THOMAS WOLFE - DRAMATIST

CHAPTER I

THOMAS WOLFE: DRAMATIST

Thomas Wolfe was a giant of a man, both physically and emotionally. Standing six foot four, he possessed a sensitivity to match his size. All his life he was able to squeeze meaning from the smallest word, gesture, or event, and all his life his tendency to exaggerate these words, gestures, and events often caused him acute pain and self-doubt. He had enormous appetites, which could be sated only with love, praise, and support. In almost pathological fashion, his love turned to hatred at the least change, real or imagined, in other people's feelings towards him.

His writing - whether letters, novels, or drama - is frequently overlong, because his gifts tended toward expansiveness rather than compression. It was a number of years before Wolfe himself saw that this talent was better suited to the novel than to the play, but until then he was committed to becoming a dramatist. The few plays he wrote were, for the most part, poor, since Wolfe was not a good

judge of his work and was unable to accept constructive criticism graciously. He vacillated in those years from the vision of himself as the messiah of American drama to the conviction of his ineptitude as a writer; these attitudes shifted from day to day.

His drama, however, did launch him on a writing career. It gave him the opportunity to experiment with techniques, to develop characters, situations, and theories which he transplanted successfully into the novels. The years he spent as a playwright must be considered more positive than negative in relation to his later work as a novelist.

It is perhaps an accident of fate that Thomas Wolfe became so enthralled with the drama that he dedicated his life to it and spent at least eight years in pursuit of an elusive dream. Professor Frederick Koch arrived at the University of North Carolina in 1918, when Wolfe was in his junior year. Koch set up a workshop in folk drama, which was becoming a new source of fresh talent for the American stage of the early twentieth century. Groups were

appearing around the country and new theatres were founded to produce the best of the work. Wolfe became a charter member of the Carolina Playmakers and a disciple of the drama.

Wolfe had come to Chapel Hill with a solid background in literature and the classics gained under the guidance of Mrs. Margaret Roberts, his beloved teacher at the private school he had attended. But neither in his notebooks[1] nor in his letters had there been any mention of an inclination to become a playwright.

He enrolled in Koch's course for two years during which time he dashed off a number of one-act dramas.[2] Typical of these is The Return of Buck Gavin, a shallow piece of work written in about three hours the night before the deadline. A classmate of his recalls that Wolfe was always running into class bleary-eyed after an all-night

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[1]Richard S. Kennedy. The Window of Memory, The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe (The University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

[2]The Third Night - A Mountain Play of the Supernatural, Deferred Payment, Concerning Honest Bob.

session of scribbling,[3] a haphazard method which was Wolfe's approach to composition during the entire two years. Unfortunately there was practically no constructive criticism offered in the course. Koch explained that "such a process may tend to make the young writer self-conscious - to inhibit his impulse to write".[4]

In later years, Wolfe himself came to the bitter realization that nobody in that class, including the professor, really knew what folk-drama was. A caricature of Koch is found in "O Lost", the original version of Look Homeward Angel; he is "The Little Man with the Urge". In the same manuscript, Wolfe parodies his own first play as Eugene Gant's The Return of Jed Sevier - "a mock tragedy of the soil". Both pieces reveal a deep-rooted bitterness over the uncritical encouragement accorded his poor dramatic efforts; but at the time, the uncensored praise led him to choose a blind alley for his creative drive.

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[3]Kennedy, p. 47.

[4]Frederick H. Koch, Carolina Folk Plays, Series 2 (New York, 1924), Introduction, p. xix.

Koch's attitude is best gleaned from the introduction to the 1924 edition of Carolina Folk Plays. About The Return of Buck Gavin, he stated:

> It was written in the fall of 1918, the year of the beginnings of the Carolina Playmakers, for our initial performance. "Tom" himself played the part of Buck Gavin - no one else could be found to do it - no one who knew the life as he knew it. He had never acted before, but a glance at the illustration accompanying the text will indicate how completely he embodied the character of his rugged hero. He was scarcely eighteen years of age then, but he had found himself as "playmaker" in his own play.

Koch gives no critical analysis of the play as drama, but he does go on to quote the earliest statement of dramatic theory made by Wolfe at the time of composing "Buck Gavin". This is of significance in any study of Wolfe's development as a playwright and later as a novelist, since much of the theory was modified to fit the new medium.

> I (Koch) have before me as I write, the original manuscript of the little play, and his [Wolfe's] illuminating forward - good counsel for the young author. "When the dramatic possibilities of this incident flashed upon me", he

> says, "I immediately started to work with a set of mountain characters, the principal being Buck Gavin, an outlaw. It is a fallacy of the young writer, I believe, to picture the dramatic as unusual and remote. It is therefore but natural that he should choose for the setting of his first effort a New York apartment house, the Barbary Coast of San Francisco, or some remote land made dramatic by all the exotic perfumes of Arabia .... But the dramatic is not unusual. It is happening daily in our lives. Some of us, perhaps, toil on a mountain farm, and when we relax from the stolidity of mind and allow ourselves thought, it is to think bitterly on the unvaried, monotonous grind of our existence. Here is drama in the true sense.

And Koch concludes:

> In his phrasing of his own feelings, the youthful writer of "Buck Gavin" has expressed the attitude of all our group. When the writer portrays the characters and scenes with which he is familiar - simple, homely scenes they may be - we share with him the life he knows and feels. His drama becomes our own.

The playwright has a very provincial viewpoint at this early period, and despite his later travels and cosmopolitan friends, he never quite lost this small-town attitude until the last year of his life. But the basic theory of dealing with the familiar remains sound.

In later statements he refines and qualifies the idea of the dramatic possibilities of daily life. In Buck Gavin he was not following his own precepts. He was more familiar with small-town life than with life in the backwoods mountains, which he knew only through family legend and reading.

It is unclear how such a paltry effort as The Return of Buck Gavin, supposedly a typical Chapel Hill play, could elicit the unqualified praise of anyone at all versed in drama. It is based on an actual incident in the life of a Texas bank robber named Patrick Lavin or "Cyclone Pat". Buck is chief of a mountain clan and is wanted by the law for bootlegging and murder. Impelled by a combination of loyalty to a dead friend and a sense of ultimate family doom, he has come back to lay flowers on Jim's grave. Jim was killed while covering Buck's escape. The action is set in the log cabin of Gavin and his sister Mary. It is "more pretentious than usually associated with mountain cabins".[5] Mary is about thirty-five with a "care-worn" face and grey-streaked hair. Buck comes in stealthily. He is a

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[5]Thomas Wolfe, The Return of Buck Gavin, Carolina Folk Plays, ed. Frederich H. Koch (New York, 1924), p. 33.

huge man with black hair, eyes, and beard, who moves with decisiveness. He seems to have been impelled home by an unconscious desire to fulfill his destiny. There is much potential in the theme, but Wolfe handles it superficially. Both Buck and his sister are inarticulate mountain folk and do not rise above stock figures. There is a distinctive mountain twang in their speech.

> Mary: But 'twarn't no use, Buck, 'twarn't no use for you to risk yer neck after all's over.
>
> Buck: Thar's the rub. "Tain't all over. There's one mo' leetle job to be done, an' I reckon I'll git to see that through ... least-ways, I'd better.[6]

This "leetle job" of putting flowers on Jim's grave does not seem sufficiently compelling to sustain the plot. Buck has come back because "they allus git us".[7] Predictably, while Mary goes out to gather violets, the sheriff comes in with a "Welcome home, Buck", to which Gavin responds "Aw .... Hell ...."[8] Mary returns and

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[6]Wolfe, Buck Gavin, p. 35.

[7]Wolfe, Buck Gavin, p. 44.

[8]Wolfe, Buck Gavin, p. 41.

cries out in despair, "Oh Buck, you needn't o' been caught. You could've got away". And her brother makes a ridiculous pun "It is the law. You cain't buck it".[9] So Mary is left to take the flowers as Buck goes to the gallows. The only interest in the whole play is Buck's motivation. Wolfe repeatedly used the motif of a family doom in his writing. Apart from this, the folk-drama remains flat.

Wolfe used the theme of the returning outlaw for another one-act drama called Deferred Payment. It was published in the University Magazine in June, 1919, a poorer play than Buck Gavin. Again there is a cabin, this time with walls "garishly decorated". Lucy, a "worn, frail" mountain woman, her husband Jack, a drunken bootlegging, wife-beater, and Jack's convict brother Sam are the only characters.

Jack, described as "bestial, unshaven, gorilla-like",[10] has framed Sam for a murder and married Sam's

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[9]Wolfe, Buck Gavin, p. 43.

[10]Thomas Wolfe, Deferred Payment, "The University Magazine", June 1919, p. 140.

beloved Lucy. After two agonizing months in "Hell's Half-acre", Sam, dying of consumption, escapes and returns to settle the debt between the brothers. The plot is contrived and lacks suspense; words and actions do not flow smoothly. When Jack reads in the newspapers of Sam's escape, he is agitated - "Gawd! What if he did come hyeh![11] And as he speaks the door opens and in walks Sam, the sensitive one. There is no subtlety of character or dialogue; everything is quite predictable, as in a scene between Lucy and Jack when he comes home drunk

> The Woman: Oh, y've been at hit agin!
>
> The Man: Sure, Hit's m'right
>
> The Woman: But - Jack - hit's not right - hit's agin th'law![12]

The play could be read today as a parody of a television western. The convict, playing "cat and rat" with his brother, says "Y' dirty dawg, y' know why I'm hyeh". He reveals that a dying convict in prison told him about the frame-up. "Quit yer bluffin'. I got the' goods on y' now".[13] Jack won't give in:

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[11] Deferred Payment, p. 142.

[12] Deferred Payment, p. 143.

[13] Deferred Payment, p. 146-47.

> Well, whut uv hit now? Nobuddy knows
> but th' three uv us, an' he's gone. Hit's
> yore word agin mine, an' ye're a jailbird.
> So thar y'air - Ye cain't do nothin'
> 'bout hit.[14]

Sam takes out a gun, but is dissuaded from killing Jack by Lucy's sudden appearance and pleading. When she takes the gun, her husband stabs Sam, who cries out as he falls, "You - dawg!" Lucy screams "Oh God, he's stabbed y', Sam!" and Sam answers stoically, "He got me."[15] Jack runs out as Sam dies with the words "...He will pay".

