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## European Culture in Southern Literature: Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner

Today, most literary historians would probably agree that Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner are among the prominent Southern novelists of the twentieth century, with the proviso that – Wolfe’s oeuvre being more incomplete and uneven – his reputation has as steadily gone down as Faulkner’s – because of the scope and solidity of his achievement – has gone up. What makes Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner of special interest in the context of “Europe in the American South” is that they represent – as their letters and also Wolfe’s notebooks show<sup>1</sup> – different artistic attitudes toward European culture. In dealing with Faulkner’s and Wolfe’s views of European culture and its reflexion in their works, I regard ‘culture’ not as a stable essence but as a ‘construct,’ varying with the spectator’s historical situation and individuality. The European experience did not have the same relevance in Wolfe’s and Faulkner’s biographies and works. In fact, the reason why Wolfe appears first in the title of my essay is that for him the exposure to foreign cultures was much more important than for Faulkner who therefore only serves as foil in my essay.

Incidentally, both writers undertook trips to Europe almost at the same time, in 1924 and 1925.<sup>2</sup> However, for Faulkner the trip to Europe remained, like the grand tour of British travellers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a single event to which he responded with openness and delight<sup>3</sup> but which he did not repeat. For Wolfe it was just the beginning of a series of seven extensive trips between 1925 and 1936, providing one of his great and continuous inspirations.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Faulkner employed European countries in his works only a few times and never with any personal commitment.

### Europe as a Motif in Faulkner's Novels

The best known example of Faulkner's use of European scenery is the conclusion to *Sanctuary* where, drawing on his stay in Paris during his 'grand tour,' Faulkner presents Temple Drake – far away from the scenes of crime and violence in the American South – in the stylized setting of the Luxembourg gardens “where at sombre intervals the dead tranquil queens in stained marble mused” (398).<sup>5</sup> The French scenery in *A Fable* consists only of a few set pieces, serving as background of the novel's moral and political allegory.<sup>6</sup> However, in *The Town* and *The Mansion*, Faulkner, who never visited Germany but apparently was aware of the German Romantic tradition, uses sophisticated references to German culture to parodically characterize Gavin Stevens as a quixotic idealist. In *The Town*, he has Gavin Stevens imagine Eula – and himself in his hopeless entanglement – as accompanied by resounding and fading Wagner music: “Who should have moved like Wagner: not with but *in* the sonorous sweep of thunder or brass music” (79); “But there was only the blue envelopment and the fading Wagner, trumpet and storm and rich diminuendo” (84).<sup>7</sup>

He developed Gavin Stevens' German connexion more fully in *The Mansion*. By way of comic contrast, he has commonsensical and humorous Ratliff expose the German escapade of his idealistic friend who, after Harvard and the law school at Oxford (Miss.), decides to study in Heidelberg. Ratliff repeats, with comic seriousness, Gavin's insistent lecturing on the superiority of German culture as “virile Aryan” and “mystical,” presenting a parodically distorted view of the musical aesthetics that German Romanticists like Novalis and the Schlegel brothers had developed against the visual and plastic ideal of classicism. Great humorist that he is, Faulkner offers a farcical version of how the “American Aryan” misinterprets (“would believe anything he jest heard and couldn't prove”; “the glorious music that came straight to the . . . Aryan's heart without bothering his mind a-tall”) the Romantic aesthetics of the unseen, the musical, and the mystical:

[R]ight now it was the German culture that had the closest tie with the modern virile derivations of the northern branch of the old Aryan stock. Because he said the tie was mystical, not what you seen but what you heard, and that the present-day Aryan, in America at least, never had no confidence a-tall in what he seen, but on the contrary would believe anything he jest heard and couldn't prove; and that the modern German culture since the revolutions of 1848 never had no concern with, and if anything a little contempt for, anything that happened to man

on the outside, or through the eyes and touch, like sculpture and painting and civil laws for his social benefit, but jest with what happened to him through his ears, like music and philosophy and what was wrong inside of his mind. (449)<sup>8</sup>

The mystical ideas, the glorious music – Lawyer said, the best of music, from the mathematical inevitability of Mozart through the godlike passion of Beethoven and Bach to the combination bawdy-house street-carnival uproar that Wagner made – that came straight to the modern virile northern Aryan’s heart without bothering his mind a-tall. (449-450)

Faulkner makes Ratliff wilfully misunderstand Gavin’s position and satirically connect German culture and German militarism: “After all you said about that-ere kinship of German culture, and the German army” (450). Above all, he lets him make fun of Gavin when, in view of Hitler’s take-over, he has to finally give up his idealistic Teutonism (“Even despite that splendid glorious music and them splendid mystical ideas?” 450).

