, in circumstances that will inevitably differ. Benjamin describes the advent of the novel as the "earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling," contending that, "What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book" ("Storyteller" 87). By "the book," Benjamin refers to the physical object; his writing elsewhere on the commodification of art confirms his distrust of the easily reproducible and saleable artwork, which lacks the so-called original work of art's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" ("Work of Art" 222). Benjamin's concerns as an author were by no means new for his time: as Ian Watt illustrates, the concept of literature as commercial object caused consternation among writers in the early eighteenth century, who were justifiably alarmed about "the subjection of literature to the economic laws of *laissez-faire*" (54), while Terry Eagleton argues that the artist had been becoming "little more than a minor commodity producer" since the nineteenth century (18). Although the technology for recording, reproducing and distributing the spoken word existed in Benjamin's time, he focusses on the

differences between "traditional" storytelling, heard only by the audience physically present at the telling, and the printed word.

Benjamin disdains what Roland Barthes, in "The Theory of the Text," deems the "work," which is an object of exchange that is consumed and interpreted, and that occupies a physical space (39). Barthes's definition of the "text," as opposed to the "work," has parallels with Benjamin's concept of the "story" versus the "novel." According to Barthes:

> The text is a productivity. This does not mean that it is the product of a labour (such as could be required by a technique of narration and the mastery of style), but the very theatre of a production where the producer and reader of the text meet: the text 'works', at each moment and from whatever side one takes it. (36)

As Allen summarises, for Barthes the "work" represents not only "the idea of stable meaning, communication and authorial intention," but also a "physical object," whereas the "text" "stands for the force of writing which, although potentially unleashed in some works, is in no sense the property of those works" (66). To Benjamin, storytelling is the "theatre of production," where narrators and listeners partake in a cyclical process of narrating, hearing, interpreting, transforming and reciting stories in turn. The "text" of the story is not the property of a singular author, nor is its origin of any relevance. However, crucially, he does not recognise that this same theatre of production is entwined in every story, whether in the tales told by his traditional storyteller figure or in the pages of the maligned novel.

If the essential failing of the novel is its dependency on the book (i.e. the reproducible printed object), this conversely implies that the transmission of stories can only occur through a medium other than print. Stories, according to this reasoning, are transmitted orally from storyteller to listener, which means that they must first be committed to memory. Whether the story has been told to a storyteller by another, or created by storytellers themselves, it must reside in the memory of an individual in order to be recited, and to become part of its listeners' memories. The novel escapes the restrictions of memory, but in doing so, leaves behind the essence of story and storytelling. Further to his separation of the concepts of novel and story from each other, Benjamin denies the influence of oral culture on the novel:

> What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature - the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella - is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. . . . The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. (87)[13]

Benjamin's storytelling process is communal in its nature, requiring listeners as well as storytellers in order to continue, and also requiring that listeners become storytellers in turn. He refuses to believe that the authors and readers of novels could be involved in a similar operation. Wolfe, however, shows an

[13] Benjamin always refers to the storyteller as a male figure. In quotation I preserve this, but in paraphrasing Benjamin I use he/she or his/her as appropriate.

intense awareness of the presence of his readers, as well as their ability to reinterpret and retell his stories.

Wolfe's narrators often anticipate questions that the reader might ask of the narrative, elaborate upon these questions, and then offer possible answers:

> And came from where? From the deep South, or the Mississippi valley, or the Middle West? From Minneapolis, Bridgeport, Boston, or a little town in Old Catawba? From Scranton, Toledo, St. Louis, or the desert whiteness of Los Angeles? (*You Can't* 359)

By addressing the reader directly, by inviting them to listen, by interjecting in order to keep the reader's attention, and by questioning and rearranging the narrative itself, the narrator establishes a relationship with the reader that appears to be bi-directional. It harks back to the companionable narrative style employed in, for instance, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Fielding's *Tom Jones*, but also anticipates habits of narrative interruption and a confusion of the figures of author and narrator more commonly associated with postmodern authors such as Vonnegut or Doctorow. As Umberto Eco contends, in both the fictional and the real world "the principle of trust is as important as the principle of truth" (89). Wolfe's narrator gives the impression that the truth of the narrative will be questioned, if the reader will trust in the ability of the narrator to question. This interactivity is an illusory echo of the storytelling experience described by Benjamin: the reader's responses are anticipated and elucidated by the narrator, who cannot actually enter into a conversation.[14]

[14] Wolfe's use of narrators and focalization is discussed in much greater detail in Chapter Five.

If we consider Wolfe's writing in terms of general thematic material, he does not exactly conform to Benjamin's descriptions of either the storyteller or the novelist. Benjamin contests that, in the novel, memory manifests itself in a very different manner to the role it plays in the story. He identifies the element of remembrance, to which is added reminiscence, the corresponding element of the story, as crucial in the development of the novel:

> What announces itself in these passages is the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist as contrasted with the short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller. The first is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle; the second, to *many* diffuse occurrences. ("Storyteller" 98; emphasis orig.)

While Wolfe's four main novels focus on the life trajectory of a male protagonist, with similarities to his own characteristics and life story, his novels so frequently digress into incidents and episodes that are dislocated from the primary narrative that much early criticism focussed on this trait as an inability to control literary form. These passages can often be read as self-contained (and indeed, often began life as short stories, or were later detached from the main body of his work and published as short stories), yet they maintain a thematic connection to the main body of his work.

An example of one of these "diffuse occurrences" is the "C. Green" episode in *You Can't Go Home Again* (chapter 29, "The Hollow Men"). A man's suicide in Brooklyn, which has been summarised by "nine lines of print in *Times*" (364) is described, speculated upon, dissected, lamented and expanded into a scathing critique of American society by the narrator, deserting the story of George

Webber entirely for a significant time. The only connection between this episode and the main "story" is that Foxhall Edwards, George's editor, reads about the incident in the newspaper: "Fox read it instantly, the proud nose sniffing upward sharply: - 'man fell or jumped . . . Admiral Francis Drake Hotel . . . Brooklyn.' The sea-pale eyes took it in at once, and went on to more important things" (374).

Unlike Foxhall Edwards, Wolfe's narrator does not dismiss this tragedy, but adopts a tone that is conspiratorial and inviting, encouraging the reader to behave as if they are listening, not just reading. The narrator uses the name of the hotel that C. Green jumps from to create a conceit whereby Admiral Francis Drake is addressed through a series of questions and interjections: "This, then, is C. Green, 'thirty-five years old' – 'unidentified' – and an American. In what way an American? In what way different from the men *you* knew, old Drake?" (362; emphasis orig.). The readers of the novel are also addressed directly: "Why do we love the paper in America? Why do we love the paper, all? Mad masters, I will tell ye why" (358). The novel's narrative arc is consciously interrupted by the narrator, who self-consciously and abruptly takes on the role of storyteller to tell a tale unrelated to the novel's overall course of events, yet crucial to the thematic development of the concept of America as a doomed place for the anonymous individual.

Returning to Benjamin, memory is the "epic faculty *par excellence*" (97), the element that is essential to storytelling and the development of historiography: "*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from

generation to generation" (98; emphasis orig.). The concept of intergenerational memory is a thematic occupation in Wolfe's writing, particularly in the manner that he foregrounds the idea of memories being transmitted genetically between bodies. The beginning of *Look Homeward, Angel* is concerned with the inheritance of generations of memories: "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas" (3). Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin point out that,

> to speak of memories that are carried in the body and that may be passed on through the generations touches on debates between those who believe in the possibility of genetic or biological inheritance, versus those for whom character and disposition, whether individual or collective, are shaped, in the main, by cultural and environmental forces. (23)

In this nature versus nurture debate, Benjamin's "chain of tradition" created by memory is a cultural force, transmitted by speech from mind to mind across the generations. As such, it is a fragile thing, a passed torch that is prone to loss or damage by accidents of history, or new methods of transmission. This defensive posture is at odds with Wolfe's ideas about the biological continuity of memory, which, along with a wealth of family history told to him by his mother, Julia Wolfe, give him the impetus to transform the experiences of his ancestors into fiction as he does his own.

Wolfe's manner of storytelling certainly contains elements of the oral literature and the traditions of storytelling described by Benjamin. He appears to cross

Benjamin's artificial divide between storyteller and novelist. However, as discussed further in the latter half of this chapter, the division between the oral and the literary has little meaning in relation to work such as Wolfe's, which omnivorously devours and then reinterprets elements of "storytelling" from many different sources and traditions. Many of Wolfe's modernist contemporaries were, of course, engaged in similar projects that involved revision and translation of elements of oral storytelling into new forms, particularly in the incorporation of the themes and tropes of epic poetry into novels and new forms of poetry.[15] Wolfe, along with many others (Joyce and Faulkner being prime contemporary examples) crosses the boundary that Benjamin establishes between storytellers and novelists.

Benjamin's trained "epic faculty" (97), carefully passing on stories from generation to generation, is to Wolfe an instinctive process of recollection and transmission, tinged with a certain mysticism in references to the inheritance of the memories of his ancestors. As Martin Maloney argues, the idea of "stories" did not exist to Wolfe: life alone mattered, and Wolfe "did not write 'stories,' but produced a single, long, complex narrative, imposing no formal structure on it, but trying by repetition and analysis and accurate statement to make the structure of the living phenomena apparent" (168). Wolfe's confidence in his own memory, as well as his instinctive absorption of material from all kinds of texts and sources, allows him to fill his work with material from his own life and from the lives of others in an outpouring that is anathema to Benjamin's idea of

[15] Kennedy notes the frequent application of the term "Homeric" to Wolfe's writing, by implication linking him to Joyce, Eliot and other modernist interpreters of bardic traditions (*Window* 3).

the easily contained and reproduced "story." While Benjamin's distinction between the storyteller and the novelist does not provide a comfortable fit for Wolfe, his analysis of the storyteller's relationship to their community is of interest in the context of Wolfe's concept of the individual experience representing universal experience. Staying with Benjamin's essay as an anchor for discussion, the following section explores relationships between reader, author and narrator within Wolfe's work in greater detail, in the context of the communal function of his particular variety of storytelling.

Community and Mythology

To Benjamin, the reader of the novel is destructive, jealously possessing and consuming narrative with no intention of sharing it with others. He makes the distinction between story and novel not just one of medium, but of reproducibility by the reader or listener, and accordingly he considers the reader of the novel to be isolated:

> A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener). ("Storyteller" 100)

It is the novel's unreproducibility through memorisation and recitation that isolates its reader and excludes them from dialogue, mental or verbal, with the author or storyteller. Once again, it is likely that this belief stems from Benjamin's objection to mass reproduction technologies that allow narrative to be commodified and artificially propagated, rather than reproduced and

transmitted in an organic fashion: memorised, modified and recited, to be memorised by others. As an immediate response to this, we must question whether Wolfe's readers are isolated (and whether readers of novels in general are alone in their pursuit).

If the reader of the novel is isolated because the text is not orally reproducible, it implies that only those readers or listeners who in turn become storytellers are active participants in the ritual and communal aspect of storytelling. Those who passively listen or read, and do not or cannot reproduce what they have heard or read, are isolated by their unwillingness or inability to do so. The basic "story" of a novel, in the sense of its essential plot and characteristics, can usually be reduced to a publisher's blurb; it can easily be memorised and told to others by its readers (a *Fahrenheit 451*-style wholesale memorisation of complete texts being unlikely). Novels are complex in essence, and this distillation of a novel into a transmissible "story" form destroys the characteristics that make it a novel in the first place. While Benjamin correctly identifies this crucial difference between the novel and the story, there is no reason why the reader of the novel should be isolated. Novels and other forms of fiction are the basis of cultural discourse, communal enjoyment and discussion, and, especially in the modern age of communication, direct exchanges between readers and other readers, and between readers and authors. The absorption of the individual reader in the novel is not a barrier to a communal response to the text, or to re-transmission and re-interpretation of the text in different forms.

Wolfe endeavours to remind his readers that what they are reading, or hearing, is a story – a fictional concoction that could be taken by the author in any direction. He creates a storytelling style in his work that echoes verbal phrases and tropes of oral narrative:

> Let us see the men who built the houses of Old Frankfort; let us see how they worked, and let us see them sitting on hewn timbers when they ate their lunches; let us hear their words, the sound of their voices. (*Of Time* 854)

Wolfe's narrators are portrayed as being hyper-aware of their status as weavers of tales, interrupting, commenting, ranting, questioning, and addressing the reader. Wolfe's use of "us" here adds to the reader's involvement: Tattoni identifies Wolfe's frequent use of the pronouns "we" and "you" as a way "to incorporate the reader into the body of the narrative, to break down the walls between the writing and the reading activity, and to let the reader become the 'writer's partner'" (46). If the reader of Wolfe's novels is not in the physical company of the author (who represents the figure of the "storyteller"), they are certainly in the virtual company of the narrator, and as following chapters shall discuss, there are places in Wolfe's work where the boundaries between author and narrator become extremely blurred.

The involvement of many of Wolfe's readers in the text was anything but isolating. Wolfe's periautographical narrative style, incorporating elements associated with oral storytelling, allowed some of his readers to read themselves and their community in the text. Much has been written about the fury expressed by citizens of Asheville after the publication of *Look Homeward,*

Angel, where the genesis of characters and incidents in the book was the subject of endless discussion and interpretation. Some even seemed to alter their memories in response to the text of Wolfe's work. Wolfe recounted in *The Story of a Novel* that,

> there was one scene in the book in which a stonecutter is represented as selling to a notorious woman of the town a statue of a marble angel which he has treasured for many years. So far as I know, there was no basis in fact for this story, and yet I was informed by several people later that they not only remembered the incident perfectly, but had actually been witnesses to the transaction. (23-24)

In adopting stylistic traits associated with oral storytelling, and by consciously transforming the material of his own life and memory into published texts, Wolfe risks being considered a factual chronicler of his community. This tendency of some readers to read themselves or others in Wolfe's work had dire consequences for his reputation, particularly in his hometown. Because of the illusion of companionable storytelling inherent in Wolfe's narrative style, some readers believed themselves to have discovered in his work an intention to tell his community the stories of its essential character, its scandals and its history.

To a more general readership, Wolfe's use of narrators who make their presence felt in the narrative allows the reader to feel involved in the course of the narrative, creating an imagined dialogic exchange with authorial and narratorial figures, as well as the characters themselves. This is particularly apparent in the case of storytelling characters, who take over the narrative

thread of Wolfe's novels and short stories at various points. In Wolfe's short story "The Lost Boy" a number of characters, including a woman who loosely resembles Wolfe's mother, adopt and focalize the narrative:

> As we went down through Indiana – you were too young, child, to remember it – but I always think of all of you the way you looked that morning, when we went down through Indiana, going to the Fair. All of the apple trees were coming out, and it was April; it was the beginning of spring in southern Indiana and everything was getting green. (15)

In this passage, the mother of the final narrator in the story (addressed as "child" here) adopts the storytelling role in an account that is marked by diversions, recursions and interjections that imitate the tangential nature of oral storytelling and the rhythms of speech. The reader is placed in the position of the "child" who listens, in a deliberate incorporation of the reader into the dialogue of the text.

Wolfe instinctively employs and celebrates the traces of orality that exist in every written text. As Walter J. Ong explains in his work on the complex relationship between orality and literacy,

> in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. . . . Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without writing at all, writing never without orality. (8)

Throughout "The Lost Boy" the narrative switches between four different narrators, each taking up the story in a vaguely chronological fashion, producing "a chorus of voices and the whole a choral symphony" (Roberts, "Resurrecting" 39). The mingling of different voices and the interactions between them have the air of campfire tales, where the reader is the listener who is occasionally referred to, addressed or questioned, but as a consequence of the medium in which the story is told, must remain silent.

Wolfe's writing is inextricably entwined with the community he grew up in, as a result of his transformation of memories of childhood experience in the production of his work. Wolfe was not physically rooted in the community of Asheville when he wrote of the people of "Altamont" or "Libya Hill." Nor did he confine the subject of his writing to one location; his novels and short stories range across America and Europe, as he did himself during his short life. Benjamin emphasises the communal and collective element of storytelling:

> A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen. But just as this includes the rural, the maritime, and the urban elements in the many stages of their economic and technical development, there are many gradations in the concepts in which their store of experience comes down to us. ("Storyteller" 101)

As Ruel E. Foster points out, even when Wolfe was writing material that was far removed from his early work, such as the biting social criticism of *You Can't Go Home Again*, set mostly in New York and Germany, he was "going home more and more in his imagination" (643) in that he also detailed the ravages of

financial speculation on post-depression Asheville, altering the town's name to Libya Hill, despite having been mostly physically absent from North Carolina for a number of years.

Much like Joyce, Wolfe remained embedded in his community in his mental life, even when he was physically absent. An excellent example of this is the chapter in *The Web and the Rock* entitled "The Child By Tiger," which had previously been accepted for publication as a short story in the *Saturday Evening Post* (Aswell 379). "The Child by Tiger," which tells the tale of a murderous rampage and subsequent lynching of the perpetrator of this crime, is focalized through the consciousness of a young George Webber. As Kennedy illustrates, Wolfe imaginatively transforms the material of his memory:

> From the memory of childhood play, from the memory of a lurid tale heard from fellow townsmen, from the memory of W.O. Wolfe in Pack Square pointing out the bullet hole drilled cleanly through the telephone pole, from the thronging memories of Asheville's faces, Wolfe brought the details to fuse imaginatively into an exciting story, full of darkness and hurrying feet, which rose to become a vision of the oldest question about the human condition. (*Window* 319)

The story is based on incidents that occurred in Asheville in Wolfe's youth, and could easily deteriorate into either a purely factual account or a subjective detailing of witnessed events, but he avoids the traps of autobiographical memory, its restrictions and its fallibility. Instead, he elevates this particular

"story" to a consideration of questions of sin and punishment, deliberately according universal significance to a small-town tragedy.

Wolfe does not offer us a "moral of the story," which to Benjamin is a crucial element of storytelling ("Storyteller" 99), but in creating a story that speaks to his people about themselves, he both humanises and mythologises a communal experience and communicates it to others in a form that does not offer counsel to his readers, but material to absorb, meditate and ruminate upon, and perhaps retransmit in a different form. In "The Child By Tiger," Dick Prosser, an African-American man, kills several members of the (mainly white) community that he inhabits in an apparently unmotivated attack and is duly punished for his transgression. There is an added complexity to the tale in that the retribution that is meted out to him is equally bloody and vicious. Wolfe indirectly queries the actions of his community, raising questions of how humanity deals with crime and punishment, with race, with madness. As Gerald Prince outlines, "narrative can provide an explanation of individual fate as well as group destiny, the unity of a self as well as the nature of a collectivity" (129). Wolfe's narrative emphasises how closely Dick Prosser's actions are mirrored by those who seek revenge against him. The fate of Dick Prosser is intertwined with the group destiny of his community, despite his fringe status in life and his complete othering in death.

In his final analysis of the storyteller, Benjamin does not name traditional oral storytellers as examples, but invokes the names of those who are known for

their production of short literary forms in the written medium, some of whom are also the authors of longer works and novels:

> His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller, in Leskov as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself. (108-09)

Even Benjamin cannot always maintain a strict distinction between the storyteller and the novelist. According to his division of the two, the storyteller uses the material of his or her own life and the experiences of others to create stories; the length of stories in either the oral or written medium is such that they can be memorised and retransmitted; and the story has a didactic function. To Benjamin, a storyteller may also be a novelist, but a novelist who is a novelist alone cannot be a storyteller. Wolfe was not solely a novelist, nor is the term entirely appropriate to him: his short stories and plays attest to his dedication to shorter forms, and as discussed, he sees no distinction between novels and life-writing, or periautography. However, this discussion has investigated ways in which Wolfe's work, published as novels and short stories, exhibits characteristics that are associated with the oral storytelling culture that Benjamin believes to be in decline.

As established in the previous section, Thomas Wolfe erodes Benjamin's storyteller/novelist dichotomy. Much of what Benjamin describes in relation to

the storyteller could be applied to a number of novelists, but since Wolfe is the topic of investigation here, I have examined how Wolfe's writing employs stylistic features that, according to Benjamin, are the preserve of oral storytelling. Benjamin's elaboration of the metaphor of the storyteller as "craftsman" is uncannily appropriate as a way of describing Wolfe's creative process:

> In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way. (108)

When Benjamin refers to a creative process that deploys material in a "useful" way, he alludes to the didactic and moralistic power of storytelling. He describes the storyteller as a "sage" (108), whose gift is to reach back into the experiences of his/her own life, as well as the experiences of others, in order to provide counsel for the listener. Benjamin's analysis, while creating an unsustainable division between the storyteller and the novelist, is useful in that it illuminates the relationship of the storyteller to their community, echoing Wolfe's concept of individual experience representing universal experience.

Wolfe's indiscriminate use of the material of his life to tell "stories" to his communities about themselves is one of the elements of his work that has been the source of considerable critical discomfort, stemming from the unfavourable reactions of early readers of Wolfe's work to his apparent plundering of their experiences. Wolfe moulds personal and communal experience into the fabric of

myth, elevating minor incidents into universal questions of morality. He sculpts the "raw material" of his own memory and experience, as well as the experience of others that he has heard about, read about or indirectly felt, into the one long text he produces throughout the course of his life. Wolfe, describing his work as a "series of concentric circles - that is, one drops the pebble in the pool," explains how "one gets a widening ever-enlarging picture of the whole thing - the pebble becomes important, if important at all, only in terms of this general and constant pattern of which it is the temporary and accidental stimulus" (*Notebooks* 2: 941). Accusations of egotism fade in the face of the reduction of the lives of his protagonists, so closely associated with his own life, to "pebbles." Wolfe, as always, is concerned with the significance of individual experience only in relation to communal and universal experience.

Benjamin's "artisan" or "craftsman" produces his or her art through "co-ordination of the soul, the eye and the hand" (108). Here, the "hand" refers to gestures that the oral storyteller uses to embellish and augment the meanings that they produce vocally. However, in relation to the novelist, the "hand" is the hand that writes or types; the co-ordination of soul, eye and hand that Benjamin speaks of can equally apply to the processes of observation, contemplation and creation that contribute to the production of the written word. It is these processes that inform the next area of investigation. Drawing on the work of Mary Carruthers, the following section explores how Wolfe's writing displays evidence of composition techniques that are reminiscent of medieval concepts of the role of memory, recitation and repetition in the creation of new ideas, cultural artefacts and states of mind. As such, it further illustrates the argument

that Wolfe's work incorporates processes of storytelling and composition that are unexpected and disruptive in the context of the writing of an early twentieth-century American author of texts, publishing his work in the accepted forms of fiction of his era.

Wolfe's Medieval Memory

As Benjamin's figure of the storyteller does not fully provide a schema from which to discuss the idiosyncrasies of Wolfe's work, it is helpful to consider an entirely different viewpoint in order to illuminate Wolfe's role as a "storyteller," focussing particularly on his use of memory in the creative process. In accordance with the question motivating this chapter, which asks whether Wolfe can be considered a "bard," this section investigates the role of memory, which is crucial to oral storytelling traditions, in the creation of Wolfe's work. The work of the medievalist Mary Carruthers might seem far removed from Wolfe's writing, embedded firmly in twentieth-century American life. However, Carruthers's concept of *memoria* provides a novel avenue to investigate how Wolfe transforms his memories into the narratives that he transmits to others through his written work. While exploring Carruthers's definition of *memoria*, this section demonstrates how this concept can be applied to Wolfe's use of memory in his work, as expressed through his texts published both as fiction and non-fiction.

Carruthers argues that, in medieval societies, *memoria*, defined as trained, educated memory (7), functioned as a crucial modality of that society. It operated in a similar fashion to, for instance, the modality of chivalry:

> It has identifiable and verifiable practices and procedures that affect a variety of cultural phenomena (the making of books, the compositional structures of sermons, the layout of the Bible, citational habits, classroom diagrams, the prevalence of certain tropes in poetry), and it also has a value in itself, identified with the virtue of prudence. As modalities, values enable certain behaviour, and also give greater privilege to some values over others . . . . They thus become conditioners of a culture . . . . (260)

Carruthers contends that we can speak of the Middle Ages in Europe as a "memorial culture, recognizing that, as a set of institutionalized practices, *memoria* was adapted, at least to a point, as these institutions changed" (260). She argues that *memoria* outlived these institutions, and that "as a modality of culture it had a very long life as a continuing source and reference for human values and behaviour"(260). It is this aspect of *memoria* that relates to Wolfe's work. This section investigates whether it is possible that this "modality of culture" lives on in the behaviour of writers such as Wolfe, who consciously employ the material of their memories in order to produce fictions.

Wolfe makes no distinction between his own experience, contained in his memory, and experience as reported to him by others, in conversation or through the medium of print. He indiscriminately gathered and memorised stories of every degree, collecting material in a way that he recognised as both a conscious process and an instinctive compulsion. He admitted to an "almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human experience, to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold, or than

the limits of a single work of art can well define" (*Story* 46). Steve Bourdeau relates this "hunger" to Wolfe's autobiographical desire, arguing that he devoted his life to "exploration of this dark and unknown continent of the self" ("Welcome" 12). However, it must be remembered that for Wolfe, who did not distinguish between autobiography and fiction, this hunger to explore the self encompassed a vast variety of experiences and memories, many of them second- or third-hand, absorbed and incorporated into his own memory.

Wolfe's "hunger to devour . . . human experience" (i.e. to commit all that he had heard, read and experienced to memory) is indicative of his habitual functioning according to a modality of *memoria*. The processes of remembering, recollecting and then retelling in new forms, which are driven by Wolfe's "hunger," are reminiscent of the commonplace medieval metaphor of memorisation as a process of ingestion, digestion and rumination. Carruthers describes this process in terms of *meditatio* (meditation) and *ruminatio* (rumination) (165), explaining that,

> the medieval scholar's relationship to his texts is quite different from modern "objectivity." Reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud, or like a bee making honey from the nectar of flowers. Reading is memorized with the aid of *murmur*, mouthing the words subvocally as one turns the text over in one's memory . . . . It is this movement of the mouth that established rumination as a basic metaphor for memorial activities. (164)

We only have to look to the most well-known early example of extended life-writing, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, to discover expressions of this concept of the production of texts, focussing particularly on the role of emotional memory. Augustine calls the memory "the mind's stomach," where joy and sadness, "like sweet and bitter food," are stored, "but cannot be tasted" (253). However, "as food can be regurgitated for the cud to be chewed, so they are brought out of memory by recollection" (253). As shall be discussed, this medieval metaphor lives on in Wolfe's work: Wolfe employs similar images throughout his texts in relation to the workings of memory and the part it plays in writing.

James Olney concludes in relation to Saint Augustine that his life's activity was to write about his life, a task which could never truly be finished: the story of his life was "this very chewing and rechewing of the cud of narrative thrown up by his memory for endless rumination" (75). Wolfe's life and writing are similarly inextricable, and his project, to write about everything through writing about or around himself, is equally unending. In both his work published as fiction and as non-fiction, we find many examples of his endless hunger, as well as his endless rumination. Often, he describes the workings of his memory in these terms. It is important to make a distinction between "memorisation," which is a conscious activity with the aim of absorbing and retaining material, more akin to the concept of *memoria* and the deliberate remembrance of memorialisation, and the processes of the unconscious, everyday workings of memory. Nonetheless, in relation to Wolfe, we find ample evidence of his use of gustatory and digestive imagery in relation to both types of memory activity, in both non-fiction texts and his fictional works.

Wolfe's rhetoric of hunger, devouring and digestion in relation to experience can be found throughout his writings. To take one example from his "non-fiction" texts, in a 1922 letter to his former teacher, Margaret Roberts, Wolfe describes the academic hunger awakened in him by the vastness of the Harvard library:

> Tonight I have read two essays of Emerson's and will finish Leslie Stephens excellent life of Pope before I retire. I suppose I make a mistake in trying to eat all the plums at once, for instead of peace it has awakened a good-size volcano in me. I wander throughout the stacks of that great library there like some damned soul, never at rest – ever leaping ahead from the pages I read to thoughts of those I want to read. (10)

Wolfe here describes his obsession with consuming literature, in order to absorb and incorporate it into his memory. In this he reveals one of the key aspects of his creative process: the conscious absorption and transmutation of texts of all kinds into his own creative work.

Considering this description of the absorption and incorporation of literature, Wolfe would surely have heard an echo of his ideas in Barthes's famous description in "The Death of the Author" of a text as a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). Wolfe's process is self-consciously intertextual, although he would not have recognised the term. Intertextuality "reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader's own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries,

and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic 'voices' which exist within society" (Allen 209). Wolfe recognises this openness, this plurality: he is aware of the potential of his texts to be interpreted in a variety of ways, and of the manner in which different voices can speak through his work. These aspects of Wolfe's work are developed further in the next section of this chapter, in Chapter Three, and in Chapter Five.

Turning to Wolfe's fictional work, one finds that his protagonists suffer similar compulsions to read, to memorise, to absorb, and a similar hunger for experience. While these descriptions cannot be taken as absolutely accurate depictions of Wolfe's own mental state, considering the interplay of reality and fiction that is crucial to his work, one can recognise in these passages an exaggerated and extended version of Wolfe's own desires. In fact, it is here that the modality of *memoria* is clearly at work: the emotions and actions described by Wolfe as personal experiences in his letters and non-fiction texts have been transformed by habitual *meditatio* and *ruminatio,* the material of memory informing the fictional experiences of his protagonists.

In *The Web and the Rock*, George Webber's exceptional memory and compulsion to add to his store of experience are presented as a gigantic and uncontrollable force, akin to a crippling physical disease, with considerable effects on his mental wellbeing.[16] George Webber's appetite for knowledge and experience is

[16] As discussed further in Chapter Three, this rhetoric of disease is a commonplace in Wolfe's writing.

a burden that drives him to write furiously in a futile attempt to record all that he knows and has experienced:

> His memory, which had always been encyclopaedic, so that he could remember in their minutest details and from his earliest years of childhood all that people had said and done and all that had happened at any moment, had been so whetted, sharpened and enlarged by his years away from home, so stimulated by his reading and by a terrible hunger that drove him through a thousand streets . . . that it had now become, instead of a mighty weapon with a blade of razored sharpness which he might use magnificently to his life's advantage, a gigantic, fibrous, million-rooted plant of time which spread and flowered like a cancerous growth. (262-63)

Again and again, the narrator describes George Webber's creative process in terms of food and consumption. He suffers from "a burning thirst to know just how things were," and is tormented by a "furious hunger" that drives him on daily, "until his eye seemed to eat into the printed page like a ravenous mouth" (273). This "ravenous eye" (274) forever seeks knowledge and new experiences, and is tormented by the impossibility of absorbing and retaining all that there is to commit to memory, especially in the tumult of the "great, the million-footed, the invincible and unceasing city" (275).

Wolfe's fiction consistently portrays protagonists that are in the grip of the constant operation of memorisation, and are mentally governed by a modality of *memoria*, albeit in an uncontrolled, semi-conscious and sometimes almost

dangerous way. This visceral hunger may seem far removed from Carruthers's images of the calm, scholarly and monastic[17] practice of the medieval art of memorisation, with its metaphorical processes of digestion and rumination, but the operations involved are closely related. Eugene Gant, the main character in *Look Homeward Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, is afflicted in a similar fashion to George Webber with the "hunger that grows from everything it feeds upon, the thirst that gulps down rivers and remains insatiate" (*Of Time* 90). Eugene Gant's compulsion to remember and recall all is such that it disrupts and disturbs his mental state:

> The years are walking in his brain, his father's voice is sounding in his ears, and in the pulses of his blood the tom-tom's beat. His living dust is stored with memory: two hundred million men are walking in his bones; he hears the howling of the wind around forgotten eaves; he cannot sleep. (*Of Time* 861)

In monastic fashion, he suffers these torments in the "hermitage of his own small cell" (*Of Time* 424), but periodically rushes out into the world in an attempt to experience more, to absorb more, to hold the whole of humanity within his being.

The passages above have been taken from Wolfe's novels, in relation to the memories of fictional characters. In discussing Wolfe's own memory and creative process, one must be careful not to assume that the emotions and experiences described here are wholly representative of Wolfe's own mental

[17] George Webber's nickname of "Monk" is a pleasing coincidence, although perhaps not a significant one.

state, despite the periautographical aspect of his work published as fiction. However, one can find evidence from Wolfe's notebooks, letters and essays that his own hunger for knowledge and experiences to store in his memory forms the basis of these exaggerated passages. In a 1937 letter to Sherwood Anderson, Wolfe writes of how he gets "maddened like Tantalus with the feeling of having everything almost within my grasp and of starving to death" (285), referring to his struggles with the "leviathan" of his work (284). Elizabeth Nowell, in her biography of Wolfe, describes his habit of repetitiously recounting anecdotes of personal difficulties: insisting that he had to "get it off his chest," in the repeated telling of these stories "he would manage to digest it and store it in his memory" (15). These tales, according to Nowell, would "emerge, years later, transmuted into fiction" (15). This insight into Wolfe's creative process links his telling of stories verbally with his later incorporation of these into his writing, once again linking his work to oral storytelling traditions, and also reinforces the "digestion" metaphor so prevalent in relation to Wolfe's work.

