The Saturday Review of Literature

Something of My Life

THOMAS WOLFE

Thomas Wolfe

— *Drawn from life by Georges Schreiber.*

"The critics say I write too much. . . ."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Under the title "The Story of a Novel," Thomas Wolfe wrote three articles for* SRL *in December,* 1935, *telling the story behind "Of Time and the River." About that time, Wolfe also wrote directly about himself for "Portraits and Self-Portraits"—a book of line drawings of literary figures by Georges Schreiber accompanied by short autobiographical sketches.* The Saturday Review *has gained access to the original Wolfe manuscript turned in for that book. Actually, more than half the material was cut out by Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's editor, for reasons of space. By special arrangement with Mr. Schreiber,* The Saturday Review *publishes herewith the complete manuscript, containing approximately* 1,200 *words of autobiographical material that has never before appeared in print. For a sample of Mr. Perkins's editing, the reader is referred to the illustration on the opposite page.*

I SUPPOSE the biographical facts about birth, home-town, colleges and so on, are available to the editors of this book, so I shall not bother to give them here. Since almost all the knowledge the world has of me, concerns me as a writer, perhaps it will be better if I try to tell something of the life.

I am thirty-five years old, and although I have written more millions of words than I should like to count—how many I don't know, but perhaps as many as anyone else my age now writing—I have published not more than a tenth of them. Nevertheless, the critics say I write too much—and I don't say that they are wrong. Although I suppose the desire to be a writer has been buried in me for a long time—certainly the itch for it has been there, because I began to scribble when I was not more than fourteen years old, I never dared admit to myself that I might seriously proclaim my intentions until I was about twenty-six.

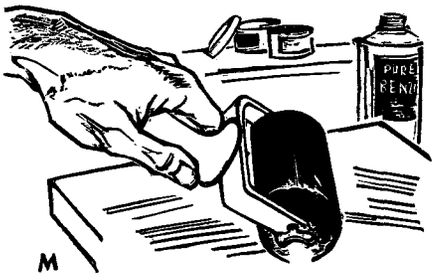
Before that, I had written a few plays and although I had hoped they might find a producer, I don't think that even then, I had sufficient confidence in my abilities to announce definitely to my family that I actually intended to be a playwright and to hope to earn my living that way. I didn't succeed, anyway. And it was not until the twenty-sixth year that I began to write a book, which occupied me for the next two or three years. During this time I was employed at the Washington Square college of the New York University as an instructor in English. I don't think that even then did I concretely and reasonably assure myself that I had found my life's direction in the work that I intended to do from that time on. I certainly did dream of finding a publisher and a public for the book, but it was really a kind of dream—a kind of intoxicating illusion which sustained me during the period of creation. I suppose I can say honestly that I wrote the book because I had to write it and after it was written and I saw the tremendous bulk of it in the cold grey light of sober actuality, I had the most serious misgivings and wondered what on earth had ever possessed me to make me spend two or three years of my life in creating such a huge leviathan or what moment of mad unreason had deluded me into thinking that I could possibly find a publisher and readers for it. My own dejected doubt was speedily confirmed by the first publisher who read the manuscript, who sent it back very speedily, with a very brief note to the effect that it was too long, too autobiographical, too amateurish and too like other books which he had published and lost money on, for him to risk a chance. This seemed to summarize and confirm my own most depressed feelings, now that the book was written and in this frame of mind I went to Europe and almost forgot about the book.

Within six months, however, another publisher had read the manuscript and accepted it. I returned to America, taught at the University and worked on the revision of the book which was published in October, 1929 a few weeks after my twenty-ninth birthday.

SO FAR as "early struggles" are concerned, my experience has been a fortunate one. The first book I ever wrote, and a very long one, too, was accepted and published by one of the first publishers who read it, and I understand that this is an extraordinary occurrence. I have had my

struggles, however, and pretty desperate ones too, but most of them, so far as writing is concerned, have been of my own making. I have to struggle all the time against indolence—perhaps it would be more accurate to say against an insatiable and constantly growing interest in the life around me, my desire to get out and explore it with an encyclopedic thoroughness, my desire to travel and make voyages and see places, things, and people I have never known. I like companionship, food and drink, going to baseball games, and having a good time. I must also struggle constantly against self-doubt—lack of confidence in what I do and the many difficulties I encounter in doing it. My knowledge of the craft and technique of my profession is still very imperfect. I believe and hope that I learn something about it and about my own capacity as a writer all the time, but I learn very slowly and at the cost of almost infinite error, waste, and confusion. I do much too much of everything; I write millions of words in the course of shaping out and defining a volume of a few hundred thousand. It seems to be an element of my creative faculty that it has to realize itself through the process of torrential production, and although I hope to be able to control and guide this force as I go on, so that I will be able to achieve my work with more and more clearness and precision and economy, without such a waste of effort, time, and material, I think that the way I work will always remain in its essence pretty much as I have tried to describe it and that it will have to come out of me in this way.