There is a striking similarity here between Gavin Stevens’ and Thomas Wolfe’s elective affinity with Germany and their eventual regretful retraction from their romantic enthusiasm for the “land of Martin Luther, land of Goethe, land of Faust, land of Mozart and Beethoven” (496)<sup>9</sup> when it had become the land of Hitler. The decisive difference in their references to Europe is that Faulkner uses his with detachment and only for the specific thematic purposes of the particular works, while Wolfe, the autobiographical novelist, writes about his travels because he is personally fascinated by foreign countries and feels a profound affinity with Germany.<sup>10</sup>

### German “Wandering” and the American Crisis

In the twelve years between 1924 and 1936, Thomas Wolfe undertook seven trips to Europe. That this *Wanderlust* derives from complex origins can be seen from the subtitle of *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* (1929)<sup>11</sup> and from that of his second novel: *Of Time And The River: A Legend of Man’s Hunger in his Youth* (1935), which has Goethe’s poem, “Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen,” facing the title page of Book I. The implications of the word ‘ziehen,’ the last word in all three stanzas of Goethe’s famous poem from his *Bildungsroman, Wilhelm Meister*, (“Dahin / möcht ich mit dir, O mein Geliebter, ziehn!”) are those of the ‘Wanderer’ and of ‘Wandering’ as Romantic mode of existence. It inspires much German Romantic literature from Joseph v. Eichendorff’s *Aus dem Leben eines Taugel-*

*nichts* to the folksong “Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust.” Wolfe takes up these suggestions of German Romanticism in the opening prose poem of *Of Time and the River*, beginning with “wandering forever and the earth again” (*TR* 2),<sup>12</sup> but then modulates the motif of ‘wandering’ in the depressed spirit of the Thirties, endowing it with both a psychoanalytic (“which of us shall find his father”)<sup>13</sup> and a social dimension (“Who owns the earth”):

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? . . .

Who owns the earth? Did we want the earth that we should wander on it? Did we need the earth that we were never still upon it? (*TR* 2)

However, towards the end of the novel he gives the elegiac German motif of ‘wandering,’ a heroic, decisively American, even Whitmanesque turn: “Of wandering forever, and the earth again. Brother, for what? . . . For the wilderness, the immense and lonely land . . . First for the thunder of imperial names, the names of men and battles, the names of places and great rivers, the mighty names of the States” (*TR* 866).<sup>14</sup> Obviously, Wolfe’s rendering of the motif of ‘wandering’ and his trips to Europe arise as much from a peculiar American attitude towards *place* as from the Romantic desire to ‘wander’:

[Eugene Gant] felt suddenly the devastating impermanence of the nation. Only the earth endured – the gigantic American earth, bearing upon its awful breast a world of flimsy rickets. . . . We have been an exile in another land and a stranger in our own . . . And the old hunger returned – the terrible and obscure hunger that haunts and hurts Americans, and that makes us exiles and strangers at home and strangers wherever we go. (*LHA* 352)

The experience of “the devastating impermanence of the nation” and of “being an exile abroad and at home” as well as the vitalistic recourse to “the gigantic American earth” reflect the desperate historical situation. The autobiographical hero of *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940) expressly refers to 1929 and its social consequences:

His novel, *Home to Our Mountains*, [i.e. *Look Homeward, Angel*] was published the first week in November 1929. The date . . . coincided almost exactly with the beginning of the Great American Depression. The collapse of the Stock Market, which had begun in late October, was in some ways like the fall of a giant boulder into the still waters of a lake . . . Security was gone, and there was a sense of dread and ominous foreboding in the air. (*YCGHA* 325-326)

### Wolfe as Critical Southerner and the European Project

In their very different literary discovery of their *little stamp of native land*, Wolfe and Faulkner share one important characteristic, they see the South and their own regional heritage with critical eyes. The outcome of this confrontation with the guilty past of their homeland is a peculiar sensitivity to cultures as changing value systems. In Wolfe's case, this urge to expose himself to foreign cultures and compare them with his own – together with his intense aesthetic and historic curiosity – explains his “great hunger for voyages” (*LHA* 425-426).

What happens if one does not encounter and interact with cultures other than one's own is revealed in the Johnny Parks episode in *Of Time and the River* (1935). At Oxford, Eugene Gant meets a fellow Southerner and close friend, Johnny Parks, who is at Merton studying law. Eugene notes that his friend has retained his Southern drawl but appears otherwise strangely changed. Externally, he has adjusted completely to British college life, but, internally, he has not been able to cope with the different culture. As a result “the . . . assured expression of his eyes had changed: he had in them the stunned, bewildered look, full of pain and a groping confusion, of a man who has been brutally slugged at the base of the brain, and is not yet certain what has happened to him” (*TR* 628). The reason why this culture shock has hit him particularly hard is his monocultural Southern background: Having been born in the small-town south and also gone to school and college there, “he had all his life breathed and lived in a familiar air, heard the familiar words of well-known voices all around him, known and seen nothing but assurance, certitude and success, in everything he planned” (*TR* 628).