In a 1923 letter to his mother, Julia Wolfe, Wolfe describes his conscious effort to recall all that he can of his childhood, and his intention to use these memories as the basis for his life's work. In this letter, Wolfe expresses his desire to recollect in order to compose – i.e. to operate according to a modality of *memoria*:

> I intend to wreak out my soul on paper and express it all. This is what my life means to me: I am at the mercy of this thing and I will do it or I die. I never forget; I have never forgotten. I have tried to make myself conscious of the whole of my life since first

> the baby in the basket became conscious of the warm sunlight on the porch, and saw his sister go up the hill to the girl's school on the corner (the first thing I remember). (52)

Continuing this passage, a switch from past to present tense and from third person to first person midway through this deliberate recollection subtly brings images held in memory into the realm of present remembrance and personal visualisation:

> Slowly out of the world of infant darkness things take shape, the big terrifying faces become familiar, - I recognize my father by his bristly moustache. Then the animal books and the Mother Goose poetry which I memorize before I can read, and recite for the benefit of admiring neighbours every night . . . . (52)

Wolfe hungers not just for new experiences, but also for full, detailed recollection of the past. In addition, he is convinced that this complete deliberate recollection is possible, having full confidence in the totality of his memory.

What has been absorbed into memory over the course of a lifetime changes the knowledge, outlook and personality of an individual, or even, as Pierre Nora claims "[takes] refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories" (13). To Carruthers, composition begins with the "incorporation" of material into memory, a term which is to be taken almost literally in terms of the body (169), once again having its roots in processes of digestion and

familiarisation.[18] Composition can be described as a type of *ruminatio* (rumination), to use Carruthers's term. She cites Bede's account of the English poet, Caedmon, who "changed what he learned by hearing in *lectio*, or sermons, into sweetest poetry by recollecting it within himself" and "ruminating like a clean animal" (165). Wolfe's endless rumination upon the experiences of his life, involving processes of repetition, reworking, and transformation, echoes this description of Caedmon's conversion of the memorised material of sermons into poetry. Throughout his writing, Wolfe consciously recognises and describes this type of process. Illustrating his tendency toward ruminative activity, he describes *Look Homeward Angel* as "a fiction that grew out of a life completely digested in my spirit" ("Note for the Publisher's Reader" 64).

Wolfe's instinctive use of the modality of *memoria*, so foreign to the reader of modern fiction, is key to understanding the tensions at work in Wolfe's writing that contribute to critical difficulties in distinguishing between Wolfe's life and his art, which, I contend, is a misguided exercise in light of his refusal to recognise a distinction between these two spheres. In Wolfe's work, the modality of *memoria*, functioning both consciously and unconsciously, is the governing principle underpinning these attempts to understand and control the vast expanses of his memory in order to convey his experience to others. Wolfe frequently refers to the overwhelming range and depth of his memory, describing nightmares of "a fiery river of unending images" in which "the whole vast reservoirs of memory were exhumed and poured into the torrents of this

[18] Wolfe's "incorporation" of the lives of others into his work, in the Derridean sense of mourning and giving voice to the dead, is discussed further in the following section of this chapter, and in greater detail in Chapter Five.

fiery flood, a million things, once seen and long forgotten" (*Story* 72). His gigantic novels and ever-rising stacks of unpublished manuscript are indicative of his attempt to master these "torrents" in an ongoing act of "memorative composition" (Carruthers 194); to organise and trammel the material of his vast memory in order to transform it into a "story" which would encompass not just the narrative of his own life, but of all the lives he had ever encountered, heard of or read about. In the following section I return to the issue of orality in Wolfe's work, considering whether Carruthers's theory of memorial versus documentary culture can be better applied to Wolfe's work than schemas that rest on a division of literature into the oral and the literary. I explore whether this framework can further illuminate unusual narrative effects in Wolfe's work, which create issues with the critical interpretation of his work as either "fiction," "autobiography," or even the hybrid "autobiographical fiction."

Memorial Versus Documentary

Carruthers implicitly rejects the logocentric concept of writing as an evolution of or representation of speech, focussing instead on the mental processes that are peculiar to the act of writing. She refuses to accept a division of culture into the oral (based on memory) and the literate (based on writing), and argues that an oral/literate distinction is a false dichotomy, based on a misunderstanding of these two terms:

> The ability to "write" is not always the same thing as the ability to compose and comprehend in a fully textual way, for indeed one who writes (a scribe) may simply be a skilled practitioner, employed in a capacity akin to that of a professional typist today.

> . . . Similarly, learning by hearing material and reciting aloud should not be confused with ignorance of reading. (10)

Carruthers speaks instead of "memorial" versus "documentary" cultures, proposing that "medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is documentary" (8). She rests this partition on the concept of *memoria*: whether a culture is primarily memorial or documentary is due to the relative centrality of *memoria* as an influential force. This does not absolutely divide cultures into one category or another, but allows discussion of their principal features, particularly with reference to literature, in terms of the prominence of *memoria* as a modality of culture.

Carruthers's division of cultures into the primarily memorial or the primarily documentary, rather than the oral and the literate, provides a far more useful way of discussing Wolfe's role as "bard" than Benjamin's compartmentalisation of traditional oral storytelling and modern literature, exemplified by the novel. This distinction is not solely based on whether or not literacy is commonplace in a society, the availability of printed material, or the technologies available to that culture, as she further explains:

> Because oral cultures must obviously depend on memory, and hence value memory highly, such valorization has come to be seen as the hallmark of orality, as opposed to literacy. This has led to a further assumption that literacy and memory are *per se* incompatible, and that a "rise of literacy" will therefore bring with it a consequent devalorizing and disuse of memory. (10)

Literacy and memory are far from incompatible in the work of writers such as Wolfe. Conversely, memory consciously informs the material and course of narrative, whether verbal or written. Wolfe's work allows an exploration of the tension between the memorial and the documentary on the scale of individual works of literature. In this section I contend that Wolfe's methods of writing and composition reflect the thoughts and ideas of an author who exists in a primarily documentary culture, but who instinctively operates with reference to memorial rather than documentary practices.

Wolfe's writing is governed by a modality of *memoria*, which is to say that it functions in what could be termed a "memorial" mode. This discussion of Wolfe often circles around the words "memory," "memorial," "memorialisation" and "*memoria*," with their ever-unfolding meanings. Among the semantic associations of words such as these is a connection between memory and death. Although Wolfe's work certainly does employ elements of memorialisation, in the sense of remembering and honouring the past and the dead, I use the term "memorial" here in a manner following Carruthers's definition, which somewhat divorces the word from its associations with death. She uses it principally to signify "making present the voices of what is past, not to entomb either the past or the present, but to give them life together in a place common to both in memory" (260). As discussed further in Chapters Four and Five, Wolfe frequently attempts to create a timeless space in his writing within which the voices of past and present merge. Wolfe's writing strives to make the material of his memory present for the reader, and in that sense it is "memorial," according to Carruthers's definition of the word. He employs a

memorial mode in order to capture and reanimate the voices of his past, whether those of his family dead and living, brief acquaintances, the snatched conversation of strangers on the street, or the words of other authors and storytellers, through a process of absorption, mental transformation and composition.

Although Carruthers tries to remove the associations of "memorial" with death, Wolfe's writing can be considered a work of mourning from a Derridean perspective, in that it actively seeks to incorporate the past into the present. We can examine the possibility that Wolfe's writing is an unsuccessful work of mourning, as Wolfe attempts to remember the voices of the past through processes of incorporation and interiorisation, and in doing so, eliminates the individuality and exteriority of those voices that he wishes to recall to memory. Derrida wrestles with this paradox in his essay "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," illustrating that,

> a certain mimetism is at once a duty (to take him into oneself, to identify with him in order to let him speak within oneself, to make him present and at once to represent him) and the worst of temptations, the most indecent and the most murderous. (38)

Attempting to give life to past and the present in a place common to both is a dangerous undertaking, risking the incorporation of the distinctive voices and lives that Wolfe wishes to memorialise into a singular, homogenous narrative that does not reflect the multiplicity he wishes to convey. Every scrap of memory that Wolfe seeks to tell, in order that it might become, in turn, incorporated into the memory of the reader, passes through the filter of the

author's conscious and unconscious recollection, rumination, meditation, composition and recomposition. It changes with each iteration, and in the process becomes something far removed from the initial fragment of memory, which is of course subject to the vagaries of consciousness and the corroding effect of the intervening time between the event and its recollection.

Wolfe does not mourn people alone (although specific individuals, such as his brothers Ben and Grover, and his father, are indirectly mourned and memorialised through his work), but the whole fabric of his life up until the point in time at which he writes, forever seeking to fill the absence left by that which has just passed. Wolfe's feeling of duty or responsibility to tell all that he knows, or to organise the material of his memory in such a way that it could be understood by every reader, is often referred to in his so-called non-fiction writing:

> I think I was like the Ancient Mariner who told the Wedding Guest that his frame was wrenched by the woeful agony that forced him to begin his tale before it left him free. In my own experience, my wedding guests were the great ledgers in which I wrote, and the tale I told to them would have seemed, I am afraid, as meaningless as Chinese characters, had any reader seen them. (*Story* 41-42)

To return to Derrida's paradox regarding mourning, if Wolfe failed to employ his prodigious memory and creative ability in order to expressively remember and "mourn" his experiences, he would preserve the exteriority of those voices of the past that he seeks to incorporate into his own authorial voice. However, if

he were to ignore this drive to function in a memorial mode, his readers would not hear these voices. Wolfe is aware that this work of mourning may be unsuccessful. The "woeful agony" that he writes of is the force of responsibility to these voices of the past to make them live again in the present, without eliminating their individuality.

Wolfe describes memorisation of books and poetry among his earliest remembered experiences. The habit of memorisation, in the sense described by Carruthers as *memoria*, is one that Wolfe frequently alludes to in accounts of his childhood and formal education. In *The Story of a Novel*, he writes of his father's "tremendous memory" for literature and poetry, and how as a child listening to him recite, he "memorized and learned it all" (5). The habit of memorisation and recitation is passed on from generation to generation in this account, in a manner reminiscent of the storytelling traditions referred to by Benjamin. However, the narratives in this account have moved from written literature to the realm of memorisation and recitation, reversing the concept of a linear progression from the oral to the literate. Wolfe and his father operate in a memorial mode, absorbing and retransmitting texts of all kinds.

In an early letter to his mother, written in March 1923, Wolfe describes how this habit of memorisation has followed him into adulthood, but has extended beyond literature to include all aspects of life experience:

> I find I have become an eavesdropper, I listen to every conversation I hear, I memorize every word I hear people say, in the way they said it. I find myself studying every move, every

> gesture, every expression, trying to see what it means dramatically. (46)

In trying to understand "what it means dramatically," Wolfe reveals a key aspect of his work: to him, every word, every memory, every experience is the material of his art. He makes no distinction between art and life, between an overheard conversation and the transformation of that conversation into a dramatic episode in his work. Wolfe's recording and communication of these voices, as discussed further in Chapter Five, is problematic in an ethical sense. It is a significant source of critical and readerly discomfort with regard to his appropriation of the experiences of others, particularly those still living at the time of his work's publication.

There are correlations between Carruthers's descriptions of *memoria* and memorial practices in the work of John Livingston Lowes, who taught Wolfe at Harvard and whose formative influence on Wolfe's ideas regarding the creative process is well documented.[19] Lowes's analysis of the work of Coleridge, detailed in *The Road to Xanadu*, describes a creative process in which books read and memorised by Coleridge were intermingled and combined in the "deep well of unconscious cerebration," as Lowes describes it, borrowing the phrase from Henry James (Lowes 56). Creative work would emerge from the "deep well," the elements of the texts that had been read having undergone a "strange transformation" into new forms (57). Moulded and inspired by the

[19] See in particular Holman's "Thomas Wolfe and America" (1977), Kennedy's *Thomas Wolfe: The Window of Memory* (1962), Tattoni's *The Unfound Door* (1992) and Yoder's "The Resurrection of Dust: Thomas Wolfe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*" (2011) for discussions of the influence of Lowes on Wolfe's work.

theories of Lowes, Wolfe developed his own ideas about the role of material that he had read in the creative process of his writing:

> Fiction is not fact, but fiction is fact selected and understood, fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose. Dr. Johnson remarked that a man would turn over half a library to make a single book: in the same way, a novelist may turn over half the people in a town to make a single figure in his [sic] novel. ("To the Reader")

To Wolfe, the books that he had read were a crucial part of his memory and his life experience, and elements from these texts would combine with other facets of his memory in his conscious and unconscious mind in order to produce new material. Wolfe's broad concept of the elements that could be dropped into the "deep well" encompassed all the experiences of an individual, including their memories, their knowledge of the world, the books they had read, the people they had met, the stories of others' experiences that they had heard, and so forth.

Wolfe does not simply reproduce the essence of books he has read (which in the context of the print medium is not the mark of a good storyteller, and could only lead to accusations of plagiarism), but employs them in a manner that self-consciously recognises and celebrates the intertextual nature of texts. One can be certain that Coleridge's work, so familiar to Wolfe, would have been subject to the same processes of absorption, rumination and transformation that Coleridge used to produce his own texts. In this there is something of the quality of Benjamin's oral storytelling, in the circularity of listening, absorbing

and memorising and then retelling in a different form. However, these acts of conscious memorisation and recitation are but one facet of a lifelong habit of memorisation and recollection, one that Wolfe recognises as crucial to his authorial drive. The way in which Wolfe collects and recollects sights, sounds, smells, tastes, emotions, conversations, passages from literature that he had read, events from his childhood and voices from his past in order to transform them into new narratives is closer to Carruthers's description of composition as a natural result of the digestion of material and rumination upon it.

Wolfe may not have consciously trained his memory in the manner of a medieval scholar, but he shows considerable awareness of the power and intensity of his memory, and the resources available to him as a result. He describes his memory as "characterized, I believe, 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" (*Story* 31). Wolfe's creative output during his lifetime is the culmination of attempts to document these memories and transform them into a recognisable narrative. While aware of the futility of such a task, Wolfe continues endlessly to compose, devouring, digesting and ruminating upon the experiences that the world offered to him. He goes about this task of documentation obsessively, breaking down the material of his memory into arbitrary chunks of experience. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe recounts the contents of the ledgers that he used during this process:

> It included everything from gigantic and staggering lists of the towns, cities, counties, states, and countries I had been in, to

> minutely thorough, desperately evocative descriptions of the undercarriage, the springs, wheels, flanges, axle rods, color, weight and quality of the day coach of an American railway train. (42)

These ledgers represent the site of the process of rumination, where the raw material of memory is recollected, organised, reorganised, and finally assembled into the building blocks of a narrative.

Wolfe's rejection of the acolytes of modernism, despite his frequent experimentation with its literary tropes (as discussed in Chapter One), may lie in his revulsion towards the picking over of the remains of memorial culture by a society that, in his eyes, had forgotten the role of processes recalling *meditatio* and *ruminatio*, and the existence of *memoria* as a shaping force in the production of literature:

> Life had recently become too short for many things that people once found time for. Life was simply too short for the perusal of any book longer than two hundred pages. As for *War and Peace* – no doubt all "they" said of it was true – but as for oneself – well, one had tried, and really it was quite too – too – oh well, life simply was too short. . . .
>
> The highest intelligences of the time – the very subtlest of the chosen few – were bored by many things. They tilled the waste land, and erosion had grown fashionable. (Y*ou Can't* 177)

Wolfe's disdain (expressed here in thinly-veiled fictional form by the narrator) for those who had become bored with more weighty works of literature, or who

could not be bothered to attempt them in the first place, yet considered themselves intellectuals of the time, is rooted in his own vast knowledge of and appreciation for literature and stories of all kinds. Wolfe values and celebrates extensive and voracious reading, recognising that his creative work depends on his absorption of texts, his meditation and rumination upon them.

Wolfe fully embraces his role as periautographical documenter of his own life, the lives of his contemporaries and the sights, sounds and smells of twentieth-century America, However, his prodigious use of the material of his memory, both consciously and unconsciously, betrays a more medieval sensibility. In a resolutely documentary age where *memoria* has become devalued as a shaper of culture, Wolfe stands out as an anachronistic devotee to the art of composition based on obsessive attention to memorised material and experiences. In struggling to adapt his memorial instincts to the demands of a documentary culture, Wolfe is a man out of time. His work exists firmly in the realm of the documentary, in that he finds his expression in the written word. However, in the age in which Wolfe wrote, forms of published, printed narrative were the most likely conduits for his work to reach a wider audience. Cultural forces shape Wolfe's medium of choice, in the valuing of the documentary over the memorial as a mode of narration.

Wolfe's novels and short stories manifest a process of attempting to reconcile an instinctive pull toward a memorial mode with the demands of a documentary culture. The tension between Wolfe's instinctive, semi-conscious drive to operate in a memorial mode and his need to communicate and express

what he has experienced in a form that can reach a broad audience is manifested in his unintentional resurrection of *memoria* as a modality of his work. In the absence of a traditional oral storytelling role, in the sense described by Benjamin, Wolfe directs his energy toward the memorisation, documentation and communication of every aspect of life that he has experienced through the medium and genre favoured by his times. As such, Wolfe's memorial instinct has to adapt to the constraints and demands of printed, mass-produced fiction. Carruthers's nuanced distinction of memorial and documentary cultures provides a more useful way of understanding Wolfe's ideas about the creative process and their manifestation in his work. Wolfe is not an oral storyteller who is forced to transcribe his stories in order to communicate them to others. However, his writing contains elements that are reminiscent of oral storytelling traditions, as understood by those such as Benjamin. This is because Wolfe instinctively operates according to memorial practices, which, as Carruthers explains, are mistakenly associated only with oral storytelling. Wolfe is a writer who operates with regard to the workings of memory, who consciously transforms the material of his life into new forms, new narratives. In a primarily documentary age, he adapts this memorial sensibility to the communicative medium most readily available to him: the printed page.

Conclusions

This chapter has focussed on the issue of whether or not Wolfe can be considered a "bard," in the sense that his style and creative processes are derived from oral storytelling traditions. In this, it has explored one facet of the

primary question at the heart of this thesis, which examines why Wolfe's writing is the source of considerable critical discomfort, particularly with regard to Wolfe's use of the material of his memory in his work published as fiction. Investigating the possibility that Wolfe employs processes associated with kinds of storytelling that are not usually found within the forms of published fiction, I have explained how Wolfe's work contains disruptive and unusual elements of orality. Benjamin's detailed separation of oral storytelling from written literature provides a starting point to consider aspects of oral storytelling that might be found in Wolfe's work. However, as demonstrated, Benjamin's artificial division does not stand up to close scrutiny. While it is valuable from the point of view of identifying elements in Wolfe's work that associate him with tropes of oral storytelling, and ways in which he expands and mythologises individual experience, ultimately it does not adequately describe or explain Wolfe's "bardic" qualities. Nonetheless, investigating Wolfe's creative process from the perspective of Wolfe as a "storyteller," in Benjamin's sense, produces some valuable insights.

Wolfe's novels are not representative of the decline of storytelling, but indicative of its transformation. Wolfe's translation of tropes associated with oral storytelling into the written word serves purposes that are individual, communal, didactic, lyrical, ritual, and memorial. In transmitting myth through the medium of print, Wolfe's written tales continue the chain of storytelling that begins with town gossip and whispers. Wolfe is embedded in his community – if not physically then mentally. This also includes not just the community of Asheville, which he returns to again and again in his imagination, but the

various communities that he moves through and believes himself to be a part of: Chapel Hill, Harvard, the New York literary scene, American ex-patriots in Europe, and of course the national community of America itself. Wolfe is thoroughly concerned with collective experience, and the ways in which individual experience can represent communal experience. It is in this aspect of his work that Wolfe functions most as a storyteller, chronicling these various communities, mythologising them and then speaking back to them about themselves.

In doing so, Wolfe unintentionally resurrects *memoria* as an artistic force in the dominant medium and genre of his time. Carruthers's division of cultures into the memorial and the documentary, depending on the relative centrality of *memoria* as an influential force, provides a much more appropriate schema for understanding Wolfe as a "bard" than Benjamin's storyteller/novelist dichotomy. Wolfe's work attempts to reconcile an instinctive pull toward a memorial mode with the demands of a documentary culture. Wolfe understands that recollection is, in the words of Mary Warnock, an "active and creative undertaking," an "art" in itself (145), which is a concept that Benjamin does not fully appreciate. This has a bearing on the difficulties associated with calling Wolfe's work "autobiographical" in the conventional sense. Wolfe is deeply concerned with the vagaries of recollection and the construction of narratives, and as such consciously avoids claims of veracity. While celebrating the breadth and depth of his powers of memory, he recognises the fragility of memory and the transformations that it undergoes in the "deep well of unconscious cerebration" (Lowes 56).

Wolfe can be considered a "bard" in the sense that he approaches writing from memorial traditions, even though he may not consciously recognise the ancestry of his instinctive practices. Wolfe's work is entirely concerned with the workings of memory, and the creative processes that depend on these operations. Wolfe adapts practices of memorisation, rumination and transmission to others into written forms. As Richard Terdiman argues, the essence of memory is not conservation, but displacement, mutation, transformation: "Memory is the medium for our experience of difference" (187). Wolfe seeks to remember, and in a sense to mourn, the whole gamut of feeling and experience that has composed his life up until the moment in time at which he writes. However, he realises that it is impossible to recreate memories exactly: there will always be transformation, always difference. The raw material of memory and experience is digested within the ruminative workings of his mind, worked out on paper in the great ledgers in which he endeavours to organise this unruly substance into categories, lists and fragments of intense recollection. These are then transformed further by the restrictions imposed by Wolfe's chosen form, that of the novel, and even further by the process of editing and publication. Wolfe's work is self-consciously intertextual, and Wolfe, following in the footsteps of Lowes, could not see how it would be otherwise. In this, Wolfe is not exactly anticipating later movements, but instinctively thinking along the same lines as many postmodernist writers who purposely employ techniques of quotation and reference in order to highlight the plurality and vocal nature of all texts.

Wolfe's notebooks and "non-fiction" writings attest to the frustration that results from these processes of transformation: the struggles with language, the overwhelming depth of his memory, the physical and practical limitations of writing all that he had experienced, and the difficulty of faithfully representing the past while recognising that memories inevitably mutate, change and combine. These are the demands of the documentary age in which Wolfe finds himself, in a culture that has been steadily losing the modality of *memoria* as a governing principle. As such, it is also bereft of the formal techniques for controlling and organising memory that Carruthers writes of in relation to medieval composition, in terms of concepts such as *ruminatio* and *meditatio*. Wolfe instinctively writes from a tradition that, unfortunately for him, has been misunderstood by some critics as a kind of cannibalisation of the material of his life, indicating a lack of imagination, rather than the conscious use of memory as a transformative shaper of narrative in order to communicate universal experiences. Following on from this discussion, I investigate ways in which tensions between memorial and documentary modes are manifested in Wolfe's work. The next chapter investigates the rhetoric, imagery and metaphors that Wolfe uses in relation to processes of remembering, composing and the physical act of writing, in his work published both as fiction and as non-fiction, questioning whether these tensions are evident in the ways in which Wolfe writes about writing. Focussing on the language Wolfe uses to describe these aspects of his life's work, I ask what we can discern about Wolfe's approach to writing from his own words on the subject, and how this can inform critical interpretations of Wolfe's project and motivations.

Chapter Three: Writing About Writing

Thomas Wolfe was not a natural orator, and it has been documented that he often found public speaking to be a challenge. An account in the *Carolina Magazine* of Wolfe's speech before a student group at Chapel Hill in 1937 describes him as "tongue-tied" (123) and "stuttering" (121), his halting speech in sharp contrast to the free-flowing verbosity of his written work:

> He came at last, stumbling down the stairs, a flushed, sweaty face and a hoarse mutter of apology. . . . "I-I-I th-thought I was c-c-coming to sit in on a class-ss," he said. "I-I-I didn't . . . . Wh-when I was here t-there weren't any more than th-th-this in school." He stumbled on a few sentences longer in this same fashion, as though some physical disorder was inhibiting the flow of words. (Stoney 122-23)

Wolfe's difficulty in speaking, particularly in front of a crowd, is also noted by Scott Berg, the biographer of Maxwell Perkins, who states, "Wolfe's most fluent channel of communication was the written word (in fact, he stammered when excited)" (183). Wolfe's biographer and former literary agent, Elizabeth Nowell, also describes his stammer, as well as his "unpleasant way of speech," referring to his tendency to spit while speaking (52-53). For a storytelling individual so driven to communicate his experience, these obstacles to his ability to tell about his life through the medium of speech must have been a source of intense frustration.

Wolfe's difficulty in speaking is symptomatic of his struggles with language. Wolfe's memorial and communicative impulses find their most natural expression in the word on the page. However, the process of transforming memory into coherent narratives is fraught with difficulty for Wolfe, who is intensely aware of the challenges posed by the translation of experience and emotion into language. Bernard DeVoto's notorious criticism of his work focusses on its allegedly chaotic nature, describing it in terms that suggest auditory confusion: "Chaos is everything if you have enough of it in you to make a world. Yes, but what if you don't make a world – what if you just make a noise?" (137). It becomes clear in the course of DeVoto's piece that by "noise" he refers to a perceived lack of form in Wolfe's work, characterised by its fragmentary nature, rhetorical exaggeration, lists and catalogues of experiences, and "placental passages" consisting of "psychic material which the novelist has proved unable to shape into fiction" (135). The question immediately arising from this criticism is whether Wolfe does, in fact, make nothing but a "noise," or whether his work signifies more than just sound and fury.

This chapter investigates ways in which the "noise" of Wolfe's work stems from an intensely self-aware exploration of the bounds of language and the nature of writing about the self, both celebrating and challenging the richness of language and the power of the written and spoken word. As Perkins explains, Wolfe wanted "to see everything, and read everything, and experience everything, and say everything" (147). However, he also firmly professed his belief that it was impossible to write except from the self. In her work on memory and art, Mary

Warnock discusses Jean-Paul Sartre's pronouncements on biography and autobiography, concluding that he believes that there is little difference between them, and that, "If everything could be told about a man, whether by himself or by another, then everything would be understood about history" (114). Wolfe exhibits a similar belief: that, by somehow expressing the totality of individual experience, one could universalise it to encompass all human experience, past, present and future. Wolfe's desire to say everything informs the next part of this investigation, which focusses on Wolfe's awareness of the restrictions and frustrations that are inherent in language and in documentary culture that inhibit the realisation of this desire.

This chapter examines the rhetoric that surrounds the creative process in Wolfe's fiction and non-fiction work, and how it can be interpreted in the context of Wolfe's refusal to recognise a boundary between autobiography and fiction. In line with the primary question of what elements of Wolfe's work are a source of critical confusion and discomfort, particularly with regard to genre, I analyse selected metaphors, recurring images and persistent concerns that appear in his work in relation to writing, language, creativity and memory. This chapter illustrates Wolfe's awareness of the fallibility of language and memory, his understanding of his role as author, and the ways in which these concerns complicate the interpretation of his work, especially in terms of how he uses the material of his memory. The textual examples are taken from texts where Wolfe himself is ostensibly the narrator, such as *The Story of a Novel*, and from passages in Wolfe's novels and short stories where the narrator is not, on the

face of it, identified with the persona of the author.[20] The questions which motivate this particular chapter are as follows: how does Wolfe understand and write about memory, creativity and the writing process, and consequently, what does this reveal about the forces at work within his texts and his approach to writing?

Firstly, I examine Wolfe's concern with the differences between spoken or written language and the workings of thought, focussing on Wolfe's delight in the possibilities of language, which is tempered by his keen awareness of its restrictions and contradictions. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of some prevalent imagery used by Wolfe in relation to creativity. Wolfe's descriptions of the creative or artistic mind are permeated by images of disease, bodily processes and death. The significance of these images to Wolfe's views on creativity and writing is the focus of this section. Following this, I consider the metaphors used by Wolfe to describe memory, which often involve storms, torrents, and other natural forces, indicating the pressure exerted by memories and the need to communicate them to others. Finally, this chapter investigates the rhetoric used by Wolfe in relation to the life of the author, or the artist in general, and the self-aware interrogation of the process of writing that occurs in Wolfe's work. The analysis contained in this chapter contends that tensions between memorial and documentary modes are manifested in the ways in which Wolfe describes the creative process, and in an intense awareness of the intricacies of memory and linguistic description. In relation to the central

[20] A discussion of the relationship between author and narrators in Wolfe's work occurs in Chapter Five.

question of why Wolfe's work has proved so problematic for critics, particularly in terms of its "autobiographical" element, I illustrate throughout how these tensions in Wolfe's work create confusion with regard to the separation of his life from his art.

Language Barriers

In Wolfe's work there is as sense of joy, and even of revelation, in the variety and possibilities of language. He is "fascinated by language, enchanted by words, carried away by rhetorical devices. A kind of primitive logomania is in him . . . " (Holman, "Dark, Ruined Helen" 28). Language is celebrated, particularly in accounts of childhood, as an awakening or an epiphany. For Wolfe's protagonists, the acquisition of language is akin to the discovery of new lands, "the unknown but waiting continent" (*Look Homeward* 70). In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the possibilities opened up by language in its written form are the source of a further revelation:

> The line of life, that beautiful developing structure of language that he saw flowing from his comrade's pencil, cut the knot in him that all instruction failed to do . . . .
>
> Eugene thought of this event later; always he could feel the opening gates in him, the plunge of the tide, the escape . . . . (71)

Wolfe also writes explicitly of the joy that he personally felt in language, saying of his early attempts at writing that it was "as if I had discovered a whole new universe of chemical elements and had begun to see certain relations between some of them but had by no means begun to organise the whole series into a harmonious and coherent union" (*Story* 35-36). However, Wolfe's palpable

delight in the possibilities of language is frequently tempered by a piercing awareness of the complications and contradictions inherent in linguistic representation. This search for a "harmonious and coherent union," along with the difficulties encountered by Wolfe in this quest, is the focus of this part of the discussion.

The motif of a search for "a stone, a leaf, a door," which first appears in the opening words of *Look Homeward, Angel* and returns ad infinitum in Wolfe's work, is often interpreted as a search for an ideal language, or a "word," a transcendental signifier that would achieve the impossible and express pure, totalised meaning. Scholars have explored Wolfe's concern with the search for a language that would accurately express the inner life of emotion and memory in great detail.[21] Kristina Bobo argues in a recent article that, concerned with "linguistic solitude," "Wolfe's project was to attempt to find a way out of that isolation through a language that would render the self communicable" (38). For Wolfe, the main barrier to communicating the self to others was his knowledge of the inadequacies of language. As Warnock writes:

> There are no ready-made words, like the words for colours or shapes, nor are there fixed classifications, like the classifications of birds and insects, to apply to the life of the emotions, yet the whole function of the artist is to communicate this life, directly or indirectly, and he [sic] has to discover the means to do it. (90)

[21] See detailed discussions of Wolfe and language in, for instance: Bredahl's "'Look Homeward, Angel': Individuation and Articulation" (1973), Holman's *The Loneliness at the Core: Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (1975), Tattoni's *The Unfound Door* (1992), Roberts's "Words Raw in their Newness: The Language of *Look Homeward, Angel*" (2003) and Bartholomew's "A Return to the Natural Through Wild Language" (2004).

Wolfe demonstrates an intense awareness of this difficulty, or even impossibility, in the representation of the inner life of a person throughout his work. However, he frames this challenge as a reason for the artist to continue to strive in search of an ideal language.

Moving to examine the treatment of ideal language in Wolfe's novels, in *Of Time and the River*, Eugene Gant's purpose, like Wolfe's, is to make something eternal out of the material of his life. He wishes to achieve a unity lacking in the fragmentary nature of thought, to transmute his memory into an ideal form. The narrator offers a compelling description of Eugene's raison d'être as a writer:

> It is to snare the spirits of mankind in nets of magic, to make his life prevail through his creation, to wreak the vision of his life, the rude and painful substance of his own experience, into the congruence of blazing and enchanted images that are themselves the core of life, the essential pattern whence all things proceed, the kernel of eternity. (550)

As is common in Wolfe's work, physical images of sculpting or of rearranging a "substance" predominate, combined with more metaphysical ideas of eternal forms and "essential patterns." Thomas Lyle Collins, focussing on Wolfe's spiritual aspects, concludes that a quest for unity is a key element in Wolfe's work. He offers a "brutally prosaic statement of Wolfe's theme: all through life we are searching for some sign – 'a stone, a leaf, a door' – which will open up to us the universe of perfection and enchantment that we feel to have left behind us when we were born" (496). Collins also links Wolfe's theme with a quest to end spiritual isolation by "achieving grace" (497).

The concept of a "universe of perfection and enchantment" is crucial to this discussion of Wolfe's project and approach. Spiritual terminology abounds in connection with the mysteries of language in Wolfe's work:

> From the first years of coherent memory, George had the sense of the overpowering immanence of the golden life. . . . as if an enormous door would open slowly, awfully, with the tremendous majesty of an utter and invisible silence. He never found a word for it, but he had a thousand spells and prayers and images that would give it coherence, shape and meanings that no words could do. (*Web* 83)

Wolfe sought "a key that would let me enter, not a key to set me loose" (*Notebooks* 1: 57). I contend that Wolfe's quest for an ideal language is a quest to regain that which is lost in childhood: the sense of pure joy felt at the transformation of thoughts into verbal expression, and in particular, the written word. In his work, Wolfe seeks to recover this innocence. In a linguistic sense, his life's work is to reach Paradise through a process of incessant creation. In the context of this discussion, his work seeks to reconcile the memorial and the documentary - to make the workings of his memory transparently visible on the page, to find a perfect expression of the material of his memory in written form in order to transmit his experience to others.

Wolfe believed that his quest to discover or rediscover this primal relationship between thought and language was a goal that could be achieved. Writing in 1936, Wolfe expressed his frustration with his search for "the articulation I am

looking for," but also his conviction that he was on the path to a final discovery: "I know the door is not yet open. I know the tongue, the speech, the language that I seek is not yet found, but I believe with all my heart that I have found the way, have made a channel, am started on my first beginning" (*Story* 48-49). In seeking to recover this state of linguistic grace, Wolfe appears to be suffering from "that addiction of modern civilisation, its endless rewritings of Genesis in the first person" (Shea 27). While Shea refers particularly to authors of autobiographies, Wolfe's periautographical work displays characteristics that fit this description. *Look Homeward, Angel* has been evaluated as a *Bildungsroman*, which, in the words of Richard Kennedy, is motivated by "the theme of passing from innocence to knowing" ("Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*" 195). The loss of innocence is a consistent theme in Wolfe's novels and short stories, from the disillusionment of a failing love affair in *The Web and the Rock* to the shock of a childhood experience of death in "The Lost Boy."

