

ON DIVERS SPIRITS: THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN THOMAS WOLFE

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Based on a longstanding reputation which Asheville gave Thomas Wolfe as a hedonist, agnostic, or worse, I began a senior essay at Davidson College in the mid-fifties with the pre-research title "The Dearth of the Spiritual in Thomas Wolfe." My reading of Look Homeward, Angel(1) destroyed that view and led to a lifelong interest in this fellow Ashevilleite and his painful spiritual pilgrimage. Far from a "dearth" I have found his novels, short stories, and letters shot through with profound spiritual reflection and insight well worth a pastor's serious consideration.

Although Wolfe was raised under the influence of my home church, First Presbyterian Church, Asheville, North Carolina, he was not a Christian in any traditional sense. His conviction that all beliefs ebb and flow, changing and growing like a river, would not allow him to subscribe to any set creed which would fix one's belief--leading in his view to a set of fixations. Yet his writings down to the time of his early death at 37 in 1938 abound with love/hate reflections on the Church, wistful appreciations of Presbyterianism, a gnawing sense of sin and guilt, a fear and finally truce with death, a prophetic critique of cant and hypocrisy, and a constant cry of pain at his lostness from the world above and from the Father.

Many a passage in Wolfe's first and best novel, Look Homeward, Angel (LHA) provide grist for the preacher's mill. This is a patently autobiographical novel (despite Wolfe's denials) which struggles with a young man's coming of age in a mountainbound Southern village in the first quarter of this century. It is a superb rendering of the agony we all experience in battling through adolescence to stand on our own two feet, in peeping over the rim of our home and hometown's circling mountains to see new vistas with all the threat and promise uprooting offers. Insofar as it is that, the novel speaks timelessly to the young and continues to be present on college bookshelves.

Drifting like an everpresent mist throughout Wolfe's poetic descriptions and expansive rhetorical outbursts is the theme of "lostness." He seeks "a stone, a leaf, a door" which will open the way back into the spirit world. Ponder his preface which ends "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again" (LHA, p. 2). This refrain, in part or whole, is echoed throughout the novel. In a brief reflection on death and afterlife, Wolfe cries "shall not this dust awaken, shall not dead faith revive, shall we not see God again, as once in morning, on the mountains? Who walks with us on the hills?" (LHA, p. 484). In this he affirms faith, though weakened, in God or else the likeness or comparison fails. He also affirms the centrality of his father's dynamic person in his life. The notion of the "quest" for God and its relation to the father figure is further developed in Of Time and the River (OT&R).(2)

One of the most powerful scenes in Look Homeward, Angel is the death scene of Tom's beloved brother Ben.

Eugene did not believe in these things, but he was afraid they might be true. He was afraid that Ben would get lost again. He felt that no one but he could pray for Ben now: that the dark union of their spirits made

only his prayers valid. All that he had read in books, all the tranquil wisdom he had professed so glibly in his philosophy course, and the great names of Plato and Plotinus, of Spinoza and Immanuel Kant, of Hegel and Descartes, left him now, under the mastering surge of his wild Celtic superstition. He felt that he must pray frantically as long as the little ebbing flicker of breath remained in his brother's body.

So, with insane sing-song repetition, he began to mutter over and over again: "Whoever You Are, be good to Ben to-night. Show him the way . . . Whoever You Are, be good to Ben to-night. Show him the way . . ." He lost count of the minutes, the hours: he heard only the feeble rattle of dying breath, and his wild synchronic prayer (LHA, p. 556).

Here Wolfe feels the pinch of his adolescent agnosticism when the head-trip of his philosophical inquiries smacks into the emotional crisis of the death of the one person closest to him. Consistent with his lifelong spiritual reflections, Wolfe is quite clear about the demonic forces but not as clear about angelic or positive ones. His passionate sensuality and inclination to ritual was forever in tension with his inability to formulate a consistent theology. In this crisis he "buys celestial insurance" with a ritualistic, inquiring, beseeching prayer. He is not sure about the nature of God nor of afterlife, but he is sure about Ben and that Ben does not and will not cease to exist. Thus an insecure faith, even among intellectuals, easily lapses into some form of spiritualism. It is a poignant moment as the youth stammers prayers to what is in essence "the unknown god."