I come from a class and section of American life which regarded writing—the profession of a writer—as something very mysterious and romantic and very remote from its own life and the world of its own knowledge and experience. For this reason, as I have said, it was twenty-six years or more before I even dared to admit concretely that I might become a writer and I was almost thirty before my own admission was concretely affirmed by publication. For this reason, perhaps, and for others—which I tried to mention—a kind of tremendous inertia in me and the tendency of human kind to put off and evade for as long as possible the thing it knows it has to do, the work it cannot avoid and without which its life is nothing—and a strong sense of direction and often a very confused sense of purpose. For all these reasons my development, I think, has been a slow one. And yet it has sometimes seemed to me that

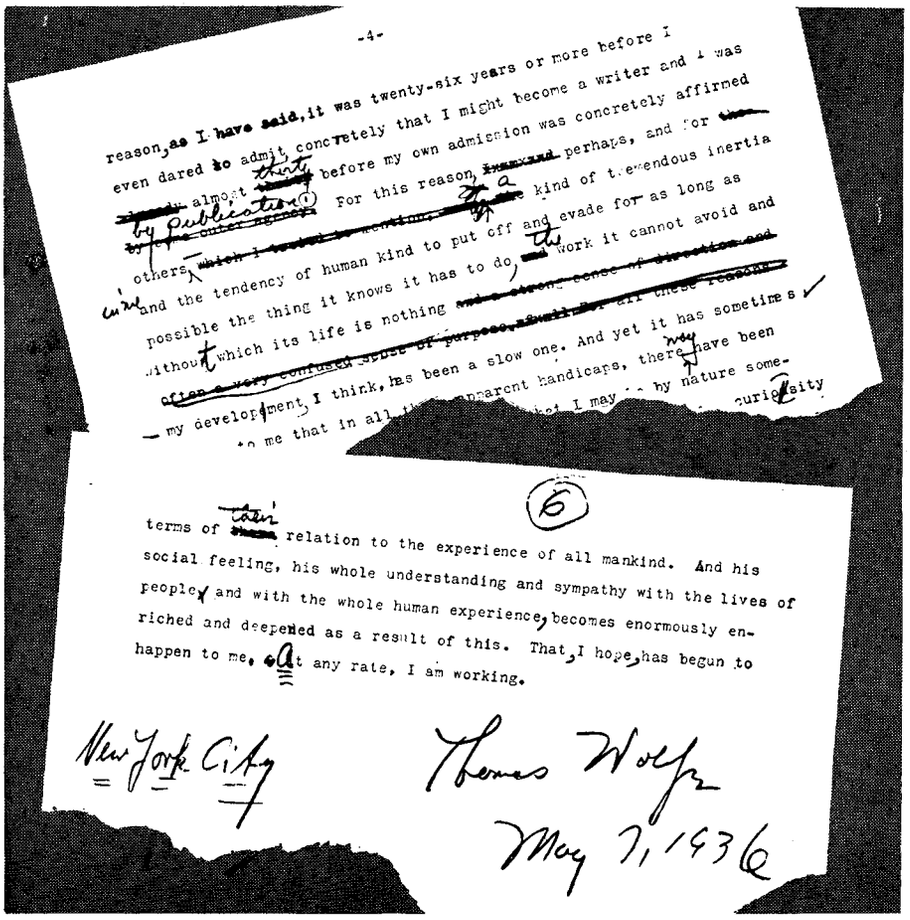


in all these apparent handicaps, there may have been certain advantages, too. The belief that I may be by nature somewhat indolent and the knowledge that I may allow a ravenous curiosity for life and new experience to come between the work I ought to be doing—and the fact that as hard and grim as work itself may be, not only the intensity of effort and concentration required, but the period of spiritual imprisonment that work necessitates—the very knowledge that once a piece of work has been begun, a man's whole life must be absorbed and obsessed by it day and night until he finishes it—all of these things, together with a certain goad of conscience, have driven me to face the fact of work, to try to meet it squarely and to do it as hard as I can once I am started on it. It has been said of much that I have written thus far that it was autobiographical. I cannot answer such a very debatable and complicated word in the short space that is allotted here and I shall not attempt to. I can only say that it seems to me that every creative act is in one way or another—autobiographical.

* * *

THE kind of naked directness with which the young man writing his first book is likely to make use of his material, but as I have said, much of the trouble and misunderstanding may have come from the fact that I have not yet succeeded in being autobiographical enough, instead of the fact that I was, as many people say, too autobiographical. At any rate, as I go on, my tendency I believe is to make use of the materials of living experience with an ever increasing freedom of the inventiveness and the plastic powers of the imagination.