In terms of Wolfe's relationship to language, this loss of innocence comes with the realisation that language is a crude representation of thought. In *The Web and the Rock*, Wolfe describes George Webber's experience of this revelation:

> At that time in George Webber's life, amidst all the nonsense, confusion, torture, and brute unhappiness that he was subject to, he was for the first time trying to articulate something immense and terrible in life which he had always known or felt, and for which he thought he must now find some speech, or drown. And yet it seemed that this thing which was so immense could have no speech, that it burst through the limits of all recorded languages,

> and that it could never be rounded, uttered, and contained in words. (261-62)

Wolfe recognises that, to borrow a phrase from Mary Carruthers, words are but "crude stick-figures" (24) to represent the workings of thought, and yet struggles against the inevitable disjunction between thought and language. As Bentz argues in a 2006 article, Wolfe does not despair, but celebrates the "splendid failure" of his unending quest to transform the entirety of his experience into text. Wolfe's work, incorporating this realisation, actively seeks to reconcile the written (and spoken) word with the inner life of the author, and in doing so, metaphorically reverse the fall from an innocent joy in language into the thickets of linguistic self-awareness.

With this epiphany, repeatedly depicted in Wolfe's fiction and non-fiction work, comes feelings of horror and shame. As discussed in the next section, attempts to set down experiences and memories in words are often accompanied by images of death, disease and natural disasters. To fail to set down every experience in writing in a way that reveals its essential truth is sinful, a source of trauma and guilt. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe writes at length about the nightmares of "Guilt and Time" that tormented him during the writing of his second novel:

> Chameleon-like in all their damnable and unending fecundities, they restored to me the whole huge world that I had known, the billion faces and the million tongues, and they restored it to me with the passive triumph of a malevolent and unwanted ease. My daily conflict with Amount and Number, the huge accumulations

> of my years of struggle with the forms of life, my brutal and unending efforts to record upon my memory each brick and paving stone of every street that I had ever walked upon, each face of every thronging crowd in every city . . . . (62)

In the same passage, Wolfe writes of "the galling bitterness of defeat" in his "contention with the multitudes of life" (63). His project is not just to record his thoughts, but everything that he has experienced and felt in the course of his life. Wolfe seeks to expiate his guilt in the only way that he can: by endlessly writing, hoping to overcome the trauma of the revelation that language is not the perfect tool of expression it seemed to be in the throes of childhood experience.

This upsetting epiphany is magnified by Wolfe's belief that all writing involves writing about the self, and that it would be impossible to do otherwise. Autobiography has been described as a "second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness" (Eakin, *Fictions* 9). Wolfe's work is not generally described as straightforward "autobiography," even though it often attracts the adjective "autobiographical," indicating the critical disagreement over his work with regard to genre. However, whether as "periautography" or "life-writing," it involves similar processes of learning what it is to write from one's own experience, and the frustrations and limitations inherent in acquiring this knowledge. In a letter to Sherwood Anderson in 1937, Wolfe states: "I realize myself through a process of torrential production" (284). Contained in this is the recognition that, in learning to express his inner life, in acquiring this new language, Wolfe is in the

process of creating a new self, an identity as a writer for whom, as he writes in the same letter "living and working are so close together with me that it seems to me they are damned near the same thing" (284).

Wolfe feels himself compelled to engage in an attempt to extract the core of his experience, to reach the truth of his innermost self, and then to transmit this knowledge to others using the tools of written language, which he believes to be inadequate. This process would be unavoidably painful for him. Bourdeau, in his 2004 article on *Look Homeward, Angel*, applies Sartre's metaphor of pen as sword to Wolfe, arguing that, "By writing about his own experience, the writer, metaphorically speaking, pierces the armor of his superficial identity with his pen in an attempt at getting at the real self" (9). Derrida employs similarly visceral imagery in relation to writing in "Circumfession," but dreams of a pen as a syringe rather than a sword, "a suction point rather than that very hard weapon with which one must inscribe, incise, choose, calculate" (10-12). Derrida envisions the effortlessness of pen as syringe, drawing forth writing as if drawing blood, with "no more toil, no responsibility, no risk of bad taste nor of violence" (12). Wolfe wishes to pierce to his inner self, using the pen in this manner, and similarly dreams of an uninterrupted flow between thought and language, from his mind to the page. As discussed in the following section, Wolfe's work is interwoven with bloody and bodily imagery in relation to the work of writing and the processes of memory and creativity, frequently alluding to the struggles involved in translating thought into spoken and written language.

Wolfe's search for an ideal language is also a pursuit of truth. Throughout his work is a conviction that every experience contains some essential truth, which can only be discovered by finding the right words to tell about it. However, the impossibility of this task is also made clear; as George Webber exclaims to his editor, Foxhall Edwards, in *You Can't Go Home Again*: "What *is* truth? No wonder jesting Pilate turned away. The truth, it has a thousand faces – show only one of them, and the *whole* truth flies away! But how to show the whole? That's the question" (320). Wolfe recognises the essential problem of operating in a memorial mode: that speaking or writing from memory involves a selection of experiences and words that changes those memories even as he speaks or writes of them. Wolfe's acknowledgement of this problem indicates the tension in his work between memorial and documentary modes, and is a clue to the reasons behind his predilection for a flexible form that was not purely autobiographical. As discussed in Chapter One, Wolfe's self-aware prose has been the source of considerable critical disagreement over genre and categorisation, and much of this stems from the malleability of truth and memory in Wolfe's work.

Wolfe's desire to show the whole truth of his experience, despite the impossibility of the task, is at the heart of his battles with language. In making concrete the vague forms of the past, in setting down in words the workings of memory, an author can only show one version of the what might have happened. Wolfe conforms to the concept of the artist who "does not invent, he merely tries to translate what he has come to know into a language which the world can understand" (Warnock 102). Bourdeau contends that Wolfe did not

wish to "understand the whole of his existence or the meaning of life," but rather aimed to "reorder specific episodes of his life in coherent structures and humbly offer them to whoever wished to read them" ("Welcome" 12). While this certainly describes Wolfe's concept of his memories as malleable and capable of being rearranged, it must be taken into account that much of Wolfe's difficulties stem from his need to write not just about "specific episodes," but the entirety of his experience. He endlessly writes and rewrites the material of his memory in different forms and in different contexts, trying to discover the language he needs through processes of repetition and rumination.

Wolfe recognises the disorderly nature of life and memory, the impossibility of fully representing experience, and the struggles with language that every author must encounter. As Nathan Zuckerman says in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, the burden of writing from one's own experience is the difficulty of selection, as life is:

> not either/or . . . . Life *is* and: the accidental and the immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined – plus the multiplying illusions! (310)

Wolfe is deeply concerned with the multiplicity of language, its deceptive and decentred qualities, and with the impossibility of constructing a "true" account of his life. Nonetheless, his work is a testament to the inevitability of continuing with this quest to transform the material of his memory in order that some truth in it might be revealed to others. The problem of representation is at the

heart of the tension in Wolfe's work between the memorial and the documentary.

Wolfe's work delights in the potential of language, yet abounds with an awareness of its limitations. Critics frequently ignore this self-conscious, metatextual element of Wolfe's work, although in recent years it has become more significant in Wolfe scholarship as a result of the work of Tattoni and Bourdeau, among others. It is usually analysed in terms of Wolfe's possible alignment with postmodernism, but I contend that rather than anticipating later literary movements, Wolfe's awareness of the fallibility of language is an element of his work that was ignored, or underestimated, by early and highly influential critics such as DeVoto, and that this omission has contributed significantly to Wolfe's reputation for naivety and unthinking production. In seeking to restore an ideal state of unity between thought and language, Wolfe's writing also seeks to reconcile the workings of memory with the physical demands of documenting experience. Wolfe's experience of this challenge is expressed through his work in many passages that are concerned with writing, creativity and memory. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine some of the prevalent imagery and metaphors in these passages, and investigate the implications of these tropes in terms of Wolfe's approach to the work of writing, and the critical interpretation of texts that are produced by this approach. In the following section, I analyse Wolfe's use of visceral, bodily imagery of disease, physical and mental possession, birth, sterility and death.

Beautiful Disease

Bodily pain, death and disease are a constant preoccupation in Wolfe's work, from the prolonged suffering and death of Eugene Gant's father due to cancer, to the background presence of the tuberculosis patients of Altamont's sanatoria. While this thematic concern with physical disease is often recognised in Wolfe scholarship,[22] it is notable that metaphorical references to disease are also widespread. In Wolfe's work, rhetorical passages on writing and creativity frequently employ the terminology and vocabulary of disease. The desire to tell or communicate, in particular, is often depicted as an intensely visceral experience:

> What is it that keeps swelling in our hearts its grand and solemn music, that is aching in our throats, that is pulsing like a strange wild grape through all the conduits of our blood, that maddens us with its exultant and intolerable joy and that leaves us tongueless, wordless, maddened by our fury to the end? (*Of Time* 34)

The following discussion analyses the prevalence and significance of images and metaphors of disease in Wolfe's work in relation to concepts of creativity, memory and language, in the context of what this aspect of his work reveals about his approach to writing and the tensions at work in his texts.

This section questions how this rhetoric of disease can be interpreted, and whether it can be considered evidence of feelings of disgust or hatred toward

[22] This aspect of Wolfe's work has attracted attention among Wolfe scholars in the past decade: see in particular Ruth Winchester Ware's "Thomas Wolfe's 1918 Flu Story: The Death of Ben in the Context of Other Literary Narratives of the Pandemic" (2009) and Paula Gallant Eckard's "'A Flash of Fire': Illness and the Body in *Look Homeward, Angel*" (2010).

the creative process on the part of the author, or whether more complex undercurrents are at work. Wolfe's hunger for experience has been described as a "Faustian sickness," characterised by an "inordinate desire to know and experience everything" (Maloney 162). I contend that the "sickness" suffered by Wolfe, and depicted in the sufferings of the protagonists of his fiction, is not just one of hunger, but of an overwhelming urge to communicate his experience to others. In Bourdeau's words, Wolfe's "burning desire to tell and to be heard" becomes an "overriding energy that engulf[s] every other aspect of novel writing" ("Welcome" 10). This "desire" and "energy" is often portrayed in Wolfe's work using the apparently negative imagery of disease. An immediate issue arising from this discussion is this: if the urge to create and communicate is the disease, what is the cure?

Sometimes, it appears that the disease so often referred to by Wolfe is one of memory, triggered by an awareness of the passing of time. In the short story "God's Lonely Man," which describes the inner life of a protagonist similar in character to those of Wolfe's novels, loneliness and the passage of time engender feelings of despair: "And the cancerous plant of memory is feeding at his entrails, recalling hundreds of forgotten faces and ten thousand vanished days, until all life seems as strange and insubstantial as a dream" (189). Memory is often depicted as a physical or mental illness that rages uncontrollably through the body or mind. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe writes of his memory as a disease in both physical and mental terms, describing it as "an unceasing nightmare of blazing visions that swept across my fevered and unresting mind" (61). This affliction of memory is implicated as the cause of an

inability to live in the present moment, a torment that disturbs sleep and overwhelms everyday existence. Wolfe would perhaps have agreed with Mary Warnock's statement that "Nostalgia is, after all, generally agreed to be a debilitating disease" (119), in its focus on recreating the past at the expense of the present, even if "nostalgia" is a term that Wolfe might have baulked at, tinged as it is with associations of sentimentality and selectivity. Nonetheless, the overwhelming force of memory is certainly depicted as debilitating, particularly in the next phase of the creative "disease:" the struggle to communicate these memories.

The compulsion to tell, and therefore to write, is frequently represented as an illness with palpable physical effects. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe describes the "tumult of these creative energies" as a "condition" with mental and physical symptoms: "At the end of the day of savage labor, my mind was still blazing with its effort, could by no opiate of reading, poetry, music, alcohol, or any other pleasure, be put at rest. I was unable to sleep" (58). Writing is described in similar terms to memory, as a proliferating force that "spread and flowered like a cancerous growth" (*Web* 273). This is a further manifestation of the disease of memory, call it a creative impulse, a memorial instinct, or in Bourdeau's terms, "autobiographical desire" ("Welcome"). At its root is the need to tell all and the crisis of representation that concerns Wolfe to such an extent throughout his work.

Paula Eckard argues that, for Wolfe, "illness fuelled the literary imagination" (6), illustrating that the deaths of his brothers, Ben and Grover, and of his

father, as well as frequent exposure to the ill and dying as a child, had a profound influence on Wolfe's work. While it is certainly the case that Wolfe created fictions from his memories of these traumatic events, it is possible to go a step further, and to contend that for Wolfe, the literary imagination is not just fuelled by disease, but is a disease itself. Wolfe's obsession with disease and illness might suggest that the impulse to create was an affliction to be endured, for which the only temporary cure would be to alleviate the pressure by writing endlessly. However, certain passages in Wolfe's work add more complexity to this view. The rhetoric of disease in relation to writing and creativity is not necessarily negative. In fact, it suggests that Wolfe maintained a somewhat Romantic notion of physical or mental disease, particularly hereditary disease, as the source of creative power. It is therefore depicted as something beautiful, to be celebrated rather than endured.

In a revelatory vision toward the end of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene Gant imagines the portraits of great poets and artists, and sees evidence of physical illness in all of them:

> He began to see that what was subtle and beautiful in life was touched with a divine pearl-sickness. Health was to be found in the steady stare of the cats and dogs, or in the smooth vacant chops of the peasant. But he looked on the faces of the lords of the earth – and he saw them wasted and devoured by the beautiful disease of thought and passion. (490)

This "beautiful disease" is compared by Eugene to his own hereditary "sickness that was rooted in his flesh," a boil or birthmark that he calls the "little flower of

sin and darkness on his neck" (490). He concludes that the ill health of his flesh is evidence of the health of his spirit, which can look unflinchingly upon "the terrible sunken river of life" and the "hidden and unspeakable passions that unify the tragic family of this earth" (491). Physical disease is portrayed as a gateway to revelation or illumination: it can bring a greater understanding of universal truths, crucial to the task of the storyteller. To Wolfe, physical disease is symbolic of the "beautiful disease" of creativity and literary imagination, a desired affliction that allows him to transform individual experience into universal experience.

References to disease and infirmity in Wolfe's work are often linked with new forms of life. In particular, there is a recurring theme of new life emerging from death, or from barrenness and sterility. In a letter sent to publishers to accompany the manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe explains his conviction that "pain has an inevitable fruition in beauty," and refers to the inspiration he finds in the uglier side of human existence:

> When I wrote the book I seized with delight everything that would give it color and richness. All the variety and madness of my people – the leper taint, the cruel waste, the dark flowering evil of life I wrote about with as much exultancy as health, sanity, joy. ("Note for the Publisher's Reader" 64)

This conviction is echoed within the text of *Look Homeward, Angel* itself, such as when Eugene wonders at the health and beauty of the children of his frail and consumptive teacher: "[he] was bewildered again before the unsearchable riddle – out of death, life, out of the coarse rank earth, a flower" (186). For

Wolfe, this intertwining of life and death, of pain and beauty, is inextricably associated with processes of writing and creation.

Wolfe uses bodily images of disease in his descriptions of the travails of composition, in contrast with the more placid metaphors, also commonly employed, of digestion and rumination. Wolfe sometimes perceives his desire to write not as a need for rumination and contemplation, but for purgation:

> For the first time I realized another naked fact which every artist must know, and that is that in a man's work there are contained not only the seeds of life, but the seeds of death, and that that power of creation which sustains us will also destroy us like a leprosy if we let it rot stillborn in our vitals. I had to get it out of me somehow. (*Story* 55)

Wolfe's rhetoric, reflecting the disease-laden vocabulary of passages regarding composition and creativity in *The Web and the Rock*, in particular, suggests that the creative urge is an illness, and composition the cure. His contention that "one writes a book not in order to remember it, but in order to forget it" (*Story* 16-17) adds weight to the idea of composition as a necessary process of physical and mental purging. The need to communicate experience creatively is figured as a form of disease, but if one attempts to cure the disease by writing, it will produce something beautiful. Suppressed, it will destroy the sufferer.

In the above passage, Wolfe mingles images of disease with those of reproduction ("stillborn"), suggesting that not only does the process of writing have curative properties, but also that the resulting work must be "born" for the

sake of the health of the author. Unusually for Wolfe, he employs imagery that reinforces concepts of origin and delivery, of the work as a physical object produced by a singular author. As Allen identifies in reference to the ideas expressed in Barthes's "The Death of the Author," allusions such as these to the "rhetoric of filiation" serve to "reinforce the illusion that a text possesses and conveys a meaning imparted to it by its author, and thus that the text has a unity which stems directly from the unified and original thought of the creator" (72). However, as discussed in Chapter Two, Wolfe emphasises the plurality of his texts, the multitude of voices that speak through them, and his role as assembler, memoriser or storyteller, rather than god-like creator. Although the imagery of birth here reinforces a common metaphor of the relationship between texts and authors, in Wolfe's work it relates more to a concept of the bodily experience of birth as a form of purgation, resulting in the creation of new forms.

The "cure" of composition is not portrayed as a process that gives any permanent relief, but as a visceral experience that involves other forms of pain. The futility of attempting to document all experience and Wolfe's difficulties with language and representation, as previously discussed, are represented using violent bodily imagery:

> The words were wrung out of him in a kind of bloody sweat, they poured out of his fingertips, spat out of his snarling throat like writhing snakes; he wrote them with his heart, his brain, his sweat, his guts; he wrote them with his blood, his spirit; they were

> wrenched out of the last secret source and substance of his life. (*Of Time* 858-59)

Wolfe portrays the process of writing about or around the self as an intensely physical experience, and frequently describes his texts as if they are physical bodies. In *The Story of a Novel*, he writes of the "dismembered fragments" of the manuscript of which would later become *Of Time and the River*, and the manner in which these fragments were assembled around the "skeleton" of the book (75). In the same text, Wolfe describes editing as a "bloody execution" and "carnage" (80). In his depiction of editing as an act of physical violence, Wolfe identifies his own body with his texts. He illustrates the difficulty of becoming "coldly surgical" in the process of editing, and also expresses his pain in metaphysical terms, writing of how his "spirit quivered" and his "soul recoiled" (*Story* 80) at the prospect of cutting scenes.

Cutting and reshaping his text is agony to Wolfe, who wishes to transform and communicate the entirety of his experience. Derrida writes of how the "trait that relates the logical to the graphical must also be working between the biological and the biographical" (*Ear of the Other* 4-5). Wolfe instinctively relates the biological to the biographical, describing the process of translating the material of his memory and thought into text in terms of bodily sensations. In the same passage, Derrida describes the divisible, dynamic borderline between the "work" and the "life" which "traverses two 'bodies,' the corpus and the body" (*Ear of the Other* 5-6). Wolfe recognises that this borderline is not a strict division or a "thin line" as Derrida calls it (5). He frequently expresses the conviction that his life and his work are complexly intertwined, to the point that

they are one and the same. Wolfe explicitly associates the act of writing with bodily pain, but the alternative, which is to suffer from his "disease" and fail to even try to document the memorial impulse, is shown to be equally abhorrent: a source of frustration that, in the experience of one of his protagonists, "tore at his naked entrails with a vulture's beak" (*Of Time* 660).

Metaphors of possession, both spiritual and bodily, also abound in Wolfe's work. These represent a different kind of disease narrative, in which the need to communicate experience is portrayed as an intrusion, parasite or foreign body. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe writes of the creative impulse as "something that took hold of me and possessed me" (37). Similarly, in *Of Time and the River*, Eugene Gant experiences a force that he calls "fury," which later finds its expression in writing:

> He never knew if fury had lain dormant all those years, had worked secret, silent, like a madness in the blood. But later it would seem to him that fury had first filled his life, exploded, conquered and possessed him, that he first felt it, saw it, knew the dark illimitable madness of its power, one night years later on a train across Virginia. (30)

Sometimes the imagery of possession is more bodily than spiritual; the same "fury" is referred to as "a strange and subtle worm that will be forever feeding at our heart" (*Of Time* 28), and similarly in *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe writes that "the worm had entered my heart, the worm lay coiled and feeding at my brain, my spirit, and my memory" (73). This kind of imagery appears to attach negative connotations to the creative process, but as with the rhetoric of

disease previously discussed, these various forms of possession result in the production of art and the alleviation of the pain of the storyteller.

The rhetoric of disease in Wolfe's work is evidence of his complex attitudes to writing and the creative process, and of the tensions engendered by the struggles with language referred to in the previous section. Disease is often used as a metaphor for excess feeling (Sontag 45), and the "disease" so often referred is the "excess feeling" of an emotional state brought on by the pressures of memory, the urge to create, and the need to communicate experience to others. Essentially, this disease is the memorial impulse. If that is the case, is the cure to be found in documenting this impulse? It is made clear throughout Wolfe's fiction and non-fiction that writing is the only way to alleviate the mental pain caused by this condition, but it is a far from perfect solution, as it requires that one compose endlessly from memory in a futile attempt to catch up with lived experience. The difficulties of this situation and the tensions between the memorial impulse and the restrictions of documentary culture find expression in the visceral and violent images of disease, bodily possession, sterility and death that hover around descriptions of the act of writing. However, Wolfe recognises that writing is not just a treatment for a "disease," but a means to "beat death and nothingness and all the abominations of a sterile and nameless fear" (*Of Time* 424). Ultimately, he portrays the "disease" that motivates writing as something beautiful, to be celebrated rather than feared. The next section examines another aspect of this "beautiful disease:" the overwhelming pressure of memory. It examines the ways in which Wolfe describes, understands and wrestles with memory, his

compulsion to communicate his memories to others, and the ways in which he struggles to contain the material of his memory within the acceptable narrative forms of his era.

Overwhelming Memory

To Wolfe, memory is indistinguishable from identity, as "we are the sum of all the moments of our lives" ("To the Reader"), and is inescapably the source of his creative work. The problem that Wolfe grapples with is how to convey that "sum of moments," which is ever increasing, in a language that others can understand. Memory is often represented in Wolfe's work as elusive, spectral and ephemeral:

> the hauntings of an accidental memory, with all its various freight of great and little things which passed and vanished instantly and could never be forgotten, and . . . those unbidden and unfathomed wisps and fumes of memory that share the mind with all the proud dark images of love and death. (*Of Time* 509)

However, memory carries much more power for Wolfe than mere "wisps and fumes." It is the "unbidden" nature of memory that concerns him, its sudden overpowering force and pressure. In this section I focus on the types of metaphors and images that are associated with the role of memory in the creative act. What can this imagery tell us about Wolfe's experience of the creative process, and how does this relate to Wolfe's preoccupation with disease and language? From the frequent references to storms, torrents and floods, to the depiction of frenzied attempts to control and document memories with lists and catalogues, this investigation examines Wolfe's portrayal of

memory and its relationship to writing, particularly in terms of whether it supports the mythology that surrounds Wolfe's creative process. In doing so, it explores another controversial facet of Wolfe's approach to writing which contributes to critical debates over the generic categorisation of his work: namely, Wolfe's conscious and deliberate translation of his memories into narrative texts published as fiction.

Wolfe's descriptions of memory in *The Story of a Novel* give the impression of an uncontrollable force, employing images of natural disasters to convey the insistent energy of memory and its intrusions on present consciousness. Wolfe's awareness of the peculiar intensity of his memory is accompanied by a recognition of his struggle to control its workings: "Now my memory was at work night and day, in a way that I could at first neither check nor control and that swarmed unbidden in a stream of blazing pageantry across my mind" (31-32). From this stream of images comes an urge to communicate these memories which begins in a "whirling vortex and a creative chaos," and proceeds slowly "at the expense of infinite confusion, toil and error toward clarification and the articulation of an ordered and formal structure" (36). Wolfe writes of this time that,

> It seemed that I had inside me, swelling and gathering all the time, a huge black cloud, and that this cloud was loaded with electricity, pregnant, crested, with a kind of hurricane violence that could not be held in check much longer . . . . Well, all I can say is that the storm did break. . . . It came in torrents, and it is not over yet. (*Story* 36-37)

Further references in the same text to this burst of creative work, fuelled by overwhelming sequences of recollection, employ terms such as "torrential and ungovernable flood" (37) and "a great river thrusting for release inside of me" (52), for which a channel must be found, or Wolfe would "be destroyed in the flood of [his] own creation" (52).

One critic, comparing Wolfe to Eliot's depiction of creative work in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," describes these passages as "hardly the calm and deliberate contemplation that Eliot required of his artist. Nor is it even emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Hobson 123). Martin Maloney also echoes Wordsworth's famous phrase when he says that "recollection for Wolfe was anything but tranquil" (160), and goes on to describe his work as "more an evacuation than a creation" (168). The imagery used by Wolfe himself in the passages cited above would appear to add weight to these comments. However, Edward Aswell, who edited and published Wolfe's two posthumous novels, challenges the myth, perpetuated by Wolfe himself, of torrential production:

> some of his readers seem to think that when Tom was in the throes of composition, all he had to do was to open the sluice gates and the words tumbled forth in an irresistible torrent like the surge of pent-up waters suddenly released. True, he wrote like one possessed. . . .
>
> But the analogy by which this process has been compared to sluice-gates becomes very misleading if left without qualification. (355)

Aswell explains that "one needs to remember all the years through which his experience and observation had slowly accumulated," as well as "his acute self-tortures of thought and feeling" (355). Essentially, Wolfe experimented with his memory, becoming a "tireless reviser and rewriter" because he "could not put anything that had happened to him out of his consciousness until he had rehearsed it in his memory a thousand times, going back over it again and again in every detail until he had got at the core of it and extracted the last shred of meaning out of it on every level" (355).

This rehearsal of memory is another way of describing Wolfe's habitual rumination; his instinctive drive to operate in a memorial mode. Although Wolfe often describes memory in terms that are violent and forceful, creating misconceptions in the process, taking a closer look at descriptions of memory and composition in his work reveals images and metaphors that reflect more methodical processes of rumination and reflection. The imagery in Wolfe's work surrounding the processes of composition often reiterates this myth of uncontrollable force, but Wolfe is also concerned with how this force can be governed. In *Of Time and the River*, Eugene Gant furiously attempts to document his memories in whatever form he can:

> They were all there – without coherence, scheme, or reason – flung down upon paper like figures blasted by the spirit's lightning stroke, and in them was the huge chronicle of the billion forms, the million names, the huge, single and incomparable substance of America. (859)

Wolfe makes it clear that this chaos must produce a narrative, in order that it be communicated to others. Eugene must "shape these grand designs into the stern and toilsome masonry of words" (858), a task which Wolfe understood all too well.

In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe describes the process of mastering his material, involving a fanatical attempt to catalogue and organise his memories in documentary form: "There were countless charts, catalogues, descriptions that I can only classify here under the general heading of Amount and Number" (43). This cataloguing involves a system of listing his memories and placing them in categories, such as "the rooms and houses in which I had lived or in which I had slept for at least a night, together with the most accurate and evocative descriptions of those rooms that I could write" (42-43). Wolfe's depiction of his creative process and his battles with "Amount and Number" is borne out by the evidence that survives in his notebooks and ledgers, which contain material exactly as it is described here. The rhetoric of storms, floods and torrents is tempered by references to this methodical repetition and organisation of memory, these attempts to create basic structures from which to compose narratives. While the tone of passages such as the above excerpts from *The Story of a Novel* are tinged with frustration at the futility of the cataloguing exercise, there is also in Wolfe's work a sense of joy in this process of listing memories.

Rhapsodic passages that build up lists of memories capture a delight in the evocative power of recollection, and in the language used to constitute and

communicate memories. This trait of Wolfe's is widely known to the point of cliché, to the extent that one critic employs his name as a verb when describing people who write passages which contain these endless, exuberant lists: they like "to Thomas Wolfe things down, to whoop it, Whitmanly, up . . ." (Gass 178). Bentz critiques this common caricature of Wolfe, arguing, as Aswell does, that the mythology of Wolfe's physical excess has been transferred into an exaggeration of his writing habits, an abiding image of a "writer out of control of his material" ("Why Thomas Wolfe" 101). Wolfe does struggle to exert control over his memory, but this frustration is mingled with excitement in his descriptions of the cataloguing process. Passages where this cataloguing or listing is evident often end with an exclamation such as "How to tell about it! It is so certain yet it is a speechless thing" (*Web* 651) or, from *Of Time and the River*, "How could he say it! How could he ever find a word to speak the joy, the pain, the grandeur bursting in the great vine of his heart, swelling like a huge grape in his throat" (82). Once again, we return to Wolfe's underlying concern with the vast potential, and yet the inadequacy, of language, which will not fully allow him or his protagonists to organise the material of memory and communicate it to others, no matter how many lists or catalogues they create.

Amidst these images of cataloguing and organising, there is an overriding metaphor of memory as a physical substance that can be moulded and shaped, corralled into pens, sorted into boxes or mined for riches. Wolfe refers to his memory as a "resource" in *The Story of a Novel*, writing of his intention "to explore day by day and month by month with a fanatical intensity, the whole material domain of my resources as a man and as a writer" (41). In one of his

notebooks, he boastfully declares: "When I open my casual mind to people I spill out looted ore as if I tore open a sack fat with golddust" (*Notebooks* 1: 129). Wolfe's conceptualising of his memory as a physical resource is indicative of his preoccupation with the need to have experienced everything, to have read every book, and so forth. His work is a record of the obsessive collection of memories in order to consciously use them as an archive or resource from which to understand the world, and to communicate this understanding to others. Of course, this collection could never be complete, and the record of it would lag even further behind: as Rubin concludes, "He spent his life trying to understand and find an order for his experience. And the longer he lived, the more experience there was to understand" ("Time" 81-82). The metaphor of memory as a physical substance that could be organised, shaped and controlled helps to maintain the illusion that this is a task that could be achieved.

Despite the unusual power and depth of his own memory, Wolfe frequently ruminates upon the fragmentary and transient nature of memories, which is reflected in the written words produced from these memories. Rubin describes these "fragments," asserting that "Some are glittering, some are sensuous, some are sordid, but they are not joined in any order" ("Time" 66). Although his work has more unity than Rubin suggests, there is a recognition that it is impossible to fully control what remains in memory, as well as what is lost:

> In the course of George Webber's life, many things of no great importance in themselves had become deeply embedded in his memory, stuck there like burs in a scottie's tail; and always they were little things which, in an instant of clear perception, had

> riven his heart with some poignant flash of meaning. (*You Can't* 38)

However, as Margaret Church argues, noting the influence on Wolfe of Joyce and Proust, it is these "flashes" of memory, which "seem of no consequence, but live with us longer than apparently important events" that Wolfe assembles to bring "unity to life and to human experience" (89). Wolfe realises that one cannot control what is remembered, but strives to unify these transient fragments in order to convey, as much as possible, an individual's memory in terms of universal human experience. Wolfe's memory was incredible, and he "really did remember and perceive an enormous quantity of phenomena" (Maloney 167), but in his work there is a recognition of the impossibility of remembering all experience, and particularly, of the impossibility of verbalising the entirety of memory.

Wolfe recognises the role of creativity in recollection, writing in *The Web and the Rock* of the "majestic powers of memory, synthesis, and imagination" (455) that are crucial to writing. He understands that, in the words of Mary Warnock, recollection is an art in itself, and an "active and creative undertaking" (145). In a short story entitled "The Return of the Prodigal," the narrator details at length how this creative recollection can produce fictions that are more real than the original memory: "He thought of this so often with the intensity of nostalgic longing that in the end his feelings built up in his mind an image which seemed to him more true than anything he had ever actually experienced" (109). In the act of recollecting and translating into language, memories are changed, rearranged and transformed. At the heart of this is Wolfe's recognition of the

transience and unreliability of memory, as well as his conviction that memory is the basis for all fictions and works of imagination. Wolfe, operating in a memorial mode, must struggle with the knowledge that memories are unreliable, and that in their recollection and reiteration, they are creatively altered. Wolfe certainly recognises the pitfalls of making claims to autobiographical veracity, but feels bound to communicate the material of his memory in some form, as to him, it is the only resource from which to write.

Wolfe's work records his quest to capture the "shining fish of a million living moments" (*Of Time* 422) in the nets of language; he wishes to uncover, in Proust's phrase, the "vast structure of recollection" (54) through sensory experience. Passages on memory alternate between a tone of frustration and joy, reflecting an awareness of the unresting and neverending nature of recollection as well as a delight in its evocative power. Nietzsche's contention that those who cannot forget can never be happy, and must always endure "a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination" (62) would have resonated with Wolfe, who frequently describes his unrelenting memory in terms that suggest a form of torment. However, it is this rumination, in the form of methodical listing and cataloguing, which allows Wolfe to transform his memories into imaginative fictions, and to temporarily relieve the pressures of the overpowering "floods" and "torrents" of memory.

The rhetoric that surrounds memory in Wolfe's work reflects, once again, his concern with acting on the memorial instinct to transform memory, through language, into a form that could be documented in print. Unfortunately, some

critics interpret this instinct as a lack of imagination, or as evidence of Wolfe's inability to control his material. While criticism of this kind has receded in recent years, the myth of Wolfe's unconsidered "evacuation" (Maloney 168) of his memory remains, as illustrated by Bentz ("Why Thomas Wolfe") and Holliday ("'The Story of a Tall Man'"). Memory is variously represented in Wolfe's work as a powerful natural force, a physical substance to be moulded, controlled and organised, a fragmentary, ghostly material and, as discussed in the previous section, a disease. The imagery he employs both supports the mythology of torrential production and undermines it, particularly in his depiction of his listing and cataloguing methods. Wolfe's focus is on the overwhelming nature of memory, and his attempts to overcome and subdue his memory to ends that are creative and communicative. In the following section, I examine another way in which tensions between the memorial and the documentary are manifested in Wolfe's work, demonstrating the self-awareness of his descriptions of the life and role of the artist, and in particular, the author.