Throughout his writings Wolfe wrestled with death. The death scene of W. O. Gant (Wolfe's father) is a classic in all literature (OT&R, pp. 261-268). In the last writing Wolfe penned, he said to Maxwell Perkins, his former editor and close friend, that the critical illness that ultimately took his life had given him a positive perspective on death and hope for his life. Wolfe wrote:

I've made a long voyage and been to a strange country, and I've seen the dark man very close; and I don't think I was too much afraid of him, but so much of mortality still clings to me--I wanted most desperately to live and still do, and I thought about you all a 1000 times, and wanted to see you all again, and there was the impossible anguish and regret of all the work I had not done, of all the work I had to do--and I know now I'm just a grain of dust, and I feel as if a great window has been opened on life I did not know about before--and if I come through this, I hope to God I am a better man, and a wiser one--If I get on my feet and out of here, it will be months before I head back, but if I get on my feet, I'll come back.(3)

The multiple references to his upbringing in the Presbyterian Church are instructive as comment on the "social sources of denominationalism," on the superficial social values of church attendance, on the order and stability of Presbyterianism as contrasted with the disorder of Wolfe's life, and on the hypocrisy of church members, so troubling to one with an inquiring mind and erratic lifestyle.

Wolfe describes how the teachings of his "oppressively Christlike" male Sunday School teacher stirred up more guilt and misery than faith. "Eugene became vaguely miserable as he talked, thinking of something soft, furry, with a wet tongue" (LHA, p. 139). Elsewhere, Eugene gave mock attention and then a demonic outburst of laughter when "an old lady of the church, who with all her power of persuasion and earnestness was unfolding the dogma of Presbyterianism to him . . ." (LHA, p. 253-

254), in an attempt to lead him to faith.

In a marvelously funny passage Eugene and his friend George Graves boast of the superiority of Presbyterians and Episcopalians to Methodists and Baptists, and then lapse into a biting exchange on the utility of Church membership:

A negro dug tenderly in the round loamy flowerbeds of the Presbyterian churchyard, bending now and then to thrust his thick fingers gently in about the roots. The old church, with its sharp steeple, rotted slowly, decently, prosperously, like a good man's life, down into its wet lichened brick. Eugene looked gratefully, with a second's pride, at its dark decorum, its solid Scotch breeding. "I'm a Presbyterian," he said. "What are you?" "An Episcopalian, when I go," said George Graves with irreverent laughter. "To hell with these Methodists!" Eugene said with an elegant, disdainful face. "They're too damn common for us." . . . "We oughtn't to talk like that, 'Gene," said George Graves reproachfully. "Sure enough! It's not right." He became moodily serious rapidly. "The best people in this town are church members," he said earnestly. "It's a fine thing." "Why?" said Eugene, with an idle curiosity. "Because," said George Graves, "you get to know all the people who are worth a damn." Worth being damned, he thought quickly. A quaint idea. "It helps you in a business way. They come to know you and respect you. You won't get far in this town, 'Gene, without them. It pays," he added devoutly, "to be a Christian." "Yes," Eugene agreed seriously, "you're right." To walk together to the kirk, with a goodly company (LHA, pp. 329-330).

Can we fail to see that same dynamic today in those who believe "It pays to be a Christian" in a very monetary and materialistic way?

Wolfe's attack on superficial religion and hypocritical public posturing led him to drag many a skeleton from the Asheville closets. The exposure of these foibles led to a terrific backlash of criticism from Asheville citizens when Look Homeward, Angel hit the bookstores in 1929. We may commend the prophetic insight he showed in condemning the materialism in the real estate boom leading to the crash, in attacking the "foxhole religion" of those who ignore God in good times, and in bringing to light the private sensual indiscretions which ran counter to the public moral and credal affirmations. Wolfe for example was well ahead of his time in exposing the sin of the preacher's condemnation of Sunday baseball while at that very moment a black woman sweated in the pastor's kitchen preparing the Sunday dinner for these pious white folks.

Unfortunately, however, Wolfe did not move to a constructive, positive theology, but remained in the negative, analytic stage. Those sins which he condemned in his father and in society at large were the very ones which continued to trouble him throughout his life. His flirtations with the church were always tainted by his own overwhelming sense of guilt. Thus he writes in The Story of a Novel:(4)

And beyond, beyond--forever above, around, behind the vast and tranquil consciousness of my spirit that now held the earth and all her elements in the huge clasp of its effortless subjection--there dwelt forever the fatal knowledge of my own inexplicable guilt (SN, p. 64).