Professor Koch's reaction to this play is unrecorded, but it would be impossible to discern the work of a potential talent behind those stilted lines.

The following year, the Magazine published another Wolfe play, Concerning Honest Bob, a satire on campus. politics using characters with Jonsonian names, such as Mr. Alf Cockure, Mr. Boise Useddit, Mr. Edward Wiseman, and Mr. Robert Goodman, otherwise knows as "Honest Bob the student's friend". They are Sophomore, Graduate, Senior

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[14] Deferred Payment, p. 151-52.

and Junior in that order, each with a particular point of view.

The Senior and the Graduate walk into the Sophomore's room in which the walls are "garishly decorated", a favorite scene with Wolfe. Both men have obnoxious, condescending manners. "What fools these Sophomores be!"[16] Spring elections are in the offing and the conversation turns to campus politics which the Graduate finds "positively funny", although two years before when he was "a mere boy", he, too, had posed as the student's friend. They discuss the "Ring", an organization that works through the class quietly to get their man elected. Bob Goodman enters and vehemently denies their taunts about his "politicing". They argue, the Senior and Graduate leave angrily, and Bob goes to shave. He overhears two classmates come to his room; they are discussing his potential as a candidate. One is against him because he is "too slick a politician"; the other insists he "hasn't got a politicking bone in him".[17]

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[16]Thomas Wolfe, Concerning Honest Bob, The University Magazine, May 1920, p. 252.

[17]Concerning Honest Bob, p. 256.

They decide to test him by offering to set a Ring to work for him. If he agrees, they will switch allegiance to another man; if he objects, they will apologize and support him. They go out to await his return, and Goodman pretends to arrive from the library. He not only refuses their offer; he is indignant, "Gawd knows, I have my faults, but I have never stooped to politics".[18] Naturally, the two apologize and support him. Just then the Sophomore returns and almost gives Bob away, but he stops in time. Before retiring Bob threatens him if ever he discloses the truth.

Concerning Honest Bob is an immature piece of writing. There is little hint of Wolfe's later capacity for human satire; nor is there any humour in the dialogue. Each character is a stereotype and the situation is predictable except for the ominous note revealed in Bob's character at the end, which is out of key with the overall tone. The play is a college joke not to be regarded seriously. Wolfe himself was very active in campus politics

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[18] Concerning Honest Bob, p. 259.

and he was likely taking a good-natured jab at his own self-pretensions and those of his classmates.

Although Koch misled Wolfe into believing he was a great dramatist, it was "one of the fortunate ironies of Thomas Wolfe's life that undiscriminating encouragement launched him on a writing career that was to become the center of his existence for the rest of his life".[19] In addition, the Playmakers were encouraged to make use of personal experience, which Wolfe did in his best novels. Therefore, the Chapel Hill years were of consequence, although it is easy to understand Wolfe's later bitterness at what appeared to have been wasted years.

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[19]Kennedy, p. 49.

CHAPTER II

THE HARVARD YEARS - PART I

After graduation from Chapel Hill, Wolfe left for Harvard to study journalism, but his first stop on arrival was at Professor George Pierce Baker's 47 Workshop, a playwriting class begun in 1905, which had developed into a theatre laboratory producing student efforts. Years later, Wolfe told a Purdue University audience how his youthful impulse had led him in the wrong direction.

> For several years after I left college (Chapel Hill) I knew nothing but failure and rejection. I was still trying to write plays - although it was largely chance and accident that had led me to writing plays, I was now fanatically convinced that plays were all that I could ever write; were all I cared to write, were what I had been destined by nature to write - and that unless I could write them, and succeed with them, my whole life was lost. This was not only wrong - it was as fanatically wrong as anything could be: whatever other talents I had for playwriting - and I think I had some - the specific requirements of the theatre for condensation, limited characterization, and selected focus were really not especially for me. Even my plays at that time showed unmistakably the evidence of my real desire - for they abounded in scenes and characters, a great variety of places and of people, too great a variety, in fact, for the economic and commercial enterprise of the theatre profitably to produce.

> Something in me, very strong and powerful, was groping toward a more full, expansive, and abundant expression of the great theatre of life than the stage itself could physically compass.[20]

The observation, however, was made eighteen years later. In October 1920, Wolfe was overwhelmed at the prospect of being part of the Workshop. It attracted aspiring playwrights from across the nation and from every conceivable background. Professor Baker knew many successful playwrights, actors, producers, and directors on both sides of the Atlantic, and to the students the professor's acquaintances were sufficient reason to respect and listen to him. Wolfe wrote enthusiastically to his mother:

> My experience in writing plays under Mr. Koch at Chapel Hill has helped me considerably. George Pierce Baker is the great dramatic teacher up here. Koch is a former student of his. When I tried to register up for his English 47 known as "the 47 Workshop" I was told I could not by any means get in since the course is restricted to twelve people and mature writers all over the country submit plays a year ahead of time (one of his requirements) to get in. I went around and saw Mr. Baker who just got home from England ....

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[20] Thomas Wolfe, Purdue Speech: "Writing and Living, ed. William Braswell and Leslie A. Field (Purdue University Studies, 1964), p. 46.

> He thawed out immediately when I told him I was under Koch at Chapel Hill for two years and he commented enthusiastically on the work Koch was doing saying he was one of his "pets". He asked me if Koch had produced any of my plays and I told him two. He then asked their names and altho he had not read them he was familiar with their titles, as he has kept up with their work. So he is letting me into the sacred circle of the "47 Workshop" and even suggested that we might put on a couple of the Chapel Hill plays, one of mine included, "To show these people here what you're doing down there".
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> Nearly every year a play is taken by Baker from his class and put on Broadway .... Of course I do not hope for any success like this in competition with seasoned and mature writers, but he tells me, "When you come into my course it is with the intention of eventually being a playwright. If you have the ability I'll make one out of you". It is a great prospect for me, but I know I must work.[21]

The Workshop setting belied its reputation. Housed in an ancient building in the Harvard Yard, it had a large open space littered with wood, props, and lighting equipment. Professor Baker had a tiny office partitioned off this space which the class shared with the University carpentry staff. Harvard President Lowell had little esteem for the Workshop. But the students felt otherwise.

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[21]Thomas Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, ed. by John Skally Terry (New York, 1943), pp.10-11.

Wolfe always had secret hopes of success on Broadway, and his enthusiasm continued to grow. After one month he told Koch that Baker had suggested staging some of the Chapel Hill plays and that he had read and liked "Buck Gavin" better than "Third Night". Despite Baker's encouragement, he still had some difficulty in adjusting to the Harvard atmosphere of sophisticated wit and sardonic comment.

> Imagine a raw Tar Heel who, with native simplicity has been accustomed to wade into a play (at Chapel Hill) with "that's great stuff" or "rotten" - simple and concise. Why one man the other day made a criticism of a play as follows: "That situation seems to be a perfect illustration of the Freudian complex" ... At any rate, you understand the atmosphere, and they are all sincere earnest people at that, but with that blasé sophistication that seems typical of Harvard.[22]

In future writing, Wolfe was less generous in his assessment of his fellow students. Of Time and the River contains some scathing criticism of their arrogant aestheticism; many of the classmates were horrified at the portrait of themselves given by Wolfe. Toward the

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[22]Elizabeth Nowell, The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, (New York, 1956), p. 10.

end of his life, he mellowed somewhat and could view the whole group with amused detachment touched with left-over bitterness:

> At Harvard, for the first time in my life, I was thrown into the company of a group of sophisticated people - at least, they seemed very sophisticated to me in those days. Instead of people like myself, who had felt within themselves the timid but unspoken flutterings of a desire to write, and to be a writer, here were people who openly asserted that they were. They not only openly asserted that they were, but they openly asserted that a great many other people that I had thought were most dismally were not. It seems that there was hardly a leading figure writing for the theatre in those days who escaped their censure. Shaw, for example, was "amusing" - but he was not a dramatist, he had never learned how to write a play; O'Neill's reputation was grossly exaggerated - his dialogue was clumsy, and his characters stock types; Barrie was insufferable on account of his sentimentality; as for Pinero, Jones, and others of that ilk, their productions were already so dated that they were laughable - in fact, almost everyone was out of step, one gathered, except our own small group of Jims.[23]

Wolfe admits that he did learn to be more critical and to question standards of taste, but at the same time he was becoming involved with a group who specialized in

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[23]Wolfe, Purdue Speech, p. 41.

"speeches of niggling and over-refined aestheticism" and who were "too detached from life to provide the substance and the inspiration of high creative work".

Nevertheless, Wolfe never lost his own integrity. Gradually through voluminous reading and studying, he derived from his jottings a theory of drama with conclusions similar to, but more complex than, those already formulated at Chapel Hill.

> I'm reading voraciously in the drama, stocking up with materials the same as a carpenter carries a mouthful of nails; I am studying plays, past and present, and the technique of these plays, emphasis, suspense, clearness, plot, proportion and all the rest, and I've come to realize that this doctrine of divine inspiration is as damnable as that of the divine right of kings. I realize that, to a certain measure, the fair name of the Carolina Playmakers at Fair Harvard rests with me, and the Carolina type of play is what I'm going on with.[24]

In a 1921 paper for Professor Greenough, Wolfe again upheld the Chapel Hill movement as one that "cannot be underestimated", because the material grows out of the very life of the author. But he qualifies this "real

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[24]Nowell, Letters, p. 11.

life" approach in his ideal of the theatre:

> I go to [the theatre] to be lifted out and away, and if that sensation leaves as soon as the curtain falls I don't think the play worth a single curse. I don't think we go to see life as it is in all its minutiae - to h - with the realists "as they style themselves - if a play hasn't some lifting quality besides bare, sordid realism, then it becomes nothing but a photograph of life, and what place has a photograph in art? ... Just as "Macbeth" and "Oedipus the King" become bigger than men they become monuments of Great Ideas - so should the play become something bigger and finer than drab, sordid commonplace everyday life. And in spite of all our pathetic optimism, that's just what everyday life is - drab, sordid, and commonplace.[25]

So while the playwright must draw from his own experiences, he must temper them and raise them to a higher plane where they embody Great Ideas capable of uplifting man.