The Life of the Artist

Throughout his work, Wolfe is engaged in a process of justifying himself, explaining his purpose, and discussing the role of creative work and of the artist in society. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe writes of the purpose of the artist in America, again revealing his concern with language and articulation. He claims, "The life of the artist at any epoch of man's history has not been an easy one. And here in America, it has often seemed to me, it may well be the hardest life that man has ever known" (91). Wolfe explains that this state of affairs is due to the relative youth of the country, the resulting lack of a "body of tradition" and

the need for the artist in America to "make somehow a new tradition for himself, derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of American life" (92). This new tradition will require the "labor of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language" (92). Although one might expect to find sentiments such as these in a work published as non-fiction that aims to explain the creative process behind Wolfe's first two novels, Wolfe's ostensibly fictional work is also rife with rhetoric surrounding the life of the artist and the function of creative work such as his own. Often satirical or humorous in tone, many of these passages also interrogate the process of writing itself. An intense self-consciousness permeates Wolfe's work to the extent that, as Tattoni argues in *The Unfound Door*, it could be seen as anticipating postmodern poetics in its focus on its own mechanics, techniques and origins.

The American literary scene is a source of intense frustration for Wolfe. In a letter to Henry T. Volkening in 1931, he disgustedly exclaims, "The literary business in America has become so horrible that it is sometimes possible to write only between fits of vomiting" (173). In his quest to find a medium through which to communicate his experience, and by extension, the national experience, Wolfe has to contend with the variable factors of commercial print: publishers, editors, the book market, financial concerns, the pressure of contracts, and, most despised of all, reviewers and critics. Significant portions of *You Can't Go Home Again* and *The Web and the Rock*, as well as short stories such as "On Leprechauns" are devoted to satirising the pretentiousness of New York literary society and the jargon of the arts, which is referred to in *Of Time*

and the River as "a language that sounded very knowing, expert and assured, and yet that knew nothing, was experienced in nothing, was sure of nothing" (135). This language, containing nothing but "falseness and triviality" and the "ghosts of passion" (135) is anathema to Wolfe's search for the language that will allow him to express the ultimate truths of his existence. Passages such as these bitterly decry the elements of literary and documentary culture that an author must necessarily interact with in order for their work to be communicated to the widest possible audience, and certainly would have done little to endear him to early critics of his work. Wolfe wished to be heard, but passages in his work, published as both fiction and non-fiction, attest to his problematic relationship with the industry of the printed word, which would allow him to translate his utterances into a form that would reach others.

Wolfe's work demonstrates an intense interest in the difficulties faced by authors, not just in their interactions with publishers and critics, but also in their struggles with the mechanics and practicalities of writing. His concern is with the work of writing, the mental and physical labour that must be accomplished in order to produce words upon the page. Much of the imagery discussed in the preceding sections of this chapter perpetuates the image of Wolfe as an author for whom writing was a calling, an irresistible force that would not allow him to do anything else. While Wolfe often explicitly bears out this idea in his non-fiction writing, he also frequently refers to the necessity to work at writing as at any other profession. His tendency to romanticise the craft of writing is tempered, even contradicted, by a level-headed and pragmatic

belief in the necessity of hard graft, the conviction that writing is a job like any other.

In accordance with this practical outlook, Wolfe insists upon debunking common myths of waiting for inspiration or finding a suitable place to write:

> I went to Paris Christmas: it is one of the saddest messes in the world to see all these pathetic bastards who are getting ready to commence to start. Why a man should leave his own country to write . . . is quite beyond me. . . . It seems to me that one of the most important things a writer can have is tenacity – without that I don't see how he'll get anything done. ("To Henry T. Volkening" 169; 2nd ellipsis in orig.)

Nowell writes in her biography of Wolfe of his "writer's conscience," his "unshakable [sic] conviction that his first and highest duty was to his creative work" (80). Wolfe exhibits this conviction in *The Story of a Novel*, calling himself "a writer who is on the way to learning his profession and to discovering the line, the structure and the articulation of the language which I must discover if I do the work I do" (2). Wolfe, for whom living and writing are inextricable, feels a moral responsibility to impart his knowledge and to convey his individual experience to the widest audience possible. While he often refers to his quest for the ultimate language with which to do so, he also maintains a practical grasp of the need to get words from his mind to the page, to accept imperfection, and to submit his writing to the demands of the literary industry in order to reach others.

This practicality and pragmatism permeates the rhetoric of creativity in Wolfe's work, particularly in the way he both sustains and undermines the romantic myth of himself as author. As Bentz demonstrates in his 2006 article, the myth of Wolfe as the embodiment of excess, the author of crates of manuscript who is tormented by uncontrollable physical appetites, has long dominated the image of Wolfe in the popular and scholarly imagination. Wolfe's simultaneous construction and destruction of this myth is often overlooked. Wolfe openly admits and even exhibits pride in his lack of control over his creative energies (Hobson 122-23), yet satirises himself mercilessly in his periautographical prose. Chapter 26 of *You Can't Go Home Again*, "The Wounded Faun," depicts George Webber in a state of anxiety, confusion and self-hatred following the publication of his first novel and the unfavourable reaction from his hometown. In writing about these circumstances, so similar to his own after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe offers some advice to his proto-younger self, via the character of Randy Shepperton: "'Look here! It's about time you grew up and learned some sense. It seems to me you're being pretty arrogant. Do you think you can afford to be? I doubt if you or any man can successfully go through life playing the spoiled genius'" (294). In later life, speaking of his attitudes toward writing at the time of the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe said that, "I did not know that if a man really has in him the desire and the capacity to create, the power of further growth and further development, there can be no such thing as an easy road" ("Writing and Living" 123). This recognition of the practical challenges inherent in the work of creation is incorporated into Wolfe's fiction in a manner that, by implication, playfully mocks his former self and his status as author.

This complex attitude to the work of writing and the role of the author is further reflected in passages in Wolfe's work that indicate doubt regarding the importance of the artist, or a lack of confidence in his own abilities. To Wolfe, the effectiveness of his communication with his audience is contingent on his mental state: "I am all broken up in fragments myself at present and all that I can write is fragments. The man is his work: if the work is whole, the man must be whole" (*Notebooks* 2: 494). As Rubin reports, Edward Aswell once remarked that Wolfe "psycho-analyzed" himself in the process of writing his texts (*Weather* 178). Wolfe certainly submits his personality and creative process to intense scrutiny. He is frequently disparaging of his own abilities, saying of the composition of *Look Homeward, Angel* that it is "a story of sweat and pain and despair and partial achievement" (*Story* 2). This attitude is also manifested in his fictional work, where Wolfe disdains the illusions and misguided intentions of young authors such as he once was:

> And the stuff of life was there in all its overwhelming richness, was right there in his grasp, but he could not see it, and would not use it. Instead he went snooping and prowling around the sterile old brothels of the stage, mistaking the glib concoctions of a counterfeit emotion for the very flesh and figure of reality. (*Of Time* 360)

Although Wolfe in some respects maintains the myth of the romantically inspired writer, for whom words easily flow forth in torrents, propelled by a conviction that the role of the artist is to reveal truth to the world, his prose is

deeply concerned with the self-doubt, pressure and mental exhaustion that can accompany this state of mind.

The tone of anxiety present in descriptions of the writing process in Wolfe's work is amplified by a focus on self-improvement, particularly in his letters and notebooks. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1937, Wolfe once again extols the virtues of hard work, rather than being a more "conscious artist" (278), and states his resolution to improve his own work: "I want to be a better artist. I want to be a more selective artist. I want to be a more restrained artist" (279). This statement of intent is one in a long chain of such declarations. In earlier years, Wolfe's excessive hunger for experience is much more evident. In a May 1923 letter to his mother, he declares: "I will go everywhere and see everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and write, write, write" (53). In his novels and short stories, similarly adamant declarations and assertions about the life of the artist are made through the voices of narrators and characters. As the narrator of the short story "God's Lonely Man" relates, a paradoxical situation exists, in that if any author is to "know the triumphant labor of creation," that author must "for long periods resign himself [sic] to loneliness, and suffer loneliness to rob him of the health, the confidence, the belief and joy which are essential to creative work" (187). The narrator here manifests Wolfe's recognition that asceticism and isolation are unfortunately necessary elements of the artist's working life, once again undermining the popular mythology of his exuberant and gregarious excess.

Wolfe's work is preoccupied with paradoxes and contradictions such as these, and with the perceived difference between "the Artist and the Man," which is discussed at length in *You Can't Go Home Again*. Following the publication of his first book, and the outcry from the residents of his home town of Libya Hill, George Webber considers the unfathomable distance between "the Artist and the Man," or "Man-Creating" and "Man-Alive" (274). As a writer and creator, he is detached from his work, able to consider its merits and flaws with a "clear conscience." However, as a "member of society, a friend and neighbor, a son and brother of the human race," he sees the hurt that his work has caused to people he knows, and feels "lower than a dog" (274). It is easy to draw a parallel here between George Webber and his creator: in reference to the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe writes at length in *The Story of a Novel* of the "awful, utter nakedness of print" (12), the distress suffered by him and the outrage expressed in his home town of Asheville on account of the book. To the wider world the author, whether Wolfe or Webber, is "Man-Creating," the promising young American writer (both adored and reviled by the public), but to himself he is also "Man-Alive," a young man from the country living in New York, trying to make ends meet as a teacher and writer and feeling a conflicting desire for both fame and obscurity. The rhetoric surrounding passages such as these is laced with shame and fear, demonstrating the ambivalence toward the craft of writing and the life of the artist that so frequently appears in Wolfe's work.

Throughout the course of his writing life, Wolfe writes frequently about the work of writing itself, its trials and its joys. Wolfe's self-awareness in this regard, which is connected to his undermining of the mythology surrounding

his creative process, has often been overlooked in discussions of his work. Passages that describe the writing process, the practicalities of the author's life and the purpose of the artist are sometimes tinged with anxiety, fear and shame. Wolfe is unabashed in his depiction of the difficulties of commitment to the creative life, and employs satire and humour in order to deflate the jargon of the arts and the illusions of young artists which he has had much experience of in his lifetime. He pokes fun at creative types, and by extension, himself, in an attempt to define himself in relation to the work of writing and the American literary scene. The rhetoric that Wolfe uses regarding the role of the artist and the life of the writer expresses both anxiety and elation about the process of documenting and transforming his memories. The tension in Wolfe's work between the memorial and the documentary is manifested, once again, in the manner in which he writes about writing itself. Although passages in his work attest to feelings of frustration, even hatred, toward the writing process, there is also recognition of the rewards, spiritual, mental and practical, to be found in transforming his experience into literature. As Richard Walser says, his experience is "filtered through his own consciousness, and from it he drew his strength – his strength as an artist" ("From *Thomas Wolfe*" 184). It is this strength that permeates Wolfe's work most clearly: an awareness of the impossibility of fully expressing all that he held in his memory, and yet a conviction that it was necessary to persevere. This persistence in the face of the impossible defines Wolfe's approach to writing, embroiled as he is in a constant struggle to reconcile the impulse to communicate his memory with the practicalities of the life of an artist, the industry of printed literature, the

reactions of critics, and the constraints of written language and documentary forms.

Conclusions

In a visiting lecture at Purdue University in 1938, shortly before his death, Wolfe spoke of his life's work of writing, which had begun in the early 1920s. The text of this speech, later published as "Writing and Living," reveals much about Wolfe's beliefs and attitudes in relation to the craft of writing and the intertwining of his life and work. With the benefit of hindsight, he examines the illusions and ignorance that have since been erased by experience:

> I had made a first and simple utterance; but I did not know that each succeeding one would not only be harder and more difficult than the last, but would be completely different – that with each new effort would come new desperation, the new, and old, sense of having to begin from the beginning all over again, of being face to face again with the old naked facts of self and work, of realizing again that there is no help anywhere save the help and strength that one can find within himself. ("Writing and Living" 123)

Tellingly, Wolfe uses vocal terms to describe his work; he does not talk of books, or of writing, but of a series of "utterances." The orality of his work is hinted at, with Wolfe keen to portray himself as a speaker or a storyteller when talking about his work in front of an audience. His emphasis on the power of inner strength and hard work is indicative of a more pragmatic and practical approach to writing than might be assumed from the myth-making efforts of critics, and of Wolfe himself on occasion.

Wolfe's work interrogates the process of writing, which in his case, is indistinguishable from writing about or around the self. The metaphors and images used in relation to the workings of language, creativity and memory are complex and often ambivalent, despite frequently appearing to be entirely negative, as in the case of the prevalent imagery of disease and corruption. However, further analysis reveals ideas of Wolfe's about writing that deeply investigate what it is to be a writer, and an author in general, in tones that mingle anxiety, fear and frustration with elation and joy. The passages that have been discussed here demonstrate Wolfe's awareness of the inadequacies and restrictions of the written word, but the fact that these passages are written at all attests to a lifelong compulsion to write. This compulsion is at heart an instinct to memorialise, in the sense of making concrete the substance of memory, of transmitting it to others in order that it might live on. This instinct, as has been discussed, has been misinterpreted by certain critics as evidence to support the "charge of autobiography," or as an indication of Wolfe's inability to control his material, a myth that Wolfe has unfortunately contributed to himself on occasion.

In her biography of Wolfe, Nowell notes his frequent quotation of Martin Luther's phrase "Ich kann nicht anders," which she translates as "I can't do otherwise" or "there is no other way" (316). If Wolfe can be said to have a philosophy, it resides in this phrase: his conviction that it is impossible to do anything but persevere to communicate the material of his memory, even in the knowledge that to do so he must engage with the imperfect structures of

language, the vagaries of print media, and the loss of control over his "utterances" that comes with submitting his work to interpretation by critics and readers. The impulse to memorialise is both a blessing and a curse. He delights in the power and depth of his memory, and feels a sense of purpose in believing that the role of the artist is to communicate essential truths derived from their own experience. However, to do so, finding it difficult to literally speak, and living in an age which values the documentary form, the written or printed word, over the spoken forms of storytelling, he performs a translation of his memories, not just into the crude forms of language, but into the coherent narrative structures demanded by the modern published novel.

In the words of Maxwell Perkins, "Surely he had a thing to tell us" (147), and the means through which Wolfe could speak to his listeners was the written word, and by extension, the published book. Wolfe's instinct to tell is constantly in contention with the demands of a documentary age. The tension created by these struggles with language and documentation is manifested in the metaphors, imagery and rhetoric that Wolfe uses to describe the creative process, and in an intense consciousness of the intricacies of memory, language, identity and creativity. Wolfe's work demonstrates an awareness of the restrictions and inadequacies of the written word, while revelling in its possibilities. As critics such as Tattoni recognise, Wolfe's work has a prominent metafictional dimension. However, in this discussion it is clear that Wolfe's work is not just literature that examines itself as it progresses, but also its origins, its inspiration, its creation and its creator.

As established in the previous chapter, Wolfe's approach to storytelling has elements of orality, but more accurately, to use Carruthers's terminology, it operates in a memorial mode. Wolfe's recognition of the limits of documentary forms and his ongoing, conscious contention with language contributes to the critical discomfort that exists with regard to Wolfe's use of his memory in the production of his work. Criticism that maintains the "charge of autobiography" misunderstands Wolfe's deliberate transformation of memory into narrative, and interprets his unwillingness to make claims of truth as a type of literary laziness or inability to construct acceptably "fictional" narratives. In the following chapters, I investigate some of the ways in which Wolfe's work shows this self-awareness in terms of certain narrative techniques and strategies that are routinely manifested in his writing. Focussing on the primary question of what elements of Wolfe's work problematise categorisation, I explore how Wolfe's interrogation of the process of writing about or around the self, which occurs through his use of these narrative devices, reveals the restrictions of conventional autobiographical forms.

Chapter Four: Life is Habit

In "Autobiography as Narrative," Alfred Kazin succinctly summarises a widely-recognised issue faced by writers of autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, histories or other texts that must make claims of truth, or of representing faithfully an external reality. In constructing any narrative, whether of oneself or of others, of long-distant happenings or the events of the past, an author out of necessity uses narrative devices that are shared with the realm of formal fiction. As Kazin explains, "autobiography does not appeal to us as readers because it is more true to the facts than is fiction; it is just another way of telling a story, it tells another kind of story, and it uses fact as strategy" (213). On a basic level, any story involves processes of selection, exaggeration of some details and minimisation of others, and the use of narrative techniques such as suspense, dramatic irony, and the structuring of events into a coherent narrative that is satisfying to the listener or reader. These texts or oral accounts are also hostage to the vagaries of language, unreliable witness accounts, fallible memories, missing documents, and all of the other difficulties that might beset the process of research, accumulation, assimilation and composition. For an individual with a memory as prodigious as Wolfe's, and an instinct to write that could not be quelled, the project of writing autobiographical texts might seem like an obvious leap. However, as has been established, Wolfe's writing does not conform to the conventional lines of autobiographical work, and the material of his memory is moulded into forms to be published as fiction.

This chapter, like the following chapter, questions the significance of certain narrative devices employed by Wolfe, focussing on the self-aware and self-referential nature of Wolfe's fiction. It examines how Wolfe experiments with the material of his memory, particularly in terms of how he handles narrative time and chronology. In this chapter, the particular narrative feature under investigation is Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, and the cyclical, repetitive and experimental treatment of time that emerges from the use of these modes. I contend that, through the use of particular techniques, Wolfe's writing demonstrates his awareness of the problem expressed by Kazin, and in its substance embodies strategies employed to wrestle with the challenge of transforming his life into narrative forms. In doing so, he produces strange narrative effects in his work that make it impossible to read his texts as straightforward "autobiography," despite his conviction that it is only possible to write from the self. The tension in Wolfe's work between the memorial and the documentary is manifested in the narrative techniques that he employs. Wolfe's memorial instinct is tempered, often frustrated, by an awareness that the processes of time and memory necessarily erase, distort, conflate and even invent people, places and events of the past. However, Wolfe's work embraces this difficulty, rather than trying to combat or reject it. In particular, Wolfe battles with the concepts of a linear progression of time, and of a definitive version of the past. While texts deemed "autobiographical" generally prioritise the construction of a coherent linear narrative corresponding to the progression of the subject through time, Wolfe's texts do not conform to this expectation.

The primary question of this thesis, which examines why Wolfe's work is the source of such critical confusion regarding the relationship between autobiography and fiction, and between an author's life and their art, is explored in this chapter by focussing on one element of Wolfe's work that makes it impossible to categorise Wolfe's work as "autobiography." Even though critics generally agree that Wolfe does not write autobiography, his work is frequently described as *autobiographical*. In the following discussion, I examine the ways in which Wolfe experiments with writing, not "autobiographically," but more accurately, periautographically (about or around the self). This chapter discusses the significance of Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes in terms of how they allow Wolfe to disrupt and interrogate the concepts of time and memory. Wolfe observes that his work can only come from his memory and the resources that he holds within himself. However, he also recognises the restrictions of autobiographical writing. In his note on Wolfe, Edward Aswell quotes a letter to him from Wolfe, written toward the end of his life, in which he declares his wish "to obtain, through free creation, a release of his inventive power which the more shackling limitations of identifiable autobiography do not permit" (360). Despite his conviction that it was only possible to write from the self, and from one's own memory, Wolfe consciously resolves to avoid writing conventional or "identifiable" autobiography. Wolfe decides to reject the restrictive frames of narrative and chronology associated with the genre of autobiography, and yet must discover other narrative devices with which to organise and communicate the multiplicity of his memories and experiences.

In terms of methodology, this chapter begins with an examination of Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, employing the narratological theories and terminology pioneered by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse*. Genette's structuralist approach provides a useful framework of description and classification from which to launch a discussion of the implications of Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative. For the purposes of this discussion, I am primarily concerned with those works of Wolfe's that have been published as fiction. Accordingly, the main texts under investigation are *Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, *From Death to Morning*, *The Web and the Rock*, *You Can't Go Home Again* and *The Hills Beyond*, recalling that the latter three were published posthumously. Firstly, the mingling of iterative, pseudo-iterative, singulative and dialogue in Wolfe's work is analysed in detail. The effects of timelessness and universality created by the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes are analysed in the following section. Further to this, a connection between the iterative and pseudo-iterative and the nature of recollection, whether authorial or narratorial, becomes an area for further exploration. The possibility of interpreting the pseudo-iterative as both a narrative device and a caveat regarding the nature of memory is of particular interest. The final section investigates the contemplative function of these modes, returning to the concepts of *meditatio* and *ruminatio* that were discussed in Chapter Two. It explores whether the iterative and the pseudo-iterative can be viewed as manifestations of these processes, so crucial to functioning according to a modality of *memoria*. Through an investigation of the role of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes in Wolfe's work, this chapter illustrates Wolfe's awareness of the challenges of representing the workings of

time and memory in documentary form. It is narrative devices such as these, I argue, that confound the attempts of critics to define Wolfe's work as "autobiography" or even "autobiographical," despite his frank admission that he can only write from his own experience, and as such, are a source of considerable critical discomfort with regard to Wolfe's transformation of his life into art.

Setting the Scene

One frequently encounters passages in Wolfe's work that seem to exist in a peculiar state of continuous and repetitive time, exemplifying the use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes. In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette identifies and defines the iterative mode as a type of narrative repetition, or a function of narrative frequency. A narrative may tell once an event that happened once, or tell several times an event that happened once, and so forth. The iterative tense is used to describe "once what happened *n* times" (114). A typical example of this would be the sentence "Every day I walked through the park." According to Genette, in most conventional novels iterative sections "provide a sort of informative frame or background" (117) and they are "*at the service* of the narrative 'as such,' which is the singulative narrative" (117; emphasis orig.). The "singulative narrative" refers to the events of the narrative that are singular and part of the progression, temporal or otherwise, of the story (for instance, "One day I walked through the park"). Umberto Eco equates the use of the iterative to the grammatical imperfect (12), which exists in most romance languages, and for which the closest equivalent in English is "I used to . . ." or "I habitually . . . ." As shall be discussed, it is particularly relevant to Wolfe's

writing to note that Eco associates the use of the iterative mode, or imperfect, with the narration of dreams, nightmares, and fairytales (13), and also refers to it as "this cruel tense, which presents life as something ephemeral and passive" (37).

In Genette's definition of the iterative, he indicates that some writers have taken the iterative beyond its purely scene-setting function:

> The first novelist who undertook to liberate the iterative from this functional dependence is clearly Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*, where pages like those narrating Emma's life in the convent . . . take on a wholly unusual fullness and autonomy. (*Narrative Discourse* 117)

Further to this, Genette claims that no author has used the iterative more fully than Proust, linking it with his obsession with time and memory, and his constant invocation of the "concern to tell things as they were 'lived' at the time and the concern to tell them as they were recalled after the event" (157). Proust's concern to "tell things as they were lived" is shared by Wolfe, as well as a preoccupation with time and memory. The iterative mode is inextricably linked to the expression of these interests in Wolfe's writing. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette refers further to Flaubert's and Proust's use of the iterative as its "emancipation" from its "functional subordination," which approaches almost a "complete functional reversal" in the development of another form, the pseudo-iterative mode (38-9).

Genette identifies the pseudo-iterative as a peculiar mutation of the iterative, describing it as follows:

> scenes presented, particularly by their wording in the imperfect, as iterative, whereas their richness and precision of detail ensure that no reader can seriously believe that they occur and reoccur in that manner, several times, without any variation. (*Narrative Discourse* 121)

As shall be discussed, Wolfe not only frequently adds this rich, singulative level of detail to the iterative, making it pseudo-iterative, but in his work the pseudo-iterative can also serve to make the reverse happen: a singulative event becomes representative of an iterative state of being. Jonathan Culler argues that Genette's explication of the iterative and the pseudo-iterative modes are especially valuable in relation to Proust, and that the pseudo-iterative emerges as "one of the distinctive features of Proustian narrative" ("Problems" 3). However, Proust is not alone among authors of his era in his extensive use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative. Wolfe also explores the potential of these modes in great depth through his experimentation with ways of narrating the passage of time. The pseudo-iterative is often used as a transition between the iterative and singulative mode, as Brian Henderson has demonstrated comprehensively in relation to cinema, and the use of the pseudo-iterative as a transitional device is also applicable to literature. In Wolfe's work, the pseudo-iterative is used to achieve these narrative switches from one mode to another, but also exists as an important narrative mode in itself.

A typical example of Wolfe's use of the iterative occurs in *Look Homeward, Angel*, when the narrator describes the routine of Eugene Gant's father: "He went several times a week to the moving-picture shows, taking Eugene, and sitting, bent forward in hunched absorption, through two full performances" (224). This use of the iterative conforms to Genette's description of it in its most basic form, where an event that happened several times is narrated once. The function of this is to provide background information, and the use of the iterative here creates an illusion of stability and routine that allows the primary narrative to progress against this backdrop. This accomplishes the scene-setting function of the mode, but Wolfe almost always uses the iterative in a more complex fashion. Iterative narration often slips into describing a singulative incident. As in the following passage, this transition can be quite clear:

> Sometimes the heavy paunch-bellied Federal judge, sometimes an attorney, a banker would take him home, bidding him to perform for their wives, the members of their families, giving him twenty-five cents when he was done, and dismissing him. . . .
>
> Once, at a hillside sanitarium, two young New York Jews had taken him to the room of one of them, closed the door behind him, and assaulted him . . . (*Look Homeward* 100-01)

The transition from "Sometimes" to "Once" clearly shows the change from iterative to singulative. The use of the iterative sets the scene, describing many similar instances, and then one particular instance of the event, perhaps different in some way, is plucked out of the continuous past of the iterative and elaborated upon by the narrator.

However, Wolfe often achieves this transition in a much more subtle way, particularly through the introduction of details or dialogue which are unlikely to have occurred on repeated occasions, and which indicate to the reader that the narrative has slipped from the general, scene-setting iterative, into the specific, narrative-advancing singulative. In this case, the mode becomes pseudo-iterative, rather than iterative:

> Arrived at "Pothillippo's," Frank . . . would be welcomed obsequiously by the proprietor and the waiters, and then would order with an air of the most refined and sensual discrimination from his favorite waiter . . . .
>
> "But have you noticed the way he uses his hands while talking?" Frank would say in a tone of high impassioned earnestness. – "Did you notice that last gesture? It is the same gesture you find in the figure of the disciple Thomas in Leonardo's painting of 'The Last Supper.' . . ." (*Of Time* 277)

In this passage, the narrator moves from a repeated event that would happen regularly (Frank Starwick, Eugene Gant's friend, going to a restaurant with him) to a long section of dialogue that is also presented as if it would happen on each of these occasions. While it is not impossible that Eugene and Frank would have had exactly the same conversation on every occasion that they went to this particular restaurant, it would be unusual, to say the least.

The pseudo-iterative in this case also accomplishes its scene-setting function, but in presenting singulative details and dialogue in the iterative mode, Wolfe

transforms the individual into the general. The iterative is liberated from its purely scene-setting function and is used to describe, in great detail, single incidents that illuminate, and become representative of, general societal conditions, character traits, relationships between characters, and the circumstances of the protagonist. Wolfe's frequent and detailed use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative creates an illusion of a stable narrative past, one that can be described in terms of routines and consistent states of being. When a representative incident is picked out of this continuous iterative state and fleshed out into part of the narrative chronology, it adds an impression of realistic representation to the narrative, subtly lending to the abstract iterative the concrete texture of the singulative incident.

One finds in Wolfe's writing another type of pseudo-iterative, one that performs the opposite function to that described by Genette. In this mode, an event is presented as singulative, but it is made clear that it is representative of an iterative state. The grammatical tenses employed are those that would be used to describe a singular incident, but the individuality of the incident is removed as it becomes clear that it represents a series of events, a routine, or a state of affairs over a certain period of time. An example of this is found in *Look Homeward, Angel*:

> He pressed his high knees uncomfortably against the bottom of his desk, grew nostalgic on his dreams. Bessie Barnes scrawled vigorously two rows away, displaying her long full silken leg. . . .
>
> One day, after the noon recess, they were marshalled by the teachers . . . . (170)

This passage is presented in the past tense ("he pressed"), rather than the iterative ("he would press," or "he used to press"), as if it were a single incident within the narrative chronology. However, it is made clear that this is not so; the shift to "one day" indicates that, prior to this, we have been inhabiting an iterative state, representative of a period of time rather than a single moment. It is at this point that the pseudo-iterative makes itself obvious, assuming its typical transitional function to move from iterative to singulative, but before this occurs, it has been subtly at work to portray an iterative state as a singulative incident.

Wolfe uses this version of the pseudo-iterative to remove events from their specific place in the narrative time. Whole periods of the life of the protagonist are prefaced with descriptions such as this, which are not immediately presented as iterative, but the reader is made to understand that they represent the general rather than the individual condition: "All through the waning summer he walked with Irene Mallard" (*Look Homeward* 395). The pseudo-iterative allows the use of the past tense "walked" to represent a walk that occurred many times over the course of the "waning summer." A period of time has been collapsed into a repeated action, which is represented by one of its instances. Eugene Gant and Irene Mallard did not walk continuously throughout the summer, of course, and the reader easily infers that an iterative state is being represented here. The singulative becomes momentarily divorced from its function in the conventional narrative chronology, and the narrative slips into a state that is somewhat vague, even dreamlike, in its depiction of time.

The dreamlike quality of these passages is significant; as previously mentioned, Eco describes the frequent use of the iterative to detail dreams and nightmares. In Wolfe's writing, the iterative and pseudo-iterative are often used in the depiction of daydreams and fantasies. In the following passage, the iterative is first used to describe Eugene Gant's propensity for fantasy, and then drifts into the fantasy vision itself:

> But even more often, the shell of his morality broken to fragments by his desire, he would enact the bawdy fable of school-boys, and picture himself in hot romance with a handsome teacher. . . .
>
> He saw himself, grown to an age of potency, a strong, heroic, brilliant boy, the one spot of incandescence in a backwoods school attended by snag-toothed children and hair-faced louts. And, as the mellow autumn ripened, she would "keep him in" for imaginary offences, setting him, in a somewhat confused way, to do some task, and gazing at him with steady yearning eyes when she thought he was not looking. (*Look Homeward* 90)

The iterative "would" is used here both in the purely scene-setting sense, and in the context of a hypothetical situation imagined by the protagonist. Eugene Gant's fantasy is integrated with the passage that precedes it by the use of the iterative mode, and the fact that it moves into a vision or fantasy is signalled by vocabulary ("picture himself"). The use of the iterative allows a smooth transition from the everyday events of the narrative chronology to a dream-like state of fantasy, which exists out of time, as a repeated pattern of thought and imagination during a certain period of time in the life of the protagonist.

This section has categorised and exemplified some of the variations on the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes that are found in Wolfe's writing. As Genette identifies in the writing of Flaubert and Proust, in Wolfe's writing the iterative and pseudo-iterative are freed from functionality, allowing the narrative to experiment with time and memory to such an extent that significant amounts of the narratives in his published works of fiction take place in a chronological space that is undefined, flexible, dreamlike and uses the individual and specific to represent the general and the universal. Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative affects the reader's perception of narrative time, and often gives an impression of realistic representation that problematises generic categorisation. These modes allow a long period of time to be collapsed into a repeated action, or conversely, the expansion of narrative time and the addition of rich detail to singular incidents, in a manner that would be highly unusual in a typical autobiographical narrative. Wolfe approaches his own life from multiple angles, transforming individual experience into meditations on the universals of human life, and is deeply concerned with how to tell the stories of the protagonists and of the enormous variety of major and minor characters that exist in the America of his narrative world. The following section explores further how Wolfe's concern with representing universal experience through individual experience is manifested in his use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative, investigating how these modes allow an expansion of narrative time that creates illusions of timelessness and universality.

Timelessness and Universality

In his fictional work, Wolfe consciously and explicitly strives to imbue his material with a sense of timelessness and universality. He wishes to make of his life myths, folktales, and legends that will transcend the spatial and temporal limitations attached to conventional autobiographical writing, which is bound to the "impossibility of transcending the pattern of rise, maturity and fall" of the subject and the particulars of their life (Olney 94). While much of Wolfe's work does follow this pattern, and repeats and reiterates it in the form of the lives of different protagonists, the scope of his work indicates an attempt to make the microcosm of the life of an individual representative of the macrocosm of the lives of all individuals, at all points in time. As William Faulkner said in his 1955 interview, Wolfe's project was "to do the greatest of the impossible . . . to reduce all human experience to literature" (81). Genre and plot universals are traits that are associated with oral storytelling, which relies on archetypal figures and narrative arcs to transmit stories from generation to generation through memorisation and recitation. This type of universalisation (involving shared formulas) has been analysed and categorised by a variety of theorists, mainly of a formalist or structuralist persuasion, such as Northrop Frye, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell. One could certainly apply this type of analysis to Wolfe's work, seeking out deep structures of myth and examples of heroes and mentor figures, quests and magical interventions. However, this discussion focusses on a different type of universality: namely, a preoccupation with the idea that the experiences of one person could encompass the entirety of human experience. In this section, I explore how Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes functions as a

manifestation of his desire to make his tales transcend the limitations of narrative time and space.