Indeed, his last words before death were "Mama, I've been a bad boy, I've been a bad boy all my life." Somehow the preaching and teaching which stuck with him was

that of sin and guilt, not grace and forgiveness. Is there not an important word for the preacher here?

Wolfe's quest for spiritual wholeness took special focus in his reflections on seeking and finding again his father. In Of Time and the River this motif is announced in the preface to Book I: "Where shall the weary rest? When shall the lonely of heart come home? What doors are open for the wanderer? And which of us shall find his father, know his face, and in what place, and in what time, and in what land?" (OT&R, p. 2). His agony over his own father's death and any possibility of afterlife and reunion already suggest that the quest is for something more than the physical father (OT&R, pp. 159, 268, 333, et al). Note especially his questioning "Shall I know you, though I have never seen your face? Will you know me, and will you call me 'son'? Father, I know that you live, though I have never found you" (OT&R, p. 856). This is a bit awkward way to speak of one's physical father and is perhaps more in phase with Wolfe's later affirmation that his search was not the quest to return to childhood nor to the lost father of his youth, but rather the seeking of a force beyond this life--rather, I would say, a quest for God. Wolfe wrote:

From the beginning--and this was one fact that in all my times of hopelessness returned to fortify my faith in my conviction--the idea, the central legend that I wished my book to express had not changed. And this central idea was this: the deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man's search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united (SN, p. 39).

Wolfe's writings are shot through with Biblical quotes, Biblical allusions, and a Biblical rhetorical style. One of the most interesting short pieces is his essay "God's Lonely Man" found in The Hills Beyond (THB).(5) In this work, Wolfe analyzes his own loneliness and states: "The most tragic, sublime, and beautiful expression of human loneliness which I have ever read is the Book of Job; the grandest and most philosophical, Ecclesiastes" (THB, p. 190). He moves to a broader discussion of loneliness in the Old Testament, then takes focus on the life of Christ and his purpose "to destroy the life of loneliness and to establish here on earth the life of love" (THB, p. 194). In Wolfe's judgment, Christ's life was a lonely one.

And now I know that though the way and meaning of Christ's life is a far, far better way and meaning than my own, yet I can never make it mine; and I think that this is true of all the other lonely men that I have seen or known about--the nameless, voiceless, faceless atoms of this earth as well as Job and Everyman and Swift. And Christ himself, who preached the life of love, was yet as lonely as any man that ever lived. Yet I could not say that he was mistaken because he preached the life of love and fellowship, and lived and died in loneliness; nor would I dare assert his way was wrong because a billion men have since professed his way and never followed it.

I can only say that I could not make his way my own. For I have found the constant, everlasting weather of man's life to be, not love, but loneliness. Love itself is not the weather of our lives. It is the rare, the

precious flower. Sometimes it is the flower that gives us life, that breaches the dark walls of all our loneliness and restores us to the fellowship of life, the family of the earth, the brotherhood of man. But sometimes love is the flower that brings us death; and from it we get pain and darkness; and the mutilations of the soul, the maddening of the brain, may be in it (THB, p. 196).

Surely there is stimulus for reflection in this analysis of human loneliness and the mission of Christ, in the attraction of the life of Christ yet the rejection of it, and in the wish to believe despite the "billion men" who espouse Christ's way but don't follow it.

Perhaps the best known, and certainly the least understood, theme in Wolfe's writings is the now proverbial saying "You can't go home again." From the first to the last we see this theme of quest for the lost home, the reveries of the past, the painstaking examination of Wolfe's "roots," and a posthumous publication an entire volume is entitled You Can't Go Home Again (YCGHA).⁽⁶⁾ The average reader (and those who have not read it but use the saying) understands this phrase to mean that you can't return to the happy days of the past. This is usually applied, with considerable pain and nostalgia, as the reluctant wisdom of those who find that not only has home changed, but that they, too, have so changed as to no longer fit easily into "home" anymore. This negative observation is usually accompanied with sighing and head wagging.

Such, however, was not the sense of the matter for Wolfe. To be sure, his works abound with a sense of nostalgia. As indicated above, he was on a passionate quest for some threshold leading back into a lost home and to a lost father, however this quest was much more a spiritual and metaphysical one rather than an historical and physical pilgrimage. Despite the real anxiety Wolfe had about returning to Asheville (especially after the uproar created by Look Homeward, Angel), his theme was something far more positive and hopeful.