When in the course of *Of Time and The River* Eugene Gant encounters French culture, the young artist realizes with admiration and some envy what French culture has done and does for her writers. Moreover, the sense of form inspiring French culture makes him more clearly and deeply aware of the formless vastness and raw reality that he as American writer has to face.

Favored at birth by the great inheritance of their language, blood, and temperament, they grew up as children of a beautiful, strange, and legendary civilization whose very tongue was a guaranty of style, whose very tradition an assurance of form. These men could write nothing badly because it was not within the blood and nature of their race to do so. (*TR* 657-658)

And far, far away from all this certain grace, this ease of form, this assured attaining of expression – there lay America – and all the dumb hunger of its hundred million tongues, its unfound form, its unborn art. Far, far away from this enchanted legend of a city – there lay America and the brutal stupefaction of its million streets, its unquiet heart, its vast incertitude, the huge sprawled welter of its life – its formless and illimitable distances. (*TR* 660)

However, the experience of this cultural contrast does not turn Eugene Gant off. On the contrary, following the dialectic of Carl Sandburg’s Chicago poem, the negative features in American culture provoke in the young writer a wave of loyalty and affection. Exposed to the riches of European culture, he becomes homesick for America and appears ready to undertake his raid upon the inarticulate in his native land:

he noted [America’s] cruelty, savagery, horror, error, loss and waste of life, its murderous criminality, and its hypocritical mask of virtue, its lies, its horrible falseness, and its murderous closure of a telling tongue [and yet] with every pulse and fibre in him, with the huge, sick ache of intolerable homelessness, he was longing with every beating of his anguished heart for just one thing – *return!* homesick for ugly, brutal, inarticulate America. (*TR* 660)

### Magic Germany

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, we learn that Eugene Gant’s “feeling for the South was not so much historic as it was of the core and desire of dark romanticism” (*LHA* 127). As we shall see, a similar romanticism informs Wolfe’s picture of Germany. An indication of this is the lexical field *unreal and magical* in the following description of the Rhine valley:

The trip up the Rhine was lovely and magnificent. It was somewhat disappointing up to Koblenz; after that it became *unreal and magical* – *the landscape is really magical – it has a faery quality* – and the vineyards that take up every inch of the great piles of rock which form the Rhine Bergs . . . the wonderful part is only 30 or 40 miles long – but you get the impression that you have been through the *measureless realm of Elfland*. (*Nb* I 165-166, my emphasis)

Wolfe emphasizes the same quality in describing his trip to the Wartburg in Thuringia as “beautiful and fine and *magical*” and the scenery as “one of the most indescribably lovely and *magical* landscapes” (*L* 490). He calls the Black Forest “a landscape of rich, dark melancholy, a place with a *Gothic soul*” (*L* 262) – *Gothic*, in the sense of *irregular, wild, quaint*, being a derogatory term in classicism and becoming a laudatory one in the romantic period. Wolfe appreciates this effect not only in landscapes but in cityscapes as well. The old town

of Frankfurt “by moonlight” appears to him as “*magical*” and as “a labyrinth of *elfin* houses, quainter and more *like Grimm*” (L 140), the linkage of elfin houses and Grimm’s fairy tales being in line with the mood initiated by “moonlight” and “magical.” Why Wolfe was so attracted to Germany can be seen from the qualities he associates with her landscapes and old cities: irregularity, wildness, quaintness, romantic magic, and the eerie world of Grimm’s tales. Wolfe’s criticism of contemporary America in *Look Homeward, Angel*, where he castigates “the brutal idiot regularity of the faces in the advertisements” and the banality of the “national demand for white shining plumbing, tooth-paste, tiled lunch-rooms, hair-cuts, manicured dentistry” (LHA 491), reveals the deeper reasons why he was so fond of ‘romantic Germany’: it seemed to him to represent a value-system he cherished, one foregrounding the imaginative and emotional and rejecting the standardized and non-descript.

However, the way in which, in *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), he has Eugene Gant modify the term *romantic*, anticipates the critical mind of George Webber, developing in *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940): “It was not his quality as a romantic to escape out of life, but into it. He wanted no land of Make-believe: his fantasies found extension in reality” (LHA 491). Among the “fantasies extended in reality” in *The Web and the Rock* (1939) is George Webber’s “sense of *place*, the feeling for specific locality” that comes from his “savagely divided childhood” (WR 31) and has psychoanalytic implications:

By the time he was twelve years old, he had constructed a kind of geography of his universe, composed of these powerful and instinctive affections and dislikes. The picture of the “good” side of the universe, the one the Joyners [his mother’s family] said was bad, was almost always one to which his father was in one way or other attached. (WR 31)

He always had a love of secret and enclosed places . . . In later years, George Webber actually discovered such a world as this in two places. One was the small country-side community in southern Pennsylvania from which his father had come, with its pattern of great red barns, prim brick houses, white fences, and swelling fields . . . The other was in certain sections of Germany and the Austrian Tyrol – places like the Black Forest and the Forest of Thuringia and towns like Weimar, Eisenach, old Frankfort, Kufstein on the Austrian border, and Innsbruck. (WR 32-33)

Interestingly, several of the landscapes and cities, which the autobiographical hero mentions, are among those that, in his notebooks and letters, Wolfe had characterized as ‘magic.’