In Wolfe's work, there are frequent explicit declarations that the experience of an individual can be wholly representative of the general experience of life. The hunger for knowledge that afflicts many of Wolfe's protagonists is fuelled by a belief that, through the accumulation of memories and information, it is possible fully to know and understand the lives of others. As discussed in Chapter Five, Wolfe incorporates the experiences and memories of others into his work through his use of narrators and focalization, aiming to make the material of his memory as representative of human experience as possible. As Church explains, "Wolfe felt at times that in him all experience existed" (89), and in his personal correspondence Wolfe attests to this belief. In a 1930 letter to Maxwell Perkins, he states: "I believe I am at last beginning to have a proper use of a writer's material: for it seems to me he ought to see in what has happened to him the elements of universal experience" (128). Revealing that he has been reading *War and Peace*, he desires to follow Tolstoy's example, ensuring that "the personal story is interwoven with the universal" (129). He concludes that "This is the way a great writer uses his material, this is the way in which every good work is 'autobiographical' – and I am not ashamed to follow this in my book" (129). Similar sentiments are expressed through Wolfe's protagonists; in *Of Time and the River,* Eugene Gant wishes to "compact the accumulated experience of eternity into the little prism of his flesh, the small tenement of his brain, and somehow to use it all for one final, perfect, all-

inclusive work" (660). In this passage, published in the form of fiction, Wolfe describes his own quest.

Wolfe's tendency to universalise is often recognised by critics, drawing frequent comparisons with Whitman and Emerson in terms of his commitment to understanding and telling the story of the peculiarities of American experience. Alfred Kazin, whose arguments regarding autobiographical narrative begin this chapter, remarks on the paradox of Wolfe's need to write from his own experience as well as his desire to write "the last great epic of American nationality," calling him "the most self-centred and the most inclusive novelist of the day" (*On Native Grounds* 477). One theorist of American literature even proposes that this equation of the individual with the universal is a peculiarly American trait, and a flaw at that, as "the figure of the dissident young male may stand for an entire culture" (Ward 114). Through his protagonists, generally young males at odds with the world around them in various ways if not entirely "dissident," Wolfe aims to make his own experience representative of American culture.

As Susanna Egan proposes, the autobiographer can also be a historian, in that "The personal, the subjective, are generalized, universalized by phrase-making and by symbols" (75). Wolfe is not an autobiographer in the conventional sense, but he employs the tools of fiction, "phrase-making and symbols," in order to transform his life experience into an embodiment of the geography, society and history of the America of his time. He describes not only American experience, but in an impossibly ambitious manner, wishes to represent all human

experience throughout time. In his work published as fiction, his characters often experience visions of physical and mental communion with all of humanity:

> I saw its plains, its rivers and its mountains spread out before me in all their dark immortal beauty, in all the space and joy of their huge sweep, in all their loneliness, savagery, and terror, and in all their immense and delicate fecundity. And my heart was one with the hearts of all men who had heard the strange wild music that they made, filled with unknown harmonies and a thousand wild and secret tongues . . . . ("Death the Proud Brother" 16)

I contend that Wolfe's tendency to universalise is not solely due to being an American writer, but that it stems from his instinct to remember and to document, to try to make sense of his life in the context of lives around him, past and present. In this, he reaches far beyond the scope of the America of his lifetime.

Wolfe's memorial mode does not just reanimate the past, but brings the people and places of the past into the realms of the timeless, the immortal. It seeks to describe the "whole temporal unity of life" (Wolfe, *Web* 456) through the experiences of individual protagonists. According to Holman, Wolfe seeks, through his fiction, to reconcile his concept of a tripartite division of time: "He concocted a three-part theory of time, which he found inherent in his materials: actual present time, past time, and 'time immutable,' and saw in their simultaneous projection in a work of fiction a 'tremendous problem'" ("Dark, Ruined Helen" 21). In his use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, we

can observe Wolfe's attempts to solve that problem. To accomplish this, Wolfe experiments with the progression of narrative time, employing narrative techniques in order to remove whole passages from their place in the overall narrative chronology, stripping them of their temporal context in order to demonstrate their universal qualities. Narrative moments exist in a state similar to that experienced by Eugene Gant in his dreamlike period spent in Tours: "suspended in this spell of time and memory, [detached] not only from the infinite connections that bound him to the past, but from every project and direction that he had considered for the future" (*Of Time* 870).

Frank Kermode's adaptation of Thomas Aquinas's concept of the *aevum* is especially appropriate here to describe the order of time that these moments inhabit. It is neither part of the day-to-day progression of time experienced by man, punctuated by birth and death, nor the endless vista of eternity. As Kermode explains, the *aevum*, originally used to describe the plane inhabited by angels, and later that of Platonic Ideas, is "neither temporal nor eternal," but "participating in both the temporal and the eternal." It "co-exists with time, and is a mode in which things can be perpetual without being eternal" (72). To Kermode, the *aevum* is also the time-order of novels, "for in the kind of time known by books a moment has endless perspectives of reality" (71). Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes brings singular experiences in the narrative chronology of his fiction into a realm resembling Kermode's *aevum*, which is similar to the "time immutable" that Holman refers to in relation to Wolfe's writing.

Kermode notes the evolution of the concept of the *aevum* through the work of Henri Bergson, and consequently proposes that through Bergson's influence on Proust, there is a "historical link between the *aevum* and Proust" (72). There may be a similar historical link between the *aevum* and Wolfe, whether directly from the writings of Aquinas or through Bergson: Bergson's influence on Wolfe is discussed at length by Church, a connection that is also noted by Kennedy, although he insists that Wolfe "should not be called a Bergsonian" (*Window* 145). Church describes the strange state of narrative time that Wolfe's work so often inhabits, using Wolfe's own phrase "no-time" (*Look Homeward* 159), and links it to Bergson's theories of duration. However, she explains a crucial difference between Wolfe and Bergson: "Wolfe fixes his moment through the mind, the individual's consciousness, while Bergson says it is the nature of matter itself to have these properties of fixity and change" (632). Wolfe, always concerned with the mental experience of the individual and its relevance to universal experience, expands on moments in his characters' lives to glimpse a state removed from ordinary narrative time. Passages mingle iterative, pseudo-iterative, singulative and dialogue; past, present and future tense are confused; and subsequent and simultaneous narration occurs, often with no clear break or transition. These devices create a sense of timelessness, or a confusion of narrative time, which lifts experiences out of the progression of the lives of his protagonists.

Chapter Four of Y*ou Can't Go Home Again*, aptly entitled "Some Things Will Never Change," begins with a iterative description of the routine of the workers in a warehouse that George Webber observes across the street from where he

lives, but then slips into an odd version of the pseudo-iterative, where their daily lunch is described in the past tense singular: "They came in, flung themselves upon the row of stools, and gave their orders" (37). George Webber imaginatively appropriates their lives, compressing their repeated experiences into a moment of his own mental life: "Oh, he was with them, of them, for them, blood brother of their joy and hunger to the last hard swallow, the last deep ease of sated bellies, the last slow coil of blue expiring from their grateful lungs" (37). From this expression of universality, the narrative moves to one of timelessness: "Before him, all that summer of 1929, in the broad window of the warehouse, a man sat at a desk and looked out into the street, in a posture that never changed" (37). This man, who becomes for George Webber the "face of Darkness and of Time" (39) sits, for George and for the reader, forever at his desk in the summer of 1929. He is frozen by the conceit of the pseudo-iterative that collapses a period of time into a repeated action, represented by a single image. George Webber's life continues, but he remains at his desk in perpetuity, inhabiting the *aevum*. Like all characters in novels, he is removed from the order of time of the reader, intersecting with it only when the novel is read. However, he is also removed from the order of time of the novel itself.

The iterative and the pseudo-iterative allow chunks of narrative such as these to transcend their spatial and temporal limitations, slipping into a state in which fantasy, imagination and myth interact with the lives of characters, and detailed depictions of the inner life of characters is possible. In *Look Homeward Angel*, for instance, a passage, the beginning of which is cited in the previous section of this chapter, starts in a typical iterative state. However, the simple

version of the iterative cited above that describes Eugene and W.O. Gant's regular trips to the cinema gradually slips into a pseudo-iterative account of their walk home, which has the texture and qualities of a singular occasion:

> He went several times a week to the moving-picture shows, taking Eugene, and sitting, bent forward in hunched absorption, through two full performances. They came out at ten-thirty or eleven o'clock, on cold ringing pavements, into a world frozen bare – a dead city of closed shops, dressed windows, milliners' and clothiers' models posturing with waxen gaiety at concealed silence. (224)

The subtle change from "He went several times" to "They came out" allows the passage to become an account of a walk home on a single occasion, adding a level of detail that would be impossible in a simple iterative description. The phrase "ten-thirty or eleven o'clock" can be interpreted either as uncertainty about the time on one precise occasion, or as an indicator of variance on different occasions, contributing to the vagueness of narrative time that characterises this type of pseudo-iterative transition.

Significantly, the town square itself seems frozen in time, as is also the case when Eugene has a dream or vision of his deceased brother, Ben, at the end of the novel. The pseudo-iterative expands a repeated action into a flexible narrative space, unaffected by the progression of time, and the scene is set for the narrator to follow the dreams, fantasies and trains of thought of both Eugene and his father on their walk home. The account of their walk focuses on their internal worlds, beginning with W.O. "muttering dramatically, composing

a narrative of the picture" (224) that ranges across time and space through the conduits of his memory:

> The cold steel of new sewing-machines glinted in dim light. The Singer building. Tallest in the world. The stitching hum of Eliza's machine. Needle through your finger before you know it. He winced. They passed the Sluder building at the corner of the Square and turned left. Gets over $700 a month in office-rent from this alone. . . .
>
> D. Stern had his old shack on that corner twenty years before Fagg bought it. (224-25)

This walk, which the reader assumes to have occurred many times, is never-ending. It begins subtly, with a switch from the iterative to the pseudo-iterative modes, and, once established in the past tense, assumes the qualities of a singular event. However, Eugene and W.O. never reach their destination.

In a Joycean fashion, Wolfe conveys the thoughts of his characters in a stream-of-consciousness narrative, moving from W.O.'s inner world to Eugene's fantasies, inspired by the archetypal characters of the films he watches every week: "Thoughtfully he pondered on love's mystery. Pure but passionate. Appearances against her, 'tis true. The foul breath of slander. She worked in a bawdy-house but her heart was clean" (227). The walk home eventually progresses to a point where Eugene begins to contemplate his father's illness and mortality, a passage that gradually merges into a history of Gant's illness in the following chapter, and a resumption of the primary narrative after a series of iterative digressions and descriptions of Eugene's family. The walk home is

not an event in the narrative *per se*, but a realm that allows Wolfe to experiment with the spatial and temporal limitations of the narrative, certainly to a degree that would be impossible in a work categorised as autobiography.

The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes that Wolfe so frequently employs allow him to prolong narrative moments, which are, to him, moments contained in his memory. These moments can be expanded, filled with the thoughts and fantasies of characters, to the extent that they are never-ending, seamlessly blending back into the overall narrative arc. The iterative and the pseudo-iterative modes are manifestations of the storyteller's desire to tell everything, to encompass all that they can within the limitations of a narrative. These modes allow the collapsing of repeated actions into a single timeless image, or the expansion of one instance of a repeated action into a limitless narrative space, frozen in the *aevum* in relation to the ongoing narrative, where the narrator, and by implication, the author, is free to experiment with the available material of memory, imagining and exploring the inner lives of characters in great detail, and overstepping the time- and space-bound particulars of their outer existence. This timelessness is connected deeply to Wolfe's concern with universality, and with the possibility that the experience of one person could represent the experience of all humanity. His work manifests a desire to describe all possible experience, struggling against the bounds of language and the forms of documentary culture. His use of these particular narrative modes facilitates the creation of narrative spaces in which to explore and document material that will not comfortably fit within the temporal and spatial constraints of overarching narratives. Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-

iterative allows him to experiment with narrative time: as shall be discussed in the following section, these flexible modes also allow him to explore the contradictions and fallibility of memory.

Memory and Veracity

Wolfe uses the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes to experiment with and question the concept of a definitive version of the past. Although he frequently expresses his confidence in the accuracy and depth of his own memory in his notebooks, speeches and personal correspondence, his work published as fiction reveals uneasiness with the workings of time and memory. Wolfe consciously and explicitly uses his memory in a creative manner, yet refuses to commit to any claims to truth. His belief that fiction is indistinguishable from autobiography demonstrates an understanding that the material of memory is malleable, subject to re-working, exaggeration, subtraction, selection and amalgamation, and as such is the source of imaginative work. The narrative devices employed by Wolfe in his work indicate a conscious recognition of the unreliable nature of memory, and the impossibility of the task of the autobiographer. This task is to construct a definitive and coherent narrative that will provide the reader with the impression of truth, and will answer the question at the heart of all life-writing: "who are you and how did you come to be that way?" (Stone 115). While Wolfe occasionally introduces narrators who directly question the veracity of their own memories, generally his interrogation of the nature of authorial and narratorial recollection occurs in more subtle ways. The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes crystallise descriptions of periods of time rather than singular events, preserving repeated

actions in a single image or adding a wealth of detail to repeated events that could otherwise be summarised in a single sentence. However, in the construction of these scenes, the vague and hypothetical nature of these modes retains an implied caveat that this only *might* have been the way that things occurred, fictional or otherwise.

The use of the iterative mode as the "hypothetical" tense is not confined to fantasies and visions in Wolfe's writing. It is also used to describe alternate versions of, or variations on, the repeated event in question. This extract from a passage in *Of Time and the River*, which describes the regular visits made by Eugene Gant to his uncle, Bascom Pentland, includes the "hypothetical" variation of the iterative under discussion:

> There would be a juicy fragrant piece of lamb, or a boiled leg of mutton with currant jelly, or perhaps a small crisply browned roast of beef, with small flaky biscuits, smoking hot, two or three vegetables, and rich coffee. . . .
>
> "You may eat that slop if you want to," Uncle Bascom would exclaim with a scornful and sneering laugh. . . .
>
> Or, suddenly, in the full rich progress of the meal, Eugene would be shocked out of his pleasure in the food by the mad bright eyes of Aunt Louise bearing fiercely down upon him. (186-87)

The use of the iterative in this fashion elaborates on the repetitive nature of the mode, describing a selection of instances that are more singulative in quality. In providing some variations of a repeated event, a richness of detail is added to

the iterative mode that elevates it above its purely scene-setting function. When the iterative is employed in this way, it allows the narrator to expand the narrative time allotted to the iterative mode, and distinguish between different types of event that could otherwise be summarised as "Eugene had dinner with the Pentlands every week."

This version of the iterative also operates as a caveat with regard to memory (as discussed in Chapter Five, the memories at stake can be interpreted as either Wolfe's memories of autobiographical incidents, the narrator's memories as constructed by Wolfe, or both). This mode offers alternatives of what might usually have happened, but doesn't commit to one definitive version of events that is representative of all similar incidents. In the space of the iterative mode, which is out of time in relation to the on-going narrative chronology, the narrator is free to mix details from different incidents in order to provide the reader with a general picture of the prototypical event. The use of the "X might have said" construction, and the depiction of alternative situations that represent a generalised iterative state, are reminiscent of formal features used by some autobiographers to indicate the unreliability of memory. Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* exemplifies the autobiographer's concern with the accuracy of recollection. After recounting an incident, including dialogue, in great detail, she offers the following caveat:

> The conversations, as I have warned the reader, are mostly fictional, but their tone and tenor are right. That was the way the priests talked, and those, in general, were the arguments they brought to bear on me. (108)

This use of specific detail to convey a general sense of "the way the priests talked" (an iterative state of being) is undeniably similar to Wolfe's use of the iterative. Wolfe employs similar phrasing in *You Can't Go Home Again*, introducing a passage of dialogue that is portrayed as recurring on various occasions with "the ensuing conversation would go something like this" (24). While ostensibly writing fiction, Wolfe employs features of self-aware autobiographical writing that question the veracity of memory.

Wolfe did not claim to be writing autobiography. Consequently, one must question why, in fictional narratives, the use of modes that are connected to veracity would manifest themselves so clearly, and what this reveals about Wolfe's approach to writing. To Wolfe, the action of autobiographical recollection was intimately involved in the creative process, and in answering these questions it is best to keep in mind Wolfe's opinions with regard to the boundaries of fiction and autobiography. Wolfe frequently expresses his belief that writing of any kind, and in any genre, is inextricably bound up with writing about the self:

> A realistic novelist, I believe, could write a novel of power and meaning simply by recording the events of his life. Most of us do not make a unity out of our lives; if it is true that each of us are novels bound up in covers of skin and bone, it is equally true that we must be subjected to the selective winnowings of art before the history of our lives may be made to possess a meaning or interest. (*Notebooks* 1: 19)

In this passage, Wolfe describes the interaction of art and memory that is necessary in order to make the chaos of one's life experience produce meaning for others. This interplay creates a sense of ambiguity for readers and critics regarding the genesis of writing such as Wolfe's, which refuses to commit itself to the truth-claims of autobiography, and yet proudly trumpets its periautographical status. This ambiguity in relation to the nature of truth in Wolfe's work is manifested in his frequent use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, which bring into question the accuracy of the narrator's recollection. By implication, this also questions Wolfe's own recollection of the experiences that have been, through the "selective winnowings of art," coerced into a narrative that meets the reader's expectations of coherence and meaning.

Wolfe employs the iterative mode to disguise or conceal the sequence of events, or to muddy the reader's perception of the progression of narrative time. This occurs towards the end of *The Web and the Rock*, where George Webber's confusion and memory loss following a concussion sustained in a beer hall altercation is conveyed through a haze of iterative description. Events occur repeatedly over an undefined period of time, as George Webber struggles to recover the memories that will reveal how he came to be in hospital. The reader is equally kept in the dark, vicariously experiencing George's confusion through Wolfe's use of the iterative mode, and piecing together the chronology of an episode that has been omitted from the narrative up until this point:

> At night he lay and turned his ruined face up to the ceiling, and listened to the rain out in the garden, making sound. . . .

> Then there would come a momentary lull, and through the rain would come the distant noises of the Fair. Immense and murmurous, rising in drowsy waves and so subsiding, the broken music and the noises of the carnival would come in upon the rain, rise and subside, recede and vanish; and then there would be the steady reek of rain again. . . .
>
> How had it happened? What had he done? Events as he remembered them were vague, confused, like half-lost, half-recalled contortions in a nightmare. (673)

Through the use of the iterative mode, the reader experiences the repetitive rhythms of hospital life and the murky perceptions of time passing that characterise George's period of convalescence. The protagonist's failure of memory is reflected in the narrator's refusal to reveal more than the reader can divine from George's patchy recollections. This episode, which can be traced to Wolfe's own experiences following a fight in Germany, uses the iterative to creatively interpret a rare instance where Wolfe's own memory of events is absent or confused. The narrative based on these events necessarily employs a mode that conveys this sense of vagueness and questioning of memory.

Wolfe also uses the iterative and pseudo-iterative to describe events that would be impossible or improbable, were they to occur in a conventional autobiographical narrative. In Wolfe's novels, these modes act not just as a caveat regarding memory, but also as a reminder to the reader that, despite Wolfe's conviction of the lack of difference between fiction and autobiography, what they are reading is not simply an account of episodes in Wolfe's life that

have been changed from the first to the third person. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene's birth and infancy are recounted in detail, an impossible feat for an autobiographer, birth being the event that most begin with, but that none remember (Olney 6). The narrator acknowledges the impossibility of Eugene recalling this time as a result of his lack of "the powers of articulation" and "the recurring waves of loneliness, weariness, depression, aberration and utter blankness which war against the order in a man's mind until he is three or four years old" (*Look Homeward* 30), but then goes on to give an account of this time, marking a break between the narrator's and the character's knowledge. This type of account would be considered incredible in a conventional autobiographical work, as Saint Augustine honestly admits in his *Confessions*: "I take the word of others. I guess what it was like from observing other infants, sound enough guesses, no doubt, but I do not like counting it a part of my life on earth" (22). Wolfe has no need of such an explanation. In his periautographical prose, the narrative is free to slip back and forth between iterative and pseudo-iterative modes in order to depict this time of impossible recollection.

Wolfe's short stories also employ the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes to a great extent. These modes are sometimes used to describe impossible or historically unverifiable events, particularly in those short stories that contain material that is not directly correlative to events in Wolfe's own life. These stories demonstrate his mining of deeper resources, his absorption of material from other sources such as books, overheard conversations and tales told to him by family members. As previously discussed, however, Wolfe considered these second-hand experiences and memories to be as much a part of his own

identity, and just as available to be used in his work, as things that he had directly experienced. Wolfe indiscriminately mingles these sources in a conscious attempt to demonstrate the interconnectedness and universality he observes in texts and "stories" of all kinds. In "The Four Lost Men," for example, Wolfe employs the iterative mode to transform a quasi-historical narrative of how it felt to live in America at the time of the First World War into a dream-like and undefined state of narrative time. The narrator's father recounts stories of other wars in his lifetime, eventually drifting into a hypothetical or fantasy narrative in which four men later to become American presidents (Garfield, Arthur, Harrison and Hayes) encounter each other on the battlefield during the American Civil War. Wolfe uses the iterative here not just to create the flexible narrative space in which this can occur, but to emphasise the universal and timeless nature of war, and again, to indirectly question the veracity of accounts of the past.

In passages such as these, Wolfe employs the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes to simultaneously reinforce the realism of the narrative (the scene-setting function), drawing the reader into the subjective experience of a character, and to remind readers that things only might have happened a certain way, even in fiction. As Kinder argues, the pseudo-iterative, particularly, is a subversive mode: it empowers the reader or viewer as an "active spectator," in that it encourages a consideration of the structures and techniques of narrative representation by "de-emphasizing the narrative line" so that one can see "both the distinctiveness of the present image and its deep immersion in a system of representation" (16). It often appears that, as in a conventional

autobiographical narrative, the recollection of the narrator (whoever they might be) must be excused or explained in some way. The reader is encouraged to become an "active spectator" and question the veracity of the narrative and its entanglement in "systems of representation," even though Wolfe's narratives do not make any claims to objective or historical truth.

This contradictory effect reflects the tension in Wolfe's work between the instinct to preserve and convey the material of his memory in a way that engages his audience, and the knowledge that the demands of producing a coherent narrative, particularly in a documentary form, will necessarily change and shape this material into something new. As Faraone argues, Wolfe's narrative "exists perpetually in a delicate equilibrium, at the very borders of autobiographical territory;" he "refuses to write a true autobiography" (208). While I contend that Wolfe actually refuses to see any difference between fiction and "true autobiography," rather than determining not to write one or the other, in his position on the "borders" he is deeply concerned with reminding the reader that memory is fallible and is changed by the very process of recollection. The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes disrupt the notion of veracity in the narrator's account of events, allowing the narrator to question the reliability of memory, particularly in relation to chronology. Wolfe's avoidance of claims of historical truth or veracity is disconcerting to any critic who sees an implicit commitment to being "autobiographical" in Wolfe's deliberate transformation of his memory into narrative forms.

These modes enable experimentation with and questioning of memories to an extent that would render an autobiography, with its implied claims of veracity, quite unbelievable to the reader. However, Wolfe's writing, better described as periautographical, operates in a way that escapes these restrictions. The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes act as a get-out clause for the narrator and the author, a way of disrupting the narrative flow to remind the reader of the self-consciously constructed nature of all narratives. The "charge of autobiography" is rendered meaningless by narrative devices that emphasise the impossibility of producing a definitive, all-encompassing account of the events of one's life, even with a memory as prodigious as that which Wolfe claimed to possess, and the inevitability of producing fictions. Returning to the issue of why these modes are so frequently used in texts which do not have to make any claims to an objective truth, such as Wolfe's work published as fiction, devices which act as a caveat regarding the reliability of memory point to a tension inherent in Wolfe's work between the uncertain, changeable nature of a memorial mode and the finality of constructing a definitive narrative on the page, making it concrete in documentary form. Even within the freedom of a fictional narrative, Wolfe often refuses to commit to a canonical version of events, employing the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes to question the narrator's memory (which is in itself constructed by Wolfe), and to interrogate the workings of recollection and the limits of narrative freedom when one is working within the confines of memory. The following section describes another function of the iterative and pseudo-iterative, linked to Wolfe's "medieval" sensibilities: the manner in which they enable pauses within the overarching narrative for contemplation, rumination and meditation.

Contemplation

Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes has a contemplative function, allowing the author to halt the narrative chronology in order to meditate on the processes of time, and to extract meaning from the patterns of thought and action to be discerned in the material of memory. Wolfe seeks, through the repetitive and recitative nature of these modes, to stall the inexorable march of time, with its daily addition and erasure of memories. As Saint Augustine says in his *Confessions*:

> Time takes no holiday, nor rolls round our senses with nothing to do, but causes strange notions in our minds. It daily comes and goes, and by its coming and going it planted in me other hopes and other memories, and little by little recharged me with the delights I knew before. (87)

Here the progression of time is described as a healing process, assuaging grief and implanting new ideas. However, as we have seen in Chapter Three, examining Wolfe's depictions of the creative process, the pressure to understand and document the entire wealth of material in his memory constructs time as an oppressive force, eternally creating more experiences and memories that must be examined, transcribed and communicated to others. The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes allow an author to tackle this problem, facilitating the compression of repeated similar experiences into singular incidents, and also allowing the author, through the narrator, to pause time in order to reflect on the events of the primary narrative. The creation of this flexible and undefined narrative space enables processes of *meditatio* and *ruminatio*, indicative of the modality of *memoria*, to become manifest.

Incidents in Wolfe's fiction are frequently liberated from the time at which they occur within the narrative chronology of the novel through iterative processes of recitation and repetition. The linguistic constructions used to indicate that the narrative has slipped into the iterative or pseudo-iterative mode have in them a hypnotic quality of recitation, as in one long pseudo-iterative passage in *The Web and the Rock* which begins each paragraph with the phrase "and then," or variations upon it:

> Sometimes it was like waking up on a Saturday with the grand feeling of Saturday morning leaping in your heart, and seeing the apple blossoms drifting to the earth . . . .
>
> And then it was like Saturday night, and joy and menace in the air . . . .
>
> Then it was like Sunday morning, waking, hearing the bus outside . . . .
>
> And then it was the huge winds in great trees at night . . . (102-03)

The ritual chanting of the phrase "and then," which gives the illusion of narrative progression, and yet describes a generalised period of time rather than a series of specific incidents, is used to evoke a timeless, meditative quality. Wolfe employs a technique similar to that described by James Olney in relation to Rousseau's *Reveries*, whereby singular experiences become, through repetition, timeless or universal experiences, in "a steady movement away from singularities and contingencies through repetition to essence, a movement from the particularities of history to the universals of myth" (197). It is this essence

that Wolfe seeks to extract from his memories, a universal meaning that will transcend the limitations of time.

The iterative and the pseudo-iterative modes, with their ritualistic recitative and chanting quality, act as an aid to recollection and help to solidify disparate memories into a meaningful narrative. The frequent use of these modes in Wolfe's work adds weight to Edward Aswell's claim that Wolfe "could not put anything that had happened to him out of his consciousness until he had rehearsed it in memory a thousand times" in order to extract "the last shred of meaning out of it on every level" (355). A long iterative passage that begins chapter 39 of *Of Time and the River* uses the repetition of the phrases "He would lie there thinking . . ." and "October had come again" to anchor the narrative, which has been paused in its ordinary progression in order to range over the thoughts, meditations and visions of the protagonist:

> hearing the great darkness softly prowling in his mother's house at night, and thinking, feeling, thinking as he lay there in the dark:
>
> "Now October has come again which in our land is different from October in the other lands. The ripe, the golden month has come again, and in Virginia the chinkapins are falling. Frost sharps the middle music of the seasons, and all things living on the earth turn home again. . . ." (329)

At first the pattern of Eugene's reported thoughts appears to be fixated on his father's recent death, but through this iterative repetition, the narrative moves into a highly imaginative and sensory description of the sights, sounds and

smells of October, ranging across the continent of America and exercising Wolfe's faculty for the synthesis of memory and imagination. Each reiteration of these phrases begins anew a scene of contemplation on a freshly discovered scene or thought, which, considering Wolfe's conscious use of memory in the creative process, signals another memory rediscovered, another connection made, to be woven into the pattern of thought and imagination he wishes to portray.

Through this recitative process, Wolfe attempts to draw out a meaning from his experiences that he can communicate to his audience. As has been previously discussed, Wolfe is intensely concerned with relating his own experience to universal human experiences: as Holman explains, "The motive force of his works seems to have been his desire to express the elements of a universal experience" ("Dark, Ruined Helen" 21). The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes allow the author, through the narrator, to contemplate the significance of repetitive and circular patterns in the chaotic realm of lived experience, to construct a meaningful and coherent narrative based upon these patterns. The ideal result of this mental process is described in *Of Time and the River*, when Eugene Gant, in a visionary scene, impossibly and simultaneously remembers or imaginatively reconstructs all the moments in the life of his father:

> A thousand memories of that life of constant and unresting fury brim in the boy's mind in an instant. At this moment, with telescopic force, all of these memories of his father's life become fused and blurred to one terrific image, in which it seems that the

> whole packed chronicle, from first to last, is perfectly comprised. (59)

The essential meaning of an entire life is imagined to reside in this "one terrific image," which can be found through the recollection, contemplation and recitation of memories that occurs in the preceding pages. In Wolfe's incessant use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, there is a sense of seeking comfort, the illusion that the chaos of experience can be rationalised, patterns can be found and described, and through this process, meaning can be divined.

In the recitative and contemplative nature of these modes, we can observe echoes of the medieval modality of *memoria* described by Carruthers, particularly in relation to the processes of *meditatio* and *ruminatio*. *Meditatio*, taken to mean the "process of memory-training, storage and retrieval" (Carruthers 163), is the precursor to *ruminatio*, referring to the habitual recall and recitation of memorised material, as well as the act of composition (Carruthers 165). Rather than carrying out these operations only upon texts that he has read, Wolfe finds his text in his own life, the fabric of his memory. In iterative and pseudo-iterative passages, one can discern the synthesis of various memories, the attempt to compose an all-encompassing narrative from the messy text of a life:

> And he would leave the phone to drain the bottle to its last raw drop, then rush out into the streets to curse and fight with people, with the city, with all life, in tunnel, street, saloon, or restaurant, while the whole earth wheeled about him its gigantic and demented dance.

> And then, in the crowded century of darkness that stretched from light to light, from sunset to morning, he would prowl a hundred streets and look into a million livid faces seeing death in all of them, and feeling death everywhere he went. (*Web* 554-55)

As the recently deceased Ben tells Eugene in the vision or dream he experiences at the end of *Look, Homeward, Angel*, "*You* are your world" (520; emphasis orig). The text that Wolfe contemplates is the text of his memory, and in his use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, the role of *meditatio* and *ruminatio* in the creative process that allows him to communicate his experience is laid bare.

The iterative and pseudo-iterative modes have a quality of detachment, standing apart from the conventional narrative chronology, and this is sometimes reflected by a change in the narrator's use of pronouns. In passages that use the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, Wolfe often detaches the narrative from the protagonist, but identifies it more closely with the reader, by substituting "you" for "he/she/George/Esther" et cetera. This could signal that the narrator is directly addressing the character in question, but the ambiguity of this phrasing ensures that the contemplative and meditative nature of these passages is extended to the reader or, in storytelling terms, the audience, implicitly inviting them to see their own experiences in the scenes presented to them. The short story "No Door," for instance, which occurs almost entirely in the iterative, uses "you" throughout, generalizing and universalising the experiences of a young writer to draw the reader into his world: "Sometimes one of them invites you out to dinner: your host is a pleasant gentleman of forty-six, a little bald, healthily plump, well-nourished-looking, and yet with

nothing gross or sensual about him" (1). Similarly, in "The Four Lost Men," the narrator uses "one" in a pseudo-iterative passage to universalise the feelings of a young man in wartime: "So it was with us all that year. Over the immense and waiting earth, the single pulse and promise of the war impended. One felt it in the little towns at dawn, with all their quiet, casual, utterly familiar acts of life beginning" (114). This distancing of the narrative from the sole perspective of the protagonist reflects the general detachment of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, adding to their contemplative and universalising qualities, and unexpectedly drawing the reader into narratives that Wolfe consciously constructs from his own memories.

Another distancing effect is in play in Wolfe's tendency to use the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes to describe fantasies and dreamlike states, as previously discussed. When the narrative slips into one of these modes, it often signals a break from the subjective "reality" of the narrative to focus on the realms of the imagination. Here, the pseudo-iterative is used to describe processes akin to *meditatio* and *ruminatio*, which are depicted as occurring during sleep, in the form of dreams:

> He slept, and knew he slept, and saw the whole vast structure of the sleeping world about him as he slept; he dreamed, and knew he dreamed, and like a sorcerer, drew upward at his will, out of dark deeps and blue immensities of sleep, the strange dark fish of his imagining.

> Sometimes they came with elvish flakings of a hoary light, sometimes they came like magic and the promise of immortal joy . . . . (*Of Time* 883)

The iterative and pseudo-iterative not only seek to induce a contemplative or meditative state in the narrator or character, and often by extension, the reader; they are also used to depict these states, whether in the form of fantasy, vision, dream, or nightmare. In elucidating a pattern of thought over an undefined period of time, the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes are suited to the depiction of the wanderings of a contemplative, and therefore creative, state of mind.