As Wolfe wrote to his old friend Belinda Jelliffe:

I know now that you can't go home again, but I know also that our home, yours and mine, and every mother's son of us, is in the future, and I believe in it and trust in it as I believe and trust in life . . . and to that end I am now willing to devote all the energy, talent, faith and hope that in me are.

And I have also found out that although you can't go home again, there are certain things you do not lose, but that grow and flourish as the years go on, and one of them is the love and belief of a friend. . . . Great bridges may be burned, and there is a path which we can never take, a road down which we never shall go back again; but there is also a fire that once lighted will always burn, and that never while life lasts can be put out.⁽⁷⁾

Wolfe expanded on this theme in writing to his old high school teacher, Mrs. Margaret Roberts:

But my discovery that "you can't go home again" . . . went down to the very roots of my life and spirit . . . it was like death almost, because it meant saying farewell to so many things, to so many ideas and images and hopes and illusions that we think we can't live without. But the point is, I have come through it now, and I am not desolate or lost. On the

contrary, I am more full of faith and hope and courage than I have been in years. I suppose that what I am trying to tell you here is a spiritual conviction that will inform the whole book--you could almost call that book, "You Can't Go Home Again," although I don't think I shall call it that. But I do want you to understand that it is not a hopeless book, but a triumphantly hopeful one. . . . I, too, believe in the brave new world, and I hope now that I am on the way to find it.(8)

Thus for Wolfe the observation that "you can't go home again" had a forward thrust which has great relevance for preaching in this day of rootless, homeless, transient people. The positive affirmation is that our home is in the future, that there are new challenges and vistas before us, that we are a pilgrim people "on the way," that we are strangers and sojourners on this earth, for our real home is with God.

Wolfe's insight can spur us to critique biblically our current preoccupation with nostalgia as that turning which turns the turner into a pillar of salt, as that faithlessness in the wilderness which would lead us back to Egypt and slavery rather than forward to a new day and a promised land, as that clinging to the past which prevents our laying aside every weight and sin in order to run the race of faith, or as that backward look which causes the runner to stumble instead of pressing forward to the goal.

A final passage in Wolfe seems to me to be particularly apt for reflection today. It is taken from Wolfe's credo at the end of You Can't Go Home Again.(9) Following a chapter, "Ecclesiasticus," in which he reflects on the philosophy of life and especially the struggle of belief and doubt, Wolfe moves to his "Credo" where he sings the praises of America. It is surprising that this did not get wider currency during the Bicentennial celebrations. Again and again, Wolfe affirms his solid convictions about Evil and the demonic, but still is hopeful for America and believes our best days are yet ahead. He ends with a poetic, hopeful note addressed to his dear friend Fox (Maxwell Perkins):

Dear Fox, old friend, thus we have come to the end of the road that we were to go together. My tale is finished--and so farewell. But before I go, I have just one more thing to tell you:

Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where. Saying: "To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth--Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending--a wind is rising, and the rivers flow (YCGHA, p. 743).

In Wolfe there are indeed "divers spirits" at work. Although his America was that of 1900-1938, his eloquently articulated pilgrimage and his painstakingly thorough observations on life and death, belief and doubt, morality and hypocrisy, can lead us to view with greater empathy those struggling questioners who from time to time grace our pews and flirt with a faith they cannot quite embrace.

In a graduate paper at Harvard, Wolfe noted that Coleridge had been criticized for returning to the established church in his later years after a period of revolt in his youth. Yet Wolfe felt that this was an inevitable prodigal journey, and that the

mature person would finally come to the recognition of a power beyond his own. Dying young at 37, Wolfe did not complete his own prodigal journey. Who knows where he might have come out, given a few more years? The point is this: there are ones such as Wolfe in our communities and perhaps occasionally in our pews. Can we so lift up Christ and the grace of God as to make the angelic vision as real and meaningful as the demonic one already seems to be? It is all too easy to make common cause with a Wolfe in describing and defining the demonic spirits, but our real challenge is to affirm the Father and his benevolent spirits of grace and hope and love.

- (1) Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).
- (2) Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935).
- (3) John Hall Wheelock, ed., Editor to Author: The Letters of Maxwell E. Perkins (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 141.
- (4) The Story of a Novel (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1936).
- (5) The Hills Beyond (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941).
- (6) You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941).
- (7) Elizabeth Nowell, ed., The Letters of Thomas Wolfe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 707.
- (8) Ibid, p. 730.
- (9) YCGHA, p. 743.