In fact, the lexical field *unreal and magical, faery quality, measureless realm of Elyfland* signals the psychoanalytical deep structure of Wolfe's romantic German landscapes.

All of these things, and a thousand others, he had connected in a curious but powerful identity with the figure of his father; and because his buried affections and desires drew him so strongly to these things, he felt somehow that they must be bad because he thought them "good," and that he liked them because he was wicked, and his father's son. (*WR* 32)

In the course of the novel's development, the tension within George Webber's heritage increases dramatically – that of his mother's side threatening and that of his father's side saving him from the psychotic nightmare characteristic of male anxieties. Again the metaphors are spatial, reflecting George Webber's "sense of *place*":

And suddenly, like a man who is drowning and feels a rock beneath his feet; like a man lost . . . in the dark and howling desolation of the strange wilderness, who sees light, comes suddenly upon a place of shelter, warmth, salvation, the boy's spirit turns and seizes on the image of his father. (*WR* 85)

The fatherland that here appears as part of a spatial metaphor is the same place that Wolfe had concretized in the Pennsylvania scenery and in the German romantic landscape. It is a positive complement to the frightening and overwhelming mother-land, "the lost half of our dark heart, the secret hunger, need, and magic working in our blood; and though we have not seen it, we recognize it instantly as the land we know the minute that we come to it" (*WR* 86). It is revealing that Wolfe, in identifying the force that drives us to seek out the complementary element of our psyche, uses the same key metaphor *magic* as in his descriptions of German landscapes. The deeper reason why he felt so attracted to Germany seems to be that he "recognized it instantly as the land we know the minute that we come to it" and that he could make these romanticized German landscapes play the redeeming part in his psychological allegory.

### **Wolfe's Split Attitude towards Germany and the Germans**

In a letter of September 7, 1928 to Aline Bernstein, Wolfe makes an interesting distinction in regard to German architecture: "There is the lovely Albert Durer (sic!) and Nurnberg (sic!) style – great delicate gables, cross timbers, and lean-over upper stories, and then there is the



Kaiser Wilhelm Deutschland uber (sic!) Alles style – great rings, and avenues and boulevards filled with these solid ugly masses – all bulging in front with bays and balconies and round turrets” (*L* 138). Leaving no doubt where his preferences lie, he takes “the Kaiser Wilhelm Deutschland uber Alles style of 1880 to 1900” as indication of the belated imperialist ambitions of the *Deutsche Reich*. But he proceeds to remark ironically that with her newly discovered imperialist vision Germany is only following the British and American example: “The way she [Germany] felt about her excellence and her duty to enforce it on others is only the way England has felt, and the way a great many of us in America are feeling now” (*L* 138).

While experiencing the Black Forest as “a place with a Gothic soul” (*L* 262), he mythicizes its people as strangely split in two irreconcilable halves. “These people, with all that is bestial, savage, supernatural, and also all that is rich, profound, kindly and simple, move me more deeply than I can tell you” (*L* 262). Obviously, Wolfe’s attitude to Germany and the Germans was more complex and less naively positive than has been often assumed. On the one hand, Germany appears as a kind of elective homeland, the embodiment of the psychoanalytic fatherland:

He had been to Germany before, but only briefly, and had found the country had an instant, haunting fascination for him. Was it his father’s German blood in his own veins that worked like magic? So it seemed to him. And now he meant to get to know this land, its forests and its cities, which stood already in his heart, not as a foreign country, but as a kind of second homeland of his spirit. (*WR* 663 epigraph to Book Seven of *The Web and the Rock*)

I went to Germany, because of all the countries I have ever seen, outside of my own, that I think, is the country I have liked best, in which I have felt most at home, with whose people I have felt the most natural, instant, and instinctive sympathy and understanding. It is also the country whose magic and mystery have haunted me most. (*L* 904)

On the other hand, there are the many negative impressions and caricatures of Germans, ‘Hun’ being a favorite epithet and men with shaved skulls and corps students with duelling scars dominating Wolfe’s hit list:

A Hun’s shaved skull above his neck seems to have been sawed off and fitted on because of the ridged folds of fat. (Nb I 88)

Passed three students in Corps uniform – they were in taxis, and carried big naked swords – fat unhealthy looking pigs but impressive in all their plumage . . . they arouse my hostility and make me want to fight them. (Nb I 155)

A prominent example of his wavering between fascination and disgust is the Oktoberfest-episode of which he has given several accounts, the most notable being that in Chapter 47 “A Visit to the Fair” in Book Seven *Oktoberfest* of *The Web and the Rock* (1939). Taking part in the Oktoberfest, Webber is driven by “an enormous hunger, a hunger for flesh such as he had never known – he wanted not only to see the Roasted Ox, he wanted to devour great pieces of it. . . . The fragrance and the odor were maddening” (*WR* 706). What is strange though is that when he enters one of “the great beer halls that each held several thousand people” (*WR* 707), he observes the eating of the others not with the neutral detachment of the realist writer, but with the disgust and horror of somebody whose cultural background is characterized by the suppressions and sublimations of Southern Puritanism: “The feeders, it seemed to Monk, were for the most part great heavy people who already had in their faces something of the bloated contentment of swine” (*WR* 707). It is only for a short while that Monk relaxes and becomes one of the party (*WR* 711). Eventually he suffers a culture shock reflected in an archetypal scene:

The effect of these human rings all over that vast and murky hall had in it something that was almost supernatural and ritualistic: something that belonged to the essence of a race was enclosed in those rings, something dark and strange as Asia, something older than the old barbaric forests, something that had swayed around an altar, and had made a human sacrifice, and had devoured burnt flesh . . . . The hall was roaring with their powerful voices. He understood now why other nations feared them so; suddenly he was himself seized with a terrible and deadly fear of them that froze his heart. (*WR* 710-11)

What is interesting about this archetypal image of Germans at the Oktoberfest is that, towards the end, Wolfe gives his vision a political twist (“why other nations feared them so”). Unfortunately, the hero’s mythicizing view leads him to enactment, a drunken brawl, and surgery in a Munich hospital.

In the wake of the successful launching of the German version of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe had been given a hero’s welcome in Berlin by his German publisher Rowohlt and by the American ambassador, William E. Dodd.<sup>15</sup> From Berlin Wolfe and some friends undertook a “beautiful and fine and magical trip to the Wartburg” (*L* 459), associated as much with Martin Luther as with Richard Wagner, and on their way, they visited Weimar, seeing

Goethe’s Gartenhaus, the Goethe Haus as well as the crypt where Goethe and Schiller are buried side by side, and finally with regret we left that wonderful and

lovely old town that seems to me at least to hold in it so much of the spirit of great Germany and the great and noble spirit of freedom, reverence and the high things of the spirit which all of us have loved. (*L* 460)

Wolfe makes the visit to the national shrines at Weimar and the letter to his editor Maxwell Perkins – no friend of Germany and the Germans – the occasion of expressing his sympathies for the country and its people and of defending them against the indefensible:

But I want to tell you that I do not see how anyone who comes here as I have come could possibly fail to love the country, its noble Gothic beauty and its lyrical loveliness, or to like the German people who are, I think, the cleanest, the kindest, the warmest-hearted, and the most honorable I have met in Europe. I tell you this because I think a full and generous recognition must be made of all these facts and because I have been told and felt things here which you and I can never live or stand for and which, if they are true, as by every reason of intuition and faith and belief in the people with whom I have talked I must believe, are damnable. (*L* 460)

The involved diction and syntax with the word ‘damnable’ coming up at long last are revealing. Being close to Ambassador Dodd and like-minded Americans and Germans in Berlin, Wolfe probably knew the nasty facts of Nazi Germany better than he admitted to himself and the recipient of his letter. We who have the advantage of hindsight note with surprise that Wolfe, like many Germans of the time, finds “this evil [of the Nazi regime] so curiously and inextricably woven into a kind of wonderful hope which flourishes and inspires millions of people who are themselves . . . certainly not evil, but one of the most child-like, kindly and susceptible people in the world” (*L* 460). He sees no other way out of the quandary – created by his psycho-analytically rooted sympathies for the German fatherland and the evil facts of the Nazi regime – than to refer the specific historic guilt of the Germans of Hitler’s time to the great reservoir of evil and guilt we all contribute to: “But more and more I feel that we are all of us bound up and tainted by whatever guilt and evil there may be in this whole world, and that we cannot accuse and condemn others without in the end coming back to an accusal of ourselves.” However, the fact remains that, a year after Wolfe’s death in 1938, the ‘Nibelung maniac’ – Faulkner’s inimitable term – started World War II and the *Endlösung der Judenfrage* with the support or toleration of Wolfe’s “most child-like, kindly and susceptible people in the world” (*L* 460).

### The Faustian Collector of Impressions: On Wolfe's Neurotic Aesthetics

That George Webber's hunger is indeed of the nature of a more complex desire is confirmed in the passage in which, in Paris, the young artist tries to assess his specific aesthetic goal and his ensuing artistic mission. The emphasis on the time factor, on the vulture of the Prometheus-myth, and on the metaphor of a soldier in battle underlines the intensity of Monk's endeavor to artistically capture 'reality.' It appears as an activity in which he is driven by a kind of neurotic anxiety:

Day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute, the blind hunger tore at his naked entrails with a vulture's beak. He prowled the streets of Paris like a mad-dened animal, he hurled himself at the protean complexities of its million-footed life like a soldier who hurls himself into a battle: he was baffled, sick with despair, wrung, trembling and depleted, finally exhausted, caught in the toils of that insatiate desire, that terrible hunger . . . The hopeless and unprofitable struggle of the Faustian life had never been so horribly evident as it now was. (*TR* 660)

The fact that George Webber alias Thomas Wolfe defines the aesthetic act primarily as the struggle of perceiving – and that he does so in regard to European culture – is a characteristic feature of several American modernist writers (e.g. Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F.S. Fitzgerald). They leave the snugness of the *Gilded Age* behind and turn eastward, developing their art in, with, and eventually against the inspiration of Europe. What is peculiar of Wolfe's attitude to European culture is his psychic and artistic preoccupation with the quantity of perception.

His relentless striving to take everything in has for him painful consequences: "Never has the *many-ness and the muchness of things* caused me such trouble as in the past six months" (*TR* 680 my emphasis). "*I am overpowered by number – not by quality . . .* I have so much beyond enough of Germany this time that I draw every breath almost with effort" (*Nb* I 203 my emphasis). The most serious consequence is that his 'over-exposure' to European culture undermines his creative power as one can see from two letters to Perkins: "I had *indigestion from seeing and trying to take in too much*, and I was depressed at my failure to settle down to work" (*L* 158 my emphasis); "I have had almost all of Europe I can stand at present. I am coming back to America to work" (*Nb* I 243).

In view of George Webber's writing block, his encounter, in *Of Time and the River*, with his old friend Frank Starwick and his companion

Elinor comes as a godsend because they help George out of his painful predicament: “the intolerable sick anguish of homelessness, insecurity, and homesickness . . . was now instantly banished” (*TR* 683). However, the reader, in contrast to the hero, soon looks through Starwick’s empty eclecticism and Elinor’s seeming superiority.<sup>16</sup> It is only at Starwick’s Mephistophelian attempt to make George give up his striving to create<sup>17</sup> and, like himself, to just lead the life of a bon vivant and fake connoisseur of European culture that George looks through him. Europe’s fascinating and overwhelming culture has increased George’s dilemma, but as he notes in his diary, it has also made him aware of the role of order and discipline: “The European temper is one that has learned control” (*TR* 677). That Wolfe does indeed make some progress in the struggle between limitless perception and the self-discipline needed to create can be seen from the impressive long story “I Have a Thing to Tell You” that appeared – before a corresponding version in the posthumously published novel *You Can’t Go Home Again* – in three instalments, in *The New Republic*, in March 1937.<sup>18</sup>

### **“I Have a Thing to Tell You”: Wolfe’s Farewell to Germany**

In “I Have a Thing to Tell You,” Wolfe is drawing on a painful personal experience in his relationship with Germany, as can be seen from the following passage in his 1937 letter to Dixon Wecter:

At any rate I’ve crossed the Rubicon as far as my relations with the Reich are concerned. It cost me a good deal of time and worry to make up my mind whether I should allow the publication of the story because I am well known in Germany, my books have had a tremendous press there, I have many friends there, and I like the country and the people enormously. But the story wrote itself. It was the truth as I could see it, and I decided that a man’s own self-respect and integrity is worth more than his comfort or material advantage. (*L* 614)

The conversation with Hartmann in the first part of “I Have a Thing to Tell You” reflects Wolfe’s observations of Germany in 1936 when he attended the Olympics. The title, becoming an ominous and suggestive leitmotif in part one, is a translation of the German phrase “Nun will ich Ihnen ’Was Sagen” with which Heinz Ledig-Rowohlt<sup>19</sup> would introduce his accounts of new Nazi atrocities. In 1935, on Wolfe’s first visit to Berlin, political realities were pushed in the background and outshone by his glamorous reception as the celebrated

author of *Go Homeward, Angel* (1929): “German critics had said tremendous things about it . . . when I got to Berlin people were waiting for me” (*Nb* II 905). He speaks of the “golden sparkle of the days, there was a sound of music in the air.” But among the sounds that he notes was also “the liquid smack of leather boots upon the streets as men in uniform came by with goose precision.” Still, his success, the brilliant parties given by Ernst Rowohlt – soon to be tried by the Nazis – and by the American ambassador, William E. Dodd, the relationships with women like Martha Dodd and Thea Voelcker, excursions like the one to Weimar and the Wartburg, last but not least the newly discovered landscape around Berlin. (“chains of lovely lakes around Berlin . . . wonderful golden bronze upon the tall poles of the Kiefern trees,” *Nb* II 905) had dominated his 1935 visit to Berlin.

Now in 1936, on his second visit, he notes “a cruel and progressive dissolution in the lives of all the people I had known,” and also, in conjunction with the Berlin Olympics, “an increased concentration, a stupendous organization, a tremendous drawing together and ordering, in the vast collective power of the whole land” (*Nb* II 911). His old love for Germany lets him be again impressed by the country, and he speaks of “the organizing strength and genius of the German people,” describing the Berlin of the Olympics as “a thrilling tournament of color that caught the throat, and that in its masses splendor and grand dignity made all the gaudy decorations of our own Worlds’ Fairs, inaugurations, great parades look like a scheme of shoddy carnivals in the comparison” (*Nb* II 911). But Wolfe no longer has any illusions about the political situation in Germany and its psychological and moral consequences: “I returned in 1936 . . . the pestilence of the year before had spread and deepened . . . the evidence of pressure and of fear was everywhere sharply more apparent. The personal evidences were appalling and too innumerable to relate” (*Nb* II 909). It is this disillusioning experience and the profound sadness about the decay of the country he continued to love as the land of Dürer and Beethoven, Goethe and Schiller – but that had now definitely become Nazi-Germany – that gives “I Have a Thing to Tell You” its poignancy.

The five persons that in Part II of the story travel in one compartment from Berlin to Paris are carefully chosen. In addition to a still attractive businesswoman and her younger lover, representing the Germany adjusting to Nazism and anti-Semitism, there is a second pair, the narrator, an American writer, and a Polish-American Wallstreet

broker, expressing the uninformed and indifferent view from outside, while a fifth person, “a sour-looking, drab little man with a long nose,” (161) whom the narrator gives the sobriquet, “old Fuss-And-Fidget,” appears right from the beginning as the odd man out. In contrast to tense and nervous “old Fuss-And-Fidget,” the two Americans are relaxed and enjoy a sumptuous meal, in the course of which the Polish American broker tells the narrator: “I am sick of Europe I am tired of all this foolish business, these politics, this hate, these armies and this talk of war – the whole damn stuffy atmosphere” (161). The split of the five persons in a group of four and one travelling alone points forward to the dramatic revelation, in Part III, when “old Fuss-And-Fidget” turns out to be a Jewish lawyer who is trying in vain to flee from Nazi-Germany and who is arrested by the Gestapo in the border town of Aachen.

The imminence of a tragic event is foreshadowed by the sinister description, at the beginning of Part III, of “the great industrial region of western Germany. The pleasant landscape had been darkened by the grime and smoke of enormous works. Now it was grim with the skeletons of enormous smelting and refining plants” (202). Characteristically, the narrator had not seen this ominous landscape – where Hitler was preparing his war machinery – before. After the arrest of their fellow traveller, he sums up the feelings of the four: “we looked at him for the last time, and he at us – this time, more direct and steadfastly. And in this glance there was all the silence of man’s mortal anguish. And we were all somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow guilty” (206). This reflexion is followed by Wolfe’s more personal resumé of his feelings at leaving Germany for good.

I too was ‘out’ of the great land whose image had been engraved upon my spirit in childhood and my youth before I had ever seen it . . . which had been for me so much more than place. It was a geography of heart’s desire. It was a soul’s dark wonder, the haunting beauty of the magic land. It had been burning there forever, like the dark Helen burning in man’s blood. And now like the dark Helen, it was lost to me . . . I had been at home in it and it in me . . . Therefore it was no foreign land to me. It was the other half of my heart’s home. (207)

The experience of Germany in 1936 had as profound an effect upon Thomas Wolfe as upon George Webber, the hero of his novel *You Can’t Go Home Again*: “He had come face to face with something old and genuine evil in the spirit of man” (*YCGHA* 705). In his enlightened worldview, Wolfe could not accept that Hitlerism was another expression of man’s ever present potential of evil, but regarded it as “a re-



crudescence of an old barbarism," speaking of it in the atavistic terms he had used in the Oktoberfest section of *The Web and the Rock* and calling it "a throwback to that fierce and ancient tribalism which had sent waves of hairy Teutons swooping down out of the north to destroy the vast edifice of Roman civilization" (*YCGHA* 705). At the same time, he sees national socialism and fascism as an international contemporary phenomenon, not accepting the comfortable and therefore widespread solution to identify it as deriving from the characteristics of a particular race or culture: "But this spirit was not confined to Germany. It belonged to no one race. It was a terrible part of the universal heritage of man . . . It took on many guises, many labels. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin—each had his own name for it. And America had it, too, in various forms" (*YCGHA* 705).

Under the impact of his experience of Nazi Germany, he also critically examines the American democratic heritage, coming to the conclusion: "I do not think political democracy has failed, but I think the processes have been so corrupted and weakened that failure is possible, and its survival dubious" (*Nb* II 916). In contrast to Sinclair Lewis' satire *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), Wolfe does not think, "there is a grave Fascist danger" (*Nb* II 916) in the United States. However, he is bitterly critical of the social situation, speaking of the disappointed "hope of high and glorious fulfilment in America" and of "America's betrayal of her self" (*Nb* II 916).

One of Wolfe's reactions after his final departure from Europe was a lessening of his interest in transatlantic comparisons that had occupied him so much ever since his first trip to Europe. But the renewal of his interest in America was not characterized by narrow isolationism nor by a bigoted anti-European or anti-German nationalism. On the contrary, Wolfe felt a critical responsibility as well as loyalty towards both his region and his nation ("it was not only in the South that America was hurt . . . we must probe to the bottom of our collective wound. As men, as Americans, we can no longer cringe away and lie" *YCGHA* 328-9). In contrast to T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Wolfe's profound interest in Europe had never meant a denial of his Southern and American identity. On May 23 1935, he had written to his editor Maxwell Perkins from Berlin of his admiration for Ambassador Dodd, a fellow North Carolinian, and of other Americans he had met in Berlin and who, in the face of Nazism, confirmed him in his belief in American values: "I have felt a renewed pride and faith in America and a belief that somehow our great future remains" (*L* 461).



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner (New York: Random House, 1977). *The Letters of Thomas Wolfe*, collected and edited, with an introduction and explanatory text, by Elizabeth Nowell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956). *The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe*, ed. Richard S. Kennedy and Paschal Reeves, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: UNCP, 1970).
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Wolfe was in Europe from October 24, 1924 to August 26, 1925. William Faulkner from August 2 to December 9, 1925.
- <sup>3</sup> See Faulkner's letters to his mother in *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* 8-31.
- <sup>4</sup> Leo Gurko, *Thomas Wolfe: Beyond the Romantic Ego* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975); Elizabeth Evans, *Thomas Wolfe* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1984).
- <sup>5</sup> *William Faulkner, Novels 1930 – 1935, Sanctuary* (1931), ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (New York: The Library of America, 1985).
- <sup>6</sup> For instance, the *Place de Ville* of the French town “whose walls were older than Clovis and Charlemagne” (789), the brief mention of bits of rococo interior as background in the meetings of the military leaders (876), and a summary representation of the Champs Elysées from the Place de la Concorde to the Arch in the conclusion (1068). *William Faulkner, Novels 1942 – 1954, A Fable* (1954), ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (New York: The Library of America, 1994). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>7</sup> *William Faulkner, Novels 1957 – 1962, The Town* (1957), ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (New York: The Library of America, 1999). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>8</sup> *William Faulkner, Novels 1957 – 1962, The Mansion* (1959), ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (New York: The Library of America, 1999). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (Garden City, New York: The Sun Dial Press 1942). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>10</sup> Kennedy, Richard S., *The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe* (Chapel Hill: UNCP, 1962).
- <sup>11</sup> Wolfe, Thomas, *Look Homeward, Angel, A Story of the Buried Life*. With an Introduction by Maxwell E. Perkins (1929; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time And The River. A Legend of Man's Hunger In His Youth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1935. Garden City, New York: The Sun Dial Press, 1944). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>13</sup> Wolfe's invocation of the father-image may also derive from Goethe's poem “Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn.” In the refrain of the third stanza, Mignon, on her way to Italy envisaging a frightening alpine scenery, turns from her beloved protector to her father: “Dahin! Dahin / Geht unser Weg; O Vater, lass uns ziehn!”
- <sup>14</sup> Richard S. Kennedy, “Thomas Wolfe and the American Experience,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 2.3 (Autumn 1965): 219–33.
- <sup>15</sup> On Wolfe in Berlin: H. M. Ledig-Rowohl, “Thomas Wolfe in Berlin,” *The American Scholar* 22 (Spring 1953): 185–201; William E. Dodd, Jr. & Martha Dodd, eds.,

*Diplomat auf heißem Boden. Tagebuch des USA-Botschafters William E. Dodd in Berlin 1933-38* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1961); Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1987).

- <sup>16</sup> “What mountains and oceans of junk! . . . In that whole place [the Louvre] there are just three things worth seeing – . . . but *they are unspeakably* beautiful, Eugene! God!” (*TR* 683).
- <sup>17</sup> “You want to lead the artist’s life, to do the artist’s work . . . what will it matter in the end if you do this, or nothing?” (*TR* 710).
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas Wolfe, “I Have a Thing to Tell You (Nun Will Ich Ihnen ‘Was sagen),” *The New Republic* 1937; I 10 March 1937: 132-36; II 17 March 1937: 159-64; III 24 March 1937: 202-07.
- <sup>19</sup> *Nb* II 835 “Commentary.”

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