Tellingly, these modes are also habitually used in Wolfe's non-fiction work to describe the work of writing. Writing for him is not an event, a step in his routine that occupies a certain period of his day, but a progression of moments, an iterative process of recollection, recitation, rumination, and composition that occurs both mentally and when he puts words on the page, without a defined beginning and end:

> I would work furiously day after day until my creative energies were utterly exhausted, and although at the end of such a period I would have written perhaps as much as 200,000 words, enough in itself to make a very long book, I would realize with a feeling of horrible despair that what I had completed was only one small section of a single book. (*Story* 54)

Wolfe's "despair" here is connected to the impossibility of ever transforming the entirety of his experience into narrative, despite the devices he employs to

encompass as much of his memory as possible in his work. However, as discussed in Chapter Three, Wolfe does not always portray writing in such negative terms: he also delights in the freedom of language, the imaginative potential of creative work. Freud connects day-dreaming and fantasies with creative writing, proposing that the imaginative play of childhood is directed, in adulthood, into daydreaming, fantasising, and creative activity: "The creative writer does the same thing as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously - that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion - while separating it sharply from reality" (36). While Freud maintains a distinction between fictional worlds and the writer's day-to-day life, or "reality," for Wolfe there is no such distinction. He is constantly involved in this process of "play," mingling and transforming the material of his experience into narrative, even as it is experienced. Wolfe's use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes in passages describing writing, as well as daydreams, visions and fantasies, reinforces a connection between writing and imaginative "play."

The iterative and the pseudo-iterative are used to describe processes resembling Carruthers's descriptions of *meditatio* and *ruminatio*, and are also manifestations of those processes at work. Once again, the modality of *memoria* functions strongly in Wolfe's work. This modality, so unfamiliar to modern readers as a shaper of culture, produces strange narrative effects that disrupt and defy attempts to categorise Wolfe's texts as either autobiography or fiction. The pausing of narrative time that is facilitated by the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes allows for a great depth of contemplation and meditation on the part of the author, allowing the narrative to drift for a while as scattered

memories, from different places and different times, are collected, collated, harmonised and expressed through the narrator. All of this occurs in the mind as it creates, but the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes allow us to glimpse something of this process at work on the page, in documentary form. The contemplative effect of these modes is extended to the reader, who is often actively invited to see reflections of their own experiences in those of the protagonist in a manner that would be extraordinary in a conventional autobiographical narrative. These modes allow Wolfe to demonstrate as closely as possible the meditative workings of the creative mind, and the translation of the memorial into the documentary. Wolfe's self-awareness and concern with the work of writing comes to the fore in his use of modes that lay bare the processes of creativity, the associative methods by which the resources available to him from his memory and experience are meditated and ruminated upon, combined and transformed into new forms. The narratives that emerge from these processes are complex, contemplative and wandering, experimenting with time and memory, and as such cannot comfortably be described as "autobiographical," despite Wolfe's conviction that it is impossible to write except from one's own experience.

Conclusions

In the recitative, contemplative patterns of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, it is possible to observe a microcosmic reflection of some of Wolfe's larger concerns: the cyclical nature of birth and death, the repetitive and common yet unbearably varied and individual experiences of the inhabitants of the "million-footed" earth (Wolfe, *Web* 275) and the circularity of progressions

of thought and activity. Passages that employ these modes are the embodiment of Samuel Beckett's statement that "The laws of memory are subject to the more general laws of habit. . . . Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals" (18-19). Although Beckett writes here of Proust, Wolfe's work is similarly concerned with the habitual and ritual nature of day-to-day living, and of the processes of recollection and reflection that allow one to understand that lived experience, and to communicate its meaning to others. In passages that employ the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, the reader is drawn into circular, associative patterns of narrative that are removed from the primary narrative chronology, reflecting the "succession of habits" which makes up the material of the author's memory, and also making manifest the habitual nature of the creative process. Through *memoria* and *ruminatio*, Wolfe ritualistically and habitually, even compulsively, chews the cud of memory. In iterative and pseudo-iterative passages, the modality of *memoria* is both described and demonstrated. The process of mastering the nebulous material of memory in a memorial mode of storytelling is laid bare: from mental process to physical transcription, from the mind to the page.

It is fair to say that Wolfe would have recognised Kazin's contention that fictional devices must by necessity produce fictional texts, but Wolfe goes further than this, insisting that there is no difference between fictional and autobiographical texts: to him, all "fiction" is the result of the transformation of memory and experience into narrative, and the narrative cannot be distinguished from that which has produced it. His narratives lay bare the

processes of their own production, the collection and collation of memories, the contemplative pauses, the digressions and repetitions that exemplify the memorial mode. Wolfe's beliefs regarding the intertwined nature of art and life, and the indistinguishability of fiction and autobiography, are key to understanding the difficulties encountered by critics in defining his work in terms of genre. Wolfe's use of complex narrative strategies, such as the extension of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes far beyond their scene-setting function, indicates an awareness of the difficulties faced by any author in the construction of a coherent narrative from the material at their disposal.

Wolfe's approach constantly interrogates and disrupts the process of writing, which to him is inseparable from writing about and around the self, creating narrative effects that toy with the reader's perception of genre and the relationship of narrative elements to Wolfe's lived experience. Margaret Church writes of Wolfe's lack of philosophy, but abundance of experience, regarding the workings of time and memory (100-01). It is in passages governed by the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes that this instinctive knowingness with regard to the complexities of time and memory shows through most clearly; the narrator is free to compress and expand time, to describe variations in experience or to indirectly meditate upon the fallibility of memory. The iterative and the pseudo-iterative have many roles within Wolfe's work. Freed from background-providing functionality, they allow the narrative to test the temporal and spatial limitations of narrative in a way that would not comfortably fit within a conventional autobiographical text, even if it had been switched into the third person. This creates a certain cognitive dissonance if

Wolfe's texts are read as disguised autobiography, or even, as a compromise, "semi-autobiographical novels," as many critics do, as to do so does not incorporate Wolfe's refusal to recognise generic boundaries into a reading of his texts.

Demonstrating Wolfe's desire to describe all human experience, these modes are used to create flexible narrative spaces in which to explore, ruminate upon and document the material of memory, giving the author, through the narrator, breathing space in which to find patterns in the chaos of lived experience. In the use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative as a caveat regarding memory, there is a self-conscious recognition of the constructed nature of any story, and a gentle reminder to the reader that, no matter what the intentions of the author are, fictions are inevitable and veracity must be called into question. These modes, in their contemplative, meditative function, often describe states that are similar to the medieval composing habits of *meditatio* and *ruminatio*, and manifest the results of these processes in the text. Wolfe's use of these modes not only demonstrates the operation of a memorial mode in his fiction, but also exhibits a spirit of playfulness and experimentation with regard to narrative techniques that is evident throughout his work. In this his work is self-conscious, interrogative and disruptive in the context of narrative arcs and narrative chronology. Wolfe seeks, as do life-writers of all varieties, to show the "universal in the particular" (Warnock 122). The frustrations of this task and the author's recognition of its impossibility, yet willingness to continue to try, are evident in his relentless experimentation with new narrative strategies. In the next chapter, I investigate the further disruption to the interpretation of

genre in Wolfe's texts that occurs as a result of the games that Wolfe plays with identity, including his implicit interrogation of the author/narrator distinction, and his attempts to imaginatively view the events of his life through the eyes of others.

Chapter Five: Narrating the Lives of Others

Considering the lingering "charge of autobiography," what are we to make of portions of Wolfe's work that are narrated by or focalized through the consciousness of characters that do not resemble Wolfe himself? The short story "The Web of Earth" is narrated by a character who bears a likeness to Wolfe's mother, Julia Wolfe; an old woman addresses her son, who remains silent throughout, with tales of family history:

> Why, wasn't I a big girl of five years old at the time, and saw it all, and remember it all as well as I'm settin' here yes, and things that happened long before that – and things you never heard of, boy, with all your reading out of books: why, yes, didn't we learn to do everything ourselves . . . . (223)

An examination of Wolfe's use of narrators and focalization strikes a blow against the "charge of autobiography," bearing in mind that Wolfe refuses to recognise autobiography as a separate category to fiction. Even a cursory examination demonstrates that his novels and short stories are not simply examples of first person narrative or "journals" transformed into third person narrative by the "sympathetic editorial blue pencil and scissors" of Maxwell Perkins or Edward Aswell, as Schorer claims (81). However, this initial perception still persists to some degree in Wolfe criticism. This chapter investigates aspects of Wolfe's deployment of different types of narrators and focalizing techniques that demonstrate a subtle and frequently overlooked

complexity in his approach to transforming his memories into narrative. Wolfe consistently examines the workings of memory and explores his experience by imagining it through the eyes of others, experimenting with narrative techniques in order to find new ways to channel his desire to tell all, and to indirectly question notions of authorial and narratorial identity. In the shifting relationship between storytelling figures, whether character, narrator or author, the tensions resulting from adapting the memorial mode to documentary forms come to the fore.

Once again, aspects of the narratological theory and vocabulary advanced by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, as well as his further comments in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, will be employed as a starting point for this discussion. This approach is complemented by an investigation of the relevance of more recent, post-structuralist theories regarding the role of the narrator, including those of Richard Walsh and Jonathan Culler. These approaches serve as useful frameworks from which to dissect the techniques that Wolfe uses, but it is important to keep in mind that no set of formulae provides a completely definitive description and categorisation of the myriad narrative effects under discussion. As Mieke Bal reminds us in relation to structuralist schemas,

> Readers are offered an instrument with which they can describe, hence interpret, narrative texts. This does not imply that the theory is some kind of machine into which one inserts a text at one end and expects an adequate description to roll out at the other. (*Narratology* 3)

For this reason, as in the previous chapter, I employ Genette's terminology in relation to narrators and focalization as it provides a relatively broad and comprehensive survey of these elements. However, the analysis obtained from this approach is then investigated further according to the narrative paradigms of a range of different theorists, in an effort to find the best description for the variety of unusual narrative effects present in Wolfe's work.

In the following, the narrative paradigms of Wolfe's four published novels and selected short stories are investigated and described, with a focus on the function and identity of narrators in Wolfe's writing. The presence or absence of the narrator within the text is analysed in detail; narrators in Wolfe's work are rarely silent and unobtrusive, and the extent to which the narrator makes him-, her-, or itself known and acquires characteristics in the course of the narrative aids in the definition of their identity. The issue of narrative agency is also investigated, with reference to how the narrators in Wolfe's work allude to their power as writers and creators. This examination of narrative agency and the nature of writing leads to another question, which concerns the relationship between author, narrator, and reader: who, exactly, is the narrator? Interpretations include a discussion of Richard Walsh's theory that the narrator is either the author or a character, and how this might apply to Wolfe's work. The status of the errant "I" figure that interrupts at points in the narration is examined, as well as the content and tone of passages where the narrator addresses the reader directly. As a result, the existence of a peculiarly "Wolfean" narrator is posited, who can be said to exist across the boundaries of Wolfe's separately published novels and short stories. The characteristics of the

"Wolfean narrator" are investigated in detail, including the narrator's assumption of the roles of analyst, historian, philosopher and literary critic, and the narrator's self-awareness as writer, creator, or shaper of stories.

Following this, the next narrative feature examined is Wolfe's use of focalization. The great variety of types of focalization in Wolfe's fiction is described and analysed, including focalization through multiple characters, internal and external focalization, and significant sections where the protagonist is not present. Focalization is analysed in terms of how it is employed by the author through the medium of the narrator, and how this is manifested in the narrator's concern with "how to tell" the story. Finally, the discussion opens out to consider the implications of these techniques in terms of Wolfe's conviction that fiction and autobiography are one and the same, particularly in relation to how he appropriates the experiences of others. This section begins by investigating the possible fallacy of the omniscient narrator, in relation to the types of focalization found in Wolfe's work. The concept of omniscience is examined with reference to its deconstruction by Jonathan Culler and Nicholas Royle, and the applicability of some alternative theories to Wolfe's fiction. Through the variety of narrators and focalization in his work, Wolfe gives voice to the memories and experiences of a surprising range of people that he has known or heard about, both dead and alive. This final discussion focusses on the operation of the memorial mode, and its effect on Wolfe's efforts to document all human experience, through his own memory and his imaginative projections of the memories of others. Considering the primary question of why Wolfe's work is the source of such critical discomfort

with regard to genre, this chapter examines how Wolfe's approach to transforming his life into narrative disrupts notions of authorial and narratorial identity in a manner that is disconcerting even in the context of "life-writing" in the broadest sense.

Types of Narrators

Genette divides narrative paradigms into four categories, depending on the level of narration and the status of the narrator: the narrative level is either extradiegetic or intradiegetic, and narrators are either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic. According to Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, "*any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed*" (228; emphasis orig.). This is demonstrated in terms of writing a memoir: the act of narrating the memoir is outside the narrative itself, meaning that it is *extradiegetic*. The events told in the memoir are *diegetic*, or *intradiegetic*. The events told in a secondary narrative within the primary narrative of the memoir are *metadiegetic* (228). Further to this, the author must choose between two "narrative postures" (244). The narrative can either be narrated by one of its characters, making it *homodiegetic*, or by a narrator outside the story, making it *heterodiegetic*. Genette defines this further by stating that, if the narrator can use the first person to designate one of these characters, it is homodiegetic. If not, it is heterodiegetic. As shall be explored later, this definition may be problematic in its application to Wolfe's writing. Genette allows that these categorisations are problematised by narratives that shift, for example, from "he" to "I," and not as a result of "last-minute reshufflings and states of textual incompleteness" (246).

He acknowledges that modern literature may be leaving these distinctions behind: "The Borgesian fantastic, in this respect emblematic of a whole modern literature, does *not accept person*" (247; emphasis orig.). In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette admits that there are "probably narrative situations more complex or more perverse" that may place his framework in difficulty (87).

Genette derives four paradigms of the narrator's status from these initial categories in *Narrative Discourse*, as follows:

1. Extradiegetic-heterodiegetic. For example: "Homer, a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is absent from." (248)
2. Extradiegetic-homodiegetic. For example: "Gil Blas, a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story." (248)
3. Intradiegetic-heterodiegetic. For example: "Scheherazade, a narrator in the second degree who tells stories she is on the whole absent from." (248)
4. Intradiegetic-homodiegetic. For example: "Ulysses in Books IX-XII, a narrator in the second degree who tells his own story." (248)

Genette's definitions and categorisations are by no means the only method of examining narrative that will be employed in this investigation. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, writing of the "crisis of narratology," argues that while the "initial bracketing" of narratology and structuralism is necessary in order to illuminate the "internal laws underlying the variety of narrative phenomena," it is also necessary to look beyond these schemas to other, neglected features of narrative. She mentions elements such as the role of interpretation, the reader, and her particular focus, "language" (158), a term she employs in the sense of language as medium (a story told with words, rather than cinematic gestures,

for instance), and in its constative and performative aspects (160). As Genette himself even points out in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, one must be aware of the "mindless technicalness" that is often perceived as the basis of narratology, and it is important to recognise that narrative texts should also be viewed from thematic, ideological and stylistic angles (8). However, the above schema provides a useful starting point for an examination of the status of narrators in Wolfe's work.

Taking *Look Homeward, Angel* as an initial example, the narrator is never identified, but their presence throughout the text is interwoven with the primary narrative to an extent that the characteristics of the narrator become sharply defined by their commentary and style of narration. The "prose-poem" passages that have become associated with Wolfe's work appear to be voiced, or at least mediated, by a narrator who uses the primary narrative as a catalyst for their own philosophical musings on human experience. The opening passages of *Look Homeward, Angel* seem to suggest that the narrative will fit into an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic schema, where the narrator introduces the narrative but, on the whole, plays no part in it. However, from the very beginning, the narrator's presence is more than that of impartial observer, directly addressing a "you" figure with a meditation on the nature of time and chance: "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas" (3). The narrator does not identify

him-, her-, or itself,[23] but presents to us the story of Eugene Gant, beginning with the story of his grandfather, Gilbert Gaunt. There is no indication that the narrator is a character in this story; after the initial meditative passage, the succeeding narrative is presented to the reader with the statement "This is a moment" (3). However, the narrator appears again almost immediately, as an "I" figure who comments on the early years of Eugene Gant's father, Oliver: "But I know that his cold and shallow eyes had darkened with the obscure and passionate hunger that had lived in a dead man's eyes, and that had led from Fenchurch Street past Philadelphia" (4).

Carl Bredahl says of *Look Homeward, Angel* that the narrator is "distinct from both the character Eugene Gant and the author Thomas Wolfe," and is "a being so radically transformed that he must be considered a metamorphosis in kind rather than simply a more mature Eugene Gant" (48). Proceeding even further from this distinction, sometimes the narrator is not just a separate being, but seems to be multiple beings, or to represent humanity in general, referred to as "us" or "we." The narrator also becomes complicit with the reader in the development of the background to the narrative arc, in a metafictional fashion: "But perhaps, reader, you have already thought of that? You *haven't?* Then let us refresh your historical memory" (*Look Homeward* 29; emphasis orig.). In addition to these references to "we" or "us," the narrator occasionally refers to an "I" figure. It is important to remember that, as Derrida explains, "the one who

[23] Narrators in Wolfe's work are referred to by the pronoun "he" where necessary in this discussion, unless it is otherwise specified, as in some of the short stories in *From Death to Morning* and *The Hills Beyond* (and as discussed in the following section, there is justification for this gendering). However, generally the narrator is never explicitly identified as belonging to a particular gender.

says 'I' . . . is not by force of necessity a narrator, nor necessarily always the same" ("The Law of Genre" 68). In *Look Homeward, Angel*, "I" figures interrupt the narrative, but are never absolutely identified, nor is it made clear that they always represent the same "person," or consciousness.

At points the narrator appears to transgress the boundary between narrator and protagonist, appropriating the experience of Eugene and attaching it to an "I" figure:

> The bread that I fetch will be eaten by strangers. I carry coal and split up wood for fires to warm them. Smoke. *Fuimus fumus*. All of our life goes up in smoke. There is no structure, no creation in it, not even the smoky structure of dreams. (*Look Homeward* 244; emphasis orig.)

Tattoni briefly analyses passages such as these in *Look Homeward, Angel*, arguing that the shifts to "I," which some consider to be a sign of Wolfe's inconsistent writing, are deliberate, and indicate "his awareness of the complexity of reality and the writing process" (*Unfound Door* 97). Tattoni portrays this self-awareness as evidence of Wolfe's alignment with post-modernism; while it is not the purpose of this discussion to place Wolfe in one literary category or another, it is certainly the case that Wolfe's writing is intensely self-aware. Wolfe's self-conscious interrogation of the work of writing, as well as the tension between his memorial instinct and the demands of documentary forms, is manifested in disconcerting narrative effects such as these sudden shifts in the identities of narrators and characters.

Genette, in reference to autobiographical narratives in which the narrator puts on the "mask of the novelistic fiction," describes the temptation of the narrator (and, by implication, the author, as the narrator's actions are, of course, directed), to "leap over the obstruction, and lay claim to and finally annex the experience itself" (*Narrative Discourse* 250). This type of disguised autobiographical or semi-autobiographical writing is a meaningless category to Wolfe, who cannot see how any narrative can be anything but autobiographical. He does not so much succumb to temptation, as refuse to recognise any boundary in the first place. As Eugene is generally described in third person terms, this intrusion of "I" is unusual, and perhaps suggests that the experience and thoughts being described do not entirely belong to the character of Eugene, especially as these passages often blend into the philosophical meditations that seem to be the province of the narrator. At this particular point, the narrator breaks the diegetic boundary between his experience and that of the protagonist in order to discuss the implications of his individual experiences in universal terms: "All of our life goes up in smoke" (*Look Homeward* 244). This appropriation of Eugene's experience is connected to Wolfe's universalising tendencies: the narrator's initial transgression allows one person's experience to become the experience of all.

The narrator of *Look Homeward, Angel* is philosopher, historian, judge of character, psychoanalyst, literary critic, satirist, and perhaps most crucially, aware of their status as writer and creator. Moving away from that particular novel, narrators throughout Wolfe's work share these characteristics. The narrator of "The Hills Beyond," for example, has an almost postmodern concern

with the effects of myth-making on historical narrative, carefully selecting relevant parts of the story he has to tell:

> The Myth is founded on *extorted* fact: wrenched from the context of ten thousand days, and rutted roads, the desolations of lost voices long ago . . . .
>
> It is important, then, to know that William Joyner "chawed the b'ar." But it is even more important to know that William Joyner was a man who learned to read a book. (218; emphasis orig.)

Narrators also comment frequently on the action of the narrative, and often cannot seem to resist satirising the thoughts and behaviour of the protagonist. In one particularly memorable instance in *You Can't Go Home Again*, George Webber is harshly lampooned:

> George began to talk about "the artist," spouting all the intellectual and aesthetic small change of the period. The artist, it seemed, was a kind of fabulous, rare and special creature who lived on "beauty" and "truth" and had thoughts so subtle that the average man could comprehend them no more than a mongrel could understand the moon he bayed at. (296)

In passages such as these, the narrator humorously explores one of Wolfe's key preoccupations: the life and role of the artist, and particularly, the writer, through satirical commentary and interference in the narrative.

Narrators who comment or intervene in this manner are not unusual, and as previously mentioned, Genette's description of the intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrative paradigm allows for the narrator to be somewhat involved in the

primary narrative. However, the presence of narrators pervades Wolfe's work to the extent that the reader is never allowed to forget that these narratives are mediated by a voice other than that of the character through which they are focalized.[24] This is most obvious when the narrator is placed explicitly in the text through the use of "I," which, as Wayne Booth argues, makes the reader "conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event. . . . even if he [sic] is given no personal characteristics whatever" (152). In some short stories, in particular, this "experiencing mind" is not explicitly present as an 'I," as in "No Cure for It" or there appear to be multiple narrators at various levels, as in "The Lost Boy." However, the narrator can also be dramatised as a character who frequently designates themselves as "I," as in "Chickamauga," or "The Web of Earth." In each of these cases, no matter the level at which narration occurs, the agency of the narrator(s) is foregrounded: the reader is always made aware that the narrator has a choice of whether or not to participate in the narrative, can decide what to tell and what to conceal, and is highly conscious of their role as storyteller.

This foregrounding of the act of narration, and in particular, the agency of the narrator, is essential to Wolfe's work, demonstrating its self-reflexivity and concern with the nature of storytelling in all its forms. The question that is ever present is that of narrative choice: "Where now? Where after? Where then?" (*Look Homeward* 223). *Of Time and the River* provides an example of this narrative agency; the narrator never reveals their identity, but can choose whether or not to partake in the story. At first, in Genette's terms, the novel

[24] Focalization is discussed in greater detail in the latter half of this chapter.

appears to belong to an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic schema, where a narrator in the first degree tells a story from which they are absent. The first sentence is typical of this narrative paradigm, situating the narrative in place and time, with no indication that the narrator is a character in this story: "About fifteen years ago, at the end of the second decade of this century, four people were standing together on the platform of the railway station of a town in the hills of western Catawba" (3). However, the presence of the narrator hovers over the narrative, commenting and philosophising, and the prospect of the narrator overstepping the diegetic boundary (from extradiegetic to intradiegetic) is always imminent.

The narrator occasionally refers to himself as an "I" or "we" figure, as in the following example, where the narrator and Eugene Gant appear to share the same experience, or else Eugene himself has temporarily taken over the narrative function:

> The genteel voices of Oxenford broke once like chimes of weary, unenthusiastic bells across my brain, speaking to me compassionately its judgement on our corrupted lives, gently dealing with the universe, my brother, gently and without labor . . . . (864)

One can point to the chequered editing history of Wolfe's fiction, particularly in terms of sections of work that were changed from first to third person by editors, and question whether these slips are entirely deliberate. Some may have occurred as accidental oversights in the editing process, but the frequency with which they appear suggests that Wolfe, whether intentionally or unconsciously, refused to establish a definite border between the experience

and identity of his narrators, and of his characters. By allowing the narrator to drift into a character's mental territory, Wolfe's universalising instincts are again made manifest, as well as his refusal to distinguish autobiography from fiction, and his own experiences from those of his characters. The overall effect on the reader is one of uncertainty as to the identity of the narrator and their relationship to the protagonist and to the author, which contributes to the generic confusion that greeted Wolfe's work upon its publication and that has overshadowed Wolfe scholarship ever since.

The narrator of *Of Time and the River* chooses to break through the diegetic boundary, indicating its permeability, and frequently draws attention to the fact that he is in control of the narrative, even if it is couched in an admission of inadequacy:

> It is very hard to tell about it – the way they felt and lived together in that house – because it was one of those simple and profound experiences of life which people seem always to have known when it happens to them, but for which there is no language. (622)

In passages such as these, the narrator relies on the audience or reader to fill in the blanks, drawing on shared experience, knowledge or moral values. Barthes's "cultural codes," which are "references to a science or a body of knowledge" (*S/Z* 20) come into play here as an element of Wolfe's texts. Through the narrator, Wolfe directly appeals to common discourses and experiences (generally involving knowledge of everyday American life of his era, rather than, for instance, scientific knowledge), inviting his readers to

project their own individual experiences into the portrait of universal experience that he is struggling to describe. Wolfe transforms his own experience into that of his characters, and extends his experience to include that of the reader, constantly seeking their direct involvement in the text through the interruptions of the narrator.

The Web and the Rock has an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic schema (a narrator in the second degree, an "I" figure again in this case, introduces a story that they are largely absent from). This narrator is also acutely aware of their responsibility to interpret and convey the events of the narrative to the reader, offering a caveat regarding the truth of the narrative that will be told:

> In the main, those facts are correct. As to the construction that may be placed upon them, I can only say that I should prefer to leave the final judgement to God Almighty, or to those numerous deputies of His whom he has apparently appointed as His spokesmen on this earth. (3)

This deference to a higher power and its judgement on the "facts" of the story, despite the sarcastic reference to the deity's "spokesmen," suggests that the burden of interpretation is acutely present. The narrator's belief in an essential difference between the "facts" and their construction into a coherent narrative (what we might now call *story* and *discourse*, or *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, or *histoire* and *récit*) indicates an awareness, not only of the role of the narrator, but of the role of the writer. Much dispute now occurs over whether these dualistic distinctions are meaningful (see Smith's 1980 article, for instance) but what is important to note here is that the narrator, whoever they might be, is aware of

the ways in which a narrative is constructed and shaped, and its uneasy relationship to truth.

Once again, the concern with "How to tell about it" (Wolfe, *Web* 651) dominates Wolfe's work, whether that protagonist is Eugene Gant, George Webber, or one of the varied protagonists of Wolfe's short stories. This is connected with an intertwining of the consciousness of the protagonist and the narrator that goes beyond internal focalization, and this imparts a distinctively autobiographical flavour to certain passages, such as when the narrator appears to be remembering rather than recounting a story: "It is hard to tell about it now. It is hard to convey to anyone the passion, the exultant hope, of that invasion" (*Web* 178). Although this "remembering" is a common narrative conceit, the consciousness that remembers is also struggling with language to a significant degree; the disconnection between lived experience and the words employed to describe it is a source of worry for the narrator. Genette's schemas are extremely useful in initially untangling and defining the relationships between narrator, character and author, but in any portion of Wolfe's work, complications emerge in describing these relationships as a result of the peculiarly self-aware nature of his narrators, who seem ever prepared to overstep diegetic boundaries, and to draw attention to their memorial role as storytellers. The characteristics shared by these narrators inevitably lead this analysis to another issue: is there a common consciousness, a "Wolfean narrator," that emerges at various levels throughout Wolfe's work? If so, who is this narrator? In the following section, I address these questions and continue to investigate the nature of narrators, narrative agency and narrative

awareness in Wolfe's novels and short stories, in the context of how these elements disrupt notions of genre and the separation of Wolfe's experiences from the experiences of his characters.

The Wolfean Narrator

The narrator is rarely a silent intermediary between the reader and the narrative in Wolfe's work. Narrators are simultaneously positioned as writer and creator, concerned with the impossibility of linguistic representation of the protagonist's experiences, and as consciousnesses that share and have shared mental and physical experiences with the characters, making narrative detachment difficult:

> A man can survey the general spectacle of life with the detachment of a philosopher or a cynic . . . but when he deserts the general spectacle to become an actor in the show, his detachment vanishes, and when his heart and interest are involved, the conflict between general truth and particular desire causes doubt, pain and suffering. (Wolfe, *Web* 374)

In Wolfe's work, narrators are aware of a responsibility to maintain distance from the narrative, if this is how the narrative schema has initially been constructed, but do not always resist the temptation to become an "actor in the show." The relation of author, narrator and character as separate entities is frequently collapsed, even though the signifier of a name is not shared by these beings, creating a confusion of identity that confounds a strict categorisation of narrators such as that devised by Genette. This is not to suggest that the narrator in each of Wolfe's novels and short stories is exactly the same

"person," or character. However, because of the nature of Wolfe's work and the extensive editing process of his vast collections of manuscript, the boundaries between novels are blurred.

The narrators in each novel share characteristics and inhabit similar narrative paradigms which suggest the existence of a peculiarly Wolfean narrator that transcends the borders between separate works. In this section I consider whom, exactly, the Wolfean narrator might be. So far, the narrator (singular, for the purposes of this discussion) in Wolfe's novels[25] has been attributed characteristics, based on the evidence of the texts: he is "aware," is "sarcastic," is "philosophical," and so forth. The agency and flexibility of the narrator might further indicate that the status of the narrator in Wolfe's novels is that of a fully-fledged character. Throughout Wolfe's novels, the narrator is defined by their commentary on the text, or the "facts" (*Web* 3) of the story, as previously mentioned. However, the narrator is also part of that text, and it is here that we encounter the problem of who the Wolfean narrator might be. In Genette's construction of narrative paradigms, the narrator, if they are not identifiable as a character within the story, is an intermediary figure between author and character, outside the frame of the story, but still contained within the text, in the sense that they do not exist in the "real" world of the reader.

Richard Walsh deconstructs this convention, and Genette's framework, in the course of his quest to prove that the narrator is either the author or a character:

[25] Wolfe's short stories are discussed in the latter part of this section.

> Narrators are always outside the frame of the stories they tell: "Extradiegetic" appears to have the additional force of placing the narrator outside representation. But if the narrator is fictional, where would that be? (498)

If Genette's schema is applied to Wolfe's work, the status of the narrator in Wolfe's novels, which comprise works of fiction, is that of the traditional "third agent" position: an intermediary who presents the story to the reader, neither authorial voice nor fully-fledged character. However, the narrator is only denied the status of character (in Genette's paradigm) because of one detail: their failure to identify themselves. This places them in the limbo identified by Walsh, who argues that this intermediary position put forward by Genette does not exist:

> Fictions are narrated by their authors, or by characters. Extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators, being represented, are characters, just as all intradiegetic narrators are. Extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, "impersonal" and "authorial" narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors. (510-11)

As previously discussed, the narrator in each of Wolfe's four novels can be assigned definite characteristics based on the way in which the stories are narrated, which seems to make them more than "impersonal" or "authorial" narrators. If Walsh's schema is applied, the question becomes this: is the Wolfean narrator Wolfe himself, or a character in their own right, albeit an unidentified one? This section analyses Walsh's framework as an alternative to

Genette's, investigating its applicability to the narrator in Wolfe's novels, and then discusses it in terms of the narrative paradigms of his short stories.

To consider the first scenario, where the narrator is Wolfe himself: Thomas Wolfe, a person who exists or has existed in our world, the world of the reader, tells the story of Eugene Gant (or George Webber) as if from the point of view of an individual observing his life. The narrator has access to the thoughts, mental landscape, and physical sensations of the protagonist. Wolfe could be disguising himself as Gant/Webber, using the third person to describe his own experiences. Rubin notes that *Of Time and the River* certainly underwent a transformation from first to third person during the editing process ("Time" 81), which adds some weight to that interpretation. However, focalization through other characters occurs in Wolfe's novels (as discussed at length in the latter half of this chapter), narratives move over vast distances of space and time, and the narrator comments on the events of the narrative and maintains a separate identity (the "I" figure) to the protagonist.

The story is not reported by Wolfe, but is invented by Wolfe, which is the prototypical fictional situation. If Wolfe identified himself as the narrator, it would place him in the same world as the protagonist. This would be problematic, since "Eugene Gant" and "Altamont" do not exist in the world of the reader, but "Thomas Wolfe" does. This would either call into question the veracity of "Thomas Wolfe" and his narrative, or it would create a separate, fictional Thomas Wolfe: a narrator who exists in the same world as the protagonists, and happens to share the name of the author. The narrator is not

identified as Wolfe, so this problematic situation is avoided. In a common convention of narration, it appears that the narrator knows or has known the protagonist, implying that the narrator and the characters of the novel exist in the same reality. The narrator is posited as biographer or historian, and cannot be considered entirely extradiegetic. The case where the Wolfean narrator is Wolfe himself does not chime with the nature of the narrator in Wolfe's fictional work. The second scenario proposed by Walsh must be considered: is the narrator a character?

In this scenario, the narrator is fictional, and shares this state of existence with characters of the narrative being told, although they do not necessarily exist in the same story world: they can still be outside the frame of the narrative they recount. The narrator is a creation of the author, and may share some of their characteristics, but does not have to. Bourdeau argues that the narrator of *Look Homeward, Angel* "must certainly be an older version of the youthful hero" ("Welcome" 7), but even if this is the case, it does not preclude the possibility of the narrator being a separate character. The narrator can be identified, or can be anonymous. In Wolfe's four novels, the narrator is never identified, or situated in any particular narrative place or time. The narrator has characteristics of what would conventionally be called the "omniscient" narrator, in that they can access the thoughts and physical sensations of multiple characters and transcend time and space in a way that would be impossible for any human being.[26] In these respects, the narrator appears to

[26] Omniscience is a concept that will be returned to shortly, in terms of focalization and Wolfe's imaginative transformation of the experiences of others.

conform to Seymour Chatman's description of the narrator as a fictional figure that resides in a different order of time and place to the characters of the story world (142). The narrator can comment on and appears to consciously shape the narrative in the way that an author would, such as when the narrator of *The Web and the Rock* promises not to "bridle further the straining curiosity of the reader" (536). In the process the narrator reveals facets of their personality to the reader, but they do not have to be continuously present in this way. All of these aspects of the narrator are under the control of the author, who is not a hypothetical ideal or implied author, but the physical, writing human being. However, the author may not fully intend to create the sense of autonomy and personality that can be attributed to the narrator from the tone of the narrative.