As far as the experience of work itself is concerned, I have found that so far from isolating one from contacts with reality and a living experience with the world around one, it enhances and enriches one's perceptions enormously. In fact, it seems to me that the core of an artist's life is his work, and his deepest knowledge, his greatest power, his profoundest social feelings come through the work he does as a great current of electricity pulses and surges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New York City

Thomas Wolfe

May 7, 1936

A working example of the Maxwell Perkins-Thomas Wolfe editor-author relationship.

through a dynamo. I suppose it is true that a man at twenty is likely to have an egocentric picture of the universe, is concerned with life very largely as it reflects and acts upon his own personality. And I suppose also that this concentration on his own immediate experience and interest is likely to show itself in his earlier work. But so far as my own experience is concerned, I believe that as one grows older, he becomes a great deal more interested in the life around him in terms of itself. His interests, and the adventures and experiences of his own personality, become valuable to him more in terms of their relation to the experience of all mankind. And his social feeling, his whole understanding and sympathy with the lives of people and with the whole human experience, becomes enormously enriched and deepened as a result of this. That, I hope, has begun to happen to me. At any rate, I am working.

Thomas Wolfe as Writer and Man

THOMAS WOLFE. By Herbert J. Muller. New York: New Directions. 1947. 196 *pp.* $2.

Reviewed by
HENRY MORTON ROBINSON

ANY CREATIVE writer will tell you that one of the cruelest bars to composition is the dread that his work will be pilloried by incompetent critics. Conversely, the knowledge that his book will be assessed by fair and penetrating criticism, is one of the disciplines that keeps a writer keen. When Lionel Trilling exercises his critical gifts on E. M. Forster, or when, as in the present case, Herbert J. Muller turns in a flawless performance on Thomas Wolfe—every creative writer, no matter how obscure, turns again to his own task with renewed vigor and confidence. "I will be dealt with," he tells himself, "strictly on my merits."

Thomas Wolfe would be grateful, I believe, for the even-handed criticism dealt out to him by Mr. Muller in the most recent addition to the New Directions series "The Makers of Modern Literature." In this compact essay, Mr. Muller not only dissects Wolfe as a writer and analyzes him as a man, but manages by some marvelous act of critical re-creation to put him together again as the personification of the Myth in, and for, our time. Myth, not legend, mind you. The distinction is crucial. As Mr. Muller says, "The legend of Thomas Wolfe is depressingly familiar," and then proceeds to summarize it in a skilful paragraph or two. But it is as the Myth of our age—"the large controlling image . . . which gives meaning to the facts of ordinary life," that Mr. Muller would have us understand his man.

Presented with this "large controlling image" (the figure, as Mr. Muller points out, is Mark Schorer's) we see Thomas Wolfe not merely as a writer of superabundant power, endowed with a passionate sensory equipment, seldom equaled in literature—but more particularly as the Mythmaker for our confused and whirling society. Mr. Muller conceives Wolfe in terms of Artist and Hero—or more exactly, the Artist *as* Hero—then proceeds to weave a taut critical fabric, containing just enough biography to keep the book at a human stretch. It is really quite an exhibition of interpretive writing; a model, I feel, of what such writing should be.

Sympathetically but without gush, Mr. Muller tells of Wolfe's lifelong struggle with creative and personal problems. Underneath the Byronic posturings, the revulsions, and the neurotic agonies of the man, we see the artist emerging surely and painfully in his principal male characters. The too-yeasty Eugene Gant of "Look Homeward, Angel" gradually gives place to the still-fermenting but more firmly controlled figure of George Webber of "The Web and the Rock." A certain objectivity in symbolism has been gained. The "rock" is the promethean cliff of Manhattan; the web is the skein of corruption and greed spun on that fabulous isle. But Webber is still Wolfe, even though he has matured, *pari passu,* with his creator. We realize that Wolfe is on a pilgrimage to discover first his own soul, then the soul of America, and that his teeming novels are at bottom a turbulent record of his quest—a "Pilgrim's Progress" across the melancholy terrain of our own day.

—*Press Association.*

Thomas Wolfe [taken in Berlin, 1935]: "I believe we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found."

Wherever true creative growth is to be noted in this progress, Mr. Muller notes it. But when Ganty rhetoric or cheap thimble-rigging are being palmed off on the reader, Mr. Muller strikes at them with his critical staff. His book is an eloquent defense of Wolfe, but there are passages in which he is a remorseless prosecutor, too. The chapter entitled "Transition" seems to me to be one of the most valuable pro-and-con discussions of Wolfe that I have ever read.

Part of the Wolfe legend runs that Tom Wolfe was written out when he died; that he had mined all the best material from the galleries of his suffering soul; that he was already repeating himself, and that he would have sunk still deeper into the slough of revulsion and bitterness from which he originally sprung. Mr. Muller refutes this in some measure by pointing out that in "You Can't Go Home Again" Wolfe had achieved a sober, hard-won stoicism, and that the book ends on a spiritual up-beat. "I believe we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found," is Wolfe's final position. Whether Tom Wolfe would have developed new material or gained a real objectivity external to himself,—these are questions that Mr. Muller quite wisely does not attempt to answer. It really doesn't matter. On the basis of evidence Thomas Wolfe can be admitted to the company of the elect. And that his life work "was as close as we can expect to come to an American epic," cannot be doubted after closing Mr. Muller's comprehensive and admirable book.

Henry Morton Robinson is the author of "The Great Snow" and co-author with Joseph Campbell of "A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake."