

# BOOKS:

## A Promise and a Legend

THE WEB AND THE ROCK. By Thomas Wolfe. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1939. 695 pages. \$3.00.

UP TO PAGE 297 this first of Mr. Wolfe's posthumous works retells some of the story of *Look Homeward, Angel* in terms of George Webber, alias Eugene Gant. The remaining 400 pages concern George's four-year love affair with a married woman, Mrs. Esther Jack, about twenty years his senior. In a prefatory note Mr. Wolfe said: "This novel . . . marks not only a turning away from the books I have written in the past, but a genuine spiritual and artistic change. It is the most objective novel that I have written. . . . I have sought, through free creation, a release of my inventive powers."

Mr. Wolfe deceived himself. According to the available evidence he underwent no basic change whatever, much less, indeed, than any other American novelist taken with the same seriousness. He neither progressed nor retrogressed. After fifteen years of writing he remained almost exactly where he started from: a perennial adolescent emotionally and intellectually, extremely shaky in his feeling for words and even more so in the matter of form, and generally lacking in the ability to create character. Further, despite his Gargantuan physical appetites and verbosity, and despite his constant references to cosmic affairs, he achieved his few successes only on small canvases. The large portrayal of large people and situations escaped his grasp.

His three novels must be described as collections of brief, impressionistic pieces, and his short stories, when

they make any sense at all, as little more than puffed-up, ill-digested incidents. *Look Homeward, Angel* contains good sketches of his brother Benjy, his sister Helen, and his father and mother, but the work as a whole arouses interest in the potentialities of the author rather than in the product. *Of Time and the River* must be put down as a jumble of punctuation marks, municipal catalogues, and geographical gazettes. It has the bigness of a runaway tumor, not that of a large concept beautifully executed.

In *The Web and the Rock* a few things stand out: George's youthful dreams of an afternoon, his first impressions of New York City, and Esther's letter to him on the boat. Though not of the first magnitude, these have fine feeling and fair writing. But the bulk of the volume falls short on almost all counts. The 400-page love affair begins as an ordinary pick-up on board ship and thereafter progresses to its commonplace ending without a trace of fresh insight. Neither George nor Esther ever comes to life. They make love, wrangle, and make up, and all the time she cooks wonderful meals for him, while he complains about the cosmos, but why the older woman held on to him, young enough to be her son, what attracted them to each other in the late afternoon and in the usually horrendous hours between supper and bed-time — these things Mr. Wolfe did not make clear.

He had the honesty to show up George as an amateur genius, but he did not have the artistry to explain the relationship which, by its very premises, must have contained a world of pity, beauty, and horror. Few situations hold more loveliness and pain than that of a woman, young or old, balancing her life on the smile of a man, and when the woman is nearly twice the man's age, even the angels count her tears and pray to God to be merciful to her. Mr. Wolfe was so engrossed in his own

loneliness that he seldom noticed the lost looks in the faces of others, being particularly blind to woman's reddening eyes. This blindness kept him from reaching true size.

Some reviewers have remarked upon the satirical gifts displayed in *The Web and the Rock*, pointing out the onslaughts upon the publishing business (as exemplified by the firm of Rawng and Wright) and upon literary critics (as exemplified by Mr. Seamus Malone). To one reader these chapters belong to Mr. Wolfe's least successful efforts. They do not satirize their objects; they burlesque them. The truth about publishers and literary critics is so astounding that if put down simply, with proper selectivity, it would make hilarious and memorable reading. But Mr. Wolfe, with hardly any sense for the sneer between the lines, let loose with all the might of his torrential verbosity — and the result boomeranged, making him look like a teller of tall tales rather than a skilful writer.

*Look Homeward, Angel* stirred people because it displayed a largesse of feeling very rare in American writers, most of whom worry themselves with small pangs and smaller yearnings. The book had faults aplenty — bad writing, no organization, some cheapness — but the massiveness of emotion tended to keep them in the background. Intelligent readers hoped that he would learn to write, develop a sense of form, and find a direction for his inner turbulence. Mr. Wolfe failed them in every subsequent book, and in the end began to tire them. A man jabbering interminably at the top of his voice that the world hurts him, soon or late becomes a bore. One therefore fears that if Mr. Wolfe lives at all, it will be as a huge promise unrealized — and as a legend because of his personal traits, some of them lovable, some grotesque, and all ex-

traordinary. How much promise and legend count for in the long run can be determined by a glance at the footnotes in any good literary history.

CHARLES ANGOFF

NOT PEACE BUT A SWORD. *By Vincent Sheean. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 367 pages. \$2.75.*

In his latest survey of the European mess, Mr. Sheean lets loose with full force against Chamberlain, who "has consistently put the interests of his own class and type above those of either his own nation or of humanity itself." Chamberlain, of course, is not personally to blame, but "the Tory governing class as a whole." That class flourishes on ignorance, stupidity, and selfishness, and has kept its doors shut to talent and honesty for decades.

Mr. Sheean also discusses Spain, former Austria, former Czechoslovakia, Germany, and the futile Evian Conference for the settlement of the Jewish refugee problem. His purely human descriptions of sufferings under the Nazi heel and of the heroism of the American volunteers who died for Spanish liberty will long be remembered. His general conclusion is the following: "Upon the will and instinct of the proletariat reposes such hope as we are justified in retaining for the future progress of humanity through and beyond the conflict which now divides the world."