One must remember that the narrator in each of Wolfe's novels is not necessarily the same "person," or character, but that the narrators in each separately published novel share characteristics and inhabit similar narrative paradigms, meaning that a "Wolfean narrator" can be hypothesised. I contend that the Wolfean narrator is a character, who is intradiegetic in the sense that they inhabit the frame of the work as a chronicler of the other characters' lives, even though they exist in a different order of time and place to these characters. As a character, the narrator has abilities that are distinctly un-human, such as the ability to read and interpret the thoughts of multiple characters. Essentially, the narrator is given the power of the author, and the author's creative battles are expressed in terms of the narrator's struggle with language.

The narrator as character is a medium through which the author shapes and comments on the unfolding narrative: as Chatman explains, the narrator is "a component of the discourse; that is, of the mechanism by which the story is rendered" (142). The gender of the narrator is uncertain and may vary in the course of Wolfe's novels, but one gains an overall impression that the narrator is male, perhaps because the narrator often seems to identify with and have shared the experiences of young men, or takes on the voice of an older man who feels entitled to pass judgement on the younger protagonist: "He was no longer a queer young fellow who had consumed his substance in the deluded hope that he was – oh loaded word! – 'a writer.' He *was* a writer" (*You Can't* 101; emphasis orig.). There are some problems with designating the narrator entirely as a character, such as the extent to which Wolfe uses the narrator as an authorial mouthpiece. However, Walsh's schema describes the Wolfean narrator in a more accurate sense than the distinctions outlined by Genette.

The multiplicity of narrators in Wolfe's collections of short stories (*From Death To Morning* and *The Hills Beyond*) adds a depth to the picture of the Wolfean narrator that emerges from Wolfe's novels. The variety of different types of narration includes the extraordinary extended monologue of "The Web of Earth," which revisits the character of Eliza Gant, allowing her to narrate her early life from her own perspective, as she addresses one of her sons (presumably, Eugene). This story is firmly placed in the extradiegetic-homodiegetic schema, according to Genette's categorisations, where a character in the first degree tells their own story, without any framing device to place it within another narrative. The character of Eliza Gant is defined in the telling of

the story as much as it is by the events of the story itself, as it reproduces the mannerisms of her speech, addresses to the listening "boy," who stands in for the reader, and her interjections and tangents that augment the narrative arc. This, of course, begs the question of who is transcribing the story as it is recounted by Eliza: it is possible, even when a character seems to be wholly identified with the narrator, to surmise that another intermediary figure exists, but does not make themselves known in the way that the Wolfean narrator usually does. Similarly, the stories "Chickamauga," "In the Park" and "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" are narrated by characters who are defined as much by their manner of speech as by the story that they tell. The narrator's mode of expression in "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" leads one critic to characterise the narrator's personality as "commonplace, literal, irascible, and yet kindly" (E. Bloom 270). However, the manner of representation of this narrating character's speech reveals how it is "heard" by someone else, once again hinting at the existence of an intermediary figure:

> "Sure," I says. "It's out in Bensonhoist. Yuh take duh Fourt' Avenoo express, get off at Fifty-nint' Street, change to a Sea Beach local deh, get off at Eighteent' Avenoo an' Sixty-toid, an' den walk down foeh blocks. Dat's all yuh got to do," I says. (91)

It appears that the narrative paradigms of these stories belong to Walsh's schema where the narrator is the author. Someone chooses to phonetically represent the speech of this character, and someone has decided that their story is reproducing. Once again, it is narrative agency that is at stake here, and the ultimate arbitrator of the story is the author. It might be more accurate to

say that there are two narrators in these types of stories: the author, and the character who narrates their own story. The use of "I" to designate a character in the narrative is evident in some of the stories ("Death the Proud Brother" and "Circus at Dawn," for example), which would also correspond to an extradiegetic-homodiegetic schema, yet these stories are completely different to "The Web of Earth" and "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn." In these, the narrator of the story is given the appearance of control as writer and shaper of the narrative, whereas in the examples where speech is "recorded," the author acts as the ultimate narrator and mediator of material. This "I-narration" is, David Goldknopf argues, an "intrusion of the fictive world into the existential one" (17). It reverses the usual flow of attention; someone from inside the fictional world created by the author is addressing the reader directly, immediately begging the questions of who is speaking, and why, and who is transmitting their speech to us. An interesting use of "I" occurs in "No Door," where the narrator begins the story as "I" and then changes it to "You," which is perhaps intended to place the reader more fully in the perspective of the main character. Wolfe's occasional switch to "I" draws attention to the fictionality or otherwise of the text in a manner that it disruptive to a reading of the text as simply disguised autobiography, interrogating authorial identity through the displacement of the "I" figure.

Genette's description of the function of the narrator in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is also startlingly accurate as a description of the way in which the Wolfean narrator operates, and provides a basis for possible future comparisons: "The narrator is present as source, guarantor, and organizer of

the narrative, as analyst and commentator, as stylist (as 'writer' in Marcel Muller's vocabulary) and particularly – as we well know – as producer of 'metaphors'" (*Narrative Discourse* 167). My analysis of narrators in Wolfe's work has touched upon a number of issues that are discussed in greater detail in the following section. These include the question of the identity of the narrator, if a single identity can be said to exist, the agency of the narrator as granted to them by the author, and the relationship between narrators and the characters through which the narrative is focalized. The role of the author in shaping the narrative is a primary concern of Wolfe's, and is manifested through the words of the Wolfean narrator, who meditates frequently on the nature of artistic creation and the responsibility of the storyteller to maintain veracity within the narrative world. The Wolfean narrator (that of Wolfe's novels) emerges as a fully defined character with definite traits: opinionated, philosophical, snide, literary, and so forth. The variety of narrators in Wolfe's short stories exhibit some of these characteristics: some are clearly outlined as characters, while others exist, more rarely, as intermediaries that can be identified with the author, reporters or transcribers of the narrative as told to them by other narrating characters. An awareness of the function of the narrator permeates Wolfe's work, and is expressed in the self-conscious overstepping of the traditional boundaries of narrator and character. In the following section, I analyse Wolfe's use of a great variety of types of focalization to experiment with the material of his memory, contending that he imagines and re-imagines the experiences of others to a degree that would be impossible within the confines of a conventionally autobiographical narrative.

Focalization

In reading a text, the reader faces the (occasionally impossible) task of "deciding, in a given passage, who is speaking, the author, the narrator, or the character, where or when, or to whom" (Miller 22). This relates to the question of who is narrating, which has just been discussed. However, from this basic dilemma we can deduce more complex questions: whose perspective is being represented at any given point in the text, and how? This section examines the use of focalization in Wolfe's work, again employing Genette's terminology in *Narrative Discourse* as the primary frame of reference, which focusses on the question "*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative?*" versus "*who is the narrator?*" (186; emphasis orig.). "Focalization" can be mistakenly conflated with other terms: "It seems better to distinguish between narrator's and character's [sic] mental experiences in the story worlds as different *kinds* of experiences, but that is hard to do if we refer to both by the same term, whether 'point of view,' 'perspective' or 'focalization'" (Chatman 142; emphasis orig.). This conflation is a misrepresentation of the term, which Genette generally divorces from the point-of-view paradigm and describes in terms of what knowledge and information is made available to the reader, and by whom (Niederhoff para. 6). Focalization may be summarised as a "selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld" (Niederhoff para. 1). This section investigates the different ways in which Wolfe restricts, conveys and experiments with narrative information, focussing on some unusual aspects of focalization in his work.

Genette identifies three primary types of focalization: nonfocalized, internal and external. The classical narrative typifies nonfocalized narrative, or narrative with "zero" focalization. The narrative is not oriented from the perspective of any character, but is narrated as if observed by an outside agent who has access to the whole panorama of the narrative world. Internal focalization, where the narrative is oriented through the eyes and thoughts of a character or characters, can be broken down into three types: fixed (focalization occurs through one character), variable (the focal character changes) and multiple (the same events are seen from the perspective of more than one character). External focalization orients the narrative around the perspective of a character or characters, but the reader does not have access to their thoughts and observations, unless spoken aloud in the text (*Narrative Discourse* 189-90). Mieke Bal's revision of Genette's terminology in *Narratology* eliminates the distinction between external focalization and zero focalization, but they are quite different in terms of what knowledge is made available to the reader.

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette clarifies in response to Bal that "zero focalization" is quite flexible, incorporating "variable, and sometimes zero, focalization" (74). As Niederhoff says of zero versus external focalization, "The first provides us with complete access to all the regions of the storyworld, including the characters' minds, whereas in the second the access is extremely limited and no inside views are possible" (para. 12). It is useful to retain this distinction, particularly in the discussion of "omniscient" narration in the next section of this chapter, and it is also crucial to keep in mind that these

categorisations can be considered quite fluid, as Genette is careful to point out in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*:

> This looseness will undoubtedly shock some people, but I see no reason for requiring narratology to become a catechism with a yes-or-no answer to check off for each question, when often the proper answer would be that it depends on the day, the context, and which way the wind is blowing. (74)

This investigation focusses on instances in Wolfe's work where focalization changes significantly, or is anomalous in some way. The question of whether Wolfe wrote "autobiographically" or even "semi-autobiographically" has a bearing on Wolfe's use of focalization, in that one might expect texts that are some form of "disguised autobiography" to be focalized only through the protagonist. Wolfe's work, however, exhibits a variety of focalization that adds significantly to its complex, experimental nature, bringing it beyond the realms of autobiographical fiction or disguised autobiography. Wolfe refuses to recognise the legitimacy of these terms, and this refusal has a significant bearing on the interpretation of his work. This variety of types of focalization is another source of considerable discomfort with regard to the genre of Wolfe's work, given Wolfe's frequently expressed belief that it is impossible to write from beyond the self. Wolfe's convictions in this regard have been somewhat misunderstood: he voraciously incorporates the experiences of others into his own experience and memory, observing no difference between these experiences and his own, and, through processes of meditation and rumination, transforms them into narrative.

Large portions of Wolfe's novels are focalized through the protagonist in each case, both internally and externally; this is a classic example of internal focalization:

> But what he noticed chiefly . . . was the look on people's faces. It puzzled him, and frightened him, and when he tried to find a word to describe it, the only thing he could think of was – madness. (*You Can't* 90)

The thoughts and observations of this protagonist are made available to the reader, and the narrative is mediated through his impressions. However, the narrator is still the ultimate mediator, and as discussed previously, is a character in their own right. The author chooses to focalize the narrative through a character, but also chooses to employ the narrator as the central mediator of material. Returning to the variety of focalization that occurs within Wolfe's work, external focalization on/through the protagonist is perhaps the most common form found, as it is the typical mode of description that moves the narrative forward. This kind of focalization usually describes the protagonist's physical appearance or actions, from an observer's perspective:

> Through this crowd, with matted uncut hair that fell into his eyes, that shot its spirals through the rents of his old green hat, that curled a thick scroll up his dirty neck, Eugene plunged with hot devouring eyes – soaked in his sweat by day, sharp and stale by night. (*Look Homeward* 428)

Genette indicates the rarity of "true" internal focalization, which may only exist in internal monologue. However, any "internal monologue" is still mediated. Dorrit Cohn's analysis of strategies for presenting consciousness emphasises this point. Much of the internal monologue that occurs in Wolfe's work is, in her terms, "psycho-narration," which is "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" or "quoted monologue," which is "a character's mental discourse" (14). Even when a character's mental activity is "quoted," it is still transcribed or recorded by an intermediary figure. Rigorous internal focalization would imply that the reader would never have access to any external description of the character(s) or analysis of their thoughts by the narrator, but the narrator's role of mediator means that they can "choose" how to present the information available to them:

> The narrator almost always "knows" more than the hero, even if he himself [sic] is the hero, and therefore for the narrator focalization through the hero is a restriction of field just as artificial in the first person as in the third. (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 194)

The Wolfean narrator frequently demonstrates that his knowledge exceeds that of the protagonists, describing narrative events that the protagonists do not witness, and referring to the future trajectories of their lives (prolepsis):

> He could not have foreseen in what strange and sorrowful ways his life would weave and interweave with this other one, nor could he have known from any circumstance of that first meeting that this other youth was destined to be that triune figure in his life . . . his friend, his brother - and his mortal enemy. (*Of Time* 94)

The forms of focalization described thus far are to be expected in "autobiographical" or even "semi-autobiographical" novels, in that they represent the protagonist's internal world, as well as his external appearance and his actions, and anticipate future events in the narrative. However, in Wolfe's novels, the narrative often departs from Eugene Gant's or George Webber's experience. Internal focalization occurs for extended periods through other characters, in scenes where the protagonist is not necessarily present. As Paschal Reeves identifies, "Though Wolfe returned time and time again to his own life to structure his work, actually he did some of his best writing using other people's experiences as fictive material" ("Esther Jack as Muse" 226). Reeves refers particularly to passages in Wolfe's work which are focalized through and around Esther Jack. These passages follow her thoughts, recollections and impressions, with some external focalization:

> Esther saw these things and people in the street, and everything and all mistaken persons cried exultantly and fiercely for life; and in this she knew from her profoundest heart that they were not mistaken, and the tears were flowing down her face, because she loved life dearly . . . . (*Web* 575)

Similar passages recur throughout Wolfe's four novels, where the narrative is entirely focalized through a character other than the protagonist, sometimes in the form of an interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness prose. Usually these other characters are family members or close friends of the protagonist. However, perhaps most crucially, they often occur in scenes where the protagonist is not present, and sometimes not even mentioned as an absent

figure. The prolonged death of Eugene Gant's father in *Of Time and the River* is focalized through various members of the Gant family in great detail, but Eugene arrives after the death has taken place.

Roberts believes that Wolfe "held his own against the autobiographical monster" in his short work, which is "dominated by points of view distant to his own" ("Resurrecting" 29). While this analysis is problematic, in that it neglects the significant portions of Wolfe's novels that are focalized through different characters, Wolfe's short works do provide further proof of his experimentation with focalization. This is not to suggest that Wolfe was necessarily more experimental in his short works, but their contained nature lends itself to comparative analysis. Discussing the experimental nature of Wolfe's novels involves plucking out very disparate chunks of narrative from the flow of text to examine the differences between them. Some of Wolfe's short stories, no doubt, were chosen in this manner, and as such demonstrate more internal consistency with regard to focalization and narrative stances. The different types of focalization in *From Death To Morning* and *The Hills Beyond* include, for instance, purely external focalization ("The Bums at Sunset"); zero focalization ("Gentlemen of the Press"); internal and external focalization through anonymous, general figures whose experiences represent those of "the tall man" and "the lonely man" in society ("Gulliver" and "God's Lonely Man"); internal and external focalization through one particular character ("The Lion at Morning") and the multiple focalizations of "The Face of the War." "The Lost Boy" circles around the central narrative event, the death of Grover Gant (an incident familiar to readers of *Look Homeward, Angel*) through the perceptions,

thoughts and memories of four different consciousnesses, ranging over a long period of time and employing a variety of modes of narration. However, these are not completely separate characters; the fourth is an older version of the first, referred to respectively as "the boy" and then "the brother" or "Eugene" in his older incarnation. Here we see Wolfe chewing the cud of his memory, as memories of the death of his brother are imaginatively transformed into narrative through the use of focalization.

One can pick out instances of double focalization or multiple focalization in Wolfe's work, where two or more characters are simultaneously described with internal focalization:

> They were all exultant, wild, full of joy and hope and invincible belief as they thought of all these things and all the glory and the mystery that the world held treasured for their taking . . . and had no doubts, or fears, or dark confusions, as they had done in earlier, younger times. (*Of Time* 654)

There are also anomalous instances of focalization, where characters demonstrate impossible knowledge, or become channels for material that rightfully belongs to another character. A striking example of this occurs in *The Web and the Rock*, when Esther Jack, George Webber's mistress, observes her lover and imagines his thoughts in great detail:

> "Now," she thought, "I know exactly what he's thinking. There are still a few things in the universe which have not been arranged to suit his pleasure, so he wants to see them changed. And his

> desires are very modest, aren't they? *Very!*" she thought bitterly. (594)

Esther Jack's "quoted monologue," to use Cohn's term, continues in this vein for several pages, as she hypothesises what George Webber's thoughts are and reacts to them.

Although this is not an impossible occurrence, narratively speaking, in these passages internal focalization through Esther functions as a device to indirectly criticise and satirise George. The words are those of her imagination, yet they offer insights into George Webber's mind that have previously only been made available to the reader by the narrator. Esther is able to express the torment within George in ways that he cannot, describing the revelation in his philosophy of writing that does not occur until much later in the narrative:

> Always believing he will find something strange and rich and glorious somewhere else, when all the glory and the richness in the world is here before him, and the only hope he has of finding, doing, saving anything is in himself, and by himself! (*Web* 598)

Throughout Wolfe's work runs the thread of the idea that the individual represents the universal; that all the material of fiction can be found in one's own life; and that there is no such thing as a specific time and place in which to write. These revelations of Wolfe's own authorial career are not yet made available to the character of the young writer, George Webber, but are prefigured by focalization through another character who is privy to this wisdom.

Wolfe is concerned with acquiring knowledge about the universalities of human life through the examination of individual perspectives in his narratives. As E.M. Forster says, it is this power to expand and contract perception, the intermittance of shifting viewpoints, which mirrors our mental experience and perception of life (56). A multiplicity of focalizations are used to illuminate the generalised human condition, providing a strong refutation of claims that Wolfe suffers from a "narrowness of [his] viewpoint" (Rubin, "Time" 82) or is a "subjectivist" who can only give us the "bewilderment" recorded in his diaries and letters (Schorer 86). This preoccupation is manifested most clearly in lyrical passages where the narrator is given free rein to meditate on the progress of the narrative and its significance, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. These universalising tendencies and multiple perspectives do not sit comfortably within narratives that are read as autobiography, or as some form of disguised autobiography.

These elements of Wolfe's work only make sense, in terms of genre, if one accepts Wolfe's viewpoint on fiction and autobiography: that they are indistinguishable, and that one's experiences and memories can incorporate the experiences and memories of others, whether heard about, read about or told to the author. Wolfe's incessant incorporation of the lives of others into narratives which are explicitly constructed from the material of his own memory is uncomfortable if one expects, from his assertions that one can only write from the self, to find only the experiences and memories of one person, disguised or otherwise, within his texts. The similarity of events and characters of his novels and short stories to identifiable elements of Wolfe's own life creates an

expectation of some form of autobiography, if not veracity, which is constantly undermined by his relentless experimentation with the material of his memory. Wolfe's use of a variety of types of focalization demonstrates his desire to describe all human experience through the experience of one individual, to paradoxically include the lives and experiences of others in his own memories and to communicate these memories to others. In the following section I explore this incorporation of experiences further, particularly in terms of how the voices of others, living and dead, speak through Wolfe's words.

Transcribing Voices

Wolfe's work displays a fascination with voices and sound, and the rhythms of storytelling speech. As Holman notes, Wolfe delights in memorising and accurately transcribing folk speech, dialect and speech mannerisms ("Dark, Ruined Helen" 27). Returning to the short story mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, "The Web of Earth," the character through which the narrative is focalized speaks directly to her listener, and to the reader, in a voice which is distinctively her own:

> Lord God! I never saw a man like that for wanderin'. I'll vow! a rollin' stone, a wanderer – that's all he'd a-been, oh! California, China, anywheres – forever wantin' to be up and gone, who'd never have accumulated a stick of property if I hadn't married him. (250)

Recalling that this narrative is narrated by this character, but also is "transcribed" by an intermediary figure that can be designated as a version of the Wolfean narrator, the complexities of this situation become apparent when

we consider the periautographical origins of Wolfe's work. Wolfe employs a direct "transcription" of speech, which seems to be based on his mother's stories of her youth as told to him, reanimating a voice from his past and bringing it from the realms of his memory into the physical dimension of documentary form. Wolfe employs focalizing techniques and the representation of storytelling characters in order to breathe new life into the voices of his past, both dead and alive, directly heard or quoted by others. This section explores how this adds to the oral style of Wolfe's work, and also investigates the consequences of this approach, particularly in relation to how Wolfe remembers and memorialises the lives of others. Firstly, I return to the concepts of "zero focalization" and "omniscient narration," considering whether this transcription of voices is performed by an omniscient narrator, or whether zero-focalization and omniscience are inappropriate frames through which to view passages where the narrator is present as an invisible listener and recorder.

Zero focalization belongs to descriptive narrative, where no particular character appears to orient the perspective of the scene:

> The great ship, as if pressed down by some gigantic finger from the sky, plunged up and down in that living and immortal substance which gave before it, but which gave like an infinite feel of mercury . . . . (*Web* 298)

Passages such as these could be considered to be solely in the domain of the narrator. However, I contend that they are not non-focalized in Genette's sense of the term. Any act of narration is invested with the perspective of an

observing consciousness, be it character, narrator or author. As previously discussed, the Wolfean narrator can be considered a character in their own right: a character with certain personality traits, opinions, awareness of their creative ability and so forth. Passages that Genette would describe as having "zero focalization" are focalized through the narrator, who is a character. Similarly, passages where anomalous focalization occurs are manifestations of the ability of the narrator to "see" through multiple perspectives, and to "choose" to mingle these perspectives or keep them separate. The reader knows that the narrator does not actually see or choose; the author ultimately uses the power of creation that can be attributed to the narrator as a medium through which to shape the narrative. However, even in passages that appear to have "zero focalization," the reader is reminded of the complexities of the act of narration and the issue of narrative agency, as the narrative is focalized through the consciousness of the narrator.

The Wolfean narrator appears to be an "omniscient narrator," knowing and seeing all, but choosing to be restricted to the perspective of one or another character. The narrator has access to the whole panorama of time and space in the narrative world, to the extent that the narrator satirises their superhuman status, inviting the reader to share their perspective:

> Turn now, seeker, on your resting stool atop the Rocky Mountains, and look another thousand miles or so across moon-blazing fiend-worlds of the Painted Desert and beyond Sierras' Ridge. (*You Can't* 392)

However, the concept of omniscience is problematic: as Jonathan Culler demonstrates quite clearly, "divine omniscience is not a model that helps us think about authors or about literary narration" ("Omniscience" 23). Culler proposes that "omniscience" has become a catch-all term for four different narrative phenomena, as follows:

> the conventional establishment of narrative authority, the imaginative or telepathic translation of inner thoughts, the playful and self-reflexive foregrounding of creative actions, and the production of wisdom through the multiplication of perspectives and the teasing out of human affairs. (32)

These phenomena provide a more apt way of describing how the narrator functions in Wolfe's work, and how this is linked with variations in focalization. Internal and external focalization through different characters, along with so-called non-focalized sections, where the narrator is most acutely present, establish the materiality and power of the narrator, both as a character, and as a shaper of the story. Internal focalization corresponds to the translation of inner thoughts. Throughout Wolfe's work, the narrator demonstrates an intense awareness of their position as writer and creator, corresponding to Culler's "playful and self-reflexive foregrounding of creative actions." As to the final phenomenon identified by Culler, the "production of wisdom through the multiplication of perspectives and the teasing out of human affairs," as discussed in the previous section, Wolfe experiments with different types of focalization in order to convey universal human experiences.

All these phenomena occur in Wolfe's work, but their presence does not imply that the Wolfean narrator is omniscient. Culler's use of the term "telepathic" is adopted from Nicholas Royle's proposal of the "telepathy effect" in narrative fiction in *The Uncanny*, and Royle's analysis provides the most apposite description of how the thoughts of characters are reported in Wolfe's work. Royle argues that discussion of this "uncanny knowledge" (257) is muddied by the religious dimension of the term "omniscience," which also refuses to incorporate intertextuality, as it "serves to promote and protect a thinking of the 'world' of narrative fiction as holistic, unified and closed" (259). Royle similarly criticises the term "point-of-view" as a visual metaphor that ignores the importance of voice and sound and preserves ideas of the unity of identity of author, narrator or character when there is "no single, unitary or unified point of view in a work of fiction" (263). Royle also dismisses Genette's use of "focalization" for presenting this sense of unity. However, it must be recalled that Genette does not claim a definitive taxonomy of narrative effects, but provides a framework from which to begin discussions of narrative techniques, and it is in this sense that Genette's work has been employed in this thesis. In relation to the "Wolfean narrator," I contend that this persona does not represent a unified point of view throughout Wolfe's work, but is just another character or consciousness who appears to varying degrees, sometimes appropriating and focalizing the narrative entirely, and at other times becoming almost invisible, an implied transcriber or translator of both thoughts and voices.

Royle proposes that shifts of perception in narrative belong to a "world of telepathy and clairvoyance" (267) and that the notion of telepathy, which is "bound up with writing and death, the spectral and the unprogrammable" is suitable to "keep generatively open the strange uncertainties of identity, thought and feeling in the world of narrative fiction" (272). Royle's concept of telepathy provides a more appropriate schema for describing the strange narrative effects that permeate Wolfe's work than "omniscience" does. The Wolfean narrator does not represent a unified point of view, or an ultimate source of knowledge, but is a recurring character or consciousness that translates and communicates the thoughts and experiences of characters other than the protagonists of Wolfe's texts, allowing a multiplicity of experiences to be represented in a manner that would be unusual in the context of conventionally autobiographical writing. Crucially, this narrator is also the invisible recorder of voices, allowing them to speak through Wolfe's work, as shall be discussed shortly. As a final rebuke to the notion of either "omniscient" or "zero-focalized" narration, in passages such as the following, it is impossible not to recognise the presence of a focalizing consciousness:

> We are like blind sucks and sea-valves and the eyeless crawls that grope along the forest of the sea's great floor, and we die alone in the darkness, a second away from hope, a moment away from ecstasy and fulfilment, a little half an hour from love. (*Web* 627)

Whether this consciousness can be denominated as that of Wolfe himself or of a persona that we call the "Wolfean narrator," it is as conflicted, unknowing, searching, and essentially human, despite its superhuman abilities, as any of the characters within the narrative world.

Turning now to the voices that speak through Wolfe's work, it is important to recognise firstly that many versions of Wolfe himself are given a voice through the imaginative transformation of his memory into narrative. Warnock describes autobiography as the resurrection of a dead self: "We may feel entitled to ask, What is the point of this re-creation? Why not allow this past person to die? His reanimation is a struggle; so what makes it worth while?" (119) The same questions could be asked of work such as Wolfe's, which, while not conventionally autobiographical, exhibits a similar struggle to remember and convey the essence and experiences of past selves. As previously discussed, Wolfe's compulsion to memorialise and to document his experience is widely recognised, and it perhaps goes beyond any rational or conscious decision to revive his past in this manner. Roberts compares Wolfe to "another young, ambitious genius in love with his own generative power – Victor Frankenstein," but views this desire to reanimate the past in an entirely negative manner, calling Eugene Gant the "autobiographical monster" who "murdered" Wolfe's reputation as a novelist ("Resurrecting" 28). While Wolfe is certainly obsessed with the resurrection of his former self, in the form of Eugene Gant, George Webber, or a host of other characters in his short stories, there is far more complexity in this process than Roberts allows. The memorial mode at work in his writing leads him to reanimate not just his past self, but a multitude of figures from his past, both living and dead, through narrative processes that sometimes correspond to Royle's "telepathic" paradigm, where the thoughts of many characters are imagined and communicated by the Wolfean narrator, and sometimes through the reporting and transcribing of voices.

Paul de Man recognises that the classical Greek rhetorical figure of *prosopopeia*, which can be used to allow the dead to "speak," as in an epitaph, is also the governing trope of autobiography, "by which one's name . . . is made as intelligible and memorable as a face" (926). Writing about the self is a means by which the "dead" past self of the author can be given a voice and a tangible personality. Wolfe, writing loosely about and around the self, is not restricted to applying *prosopopeia* solely to himself. The voices of the dead are present throughout Wolfe's work. These are sometimes the voices of ancestors imaginatively heard through the voice of another, a storytelling figure:

> Such then, were some of the stories Aunt Maw told to George. And always, when she spoke so in the night . . . he could hear the thousand death-devouring voices of the Joyners speaking triumphantly from the darkness of a hundred years . . . . (*Web* 82)

Dead characters may also speak in the forms of dreams or visions, as in the final scenes of *Look Homeward, Angel*, when Ben returns to offer advice to Eugene. Those whom Wolfe has known, but who have died, are brought back to life between the pages of his books in the form of characters that bear relation to them, and voices that represent them. As Wallace Stegner says of "The Lost Boy," it "comes close to being pure necromancy" (256).

Wolfe does not just reanimate the dead. Through his impulsive memorialising, consuming, digesting and composing from all that he experiences, Wolfe also conveys the voices of those still living. Significant passages of his novels, as well as entire short stories, are focalized through or narrated by characters who can

be directly correlated with Wolfe's family members, friends, mistress, and any number of acquaintances and chance meetings. He does not just base his characters on people he encounters in terms of their external appearance or biographical details: he experiments with narrative techniques in order to imaginatively appropriate their thoughts and memories, to view the world through their eyes, and to speak in their voices. This propensity to memorialise the lives of those not yet dead has been a cause of significant consternation about the ethical and moral aspect of Wolfe's writing, which is demonstrated in the adverse reactions and generic confusion generated by the publication of his work. Wolfe recognises and anticipates these difficulties, describing "The Web of Earth" in a 1932 letter to his mother, Julia Wolfe, in order to ward off any criticism in advance of its publication:

> the story is told completely in the words of one person, a woman, who starts out to tell her son about a single incident and in the course of telling it brings in memories, stories and recollections that cover a period of seventy years. . . . you need feel no alarm or nervousness: it is "on the side of the angels," it has been written to the glory of mankind, and not to their shame . . . . (220)

Wolfe employs the material of his own memory in order to project the voices of others through his fiction, in a manner that, though not likely to be malicious in intent, is likely to cause discomfort to some of those who are "resurrected" in this manner. In the restricted documentary form of written storytelling, unable to convey orally his imitations of sounds and voices to the ears of his audience, Wolfe strives to use the blunt tools of linguistic description to make a great variety of voices speak through his narratives. Having incorporated these

diverse voices into his own experience, he strives to convey them in order to portray as broad a representation of humanity as possible.

These voices often speak through storytelling characters who commandeer the narrative for long passages of Wolfe's novels, and for the entirety of some short stories. While their speech is reported by an intermediary figure, these characters become primary narrators in these portions of text. Voices that Wolfe remembers hearing are transmitted to the reader, who, it is presumed, "hears" the voice speaking in their imagination, while recognising that this is an illusory perception. Of course, texts may also be heard when read aloud, but this terminology makes explicit the relationship between narration and speech, between reading and "listening" to the story as it is told by the storyteller. This connection is recognised by many theorists of narratology; Bakhtin most famously discusses narrative in terms of dialogue, introducing concepts that are semantically associated with sound and voices, such as "polyphony" and "heteroglossia," in relation to the kind of narrative found in novels. Bakhtin refers to language's essentially intertextual nature (Allen 22) in his use of these terms, while arguing specifically in relation to the novel, and it is in passages in Wolfe's novels and short stories where multiple voices are able to speak that Wolfe's conscious recognition of intertextuality becomes most clearly apparent. In passages narrated by storytelling figures, readers with any paratextual knowledge of Wolfe will not only have the impression that someone is speaking, in the sense of a character or narrator. Because of Wolfe's insistence that autobiography and fiction are indistinguishable, it appears that someone *real,* in the sense that they have in some way existed in our external reality, is speaking

to us through Wolfe's memories and creative process in a dialogic manner. Wolfe's periautographical writing produces unusual effects in terms of the reader's perception of the text's relationship to their own personal reality and concept of the world versus the text.

It is though these storytelling figures that Wolfe most strikingly reanimates the voices of his past and consciously allows them to speak through his work. His mother is recognisable in different guises throughout Wolfe's novels and short stories, often providing a link to the past through her role as storyteller. In this passage Eliza Gant takes over the narrative to tell Eugene about his grandfather; it is worth noting, however, that the Wolfean narrator is still made apparent through bracketed "stage directions:"

> "Yes," said Eliza, "I remember my father – it was long before you were born, boy," she said to Eugene, "for I hadn't laid eyes on your papa – as the feller says, you were nothing but a dish-rag hanging out in heaven – I'd have laughed at anyone who suggested marriage then – Well, I tell you what [she shook her head with a sad pursed deprecating mouth], we were mighty poor at the time, I can tell you. (*Look Homeward* 174-75)

Storytelling figures are employed to describe events that Wolfe cannot possibly hold in his own memory from direct experience; they are his link to history, as in "The Four Lost Men" and "Chickamauga" which are both primarily narrated by a father telling stories of the Civil War to his son. As Roberts says of "Chickamauga," Wolfe displays his captivation with "the voice in which he heard the story told" ("Resurrecting" 38), capturing the quality of speech, the

digressions of the narrative. Through hearing voices such as these, Wolfe has gained memories of events and people of which he has no direct experience.

By assimilating and incorporating these voices into his writing, through their "transcription" by the Wolfean narrator, Wolfe greatly expands the scope of his own memory, and by extension, the material from which he creates his work. In a manner which would be utterly disconcerting in the context of conventional autobiography, Wolfe augments his own experiential memory with the memories of stories that he has heard, often transforming them into documentary form while trying to maintain the essence of the speech and the speaker through which they were first heard. He portrays this incorporation of experiences through his protagonists, such as Eugene Gant, who had "never gained a living memory of the Civil War until he heard his mother speak of it one day" (*Of Time* 804). Storytelling figures assist in the reanimation of those both dead and living. In their temporary roles as narrators, they become intermediaries between the present and the past, between life and death. Problematically, Wolfe places living people from his everyday life in this intermediary position of "storyteller" by using representations of their voices in writing, elevating them to a position of narrative authority in the text and using them as a means by which to enhance the memories that he transforms into narrative through his creative process. Although their voices speak through the text, this speech has still been reported, transcribed and perhaps altered: to Wolfe, the voices of the past no longer belong to those who have spoken, but have become another part of his memory to be transformed into narrative.

Conclusions

E. M. Forster, referring to shifts in "viewpoint" that would be characterised by Genette as switches in focalization, concludes that if the author successfully "bounces" the reader from one to the other, the reader is unlikely to mind, or even notice, these transitions, employing Dickens's *Bleak House* as an example of this effect:

> 'I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever,' pipes up Esther, and continues in this strain with consistency and competence, so long as she is allowed to hold the pen. At any moment the author of her being may snatch it from her, and run about taking notes himself, leaving her seated goodness knows where, and employed we do not care how. (55)

Forster notes that critics are more likely to object to these logical discrepancies than readers, or at least to notice them; it is interesting that in Wolfe's work experimental shifts in focalization and narration occur often, yet have attracted little critical analysis, with the exception of his short stories. The "charge of autobiography" persists, despite the complexity evident in Wolfe's use of the material of his memory, examining, re-examining and interrogating it imaginatively through the eye of others. Wolfe imperceptibly "bounces" the reader to inhabit many different minds, different memories. Although these are mediated by versions of the Wolfean narrator, and ultimately by Wolfe himself as author, Wolfe employs these narrative techniques to examine material that is outside the limits of his direct experience, in the realm of hearsay and history.

Much of this chapter has aimed to describe and analyse some unusual aspects of Wolfe's use of narrators and focalization. Wolfe's narrators, present or absent to various degrees, share characteristics that reinforce the concept of a "Wolfean narrator," sharing something of Wolfe himself perhaps, but not exactly identifiable with Wolfe as author. Through the (perhaps unintentional) creation of this Wolfean narrator, who can be deemed not just an invisible intermediary figure, but a character in their own right, Wolfe interrogates authorial identity and agency, often creating ambiguity about who is "speaking," and what the relationship is between author, narrator and character at any given point. This is particularly the case in instances where the narrator comments on the narrative in a self-aware manner, indicating their position as storyteller and conscious shaper of the narrative: "As for the child, another construction can be put on that. The bare anatomy of the story runs as follows" (*Web* 5). Wolfe indirectly questions notions of authorship and the process of writing about the self through the use of a narrative style that oversteps the boundaries of conventional autobiographical, or even disguised autobiographical, writing. Wolfe's desire to memorialise the entirety of his experience, incorporating the experiences of others, leads him into narrative strategies that are incompatible with focalization through and on one character alone, such as the range of strange effects that are sometimes denominated under the umbrella term "omniscience."

This experimentation with narration and focalization is yet another source of critical discomfort with regard to the generic boundaries of Wolfe's work, and the relation of the world of his texts to the world of the reader, although it is

rarely acknowledged and analysed as such. Wolfe's memories do not flow directly from his mind to the page, uninterrupted except by an editorial change of the first to the third person. The material of memory is interrogated, ruminated upon and augmented by the experiences of others, leading Wolfe to dissociate his identity as author from the protagonists of his novels and short stories, often ceding narrative agency to storytelling figures that cannot be identified with any version of himself. Demonstrating his fascination with the sounds of speech and the oral tradition of storytelling, these figures speak in their own distinctive voices, expanding the spatial and temporal scope of Wolfe's work. Wolfe memorialises past selves and resurrects people that he has known, by transforming his memories of them into documentary form.

Wolfe recognises the impossibility of this task: the struggle of the author with the constraints of language and the difficulty of representing all human experience is always to the fore, manifested in his experimentation with different narrative strategies. The operation of Wolfe's memorial mode is stymied by any insistence on a singular narrative viewpoint. Frequently abandoning his primary characters for significant periods of time, he employs the "majestic powers of memory, synthesis, and imagination" that George Webber discovers in *The Web and the Rock* (455) in order to reach back into a past and into other lives that he cannot possibly have directly experienced, making the voices of others, dead and alive, speak through the narrative. The limitations of a strictly autobiographical form are obvious in this regard. In his desire to capture the totality of experience, Wolfe demonstrates the artificiality of an author's choice to focalize through and on one character alone, even if that

character purports to be an earlier version of the author's self. The selective nature of writing about the self is brought into the light by the tension between memory and the words on the page, pointed out in the playful and self-aware experimentation evident in Wolfe's decisions about how to shape the story for the reader. While Wolfe does not ever explicitly write of his intention to demonstrate the restrictions of autobiography through various narrative techniques, through his experimentation with narrators and focalization he indirectly critiques notions of veracity and of the separation of fiction from autobiography.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

As *The Web and the Rock* nears its end, George Webber suffers a torment stemming from the tide of memory and experience that threatens to leave him powerless and overwhelm him entirely:

> In a thousand darts and flicks and fancies of his swarming brain, his life was buffeted in a mad devil's dance like a bird hurled seaward on the wind, and, ever in his sight, always within his touch, forever to be captured and yet never caught, the ever-shifting visages of that mercurial atom, truth, melted from his furious attempt like images of painted smoke and left him baffled and bewildered, a maddened animal that beat its knuckles bloody against the strong wall of the earth. (600)

In Thomas Wolfe's characteristically rich and visual prose can be discerned the struggles and concerns that beset his own writing life: the difficulties of conveying truth and expressing meaning through language, the impossibility of capturing the entirety of memory, thought and experience, the fleetingness of the present moment, and the threat of chaos. However, even a passage such as this, laden with imagery of despair, madness and violence, resounds with a savage joy in the energy of the "mad devil's dance," the freedom of the "bird hurled seaward," the beauty of the shifting "images of painted smoke." Wolfe's writing is imbued with this acute awareness of the limitations and difficulties of creation, counterbalanced by a paradoxical delight in the freedom afforded by language. His work is defined by the ways in which it encounters and describes

the contradictions and complexities inherent in writing, which to him automatically entails transforming his memory into narrative, and writing about or around the self.

This thesis has investigated the question of why Wolfe's work has been a source of considerable critical discomfort and confusion with regard to its categorisation in one genre or another, Wolfe's creative purpose, and the relationship between Wolfe's life and his work. In order to answer this question, I have explored elements of Wolfe's approach to writing that problematise categorisation. Wolfe's adamant insistence that "all serious work in fiction is autobiographical" ("To the Reader") has been the impetus for a consideration of the implications of this complex attitude, in terms of how it is expressed in Wolfe's work, and how it is manifested in narrative strategies that elide this distinction for readers and critics. Much criticism of Wolfe that rests on its "autobiographical" genesis, or that focusses on how it should be categorised, stems from a distinction between genres that Wolfe himself does not recognise. Wolfe's approach to transforming his memory into narrative has been explored in terms of the storytelling mannerisms and underlying inclinations toward a memorial mode that can be observed throughout his writing; the types of imagery and metaphors that he employs to describe the creative process; and narrative strategies that allow him to experiment with and interrogate concepts of time, memory and identity.

There has been an underlying concern running through this discussion with whether or not Wolfe's strategies and methods are purely instinctive. Are they

the result of unrelenting unconscious rumination, the product of a voracious memory and a creative mind? Or do they represent a considered outlook, a deliberate attempt to escape the "shackling-irons of memory and desire" (Wolfe, *Notebooks 1:* 396) through creative activity? In this regard, this thesis has looked particularly to the rhetoric that Wolfe uses to describe the creative process, in works published both as fiction and as non-fiction. Wolfe demonstrates an intense consciousness of the complexities involved in transforming his memory into narrative, and while his narrative strategies are not necessarily consciously worked out and applied, they are manifestations of Wolfe's beliefs about writing. The following sections discuss the primary conclusion derived from this analysis: that Wolfe's approach to transforming his memory into narrative is problematic for critics in terms of generic categorisation because it is highly experimental, intensely self-reflexive and is the product of significant tensions between different modes of communication and expression. I contend that a focus on genre is irrelevant in relation to Wolfe's work, in light of how these elements illuminate Wolfe's conscious and deliberate refusal to distinguish between autobiography and fiction, and that it is time for scholars of Wolfe to move away from the "charge of autobiography." Further to this, the findings of this thesis are discussed in terms of how they enable future research.

Experimental

Wolfe's work as a whole, encompassing his novels, short stories, essays, speeches, letters and notebooks, provides ample evidence of a restless and ever-seeking mind. In his relentless quest to memorialise, document and convey

the material of his memory to others, he finds his most natural expression in the written word. Wolfe's attitude towards the boundaries of fiction and autobiography has been particularly relevant in this discussion, as an indication of the genesis of his narrative strategies. His adamant insistence that autobiography and fiction are one and the same is an underestimated source of critical discomfort with regard to the interpretation of his work. His ready acceptance of the term "autobiographical" is frequently misunderstood as an admission of literary guilt, setting up an expectation of veracity or of the typical narrative progression of disguised autobiographies of "autobiographical novels" that is constantly frustrated and denied by his experimentation with time and memory. Wolfe's personal, broad definition of "autobiography" is at once nonsensical in its rejection of generic boundaries and perfectly reasonable, in that an author cannot help but construct their creative material from what they know, in the most all-encompassing sense of the term. In this, Wolfe is perhaps being disingenuous, but it is the closest that he comes to an explicitly stated philosophy regarding his work, and this philosophy cannot be underestimated in terms of its importance in interpreting Wolfe's work.

In light of this attitude, the status of narrators, the use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes and the variety of types of focalization in Wolfe's novels and short stories suggest that he experiments with the material of his life, ruminating upon it, reciting it in memory, imagining and reimagining it through the eyes of others in order to transform the raw stuff of his life into the ordered narratives required by fictional forms. Although Wolfe could be said to have an autobiographical impulse, it is more accurate to deem this impulse "memorial,"

in Carruthers's sense: his compulsion to gather and communicate experience encompasses not just his own direct experience and memory, but that of people he has read about, heard about, or knows of through the storytelling of family members. The anachronistic modality of *memoria* that functions in Wolfe's work produces unusual narrative effects that defy the attempts of critics to categorise Wolfe's texts as either autobiography or fiction. Although formally educated, throughout his life Wolfe also remains an autodidact of sorts, unsystematically and instinctively adopting ideas, forms and eclectic knowledge from sources all around him. This impulse is directed into experimentation with methods of transforming his memory into narrative, memorialising all that he has known, and interrogating what is involved in writing about or around the self.

Wolfe's work is permeated with a concern with how to tell the stories of the protagonists and the enormous variety of major and minor characters that exist in the fictionalised America of his narrative world. The struggles of an author with the inadequacy of language and their burden of responsibility toward the narrative are manifested in the ways in which Wolfe approaches his material. This often occurs explicitly, as in the interruptions and interjections of the Wolfean narrator who wonders what language to use to tell the story at hand, or the visceral descriptions of writing and the force of memory which riddle his work, both fiction and non-fiction. However, this negotiation with language and documentary forms can be discerned more subtly in the traces of oral storytelling that inform his work, or in his widespread use of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, which interrogate the processes of time and the

conventions of narrative chronology. Wolfe's recognition of the difficulties involved in translating his memories into the coherent narrative required by the medium of the print novel is made clear in his constant engagement with the bounds of language and the limitations of a documentary mode of culture.

Wolfe approaches his own life from multiple angles, transforming the individual experience into meditations on the universals of human life. Returning to Faulkner's contention that Wolfe "tried to do the greatest of the impossible, that he tried to reduce all human experience to literature" (Interview by Harvey Breit 81), this investigation concludes, conversely, that Wolfe's narrative strategy was to expand the individual experience, not to reduce the general one. In writing periautographically, he employs his own prodigious memory, augmented by the stories he has heard, books he has read, and the experiences of others recounted to him, to provide the material that is transformed into complex narratives. He strives to encompass the entirety of human experience through a focus on and through the minutiae of individual lives: his "life-writing" does not just include his own life, or strictly his own direct experience. In his experimentation with narrators, focalization and the depiction of narrative time, Wolfe creates fluid and flexible narrative spaces that allow an expansion of spatial and temporal scope to a degree that would be impossible in a conventional autobiographical narrative, and unexpected or unlikely in a "autobiographical novel" that involves a direct transformation from first person to third person narrative. This approach enables him to broach the material of his life and memory, which encompasses the lives of all those he has met, heard of or read about, in a way that the selective narrative of autobiography would

not allow, with its necessarily restricted point of view and, generally, its basic chronological progression. Given his frequently misunderstood description of his own work as "autobiographical," this approach has been a source of considerable critical confusion regarding whether Wolfe's work should be categorised as "autobiography," "fiction," or as something hybrid and in-between.

This analysis has demonstrated in detail that Wolfe consciously and deliberately experiments with the material of his memory, reimagining his experience in a manner that often converges toward the biographical details of his own life, and yet refuses to follow the narrative line expected of "autobiographical fiction." This experimentation within Wolfe's extremely broad definition of "autobiographical" writing is one cause of disagreement with regard to the genre of his work, although it is not often recognised as such. In this nebulous area of writing which refuses generic categorisation, analysis of Wolfe's narrative techniques, in particular, has provided a toolkit with which to explore aspects of Wolfe's experimentation with narrative structures and strategies. This brings studies of Wolfe's writing into an area that has not previously been investigated on a significant scale. A detailed examination of the metaphors, imagery and rhetoric used by Wolfe in relation to the creative process provides further evidence of his complex relationship to the work of writing, and his recognition of his desire to experiment with new ways of expressing and conveying his experience to others. In this aspect of Wolfe's writing can be found evidence of another significant trait: his work is intensely self-aware and self-conscious, despite the impulsive and uncontrolled nature of

his instincts to remember, to memorialise, to document and communicate through any medium available to him. The following section describes some of the conclusions that can be made regarding the self-reflexive nature of Wolfe's writing, particularly in terms of what can be discovered about the nature of authorial intentions and the varied ways in which the self can be represented or expressed in literature.

Self-reflexive

Wolfe's novels and short stories are intensely self-aware and self-reflexive, in that they constantly engage with issues surrounding the life and work of the writer. He draws attention to the methods that his writing employs, interrogating the part that memory plays in the creation of fiction and questioning veracity at every turn. Significant portions of Wolfe's fiction are thematically concerned with the work of writing, the role of memory in the creative process, and questions of responsibility and truth that must be addressed by any artist. In passages that describe the tortures of writer's block and ecstasy in overcoming it, explore the dichotomy between "the Artist" and "the Man," or bitterly satirise the language of literary reviewers, recurring features of Wolfe's own literary career are transformed into fiction. Wolfe is by no means unusual in being a writer who writes about the craft of writing, creating fiction that examines its own creation. This self-reflexivity occurs not just in passages where Wolfe overtly "writes about writing," but is manifested more subtly throughout the fabric of his narratives. From the self-conscious interjections of the Wolfean narrator, to the meditative and contemplative passages in the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, the flow of narrative is

constantly interrupted or paused by devices that invite the reader to reflect upon the narrative that they are reading or hearing, its truthfulness and relationship to their reality, the language that it employs, and its application to their own lives.

This self-reflexivity is disconcerting in the context of work that is paratextually described as "fiction," but that the author so readily states is "autobiographical." This disjunction brings into question the veracity of Wolfe's narratives and the relationship between his narrative world and the world of the reader, and the self-reflexive nature of his narratives invites the reader to interrogate this contradictory situation. As discussed in the previous section, Wolfe's definition of "autobiographical" writing is much more broad than that of many of his critics, particularly the initial scholars and reviewers of his work. Much of the critical obsession with the genre of Wolfe's work stems from the cognitive dissonance that results from Wolfe's ready admission that his work is "autobiographical," versus the narrative devices in his work which produce effects that are extremely unlikely in a conventional autobiographical narrative, such as multiple focalization, the expansion of narrative time, and constant subtle questioning of the reliability of memory and of language.

Frequent contemplative pauses, digressions, interjections and tangents contribute to the episodic and fragmentary nature of Wolfe's novels. His short stories, which are frequently based on one of these episodes explored in more detail or viewed from multiple angles (as in "The Lost Boy" or "The Child by Tiger") are not as fragmentary purely as a consequence of their length. Viewed

as a whole, and as a result of the chequered editing history of Wolfe's manuscripts, it can be useful to look at Wolfe's work as a series of episodes and anecdotes, disparate fragments produced by his enormous memory that are woven together by these self-reflexive passages. Using the iterative and pseudo-iterative in particular, the Wolfean narrator, and by extension the author, is able to meditate, to ruminate, to draw together the themes and concerns that motivate the narrative before turning back to the question of narrative choice and agency: where to go next? What to tell? This tendency is at the basis of much criticism of Wolfe's work, in terms of its lack of form, or it chaotic nature. However, given Wolfe's conviction that autobiography and fiction are one and the same, Wolfe's fragmentary, self-conscious prose is a way of writing about the self that reflects the workings of memory and the translation of memory into the written word. Wolfe explicitly uses his own experience, yet refuses to commit to one definitive version of the events of his life, or to restrict himself to one viewpoint from which to examine his material. Contained in his episodic, contemplative writing, which recites and reinterprets the material of memory from multiple angles, is an implicit acknowledgement that any narrative is by nature artificial and constructed. Wolfe recognises that selectivity is involved in any autobiographical account, and that the creation of a coherent narrative of the past does not accurately reflect the chaotic, fleeting nature of recollection.

Wolfe is concerned not just with the uncertainties and vagaries of memory, but with the traps of language. His novels and short stories are self-conscious in their use of language, drawing attention to the power of the written word and yet lamenting its inadequacy. In his work published as non-fiction, particularly

in *The Story of a Novel*, the search for an ideal language with which to describe human experience is fraught with visceral imagery of physical pain and disease. This imagery carries over into Wolfe's fictional work, particularly in his two posthumously published novels. However, as has been discussed, this apparently negative view of the creative process is tempered by a joy in the possibilities of language, a sense of revelation in its ability to convey meaning, and a conviction that to write, and to write endlessly, is the only way to alleviate the pain stemming from the overwhelming tides of memory and experience. Language, in the form of speech as well as writing, is figured as both a frustratingly blunt tool of description and a key to freedom. Returning to the issue of whether the narrative techniques described in Wolfe's work occur as the result of incidental rearranging, or unconscious slips of the pen, I contend that this fascination with language, with speech and sound, with the process of transforming memory into narrative, is evidence of Wolfe's awareness of the challenges of creating a coherent, definitive narrative. In this we find the impetus for his experimentation with narrative forms and narrators, with different types of focalization, with passages that are removed from the primary narrative chronology, with digressions, interruptions and interrogations of the process of narrating, even as it is in progress.

This analysis implies that Wolfe's writing displays a greater awareness of the challenges of writing about or around the self than has previously been acknowledged by many critics. The fragmentary nature of Wolfe's work is reconsidered as a more accurate representation of the process of transforming memory into narrative, rather than as a failure to create coherent stories. In

this, the present discussion speaks to some of the concerns about Wolfe's work which attended the initial publication of his novels (in particular) and which still persist to this day: that it is naive, immature, formless, chaotic, devoid of structure. Wolfe's work has been rehabilitated to some extent by a number of critics who have addressed these issues, and this thesis aims to add to this reconsideration of Wolfe's tendencies toward episodic description linked by digressive reflections. This needs to be considered in light of his work's self-reflexivity and demonstrative awareness of the vagaries of memory and language. Wolfe's writing examines and interrogates its own process of creation and in doing so it foregrounds tensions and contradictions inherent in writing, particularly when it seems (as it did to Wolfe) that it is only possible to write from personal experience. The following section analyses some of these tensions, and how they are manifested in the course of Wolfe's fiction.

Tensions

Wolfe's autobiographical drive is directed into experimentation with transforming his life into fiction, and interrogation of what it is to write about the self. His writing records his attempts to act on the impulse to write from his own experience, but the tension between Wolfe's memorial instinct and the demands of documentary culture pushes Wolfe's writing into strategies that are incompatible with conventional autobiography, and that contribute to significant critical disagreement with regard to the genre of his work. Carruthers's division of culture into memorial and documentary modes has provided an extremely useful framework from which to investigate Wolfe's writing. The traces of a memorial mindset can be found in Wolfe's work, a way

of thinking and creating that prioritises memory as the source of all artistic endeavours. Wolfe's methods of remembering, ruminating and composing, producing reams of manuscript in an attempt to record the entirety of his experience, comes up squarely against the limitations of written culture, documentary forms and the conventions of commercial printed fiction. Ghosts of oral storytelling abound in Wolfe's work, from his fascination with speech and sound, to the companiable interjections of the Wolfean narrator, to the abundance of storytelling figures that commandeer the narrative, particularly in his short stories. This is not to suggest that Wolfe was more naturally an oral storyteller: from a practical point of view, he was known to have some difficulty in public speaking, and he seemed to turn most comfortably to pen and paper. However, he erodes Benjamin's storyteller/novelist dichotomy, which supplies the other major paradigm from which this thesis initially approached Wolfe.

Wolfe straddles these gulfs between the storyteller and the novelist, the memorial and the documentary, autobiography and fiction. Wolfe refuses to recognise the division between autobiography and fiction, in particular, and his work consciously describes and more subtly interrogates this imposed dichotomy in a manner which is disconcerting to any critic who hopes to categorise his work in one genre or another. Wolfe seeks to reconcile the memorial and the documentary, and to make the machinations of his memory visible on the page. His quest is to find a perfect method of transmitting the material of his memory directly to the minds of others. However, he is painfully aware of the limitations of this process: the unreliability of memory, the imperfect nature of linguistic representation, the inevitable editing and

rearranging that must take place before his work can be brought to the public eye, and finally, the inevitable realisation that this material can be read, interpreted, misinterpreted and incorporated into the memory of others in myriad different and unpredictable ways.

Again, this investigation comes up against the question of how conscious Wolfe is of these difficulties, and whether he sets out to combat them intentionally. From his writings published as non-fiction, his letters, notebooks, speeches and essays, there is ample evidence that Wolfe is aware of these issues. However, the tensions inherent in this process are also manifested in the narrative techniques employed in his fictional work, and in the imagery Wolfe uses in relation to writing and memory. For instance, the ambivalent nature of the illness metaphors that abound in relation to the compulsion to write suggest that the "disease" of the memorial impulse is a source of pain, but also of beauty. Or, turning to the analysis of the iterative and pseudo-iterative modes, Wolfe's use of the pseudo-iterative as a caveat with regard to memory and veracity is indicative of the tension between the impulse to tell all and the knowledge that memory is changed in the telling, in its conversion to language and its recitation.

Other tensions are at work in Wolfe's writing, beside the memorial and the documentary: he struggles to reconcile past and present, fiction and reality, the individual and the universal. The latter, in particular, is key to understanding Wolfe's never-ending, intensely self-aware experimentation with different ways from which to view and interpret his own material existence and direct

experience, as well as the wealth of indirect experience he has gleaned from the accounts of others. Wolfe often espouses a conviction that in the experience of one individual could be found the entirety of human experience, stretching back through history and encompassing all facets of life. His own hunger for experience and knowledge, his ambition to know all, see all, feel all, remember all, and finally to write all, stands as the foundation for this belief. In his use of narrative modes that tend toward the creation of timeless and universal narrative spaces, in his creation of a Wolfean narrator who appeals constantly to universal experience, in his quest to expand the spatial and temporal scope of his work through the appropriation and resurrection of the lives of others, Wolfe attempts to make his own life representative of all lives. This concern with universalism in Wolfe's writing has been recognised and explored by many, but this thesis has investigated in detail numerous narrative manifestations of Wolfe's attempts to reconcile the individual experience with the general experience.

Framing Wolfe's work in terms of tensions, particularly between the memorial and the documentary and the individual and the universal, helps to illuminate some of the unusual narrative effects that one encounters in Wolfe's work, as well as his seeming obsession with writing about the work of writing itself. Wolfe's self-conscious efforts to reconcile these tensions, to bridge the gaps between these opposing forces and paradigms, unavoidably nudges his writing into experimental territory which constantly sets up and then undermines and questions critical expectations with regard to the genre of Wolfe's work, and the relationship between his work and his life. Wolfe's self-reflexivity forces him to

examine his own process and his memory from different angles, which leads him to approach the material of his life in the experimental ways described above. Looking at Wolfe's work in these terms provides an insight into the reasons why Wolfe's work is misunderstood as "disguised autobiography" or "autobiographical fiction," and yet contains too many anomalous features to comfortably fit within these categories. Wolfe's work can be understood as the product of an ongoing negotiation with opposing forces, even when the influence of these tensions is not explicitly acknowledged. The analysis provided in this thesis represents a useful basis from which to explore further how these tensions come to the surface in Wolfe's writing. In the final section of this conclusion, I discuss further the implications of this research as well as the avenues for further study that are opened up by this investigation.

Research Implications

This research has explored why Wolfe's work has been a source of considerable critical disagreement with regard to the genre that should be assigned to it, and why an obsession with the relationship between Wolfe's life and the events and people portrayed in his work persists to this day in Wolfe scholarship. In order to answer this question, I have investigated elements in Wolfe's work that problematise categorisation. These include Wolfe's idiosyncratic definition of "autobiographical" and his belief that all fiction is derived from one's own experience; the tensions in his work between his memorial impulse and the demands of documentary forms; his self-reflexive struggles with language, memory and the role of the artist; his use of experimental narrative strategies that disrupt and interrogate narrative time; and his deliberate incorporation of

the memories, experiences and voices of others into his work. These elements, I argue, produce unusual narrative effects in Wolfe's work that emphasise the disconcerting generic confusion produced by work which is usually paratextually described as "fiction," and yet is so readily called "autobiographical" by its author, who employs an extremely broad definition of the term.

Wolfe approaches the task of writing in an experimental and self-aware manner, working to transform the material of his memory into the ordered narratives required by his chosen medium. The re-framing of Wolfe's work in terms of underlying currents of tension between different modes of representation and communication opens up new avenues of study, in terms of how these tensions are manifested in the narrative devices and rhetoric employed by Wolfe. This project is concerned with the application of autobiographical and narrative theory to questions of self-representation in Wolfe's work, and as such approaches the "charge of autobiography" which has dogged Wolfe's work from an angle that has previously not been explored in great detail. Since the "autobiographical" element of his work is the foundation for much criticism of Wolfe, the conclusions made here, which suggest Wolfe engages with the problems of autobiographical (or in his case, periautographical) writing on a constant basis, suggest that one should examine Wolfe's work more closely in the context of his awareness of the fallibility of linguistic representation and memory. An obsession with categorisation is irrelevant in the context of Wolfe's own refusal to distinguish between fiction and autobiography, which is borne out in his intertwining of his life and his

work, and his use of narrative strategies that disrupt notions of separating fiction from the material from which it is derived, which is the material of the author's own life, in the most all-encompassing sense.

A detailed investigation of narrative techniques in Wolfe's work, applying the work of Genette in particular, brings studies of Wolfe's writing into a realm that has not been previously investigated on a large scale. The positing of a Wolfean narrator in Chapter 5, in particular, provides a basis for further analysis. The application of the scholarship of autobiographical theorists is a relatively new departure in studies of Wolfe, as is a detailed study of the types of metaphors and imagery Wolfe employs in relation to the creative process. In particular, the application of the very different paradigms of culture developed by Walter Benjamin and Mary Carruthers to Wolfe's work provides new frameworks from which to approach his fiction, in terms of the storyteller/novelist and memorial/documentary dichotomies. This research should prove useful to scholars of Wolfe, as well as to those with an interest in narrative techniques and the varied ways in which the self can be represented in literature. This work has particular application to research that explores "life-writing" of all kinds, as well as studies on self and identity in literature, the autobiographical impulse, and authorial motivations and intentions. This study is necessarily limited in its scope, and can be built upon in various directions. For instance, the application of Benjamin's and Carruthers's frameworks has proven to be a good starting point from which to explore the idea of storytelling and storytellers in relation to Wolfe, leading to a re-framing of his work in terms of memorial and documentary modes.

This re-framing provides a new perspective from which to view Wolfe's work, elucidating the underlying tensions that motivate his creative process. In his habitual use of a memorial mode, Wolfe is a man somewhat out of time, struggling to reconcile his urge to memorialise with the constraints of documentary culture. This perspective provides a valuable insight for researchers who suggest that Wolfe is out of time in another sense, in that he could be more closely aligned with literature that developed later in the twentieth century. This thesis has analysed in detail Wolfe's instinctive awareness of the fallibility of language, his tendency to deconstruct the narrative as it unfolds, his erosion of the boundaries of authorial and narratorial identity and his refusal to recognise generic borders. While this thesis does not aim to situate Wolfe in one literary movement or another, these issues are relevant to researchers who wish to investigate Wolfe's possible prefiguring of post-modernist literature, an approach pioneered by those such as Tattoni and Bourdeau. Similarly, the application of narratological theories, particularly those of Genette, is yet another starting point, a foundation from which to proceed with further analysis. Many such formulae and structures of narratological terminology exist, particularly in relation to narrators and focalization, which could only be referred to briefly within the context of this study, and which could equally be applied to Wolfe's work in order to investigate how he transforms his memory into narrative. This thesis approaches Wolfe's work from a number of different angles, all the while focussed on the issues of how he writes about or around the self, and how his

approach lends itself to critical confusion with regard to genre, but this analysis leaves room for further exploration.

While it is almost impossible to avoid attaching some descriptor to Wolfe's writing, whether "disguised autobiography," "autobiographical novels," or even "life-writing" and "periautography," which I have used in this discussion, labels such as these unfortunately contribute to the critical obsession with genre which follows Wolfe scholarship, and which is only now beginning to recede. These terms are useful in referring to the looseness and hybridity of Wolfe's work with regard to genre, but it is more important to consider how and why Wolfe's work emerges in the form that it does, rather than what it is. This analysis has described some of the elements of Wolfe's work that have contributed to this critical debate and confusion with regard to genre and the "charge of autobiography." Wolfe's philosophical position with regard to the writing of fiction from one's own experience is key to understanding his transformation of his memory into narrative, and Wolfe's own words on this subject have so often been ignored or misinterpreted.

Finally, I suggest that it is time that scholars of Wolfe's work leave behind the "charge of autobiography," with its moralistic connotations, and that it is more suitable to analyse Wolfe's work in a manner that discards categorisations of genre as much as possible. This research, in illuminating some sources of the critical disagreement regarding genre which continues to influence Wolfe scholarship, adds to the growing body of work that is casting aside issues of genre in favour of reconsidering more neglected aspects of Wolfe's writing.

Some of these elements have been touched on throughout this discussion, such as his commitment to expand individual experience to incorporate communal and universal experiences, his role as storyteller, in the sense of being a chronicler and social historian of his community and nation, his conscious recognition and pioneering of what we now call "intertextuality," his experimentation with narrative time and multiple focalization, and his struggles to adapt a memorial instinct to documentary forms. This investigation enables research in these directions on the basis of the conclusions reached in this particular project, and ultimately urges a movement away from attempts to categorise Wolfe's work in terms of genre, as attempts to do so arise from distinctions that Wolfe himself refuses to recognise.

Epilogue

Thomas Wolfe, despite his own extensive university education and experience lecturing at Harvard, harboured a disdain for the efforts of doctoral students and scholars of literature in general. In one particularly scathing attack, he scribbled a satirical "Epitaph on a Ph.D. Man" in one of his notebooks:

> Here lies a noble scholar,
> More musty than his books
> A tireless grubber after facts
> A layman overlooks,
> Who sucked the works of dead men dry,
> Of new ones a despiser:
> He left the world a duller place
> But not one whit the wiser. (*Notebooks* 1: 30)

Similarly, in "The Hills Beyond" the narrator refers to the manner in which mountain folk are "gloated over by exultant Ph.D's (who find in mountain shacks the accents of Elizabeth)" (238). These passages are a harsh rebuke to anyone who wishes to study Wolfe's work, and represent a damning opinion of literary scholarship. Wolfe would undoubtedly not have approved of the manner in which his work has been dissected, investigated, reassembled, reinterpreted and written about by critics and scholars in the years since its initial publication, and this research only adds to that process.

Wolfe, despite his proclivities toward reflection and self-examination, particularly in terms of his fascination with his own creative process, could not bear to have his work interpreted by others. This is made clear in his reactions to reviews, even favourable ones, which he generally viewed with horror, and his fear when approaching the "hour of naked print" (Wolfe, *Story* 88). So, as a final note, research of this kind would probably have offended Wolfe, were he still living. However, despite the reservations of the author whose work is under investigation, this work serves not to "suck the works of Wolfe dry," but to reassess them, to find their place, to understand the motivations behind them and the complexities and richness within them. While Wolfe's own words about autobiography and fiction and his many statements about writing are key to understanding the ways in which he transforms his memory into narrative, in this case, his authorial opinions are not in the best interests of his work, which deserves greater recognition, analysis and understanding. I endeavour to move Wolfe scholarship away from the "charge of autobiography" against which he

struggled throughout his life, and for that reason, must disregard his warning to those who wish to study his art.

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[27] Church's article on Wolfe appears in an early form in PMLA, and is greatly expanded and revised in the later version, published in *Time and Reality: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* and reprinted in Field's *Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism*. Both versions of the article unfortunately share the same title, but can be distinguished in in-text references by the page numbers, which wholly differ.

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[28] This book is a published excerpt from the original *Of Time and the River*. References to *Of Time and the River* in the text (shortened to *Of Time* in parenthetical citations) refer to the originally published text, which is fully entitled *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth*, and not to this later published excerpt.

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[29] This book is a published excerpt from *The Web and the Rock*. Shortened references to *The Web and the Rock* as *Web* in parenthetical citations refer solely to the original *The Web and the Rock*, and not to this published excerpt.