The theory was applied unsuccessfully in Wolfe's next play, The Mountains. Begun at Chapel Hill, it tells of a young Carolina doctor who returns to take up his father's practice in a native region and give care to the

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[25]Nowell, Letters, p. 12.

poor mountain folk. On his arrival, an old family feud is reactivated and despite his determination to remain uninvolved, he succumbs and picks up his rifle as the play ends. Wolfe sent a duplicate copy to his mother with a covering letter. He admits that it is overlong and needs condensation "but it is the real thing and deals with a great tragedy". It is

> the tragedy of a fine young man who returns to his mountains with fine dreams and ideals of serving his people. It is not a feud play, although the feud is used. The tragedy of the play is the tragedy of this fine young man fighting against conditions that overcome him and destroy him in the end. When you read this play, I hope you will be aware of this tragedy, and the tragedy of the lot of these poor oppressed mountain people, old and worn out at middle age by their terrific hopeless battle with the mountain.[26]

The motivation for the play grew out of indignation at the romanticizing of mountain life by many writers - a complete misrepresentation of what is actually "a terrible sordid story". Wolfe claims it is the best play written in the Worskhop that year, and he accomplished it partly because of enthusiasm and partly because his distance from North

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[26]Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, p. 13.

Carolina provided him with a needed sense of perspective. He wants his mother's true opinion. "All the critics in the world may say it's good but a man's own mother will know."[27]

A trial performance was given on January 25, 1921, in the Workshop Rehearsal Room. One month later, Wolfe was confident of a production at Harvard and "a road trip if my revision justifies it."[28] After revision it was produced at the Agassiz Theatre at Radcliffe on October 21, and 22, 1921. It was customary Workshop practice to have the audience submit written criticism in the belief that the comments would be helpful to an aspiring playwright. This was contradictory to the whole philosophy of the Carolina Playmakers and a classmate of Wolfe's recalls that Tom "no more expected to hear from his audience than an actor on stage would expect comment from beyond the footlights."[29] All the criticism of The Mountains was unfavourable; after all his optimism, Wolfe reacted with hurt bitterness. The play had failed

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[27]Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, p. 14.

[28]Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, p. 21.

[29]Philip W. Barber, "Tom Wolfe Writes a Play", Harper's Magazine, Vol. 216 No. 1296 (May 1958), p. 72.

to lift the audience "out and away". In his personal Outline he noted: "The writing of my play - reading it to Ketchum - his generous enthusiasm - Alas the generous enthusiasm of Baker - But how they turn on you when it fails - the coldness, the neglect".[30] Even the notes have a melodramatic overtone. Two letters, written but never mailed, to Professor Baker give a more detailed reaction to the failure of the play:

> My play has been called "depressing" so many times in the criticisms, and with so small a store of illuminating evidence that I am even now in doubt as to just what has depressed these gentle souls.
> My play is wordy, I admit [but I] take it they didn't mean exactly this. The play itself, the theme, more than the manner and the execution, depressed them. All I have to do to please these people is to change the ending slightly. The cause of depression having been thus removed by these slight changes, the curtain can descend leaving the audience to go home in a happy frame of mind, knowing that virtue and the higher education has triumphed, and myself - to go out and jump into the Charles River. This can never be! My show is over, they will not have to suffer again, but, even now, they can't egg me into changing the ending.
> .... Let me write a contemptible little epic to small-town mean-ness (a favourite theme nowadays) in which the principal goes down to defeat from the parlor-and-gate slander of spinsters, and they will applaud me to the echo. "This is life! This is reality! This is a play of great and vital

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[30]Richard S. Kennedy, The Window of Memory, The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe, (University of North Carolina Press, 1962) p. 72.

> forces!" But let a man go down in a monster struggle with such epic things as mountains, and it is merely depressing and sordidly realistic. They can see no poetry to such a fight.[31]

Characteristically, Wolfe over-reacts; he takes the criticism very personally and sees the critics as his persecutors. There is something almost frightening in this paranoid outburst. While he possessed a certain grandeur of spirit, he harbored deep within himself at the same time a miserable pettiness which often resulted in malicious criticism of his classmates. At times he became slanderous as in the case of Kenneth Raisbeck, Baker's assistant, who had befriended Wolfe when he arrived at Harvard. Wolfe held him in awe until they had a quarrel and parted bitterly. When Raisbeck died of spinal meningitis, Wolfe circulated a hideous lie, regaling all listeners with the gruesome details of Raisbeck's death as he tried to attack a young man in a cemetery.[32] So it is not inconceivable that he have a violent reaction to adverse criticism of his work.

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[31]Nowell, Letters, p. 19-20.

[32]Barber, p. 76.

But he did not jump into the Charles River. Only one month after those letters, he was comparing his play to Eugene O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon - "probably our greatest native play".[33] He continued to dismiss the comments of the audience and stood convinced that The Mountains had been successful. He would now expand it to three acts.

Wolfe remained determined to devote his life to the drama. In February, 1922, he wrote to Horace Williams, a former professor: "I must be where I can read plays, see plays, and study plays. I think this is absolutely necessary if I'm ever to become an artist."[34] In letters and notes, he continued to drop scattered observations on drama. Many of his opinions were out of tune with those of his classmates. For example, he considered Barrie "the most significant dramatist in the English-speaking world today - an arch heresy here where some of my young critical friends consider him as "sentimental" [but] like Shakespeare and other old fogies [he] is more

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[33]Nowell, Letters, p. 22.

[34]Nowell, Letters, p. 27.

interested in the stories of human beings than in the labor problem".[35]

The dramatist mentioned most often in Wolfe's notes is Eugene O'Neill, "the beacon light of our own drama today; he's kept his ideals and now seems in a fair way to prosper by them". He felt, however, that O'Neill had a tendency to look backward while "great tragedy must look ahead". Nevertheless, Wolfe seems to have visualized himself as a potential O'Neill. In March of the same year, he told Edwin Greenlaw, another former teacher: "It won't be long until America has a drama. If we have three or four men of the calibre of Eugene O'Neill, each with a capacity for a different form, our drama has arrived. I don't feel as if I'm walking toward the sun but as if I could almost touch it. The thing will surely happen soon".[36] Yet a few weeks later, he had another of his moody changes of heart and wrote to Professor Baker withdrawing from his course:

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[35]Nowell, Letters, p. 25.

[36]Nowell, Letters, p. 29.

"The conviction has grown on me that I shall never express myself dramatically. I am therefore ending the agony by the shortest way; I would not be a foolish drifter promising myself big things".[37] No copy of this letter was ever found in Baker's files, so there is some doubt whether Wolfe ever sent it. Obviously Wolfe's was a passing mood, because the next month he submitted his three act revision of The Mountains with an enthusiastic letter.

In a passage finally omitted from Of Time and the River, Wolfe described his feelings towards Baker. "I worshipped him for almost a year. He was the great man, the prophet, the infinitely wise and strong and gentle spirit who knew all, had seen all, could solve all problems by a word, release us of all the anguish, grief and error of our lives by a wave of his benevolent hand".[38] But in the classroom, the young dramatist rarely displayed such affection for his Professor.[39] And still, he remained.

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[37] Nowell, Letters, p. 31.

[38] Elizabeth Nowell, Thomas Wolfe: A Biography, (New York, 1960) p. 58.

[39] Barber, p. 73.

While expanding The Mountains, Wolfe had begun other plays, none of which is published and two of which have significance in his later writings. One, begun in the spring of 1921, was entitled The Heirs or The Wasters, which later became Mannerhouse completed in 1925. The second one was The Old School, a play about Horace Williams and a group trying to oust him from the University of North Carolina. Wolfe used the plot of H.G. Wells' story The Undying Fire, a modernized version of Job. He called the professor Job Weldon and surrounded him with three malicious comforters. Richard Kennedy claims that this is "the first indication that Wolfe was beginning to adapt a world-view which underlies his novels".[40] More directly, Wolfe adapted this play to be the first act of his new version of The Mountains and gave the arguments to two doctors. Act II was entirely new and Act III an improvement of the original. Wolfe told his mother that Professor Baker read the prologue to the class and

> pronounced it the best prolog ever written here. The class harshly critical as they usually are, were unanimous in praising it. The circumstance bewilders as well as pleases me. I am absolutely no judge of my work. At times the work over which I expend the most labor and care will fail to

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[40]Kennedy, p. 74.

impress while other work, which I have written swiftly, almost without revision, will score.[41]

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[41]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 21.

CHAPTER III

THE HARVARD YEARS - PART II

In September, 1922, Wolfe registered for only the 47 Workshop and, at the commencement of the term, brought to class first acts of six different plays within two weeks. He could not work them out any further without approval.

One manuscript, The House of Bateson, contained the embryo of the Gant family. The hero, Eugene Ramsay, has a drive to acquire knowledge similar to Wolfe's passion, and a Professor Wilson or Weldon, was again presumably based on Horace Williams. With this play, Wolfe wrote to Baker:

> I am leaving herewith the first act of a three-act play with a synopsis of the rest. I am on so unsure a footing, so troubled with doubt and misgiving that I feel the necessity of waiting your opinion before going on. This is my first attempt at what is called the "problem play". But the play, as I conceive it, deals with a spiritual and human problem, rather than with a social or economic problem for which I have small use.[42]

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[42]Nowell, Letters, p. 35. See Appendix II for full synopsis of this play.

He gives a statement of Ramsay's quest, then continues: "As you have doubtless surmised, there is much that is personal in this statement. But let there be no confusion between Ramsay and myself. I am trying to portray a figure bound by his own strength, not by his limitations.[43] This is the first time he makes use of autobiographical material.

A second play, untitled, revolved around a misanthropic Swiftian figure, but it was not biographical. Wolfe had drawn his own play out of Swift's character. Still another play, The People, dealt with "the eternal warfare that is waged between the Individual and Society". From the descriptions given in a letter, it seems to have been a modern Bartholomew Fair. Wolfe wrote, "The fiction I have invented to dramatize these ideas is fairly evident, I think, in the first scene. I will hastily sketch out the rest of the play as follows: In Scene II we see the Fair and the People, who are a sort of chorus. In the various tent shows and booths, under the guise of

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[43]Nowell, Letters, p. 36.

"bally-hoo" men and spoilers."[44] (The rest of the letter is lost.)

According to Richard Kennedy, the remaining fragments were attempts at satire and farce. "The mummy of Mycerinus comes to life in the Boston Museum for commentary on the twentieth century in one unfinished episode: a witty Satan struts through other pages; a number of scraps contain satiric thrusts at literary pretense in Boston. There is evidence that he ventured upon [a modern version] of Ibsen's An Enemy of the People".[45]

Baker asked for one complete work out of these manuscripts. The only one Wolfe ever finished was Niggertown, later Welcome to Our City, for which he had gathered material on his trip home to his father's funeral. It was his most ambitious effort up to that time.

When Wolfe submitted a synopsis of the play, it had detailed background on many of the characters, long

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[44]Nowell, Letters, p. 39.

[45]Kennedy, p. 76.

expositions on recent problems in the city, in addition to his own ideas on the racial issue and other questions. Baker felt that compression was essential to prevent the audience's being distracted from the central issue, but Wolfe disagreed, insisting that if the play were true to life, the audience would be receptive regardless of length or numbers of characters. He wrote: "I have written this play with 30 odd named characters because it required it, not because I don't know how to save paint. Some day I'm going to write a play with 50, 80, 100 people - a whole town, a whole race, a whole epoch - for my sould's ease and comfort."[46]

The play is set in Altamont, a small Southern city experiencing a phony development boom similar to the happenings Wolfe had witnessed in his own home town, the type of wild speculation that became commonplace in the twenties before the Crash brought down the paper houses. The title is an ironic allusion to the Rotary Club slogans that mask the rot and corruption in Altamont.

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[46]Kennedy, p. 79.

For Wolfe, the city evoked images of evil; there one saw man at his worst. He had written to Margaret Roberts about his new play.

> This thing I had though naive and simple is as old and as evil as hell; there is a spirit of world-old evil that broods about us, with all the subtle sophistication of Satan. Greed, greed, greed, - deliberated, crafty, motivated - masking under the guise of civic associations for municipal betterment. The disgusting spectacle of thousands of industrious and accomplished liars, engaged in the mutual and systematic pursuit of their profession, salting their editorials and sermons and advertisements with the religious and philosophic platitudes of Dr. Frank Crane, Edgar A. Guest, and the American Magazine.[47]

The motives of all but two of the characters are summed up in that paragraph. A group of unscrupulous realtors, best exemplified by Sorrell, are trying to buy up the unsightly Niggertown in the center of the city so they can build an exclusive white development. At the same time, the town's most prominent citizen, Mr. Rutledge, is desperately attempting to recover his family home, now in the hands of the only educated Negro in Altamont, Dr. Johnson. They are the only characters fighting for a moral issue. The others are greedy.

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[47]Nowell, Letters, p. 33.

A whole community is thriving on empty slogans. "Vision", that quality so abundantly possessed by Sorrell, is the motto of the land development office.

> Jordan: Your friend Sorrell has not only made money, he has shown other people how to make it.
>
> Bailey: That's it exactly. He had Vision ... the thing big businessmen, and poets and all those people have, you know.[48]

Wolfe's thrusts at the sham are skilful. He explodes their self-aggrandizing myths with subtle comic dialogue. When Bailey tries to convince Jordan that their State can compare with any in the North, he lists their latest achievements and concludes:

> Do you know that the largest factory in the world for the manufacture of men's underwear is located within the boundaries of this state? Had you heard that, eh?[49]

The pretensions of all the townspeople are summed up in the State governor, Preston Carr, a man of imposing

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[48]Thomas Wolfe, Esquire, Welcome to Our City, Scene II October, 1957, XLVIII, No. 4.

[49]Wolfe, Welcome to Our City, Scene II.

stature and rhetoric. At the end of Scene VII, he is alone in his hotel room removing his handsome front piece by piece, toupee, false teeth, false soles, shoulder pads and braces, abdomen supporter, and three suits of underwear. The governor locks and bars every door, window, crack, and keyhole, checks behind bureaus, in drawers, under rugs and bed before daring to disrobe, and all the while quotes Macbeth: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be what thou art promised". Here Wolfe uses pure farce, a considerably more heavy-handed technique than the satire of the early scenes.

He makes use, too, of Jonson's humourous characters. Many of the people are recognized by their tics; one particular trait is drawn in relief. Even minor roles, such as Old Sorrell, are striking. His bullet hole through the mouth is his badge of honour from the Civil War, the symbol of the racist doctrine he fought to preserve. The portrayal is extremely funny.

One serious problem is that, though much of the play is humorous, it is not a comedy. The conflict between Rutledge and Johnson is deeply serious; the portrayal of

evil is deeply serious. The two strains never make a cohesive unit.

For Rutledge, his house is the symbol of the family honour. Anticipating Mannerhouse, Wolfe lets the house stand "for feudalism - something we call the old South."[50] But Rutledge is not a sympathetic character. His bigotry is distasteful to the reader, perhaps even more so today than when the play was written. Aside from bigotry, he speaks Wolfe's poetic, rambling language and is less believable than the characters who were copied from real life. He still clings to a romantic, decadent past.

> I have forgotten, and I remember - for I am growing old; and now I call the lost years golden - it seems I was a poet riding on a wind up to a star; an eagle freed in luminous bright worlds, and all my talk was liberty and love. It seems! It seems - but this I know, that I am growing old, for I belonged with all that idiot rabble that we call youth; which can do nothing alone, which calls for liberty, and makes the mob, which feeds, eats, drinks, lives, dies together; and I have told the old man's lie and called it golden, for I am old, ... and a great hour is blowing faintly in my heart.[51]

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[50] Wolfe, Welcome to Our City, Scene II.

[51] Wolfe, Welcome to Our City, Scene III.

This is the vague tongue for which Wolfe is notorious; it is inferior to the dramatically apt dialogue of Sorrell or Bailey.

The relationship between Lee Rutledge and his father is unclear. When Lee first appears, he seems to have integrity and to have rejected his father's worn romanticism. But as the play continues, Lee is shown to lack any moral fibre whatever and to be even more tied to a decadent tradition than his father is. The father and son grow closer through their immorality. The relationship foreshadows that of Eugene and Colonel Ramsay in Mannerhouse as well as the father-son theme that runs through the prose work.

Johnson, too, is a problem character. Despite his education, "a mad Negro laughter lurks forever behind his voice". His position is never clarified. Is Wolfe trying to say that you cannot educate a certain savagery out of the Negro? Wolfe himself was very much part of the South and traces of the inbred bigotry are revealed in the portrait of Johnson. It is difficult to be antagonistic toward the man. Why should he sell the

house to men who scorn him? If he discovers Lee Rutledge in his home seducing his daughter, he has every right to be enraged. In wrath, he joins the Northern agitator in leading the black men to defy the realtors. But even in this action Johnson is ambiguous. When he exhorts the Negroes to resist he tells them that they truly are inferior to the white man and education will not change them.

> Johnson: You're a long way from it. You ain't even as good as I am.
>
> Sykes (glibly): Education will change all that.
>
> Johnson: No, it won't; it's mo' than that. You can't give a man a few books, you can't teach him to read or write, an' make him ovah .... As long as you act like a dog, the white man will treat you like a dog.[52]

As if to bear out that judgment, the whole crowd rushes merrily away to see a minstrel show, leaving Johnson alone. It is quietly understood that the Negroes cannot rise above their condition.

In the minor riot that follows, Johnson is killed by Lee Rutledge (in a militia uniform), not in self-defense, but in a lynching spirit because Johnson had dared

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[52]Wolfe, Welcome to Our City, Scene VIII.

to touch him. The death scene is very stilted, almost ridiculous as the Negro "bays twice in his throat, like some giant mastiff, and baying in his throat, he dies."[53] The house is burned to the ground; Rutledge and his son are bound by the knowledge of dishonour and the curtain falls.

In addition to the main issues, Wolfe dealt with many peripheral problems. A professor who heads the social welfare department at the State University is prostituting himself as the flunkie of the pompous governor; McIntyre, a school teacher, is being forced out of town for teaching evolution; Jordan, a tubercular, world-weary author wants to settle in Altamont. He reminisces with Rutledge about the old days in Paris with the American literary exiles. Finally he is rejected by Sorrell as a potential buyer in the better part of town because a "lunger" would ruin the neighbourhood. Of even less relevance to the main action is an episode dealing with Mrs. Rutledge and her ladies' social drama club. There are ten scenes in all, many of

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[53]Wolfe, Welcome to Our City, Scene X.

which do not flow smoothly into one another, and Wolfe tries to bind them together artificially with devices such as the recurrent symbolic phrase in the stage directions. "A foolish, futile little tune" played at beginning and end is meant to sum up the efforts of the Negro to resist his oppressors. While the tune plays, workers march implacably on. There is too much material to be successfully assimilated into one drama; nevertheless some of the writing is first-class. The portrayal of small town characters such as Rotarian Bailey and realtor Sorrell is impeccable. Much of the satire on the townspeople and their Boom is pointedly apt. The main weakness of the play apart from its diffuseness lies in the ambiguous characterization of Rutledge and Johnson. The quality of the writing varies; some of the burlesque is too clumsy. Finally, the central action cannot come to a sufficiently gripping climax because of all the peripheral matter. A few of the techniques, such as the method of characterization and the best social satire, were adapted to Wolfe's later prose work.

Wolfe was more than optimistic about the play. On January 14, 1923, he wrote to his mother, "I will read my

complete play to class Wednesday and will let you know their opinion then. I have spared neither myself nor that of which I wrote: - in a sense I feel I have expressed dramatically the modern South".[54] The same day he wrote to his cousin, Mrs. Gould, in answer to her criticism of the manuscript which he had sent her.

> I do not think, as you suggest, that there is any fundamental difference between us as to what constitutes a play; there is rather, I think, a misunderstanding as to the kind of play I have written, and as to what that play was primarily about. I have no doubt, when I come to the criticism, that I shall run into the same difficulty with other people and I know that it is a difficulty to be reckoned with, since I cannot hope to reach a general audience of any such intelligence.
> First of all, I want to impress the fact that the play is not about any problem - least of all about the negro problem. I try to settle nothing, I want to prove nothing - I have no use for solutions.
> My play is concerned with giving a picture about a certain section of life, a certain civilization, a certain society, I am content with nothing but the whole picture, I am concerned with nothing else.
> So here I think, you struck your snag, and you thought I had written two plays instead of one. It is sometimes difficult, of course, for people who have been trained in the theatre of the last twenty years to adapt themselves readily to the looser and more expressive structure of such a play as I have written. The mind is accustomed to the old forms, to the three, four, and five act forms, and adapts itself hardly.[55]

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[54]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 43.

[55]Nowell, Letters, p. 39.

Wolfe is pompous. He tends to blame the audience for a lack of sensitivity when his own shortcomings as a dramatist are the source of difficulty. He wishes to present a panoramic vision of the modern South and such a play must necessarily focus on the negro, yet he repeatedly and vehemently denies that it is primarily about the negro. Despite a penetrating insight into social ills, Wolfe for most of his life remained suspicious of all minority groups or foreign elements in America. So to read the play solely as a study of injustice to a particular group would be to misread it. Racial tension is only part of the whole view in Welcome to Our City. Wolfe was acute enough to realize that an audience would prefer to see that one aspect emphasized, but he continued to defend his own approach. When he submitted the script, he reiterated his position.

> I would be sorry to think that a close eye on the relevancy, the direct bearing of each scene and incident on the main problem, that of the negro, would conceal from you the fact that I know what I wanted to do from the beginning to the end. With what success I did it, I can not even venture a guess. But will you please remember this: a play about the negro, a play in which each scene bore directly on the negro, a play in which the negro was kept ever before you might be a better play; it would not be the play I started to write. I wish you would bear

> this in mind when you read the mooted scene VIII - the cubistical, post impressionistic political scene. It needs revision, but I'd hate to lose it. It's part of the picture; part of the total.[56]

Wolfe still found it difficult to accept cuts in his work. The first version of the play contained a great deal more burlesque than the final edition. Baker wanted these cut and at every suggestion, Wolfe would break into a frenzy.

> Tom made a gesture of agreement, promptly followed by reasons why he felt the lines in question should be left in. Baker listened politely, then turned to the actors, and read them the cuts. As he read, Tom, now sitting erect, began weaving back and forth in his chair like a polar bear suffering from the heat, and as Baker finished giving the cuts to the actors, Tom sprang to his feet with a tortured yell, and rushed out into the night.[57]

In spite of its unwieldiness, Welcome to Our City was chosen for the Workshop production in May and Professor Baker invited Richard Herndon, a New York producer, up to see it. Each year Herndon awarded a prize for the best play written in the Workshop. With

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[56]Nowell, Letters, p. 40.

[57]Barber, p. 73.

the five hundred dollars came a contract for a New York production within six months.

Wolfe was elated. He planned to enter both Welcome to Our City and Mannerhouse, another play on which he was at work. No one was permitted more than two entries. He wrote to his mother:

> I try not to build my hopes too high, but I cannot help feeling I've more than a good chance. [There is] no one in this country writing the plays I want to write! I feel the sap rising in me, I cannot with all humility, help but feel that thing is bound to come, and come with a rush when it does.
> It's impossible to be a dramatist and a gentleman; I gave it up long ago. Well, there are lots of gentlemen - only a very few dramatists.[58]

Before the play finally went on stage, Baker did most of the cutting himself against his policy of never touching student work.

Welcome to Our City was produced at the Agassiz Theatre in May, 1923, and was one of the most ambitious undertakings ever attempted by the Workshop. There was

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[58]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 45.

a cast of forty-four, with thirty-one speaking parts, seven different arrangements of a unit set and a four hour running time. In spite of its excessive length it was well received and Baker assured Wolfe, that with tightening, it had better commercial possibilities than Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine, which had had a three-months' run on Broadway. The Professor asked the Theatre Guild to read the play.

After the May production, Wolfe reached a zenith of hope.

> I know this now: I am inevitable. I sincerely believe the only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease, and death. The plays I am going to write may not be suited to the tender bellies of old maids, sweet young girls, or Baptist ministers but they will be true and honest and courageous and the rest doesn't matter.[59]

In June, the Theatre Guild asked Wolfe to shorten the play to the usual two and a half hours before submitting it. Although the Guild had the greatest dramatic producers in America, and Wolfe especially wanted them

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[59]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 49.

rather than anyone else to take his play, he just could not do the necessary revision. In fact, he ended up expanding the play. He sent Baker a letter about it.

> I have been having Welcome to Our City copied to submit to the Guild. The young stenographer who is copying it for me has come to the first cut you made. She broke into laughter at the comedy lines. Needless to say I am putting back everything in the play that you cut out, so it will be exactly as it was before production.[60]

To his mother, he said, "Professor Baker thinks if I gave my name a German or a Russian ending the Guild would take the play in a minute. Most of their plays come from Europe."[61] The self-delusion is amusing, but despite Wolfe's egomania, one cannot help being attracted to him and feeling his hopes and disappointments.

The disappointments come one after another at this period. Gradually Wolfe was again growing disillusioned with the Workshop. Money was a problem. While his professors encouraged him to write, their praise failed to bring him any material reward. He had to consider

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[60]Barber, p. 74.

[61]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 54.

supporting himself and he wanted Baker to know how hurt he was by the treatment he had received.

> I admit the virtue of being able to stand criticism. Unfortunately it is a virtue I do not happen to possess .... The ability to take such criticism you said not long ago might make the difference between a second-rate artist and a great artist - I do not believe this. I have no doubt that if I set myself to it and worked long and earnestly, I could ultimately be successful in writing plays which only the dramatic critic for the Boston Transcript could understand. Unfortunately for those who unlike myself are indolently inclined the way out is not easy.
> It is difficult for me to escape the reflection that while you have been able to provide some tangible opportunity for everyone who has needed it - from Carlton to Brink to Raisbeck to Daly - you have been generous to me only in words. I do not say I would have accepted such aid - I do not think I would at any time, certainly not now - but I would have felt considerably better about the whole thing. I have even heard you speak with deep emotion of the sacrifice Fritz Day is making "for his art" - on $15,000 a year. Really, how does he do it?[62]

Wolfe submitted the lengthy manuscript Welcome to Our City to the Theater Guild at the end of August. "Everything I have is staked in this play", he told his mother, "and of course when you consider how many people are writing plays it seems a long, long chance. I dare

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[62]Nowell, Letters, pp. 47-51.

not think of failure".[63] In December they declined it, offering to reconsider their decision if Wolfe would shorten and tighten it. He was depressed but tried to comfort himself with the praise he had received in New York.

> The Guild has returned my play - but they first told me I was the best man the Workshop had yet turned out and the coming young man in the theatre. This was their play-reader Lemon .... The Guild was afraid that I would hold it against them, and that I would not submit my other work to them. He then told me that Langner, a prominent director on the Guild board was "crazy about my play" and wanted to see me before I left town. Langner is a very wealthy Jew - I talked to him two hours. He told me I was a fool if I gave this play up now. He said in a week's time I could make it into a play that will sell - It needs no rewriting he said - the stuff's all there - it needs cutting- i.e. shortening. The sum total was this: If I could go off somewhere - ... and work a week on the play - cutting it down thirty minutes, and from ten scenes to eight, and "tightening" it up - that is making the main thread of story, the plot, more plain in every scene - he would handle it for me - I had a play and half at present - he wanted to cut to playing time - Well, I will take one more chance and give him what he wants, in spite of the fact that Professor Baker will throw up his hands and say that I have "prostituted my art" and so on, when I see him. Well, my "art" has kept me ragged, and driven me half mad. - I will see now if prostitution can put a few decent garments on my back and keep me housed.[64]

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[63]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 59.

[64]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 60.

Wolfe always tried to give his mother only the optimistic side of things. Just why Baker would accuse Wolfe of prostitution on account of cutting the play is unclear; he himself had been urging exactly the same thing for months. In any case, the playwright never did make any effort to revise. Deeply depressed, he decided he must support himself by teaching. He wrote to Homer Watts at New York University seeking a teaching post, in the letter of application he stressed the fact that teaching was merely a means to his end. "It is only fair to tell you that my interests are centred in the drama, and that someday I hope to write successfully for the theatre and to do nothing but that."[65]

Baker was annoyed about the job. He felt that it would give Wolfe no time to write and might impair his talent because it was critical work rather than creative. He called the young man "pig-headed" - "he thinks me stubborn and self-willed - if I had taken his advice four months ago and shortened my play he thought it would be sold by now."[66] However, by this time, Wolfe had no choice,

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[65]Nowell, Letters, p. 56.

[66]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 65.

he was broke and could not ask his family for more money.

He did receive recognition in a new book on the theatre, New American Drama,by Oliver M. Saylor, who called Wolfe's play "the most radical experiment in the American theatre", both because of the uncommon ten-scene structure and because of the frankness with which it faced the race question. Wolfe was proud, but still bitter over the lack of response from professional dramatic circles.

He wrote to Margaret Roberts telling her about the Guild's refusal; the tone is quite different from that in earlier letters to his mother.

> The Guild held my play for three or four months, as you perhaps know - held it until I was on the verge of madness and collapse - and finally returned it, after wining and dining me, telling me I was "a coming figure" and so on, and trying to extract a promise that all my future work would be submitted to the Guild for consideration before any other producer got hold of it. Of course, I made no such promise.[67]

He told of the changes suggested by Langner and concluded that:

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[67]Wolfe, Letters to Mother, p. 65.

> This would mean a more conventional type of play. I told him I had deliberately tried to avoid writing such a play, that I had written a play with a plot which centred about the life and destiny of an entire civilization, not about a few people.

By this time Wolfe had no intention of touching the play. Baker had long since recognized his propensity for the novel, but Wolfe was still determined to fit his grandiose schemes to the drama.

After two more months passed without further success, his arrogance increased, but it was a facade to cover his wounded feelings.

> Perhaps you wonder what I have done with my ten-scene play - whether I have rewritten, revised, recast, cut, added, changed. No - I have done none of these things. As a matter of fact, I was hectored, badgered, driven, [harried?], to such a degree before, during, and after the play by commendation and criticism - none of which agreed - that I am wholeheartedly and completely tired of my first huge opus. I leave it to all the glory of its imperfections .... But - I am beginning to see that a mere course in play-writing is not enough. There should be a sister course in peddling, auctioneering, servility, fawning, licking, and whining - a kind of sales course, you know.
> They could have talked to me if they had had any genuine interest. And now, damn them, they'll come to me - or not at all.[68]

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[68]Nowell, Letters, p. 61.

Nevertheless, Wolfe continued to go to "them". The Provincetown Theatre held his play for months before rejecting it and in May, 1924, the D. Appleton & Co. asked to read it for publication. Wolfe allowed them to read it, although he claimed he would not allow them to publish it even if they wanted to, which they did not. Finally, Mr. Real, the manager of the Hotel Albert, where Wolfe lived, knew an Anne MacDonald, who was connected with the Neighbourhood Playhouse, under the direction of Alice and Irene Lewisohn. He asked Miss MacDonald to show them the manuscript, which she did. The board could not reach a decision. Irene Lewishon and Aline Bernstein liked it; the others disagreed. So Aline Bernstein took it with her to Europe to show Alice. In August, she wrote to Wolfe with enthusiasm calling the play "unusually fine" and saying it "promised well for young America". Wolfe was sick of praise, he wanted money. He took little satisfaction from the words of this stranger whom he called "the wealthy woman producer".

The encounter with Alice Bernstein was actually

a momentous event in his life. This was the woman whose love and trust in his ability would guide him through his wracking first attempts at the novels. She was to be the only great love of his life and their stormy, years-long affair would bring Wolfe his moments of deepest passion and of most destructive hate. If not for his play, he would have had little chance of ever meeting Mrs. Bernstein, so Welcome to Our City is important for more than its skilful writing and literary experimentation.

CHAPTER IV

In 1924 Thomas Wolfe was teaching the winter term at New York University, and, as Professor Baker had predicted, the job occupied most of his time. He faced his class with a mixture of love and hate - love for those students who responded to his savage eloquence, and hatred for those same students, "foreigners" who were sapping the energy that should have run into his writing.

In the first six months of 1924, the only encouraging event in Wolfe's dramatic career was Professor Koch's request to publish The Return of Buck Gavin in a collection of Carolina Folk Plays. Wolfe was reluctant; he did not feel that he could allow his name to appear on such a juvenile composition at a time when he was seeking recognition from the theatrical elite. After what Wolfe described as a barrage of letters and telegrams from Koch, the playwright decided that he could not consent to publication because "it would be unfair to myself".[69] The temptation to see his name in print was great, however, and if this was the only way to achieve it, he would permit the publication.

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[69]Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, p. 79.

His principal concern during this period was a new play, "The House", which he worked at feverishly in the few hours a week left to him. In May, he told Mrs. Roberts that "the desire to write - to create - has, for the first time, become almost a crude animal appetite. And this is because of the obstacles thrown in the path of creation. During the few hours left to me, I write like a fiend on one of the finest plays you ever saw."[70]

Wolfe had begun this play in his first year at the 47 Workshop. At that time he wrote a detailed account of it to his mother.[71] He called it "The Heirs" or "The Wasters" - "an attack on Southern aristocrats who fail to face reality and responsibility".[72] The time is after the Civil War. The Weldon family stands for all Southern aristocracy. One Weldon, Eugene, realizes that the only salvation is to abandon old ways and outmoded tradition, accept defeat, and move towards an era of productivity through hard labour. He is ridiculed - Their

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[70]Nowell, Letters, p. 67.

[71]Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, p. 14-20. See Appendix II.

[72]Wolfe, Letters to his Mother, p. 14. See Appendix II.

land is sold, the money squandered and Eugene goes off to fight his way in the world, leaving behind his sweetheart Christine. After ten years he returns to find the house being demolished. But Christine is waiting, and together they walk into the sunset to build as better future.

The central focus of the play was changed many times in four years. Wolfe continued to revise plot, character, setting, and philosophy. By 1923, Mannerhouse was no longer to be read as an attack on Southern aristocracy. The author explained:

> It is founded on a sincere belief in the essential inequality of things and people, in a sincere belief in men and masters, rather than in men and men, in a sincere belief in the necessity of some form of human slavery - yes, I mean this - and it deals, moreover, with the one period in our history that believed these things and fought for them and was destroyed because of its belief in them.[73]

Wolfe worked at the play doggedly in New York and took it with him on an overseas trip after he finished his first teaching session, only to have the valise containing the manuscript stolen from his French hotel in December, 1924. He was

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[73]Nowell, Letters, p. 45.

in a state of anguish akin to what he had felt at the death of his brother, Ben. He changed hotels, began again, and in a few weeks had recreated the play with many new additions. By the end of 1925, he submitted the manuscript to the Theatre Guild with a covering letter to Alice Lewisohn describing the genesis of Mannerhouse.

> Miss Lewisohn, this play belongs to no world that ever existed by land or sea. For it, I have created a medium as special as the one Coleridge used for "The Ancient Mariner".
> This is what the play means to me: - One, three or four years ago when I was 21 or 22, and wanted to prove things in plays, I wanted to write a play that should describe a cycle in our native history - I should show it by the rise and fall of a powerful Southern family. I was going to call it "The Wasters". I made a draught of it and destroyed it. Later, still significant, I called it "The House" - my house was to be the symbol of the family's fortunes - you saw it put up and torn down.
> Finally in Paris, after that script had been stolen, and I was alone, I knew that I cared little for that, and beginning anew, I created this play - which has no relationship to problem, none to history - save that anyone may guess when it is supposed to occur, but no one, I think, will confuse it with realism. It became the mould for an expression of my secret life, of my own dark faith, chiefly through the young man Eugene. If you would know what that faith is, distilled, my play tries to express my passionate belief in all myth, in the necessity of defending and living not for truth - but for divine falsehood.
> You complained of a certain diffusion in my first play. I do not believe you can complain of it here. There is certainly the focal power of one idea, developed with enormous concentration - I do not believe any speech is vague, but the whole is packed.

> I have not tried to be smart or wise, nor have I adopted a cheap easy obscurity. I tell you again this thing came out of me - even in its fierce burlesquing of old romanticism, it defends the thing it attacks.
> Finally, of course, it contains the first complete expression of that thing that has fascinated and terrified me since I was a child. Are we alive or dead? Who shall tell us? Which of the people in this play are ghosts, and which are living?
> Read it carefully, Miss Lewisohn. Certainly men must have felt like this, but I have never seen it expressed.[74]

Wolfe was, by self-admission, a poor judge of his work. This play was not as good as he thought it to be, not as good as many scenes of Welcome to Our City. There were many shifts in emphasis before the final script of Mannerhouse was produced and these often became confused. In some parts, the playwright through Eugene attacks Southern aristocracy as in the original; in other parts, he upholds a belief in the necessity of some form of human slavery; and at various points, he seems to defend what he attacks. Eugene's point of view is never clarified. The play shows the influence of Chekhow, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Byron and the Bible. It combines Elizabethan puns and Romantic melodrama in its worst sense. But despite its blatant flaws, certain passages do reveal Wolfe's progression

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[74]Nowell, Letters, p. 103.

towards maturity as a writer, and his move towards the philosophy of the novels.

Mannerhouse is the home of the Ramsay family and ultimately of all Southern aristocracy. As in the previous play, the house stands as the symbol of the South itself. The lives of the characters are regulated by a set of Romantic gestures or manners, giving rise to repeated, self-conscious plays on the word "manner". The central action occurs in the Civil War period; a Prologue sets the background showing the erection of the house in Colonial times by the first Ramsay and his army of slaves. His house is his object of worship, his motto - "Nil Separabit". "My house will be more strong than death".[75] In this scene, the rebellious king of the slaves is beaten into submission to acknowledge his allegiance to Ramsay. Wolfe uses this scene against which to work out the ironic fate of house and family.

Act I introduces characters and themes, as the Ramsays prepare to go to war. General Ramsay is the epitome of the

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[75]Thomas Wolfe, Mannerhouse (New York, 1948), p. 5.

well bred gentleman soldier. Except for a few brief moments of insight, he is a stereotype, a man who sincerely believes in his bigotry and the necessity of manner. His two sons, Ralph and Eugene, are antagonistic towards each other. Ralph is a humorless, unthinking follower of his father's ways, while Eugene is the loner, the rebel whose eye pierces to the quick of all it observes, and both men love Margaret Patton, the young belle who lives for Eugene, her "little god". All the ladies and gentlemen at Mannerhouse are optimistic about the impending war, except Eugene. The general has enough intuition to realize that the fighting is not going to be romantic and daring; still he believes fervently in his cause. Porter, an ill-bred poor white, comes by to beg for his son's release from military duty. He is coldly dismissed, casting a malevolent eye upon the house as he departs. When the soldiers march off, care of Mannerhouuse is entrusted to Tod, faithful servant and direct descendant of the subdued slave king.

Act II, Part One, begins after the War when the slaves have been emancipated and the house is slowly eroding. The South is broken; the general returns to find his servants gone,

his currency worthless, his land decaying. Porter now holds control. He has remained behind to batten on the war-torn aristocrats and suck their remaining vigour. His son is dead; he now has to revenge himself on the Ramsays. In Part Two, the General has lost his health and awaits death. Before dying, he sells his land and house to Porter. The house must survive even in the hands of this vile trader. His business concluded, the General meets death with a gallant gesture, and Eugene leaves Mannerhouse.

In Act III, after the Reconstruction, Eugene returns a broken man disguised as a carpenter. The house is being demolished, so Porter gloatingly hires young Ramsay to assist in the job. Margaret comes by, recognizes Eugene, and pleads with him to accompany her, but he has a destiny to fulfill. He cannot bear to watch the house defiled and destroyed by Porter. In anguish he attacks Porter, who is saved by his workmen. Tod kills the white tyrant and is killed by him. Eugene grasps the pillars of the house in a Samson-like gesture and destroys both house and inhabitants.

The plot, in brief, is sensational and melodramatic. There are many weaknesses in dramatic technique. Wolfe later

admitted that he had been influenced by Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard.[76] In both plays, there is the decay of an old order, the takeover by a new class and the Emancipation of slaves or serfs. Both plots focus on the fate of a piece of property to reflect changing social conditions. Wolfe, however, lacks Chekhov's subtlety of characterization and symbolic phrase. The resemblances between the plays are superficial. Wolfe copied many word patterns. For example, Chekhov wrote, "Suddenly a distant sound is heard, as if from the sky, like the sound of a snapped string mournfully dying away".[77] This sound, heralding the coming destruction, is heard again at the end of the play after the house and orchard have been abandoned. Wolfe used two variations of this sound effect. To symbolize the decay of the house, an ominous sound is heard "somewhere within the house - the sound of a single large drop of water which somewhere forms, swells, develops, and falls at length with an unvarying punctual monotony".[78] To point up the futility of defending the outmoded Southern manner, a "thin high voice" recurs

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[76]Nowell, A Biography, p. 58.

[77]Anton Chekhov, Chekhov: The Major Plays, "The Cherry Orchard", p. 348.

[78]Mannerhouse, Act I, p. 83.

periodically howling with malevolent laughter, "Snap your fingers, gentlemen", in mockery of the Major who claimed the Yankees would bolt at the snap of a finger. The dripping erosion is effective, but the howling voice is gothic.

Wolfe also uses Ibsen's recurrent phrase, supposedly for symbolic effect, but often without meaning. Before marching off, Eugene exclaims, "I shall come to my house and my home again to find the doors a little taller and the windows high".[79] It passes unnoticed until his return when he enters through a window, explaining, "I couldn't find the door. It has not grown".[80] These obscurities are unnecessary to the play.

Many of the play's flaws are embodied in Eugene himself. Wolfe had told Miss Lewisohn that Eugene expressed his "own dark faith" - the passionate belief in all myth and in living for divine falsehood. The idea, however, never comes across as envisioned. Eugene is a conglomeration of many literary predecessors, most notably Hamlet. There is constant reference

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[79] Mannerhouse, Act I, p. 65.

[80] Mannerhouse, Act II, p. 100.

to the mad prince. Eugene, too, is a philosophical youth, disturbed by the moral decadence surrounding him. Yet he lacks Hamlet's motivation - there is no murder, no incest, nothing to justify his mockery of mother, father, and lady. If Hamlet can be accused of having no objective correlative, what can be said of Eugene? Often his speeches are without sense as when he states: "I shall run for Congress. I believe in bathtubs with the innocent faith of a child",[81] or "I have lost something in the sun. I cannot find it - there is no moon".[82] Margaret is his Ophelia, an object of love and disdain. Again, there is insufficient warrant for his attitude towards her other than that she is a product of the system he no longer believes in. Even his beliefs however, are unclear. He is continually shifting his point of view.

While he is Hamlet, he is also Prince Hal and so has incompatible roles.

> General Ramsay: Tonight you were observed drinking with four of the commonest enlisted men in the regiment. You command not even the respect of your own men.
>
> Eugene: What is honor? A word. ... Sir, I am Falstaff without the belly.[83]

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[81] Mannerhouse, Act II, p. 101.

[82] Mannerhouse, Act II, p. 130.

[83] Mannerhouse, Act I, p. 55.

But Eugene also lacks Hal's instinctive love of revelry, his exuberant vitality. Nor has he an established order to preserve when his revels end. Eugene preserves his father's order by ultimately destroying it before it can be desecrated by Porter.

Like Lee Rutledge in Welcome to Our City, Eugene at first stands opposed to all his father's values. He has derision for the naive "plumed" soldiers and the pure organza-frilled maidens. He believes "only in endings".[84] Yet he dons his plume to march with the General out of respect for the latter's integrity, if not his order. Eugene mocks the gestures, the manners, while he unconsciously admires the Byronic flourish. Despite all his contempt, he is finally drawn back to Mannerhouse because he cannot abide its desecration. He wants to preserve intact at least the memory of the Romantic South. The protagonist is at odds with himself intellectually and emotionally, but Wolfe fails to turn this conflict to dramatic advantage. The audience is never sure just what Eugene does finally stand for - he mixes high philosophy with gibberish and obnoxious puns. He remains

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[84]Mannerhouse, Act I, p. 64.

neither tragic nor sympathetic.

Margaret is a melodramatic heroine. In spite of Eugene's bitter railings, she loves her "little god" and masochistically offers herself as sacrifice.

> Oh, little God, I love you. Put your hand upon me - let me know that you are there. Wound me with your language.
>
> She opens her breast for him.
>
> Defile me with your touch, as you did before; soil me, stain me. But tell me you believe I live again.[85]

She is Ophelia to Eugene's Hamlet, but she stops short of madness. Inane puns come between them. When Eugene returns from the war, Margaret asks his battered plume as a memento. "I shall wear it next to my heart". Eugene retorts, "That will be a ticklish business, I'm afraid".[86]

General Ramsay is a strong man, soldier, and father who understands the issues behind the Civil War but can conceive of no other mode of existence outside his own. He does not fear losing his slaves after the Emancipation, because they "love"

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[85] Mannerhouse, Act III, p.133.

[86] Mannerhouse, Act II, p. 109.

him. Their departure leaves him a broken man; his wish that "Samson were only here to pull us down"[87] serves as a prophecy of the play's ending. The General's death-scene is however, unworthy of so rational a character. Wolfe has him attired in full regalia, resplendent down to the sword and buckle, as he stands to meet death hovering outside the French windows. His last gesture is a flash of the sword; he does not abandon the manner even in death. Dramatically, the scene is contrived and screaming with gothic terror - all in all, ridiculous.

The most memorable character in the play is Porter, whose malevolent greed and lower-class animal cunning is symbolized in his ~~skin~~ diseased hand which he is constantly "flensing" and which everyone dreads to touch. Porter is associated with a subtle evil that is gradually eroding a way of life and that will be waiting to grab the ruins in preparation for a new way, the way of the industrialized philistine. He is ignorant, coarse, and filthy, but his motivation is clear. When Mannerhouse is finally brought down in the sensational ending, both ways of life are

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[87] Mannerhouse, Act II, Part II, p. 118.

destroyed, with the understanding that Porter's way will triumph.

The play is not entirely bad. All the main characters at some point are given penetrating speeches which reflect the author's views on youth, democracy, and slavery. Much of this writing is acute. Of special interest is Eugene's pondering on the essence of life. Who is alive? Who is a ghost? The question more fully developed recur in the novels.

Wolfe anxiously awaited critical response to his play from Miss Lewisohn. The Board rejected it. If it had not been for the sustaining belief of Aline Bernstein, the aspiring playwright might have gone down in despair. She stood by him while he sent the script from producer to producer and collected rejection slips. Gradually, it was becoming manifestly clear that drama was not his medium. He turned to prose in desperation and found the space necessary to work out his expansive concepts. Drama he abandoned forever, and, as the years passed, he was able to turn an objective eye upon his early scripts and to pronounce dispassionate judgement.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Just what importance has Wolfe's drama? In terms of the history of drama proper, he is forgotten (apart from Oliver M. Sayler's passing reference) and rightly so. The work has significance only in relation to Thomas Wolfe's growth as man and artist. If not for his youthful commitment to playwrighting, it is likely that he might never have been more than a literary dabbler as in his college days, while pursuing a more lucrative career in law or politics. The extravagant praise of Koch gave him confidence in himself as a potential artist and the drive to fight against odds.

The plays themselves show progression in the young man's thought. The one-act dramas at Chapel Hill were hastily scrawled and superficial; they dealt with topics far removed from daily problems and modern human yearnings. Buck Gavin and Deferred Payment are hackneyed and have shallow characterization. Wolfe's Harvard plays, however, became more serious in scope and philosophy. Gradually he shed the mountain twang in his dialogue, at the same time

making the plots more relevant. He still had a tendency towards melodrama, as in Dr. Johnson's doglike death or Eugene Ramsay's destruction of Mannerhouse, but he also developed techniques of satire and characterization which he used successfully throughout his career.

In particular, the Workshop plays show the seeds of an eclectic philosophy of life, later to be Eugene's philosophy in the novels. Wolfe begins to seek a unity in life, to question what is the Absolute; he wants to understand the essence of living - who is alive? who is a ghost?

The plays were still very derivative in dramatic techniques, but they were a fuller expression of Wolfe's growing vision of man and life. His drama was the first step in a slow progression toward maturity which Wolfe achieved only in his final years before death.

APPENDIX I

THOMAS WOLFE'S LETTERS TO HIS MOTHER

I heard papa tell one time about a family of aristocrats in W.N. Carolina who owned a vast quantity of Mountain land. Major Love, I think he said was the man's name. They owned 500,000 acres and sold it for 20¢ an acre to lumber people simply because they were impoverished by the War. They died in want. I am using this as a basis for my story. The scene starts at the home of Colonel Tasher Weldon 15 months after the Civil War. Colonel Weldon is a typical Southern aristocrat. He fought bravely for the South in the War and now he has retired to his estate not being able to see that the old order is gone, that it is gone, thank God, forever. He lives in the memory of his past greatness when Oakmont was rich and flourishing, when he owned a hundred Negroes. Now he is impoverished, owning a vast estate of 500,000 acres of arable land but without capital.

We may look out the windows of his great living room and see stretched out below by the side of a stream hundreds of acres of fine loamy bottom land, wonderful for farming, but overgrown and choked with weeds. In the distance on the other side of the stream stretches his great forest. The colonel has two sons, Ralph and Eugene. Ralph is a replica of his father, a true aristocrat, handsome, lovable, dreaming, but a waster, a hard drinker, no more. Eugene, the younger, is filled with bitterness and broods in his heart because his father and brother will not wake up and realize that they are making no efforts to avoid ruin. He points at the bottom-land choked with weeds and tells them they are all choked with weeds, that they are living in the past, that the South is bleeding to death from her wounds, and that they the quality folks who fought so bravely in the war are making no effort to fight the greater battle of peace, that they are letting the country be given over to thieves, carpetbaggers, Negroes, while they live in idleness. Do you begin to see the idea? The Weldons are not merely one family. They stand for the whole of Southern aristocracy.

The Colonel and Ralph laugh at Eugene's idea that a Weldon is not too good to till his own land. And so the fight goes on in this boy's heart, a mighty epic struggle - He the thinker, the Seer, realizing that the old order has gone, that it is man's highest duty to produce, to create - they the lovable but worthless aristocrats hating the idea, and tragically failing to realize that new times have come. Well, I'll give just the

barest details now. Against Eugene's and his mother's protest that to sell their land at next to nothing is criminal, the Colonel hardpressed for money, and unwilling to work or have his boys work, sells his 500,00 acres for 25 cents an acre to a New Eng. lumber firm.

Four years elapse. The money has been squandered living at the pace they set. The Colonel is an old broken man realizing for the first time how useless his life has been. Ralph, the gay, reckless young ne'er-do-well is killed in a gambling house in New Orleans. The Colonel dies. This is not supposed to be tragedy but merely an event in the play. For the Colonel doesn't fear death, he knows that death is not tragedy, that his tragedy lies in his mis-spent and wasted life. Eugene the dreamer, the idealist is left the heir to a vanished kingdom and a decaying mansion. Eugene the boy who would have done great things has been conquered by the canker-worm of waste that has ruined his family and he is left sitting in his decayed mansion looking at the estate that once was his from which already comes the sound of falling trees and buzzing saws. There is a very pretty little love story I haven't dealt with.

Christine Roably, the girl on the neighbouring estate, daughter of Major Roably, is another aristocrat who can't realize the time of her father's glory is past. Maj. Roably sold his land when Col. Weldon sold his, has squandered the money, died, and now Christine and 'Gene are in much the same boat. Deep in his heart 'Gene has always loved this girl but she was such a gay, teasing person, and he had lost all his gayety and his sense of humor by his brooding, that they'd never gotten along. He thinks she was in love with Ralph, the elder brother who was killed. The girl comes in and sees 'Gene sitting in the ruins of his estate. She is touched with sympathy and asks him what he is going to do. With sudden rage he tells her he's going to get away from it all, get away from the bitter reminder of terrible tragic waste that has ruined his family, that's he's going into the world and try to play the part of a man for once in his life. "But, my dear", she says, "You don't know what you're saying. You're out of your head with grief. 'Gene, don't you realize you're Master of Oakmont now?"

Eugene bursts into insane laughter "Master of Oakmont. Master of a ruined kingdom, and a rotting Mansion - What a farce! Lord of Misrule. Master of Oakmont". Wild with grief he flings out of the house and leaves the girl weeping behind him.

The Last Act. Ten years have elapsed. The scene is the same, the great living room of the old house. But what a change. The door hangs open from one rusty hinge; two pieces of plank are nailed crosswise before it. The room is delapidated and in the last stages of decay. Think of the terrible sadness that associates itself with a room that one has been so full of light, live and gayety. There is the sound of voices from a distance. Two men enter. They knock the boards from the door and come in. From their talk we learn that they are master carpenter, that the lumber company has acquired the house and is tearing it down for its own headquarters. Do you see what this house stands for? It is the symbol of the old South, the old aristocracy being torn down, to make place for the new productive order. From the men's talk, we learn that the last of the Weldons, Eugene, went away ten years before and has never been heard from. A man enters. He is roughly dressed and his face is covered by a thick black beard. It is Eugene. Life has been tragic to him also, he thinks he too is a waster, he never found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The men do not recognize him. He explains that he is a stranger and that he has been given employment by the lumber company and that the foreman has sent him up here to help them. The carpenters explain that the house is being torn down and they give him a hammer and a chisel and tell him to take the mantel down. Like a man in a daze 'Gene obeys but when he sets his chisel against the wall and starts to strike the blow he staggers back with a cry of agony. He can't do it. To strike the house that has sheltered him, under which his father and that dear, gay brother moved, to strike the mantel on which his mother's hands have rested is like striking a blow against his naked heart. The men recognize him and respectfully go off to other parts of the house to leave him alone for a while to brood over his lost estate. Christine comes in. She is now the school teacher in the village. Sadness and the tragedy of waste has touched her life. She now knows what Eugene was embittered over.

She doesn't recognize 'Gene under his beard and he lowers his cap and pretends to be very busy with his work hoping to keep his identity undisclosed.

With a sigh she tells him she came to take a last look at the old house, what fine peole once lived there, how sad it is now that they are all gone. Judson, Colonel Weldon's old

negro butler comes in and begins polishing up the old furniture. It is pathetic to see this old negro himself a reminder of the past who daily, in memory of his dead master, polishes the old tarnished finery. To those dim old eyes the place is as splendid as it ever was, he doesn't know that time has passed him in its swift flight also. "Just you wait 'till Marse 'Gene gits back", he tells the workman - "He'll put a stop to dese goins on". Eugene is so overcome with emotion when he sees the old Negro that he can't resist saying a word to him. The old man instantly recognizes him and falling on his knees kisses his hand. Eugene tries to escape but Christine stops him. There follows a scene in which he blurts out his love for her, and tries to get away but she stops him and tells him she has waited. He can't believe she is earnest, he thinks she is teasing as she used to, and he starts to go. When they go, they go together facing a new life, purged and strengthened by the life they have been taught by. On a little plot of ground with their lost kingdoms ever before them to remind them and strengthen them in their desire to produce, these two people, glorious forerunners of the New South, will settle down. Arm in arm they go out the door. At the door the sound of a plank being ripped away upstairs brings 'Gene back with a groan. "Take one last look at this room 'Gene", she tells him, "and realize that this is past, that this was a fine life but a useless one. We are not living in the Memory of past greatness, but Now and Here. Are you ready to meet it?" Thus, they go out together, these two fine people, and as they go down the path one may hear the sound of hammering in other parts of the house. A castle is being torn from it's foundation, a mansion of the past is falling before the inexorable call of Tomorrow. From the distance comes the deadly whirring buzz of the New and the Curtain Falls!

APPENDIX II

SYNOPSIS OF "THE HOUSE OF BATESON"

I [Wolfe] will state it, as I see it, and it's unfortunate if the language seems involved and complicated. In a system where things are forever changing, where is the fixed, immutable, unchanging principle to be found? That is - where is the Absolute? Moreover, by the very exigencies of this vast, mechanical civilization we have built, life becomes bewildering and overpowering in its complexity. In the last chapter of that remarkable book, "The Education of Henry Adams", Adams voices this sentiment when he returns to New York after a long absence and looks at that terrific and chaotic skyline Civilization has exploded. In this chaos of force and disorder, where is to be found that principle of unity, order, which his spirit seeking "education" (which is but knowledge of unity) is on the hunt for. He goes to Washington and finds his friend, John Hay, a man of splendid ability, already drained and sapped of his vitalities by the demands of this monstrous new world. Now, as I interpret it, Hay represents the finest we have to offer to combat the demands of our present life. But he is not adequate. A new type of man must be created. And so he leaves it up in the air.

But how, how? In the first act of my play I try to present the problem. When the young man, Ramsay, tells Professor Wilson, the philosopher, that he feels at times he is on the earth seven centuries too late, he is giving expression to a sincere conviction. Adams mentions the mighty gap that yawns between the unity of 1200 and the multiplicity of 1900. Consider the case of the young man Ramsay. He too is on the go for "education" - that is the quality of understanding and grasping present life in its entirety. He knows the limitations of the Middle Ages, their comparative ignorance and superstition, but he also knows the promise of fulfillment they held open to the student. Ramsay could picture himself taking orders and going into a monastery in the 13th century. There he could have spent the years in his cell going through the monastery's precious collection of manuscripts - not too many, however, for a life time. He would have known Plato and Aristotle almost by heart, he would have been well-read in the scholastic

philosophy, and perhaps sub rosa (safe from the prying eyes of a fat abbot) would have refreshed himself, in moments of relaxation, with Homer and the dramatists.

I do not expect people to be greatly interested in Ramsay's account of his trials in the world of books. For this reason, I mention this problem only in passing, believing that, for dramatic purposes, his trials in the world of action will be more appreciated. Yet when Ramsay tells of wandering past the countless, loaded shelves of the library like some damned spirit in search of the unattainable, he is voicing that which has caused him acute pain. How infinitely little of the contents of those pages can be made his own: he, with a passionate thirst for knowledge, cannot become master even here. It goads him to fury to think that some idle woman gorged to the gills with the latest output of fiction, can speak knowingly of this, that or the other book, which he has not come to. Ramsay feels passionately that instead of there being too little science ...

[A PORTION OF THE LETTER IS MISSING HERE]

... knows that once he loses this, he too is lost. Then we find him being swept into the current. The bewildering cross currents of this life to which he makes a frenzied effort to apply his philosophy, and for which he finds his philosophy incomplete and inadequate, begin to sweep him about. He realizes that he has so adapted his philosophy to each occurrence that denies it, that it has lost its original quality and has become a mere agent of expediency, through which he is trying to find - what?

Ramsay, as I should have stated, wants to interpret life through the medium of literature. In the city he works for a newspaper (however I have no newspaper scenes in the play). Time and again he writes, but tears up what he has written, with a terrible sense of its incompleteness. A cross-section of life will not content him; he wants to show in each type the universal, in the one the many. At first he says, "I will write nothing now. But in five years I will know enough. Then I will be able to give a broadside view of things". But the conviction grows that in five years this knowledge of imperfection will be more oppressive than ever. It disgusts

Ramsay to hear the perfection of universal understanding of humanity ascribed to such a writer as Dickens, for instance. He admires Dickens but he sees plainly that Dickens, as so many other writers, had a very limited point of view. He knew one particular side of life and he knew it well.

It would perhaps be much better for Ramsay if he could limit himself thus. His own common-sense tells him that a sure limitation is the only solution in the present frame of things. But the daemon goads him on.

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