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The Discovery of a Missing Thomas Wolfe Letter

Suzanne Stutman

RECENTLY, while continuing my research on Aline Bernstein at the Lincoln Center Branch of the New York Public Library, I was astounded to find in a file supposedly containing a Bernstein letter, the electric scrawl of Thomas Wolfe. A review of the first few lines of the letter indicated at once what I had found: the missing final draft of Thomas Wolfe's 1933 letter to Aline Bernstein.¹ In my edition of the correspondence of Wolfe and Bernstein, *My Other Loneliness*, as well as in Richard Kennedy's edition of *The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe*, the second draft of this letter had been included, since we had both presumed that the final draft had not survived. Yet there it was, sitting unobtrusively in an Aline Bernstein collection that I later found to have been donated by her daughter, Edla Cusick, to the Billy Rose Collection on 18 March 1958.²

This letter is significant for a variety of reasons. Wolfe had not written to Mrs. Bernstein for a period of two years and had not seen her since their dramatic break in January 1932. His struggle to answer the brief birthday letter that Mrs. Bernstein sent to him on 28 September 1933, is documented by these three drafts, which comprise a total of 102 8½" by 11" handwritten sheets and are equalled in length only by Wolfe's October 1928 letter that detailed for Mrs.

¹ The first and second drafts of this letter are included in the complete Wolfe-Bernstein correspondence, which is housed in the Houghton Library. This letter is reprinted with the kind permission of Paul Gitlin, executor of the Thomas Wolfe estate. Thanks also to Rodney G. Dennis, Curator of Manuscripts, Harvard College Library, for his gracious assistance, and to Moylan Mills, Pennsylvania State University, and Richard S. Kennedy, Temple University, who read this paper for me.

² Thanks to the librarians at the Lincoln Center Branch of the New York Public Library who were so helpful to me: Christine Karatmytsky, Donald W. Fowle, and Dorothy L. Swerdlove, as well as to Juanita S. Doates and Herbert Serious, Collection Management.

Bernstein the events of the *Oktobefest* brawl and its aftermath. This 1933 letter reveals Wolfe at a pivotal time in his life: he was developing from a self-centered writer into one concerned with the national consciousness and with the plight of the common man. The letter presents not only important biographical material concerning his changing relationship with his family, but also incorporates many of the major themes and symbols that were finding their way into his work during this period. In addition, a study of the drafts gives the reader insight into the dynamic ongoing process of Wolfe's writing.

Although all three drafts contain common themes and passages, each seems incomplete without the others. It is fascinating to examine the changes in the drafts, as Wolfe chose to revise and edit the torrent of his thoughts from a relatively formless, almost compulsive, cascade of ideas into a patterned, organized (albeit maddened-in-spots) communication to this woman who still proved to be his soulmate after all the years of bitterness and separation.

The first draft of the letter consists of sixty-four handwritten sheets. It is the most poorly punctuated; in addition, Wolfe had scratched out several passages and had often broken off his writing. There are actually two brief, formal beginnings in which Wolfe attempts to tell Mrs. Bernstein why he is writing to her after a silence of two years. Each introduction breaks off quickly, for apparently Wolfe was not yet ready to fuse the contradictory elements of his letter together. After a brief section in which he declares his undying love for the mythical woman who was everything to him, Wolfe devotes the body of this first draft to a refutation of what he considered to be Mrs. Bernstein's superficial and decadent "art theatre cant" about the beauty of life in the face of such obvious suffering around them: the suffering of millions, created by the Depression; the suffering of his own family; and, finally, his own suffering as well.

Another common theme Wolfe addresses in his drafts is that of Mrs. Bernstein's transformation from the "best and most beautiful" woman in the world with "the face of a flower" to the "stranger and enemy" who betrayed him. Interesting to note is the fact that Wolfe chose to attack her family in this first draft, but later to delete all such painful material from his final letter to her. (His approach resembles that of his infamous and hair-raising, unfinished questionnaire of 1932, which he also decided not to send.) As Aline Bernstein's life is "soul and rotten" so, too, is the life of her family — her husband,

son, and daughter. Like her friends, these "precious people" are the ones who have brought about the ruin of his own people, and others like them: "the people I came from and the people I knew . . . are just the kind of people of which this country is made, the real workers, laborers . . . and stonecutters."

In all three drafts, Wolfe focuses on the theme of his father as a common man, a stonecutter, and on his own legacy as one of the common men who together make up the vast fabric of America. This is, of course, one of the major themes of Wolfe's later work — his turning away from all that is false and superficial — the woman and the city and what they represent — and his quest for community with the "common clay" of America, represented in the central symbol of the stonecutter. Wolfe concludes his draft with one more stab of reverse snobbery: "I know that the lives and adventures of these common and ordinary people must seem dreary to so rare and pure a spirit . . . whose own life and spirit has been distilled out of this weary chaos of blood and clay and sweat and agony and latent imperfection from which my own base stinking flesh has come and in which I still wallow."

The second draft, much more carefully organized and written, contains many of the themes and passages found in drafts one and three. All the drafts include a variety of contradictions — often within the same thought or sentence — as Wolfe struggled to grasp reality through the nightmare of uncontrolled suspicions that constantly wracked him. The form of this letter reveals these contradictions, as it moves from a positive beginning of praise for the ideal Aline Bernstein of his past to a tirade against the "false" Aline Bernstein who wears only a mask of her true self as she and her friends seek to destroy the hapless and vulnerable Wolfe.

Wolfe has edited from this second version references both to Mrs. Bernstein's family and to most of his own. What remains, however, is the focus on his father, the stonecutter, who at 33, Wolfe's age at the time, forged a new beginning, as Wolfe himself vows to do. It is with this masculine image, this image of the common man, that Wolfe now identifies. Indeed, his best and only friend, his mentor Maxwell Perkins, has enough sensitivity, he chides Mrs. Bernstein, at least to be ashamed of his wealth: "I have seen grief and misery and desperation all around me so that any decent person who has wealth and luxury should be ashamed of it to the roots of the soul — as Maxwell

Perkins honestly and genuinely is ashamed of it." Wolfe ends this draft as he ended his first, with a melody of the common man — but he has obviously not yet gotten his song quite right:

If I ever win release it will not be flights of pigeons or threads of gold or fine art theatre sentiments that do it. It will be because I am the son of a stonemason and have known the same kind of fury, anguish, shame, drunkenness, regret, and suffering that my father knew. If there is any great creature dormant in me he will have to come out not because I am different from other men but because I am compounded of the same sweaty stinking clay of toil and agony as every mother's son of them — and the only difference is that I have more of that stinking sweaty clay.

The third and final draft is much more organized and controlled than the first two. Wolfe begins with a sustained declaration of love and appreciation for "those ten thousand hours of love and generous devotion that you gave me" and an apology for "the bad things" he had done while "sick at heart and maddened in my brain." However, Wolfe cannot resist his seeming need to revile Mrs. Bernstein as the one "who sent the ugly brown poison to the roots of life." Again, as in his first two drafts, he speaks of "the stranger and . . . enemy" who, behind the mask of the woman he loved, betrayed and sought to destroy him. As this letter and its earlier drafts indicate, Wolfe did indeed suffer bitterly because of Mrs. Bernstein's letters and cables and declarations of both pain and undying love. As he was wont to do, however, his reactions skidded at times toward paranoia, as he described this "false enemy" as being "the one who told me people were laughing at me behind my back, that I had made a fool of myself by the things I write, and that there was no hope for me anymore." Typically, the negative outburst is then followed by words of love and praise for this grand woman of the past — which are once more subsumed in a tirade against "the ugly figure of that other woman." Wolfe was tormented constantly by these uncontrollable mood swings from one illogical polarity to another.

He turned after this outburst to a constant theme in his work, rebirth, a new cycle and a new beginning. Like his father "who was a stonemason, and who began a new life when he was just my age," Wolfe, too, would begin again. For the first time in all three drafts, Wolfe goes on here to include more biographical information about his father and background material that he had used earlier in *Look Homeward, Angel*. He also includes new information that he had been

researching for his short story "The Four Lost Men," published earlier that year.

The final, lengthy segment of Wolfe's letter is a direct response to Aline Bernstein's comments about what Wolfe refers to as "this peace and beautiful life of which you are a part" which seems to him to be "amoral and corrupt, the society of wealthy and trivial and perverse people around you, the stockbrokers, art theatre actors, precious boys, professional widows, lesbians, pederasts, New Yorkers, etc. . . . and ugly Westchester homes and Park Ave. apartments are conducive to these visions of pure love and flights of pigeons that you write about." Part of Wolfe's purpose in writing this letter to Mrs. Bernstein was to express to her his vision of the real world, in contrast to her unreal world, with its web of illusion that for a time enmeshed him — themes which were to dominate his later work, *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*. He lists examples of degradation and injustice the Depression has wrought and returns to materials he has catalogued in his first draft as he recalls the frustration and poverty of his family during these bitter years. This, he tells her, is the real world: "So to hell with flights of pigeons and threads of gold and all these beautiful lines of love and art theatre sentiments that I can not understand." He transforms the stonemason theme from the second draft so that it reinforces his connection not only to his father, but to all men like him: "Aline, I am the son of a stonemason, and I have all the fury, hope, anger, drunkenness, joy and misery that my father knew and if there is any 'great creature dormant in me' he will rise not because I am not as other men, but because I am compounded of the same base sweaty stinking clay of blood and agony that my father and all other men have been made of."

Wolfe foresees Aline Bernstein's grief at the mad underside of his letter and in his postscript, which includes Hamlet's response to Gertrude, exhorts her to cast that dark side away, retaining only the declaration of love. Amazingly, that was just what Aline Bernstein was always able to do. In her response to Wolfe's letter Mrs. Bernstein wrote: "I had your letter, and it moved me deeply as everything concerning you moves me. . . . You said goodbye to me in the letter, but there is no goodbye between you and me. I love you forever, I know you and understand you, as no one in the world will ever do.³

³ *My Other Loneliness: Letters of Thomas Wolfe and Aline Bernstein*, ed. Suzanne Stutman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 359.

On a more practical vein, in response to Wolfe's dramatic catalogue of family woes and to his own inability to own even the basic articles of clothing, her reply amounts to an ironic rebuttal of all he had yearned so fervently to communicate to her: "The tale of your family sounds unspeakably dreary, and I cannot see why they all should have such a dreadful time of it. Is there not one of them who can take hold of life and live? You can, if you will. There is no need to be without some spark of delight, and you will never convince me that you need go without shirts and drawers and suits, if you want them.⁴

Dear Aline:

I have tried three times to answer your birthday letter but I could not. There was too much to be said, but I think at the end there is very little. It has been two years now since I have written or spoken to you, but in justice and decency I want to speak now because life seems so long in its pain and suffering and is really so short, and there is something to be said now, and I think it is better to say it than to hide it — you were the only woman who ever loved me and you were the only one I ever loved. I was a lonely, clumsy and obscure boy filled with the illusions, vanities, and arrogance of a boy. My family did not think that I was much good, or would amount to anything, and I don't think anyone but you thought so. My childhood and youth were about as bitter, alien, desperate, and lonely as anyone's has ever been. It was a miracle to find you — it was like discovering a new world — finding a magic country — the most fortunate and happy life I had every known. At first when I met you I was exultant and proud because I had got me a beautiful, rich, dainty and luxurious mistress. Then I began to love you — at what moment, hour or day I never knew — and you were mixed into my blood forever. — About everything you did while you were away from me, the life you led, the friends you had, the world you lived in, that seemed corrupt and bad to me, I don't want to say anything because it has been the source of so much madness, horror, and confusion. But about the world you and I made together, the ten thousand hours we lived together, the million things we did and said and thought and felt together, I want to say that this is mine, made, seen, felt, and shaped by me — and by you — and that nothing anyone says or does can touch it. I want to say also that the memory of those ten thousand hours of love and noble and generous devotion that you gave me is the best thing that I have ever known — and that the woman I knew and loved then is so much the best and most beautiful woman I have known that the rest are nothing beside her. Finally I want to tell you that I bitterly regret and can never expiate in my conscience some of the things I did and said then. I was sick at heart and maddened in my brain and spirit when I did and said the bad things, but I want you to know now how bitterly and sincerely I regret it, and how I have learned to value and treasure as the finest thing I have ever known what you gave me. This is what I wanted to say to you, because it now seems time to say it,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

and I hope you will accept it in the spirit in which it is offered and can find charity in your heart to accept it.

About the rest of it, Aline — the reason I could not finish those other letters that I wrote to you — I know how wrong I have been and am sorry for it. Have you now enough直ness in you to say the same or will vanity and pride make you say that you have done nothing wrong? A stranger comes in between me and you when I try to think of you — the one I love, the woman with the flower face and noble beauty who also came and cooked for me every day. That stranger and enemy is masked in your face and wears the look of your life. She was the one who spat into the face of life and struck the coward traitor's blow at a young man's life. She was the one who said that she alone of all the living should not grow old, and that the structure of life must be changed because she willed it so. She was the one who, in the name of love, pounded at me daily with an ugly, brown, morbid and corrupt hysteria. She was the one who sent the ugly brown poison to the roots of life. She was the one who sent me the cables and letters when I had gone abroad and was living alone trying to do my work — the cables and letters saying she was dying, about to commit suicide, would kill herself, and could stand no more. She was the one who also wrote me letters from hospitals when I came back saying she was about to die and could she see me before the end came. She was the one who has written me letters, cards, telegrams the last three years saying that I had basely deserted her, that I had given up the best thing I had ever had, that my work was no good and could never be any good because I had deserted the source of my inspiration, my guide and critic who had kept me from committing my worst faults. She was the one who told me people were laughing at me behind my back, that I had made a fool of myself by the things I wrote, and that there was no hope for me any more. All this came to me in the most desperate and lonely time of my life, and it came from a woman using the name of the one I love. I say this woman who has done, said, written and contrived these things is a traitor, a stranger, and an enemy, who struck the coward's blow at the heart of life — and I say I do not know her, and that she is not the woman who gave me the best life I have known — I'm not going any further with this. You know what I am saying, if you have found justice and truth in you, and if vanity and pride does not still make your spirit false, which has such honor, greatness, and love in it. — Aline, I needed a place of honor, dignity, warmth, and security in the world, and I won it. You say I got it because you were there to love and help me, but what you gave you have also taken away. You say in your letter you do not know how many years it has been since we met. Well I can tell you, it has been eight. I was twenty five years old when I met you on my birthday before the library that day. And I am thirty three years old now. I was a young man then, with the faith, ignorance, passionate hope, and desperate resolution of a young man. Now I'm a middle aged man who is gross and heavy of figure, and is growing bald. You are an old woman. It had to end, it was the law of life, of justice, and of honor that it had to end but why, after giving me life, did you try to destroy me? If you had known what my youth was like — and how I have had to find faith, joy, exalting alone, and a belief in the

triumph of life for myself — and how in my childhood there was no one to tell me I was any good, and that my hope of somehow achieving the beautiful good life of work and creation was not just the dream of a million other young and impotent young fools — you would not strike that traitor's blow [which] has destroyed the only place of dignity, security, honor, and hope that I had ever known. — That place is gone, I am 33 years old, penniless, alone and desperate, as when you met me, no one in the world has any belief any longer that my life shall come to anything, except a single person. His name is Maxwell Perkins, and in his faith and belief I shall live and work and begin again. That man's belief means more to me than the belief of anyone on Earth, and the knowledge that I have it far outweighs the disbelief of all the others.

Aline, I can not close this letter to you with bitter words, because it was not to revile you that I wrote it. I wrote it to tell you of the memory of love and happiness I have when I think of the woman that I loved, who came to see me for years. But to get back to that woman that I loved I had to go around the ugly figure of that other woman — the stranger who came in and used every rotten and despicable means she had to destroy me. Well, she got everything I had gained — reputation, security, the belief of people in my work — and for a rich, fortunate, well-protected and mature woman of the world who had had everything — it was a glorious victory, wasn't it, to destroy the position and the beginning of a young man without wealth, influence, or stylish friends? Well, that woman got what I had gained, but she did not get my life. Aline I am 33 years old, and I have nothing left — no, not a decent shirt or a pair of pants to cover me — but I can begin again! My father, who was a stonemason, began a new life when he was just my age, and when it seemed to him that everything was lost. In that year he came up to the town where I was born, in the mountains. It was after Reconstruction in the South, my father was a "Yankee", a wandering stonemason, the son of a farm laborer who had never earned more than 50 cents a day — my father had drifted South, had been around town, and there was nothing but pain behind him and pain in his heart. He thought he was dying of consumption and he knew he had wasted his life, and lived badly and wrongly. In that year of his life my father was a stranger and an outcast, but he began a new life there in the mountains and it was the best part of his life that was before him — and his was a strange and wonderful life. What my father did without a single friend or anyone to believe in him I can do as long as there is one. And I could still do it if there were no one at all.

In your letter you say you wish that you could help me, that you have faith in my "greatness" and my "genius" and that you pray for my success. Don't you think it's wonderful that you should say this after all you've said and done and written these past four years?

The time for your helping me is past. There is nothing you have now that I want. My own friends grieve for me, knowing what you are. They know I love you, they do not know the one I really love and know — the one with the flower face, the woman of grace, power, knowledge, grandeur, beauty — there was never anyone like her, she is buried in me, I will love her till I die. — As for the other one, — the one the world has seen and thinks I am enslaved too — the stranger and

the enemy, the oily, treacherous, too familiar Jew, the one who wept, phoned, threatened suicide and then went out to dinner parties — only she belongs to Broadway to the show business — she belongs to the forces of rats, reptiles, apes, lions, foxes, vultures, scne — this one belongs to rats alley where the dead men live — and let her go there — let the dead live among the dead and by the dead — I want nothing to do with her — but Aline, you — the one I loved — were the best and greatest woman in the world, and it will always be the same when I think of you — I'll love you forever.

You write me in this last letter of the beautiful pure life you have achieved. I am glad to hear it. I have not achieved it for myself. You say I have released a flight of pigeons in you. And in your letters you have talked to me of "threads of gold" and "clear designs" and said I "make a music in you" and hoped the "great creature that lay dormant in me" someday would awaken.

Aline, there was a time when everything you wrote to me — the "threads of gold", the "clear designs", the "flights of birds", the "faithful forever" and "it will never change" seemed finer, better, truer than the greatest poetry I had ever read. It seemed to me that your life was true and precious, that you had found something true and precious which my life had never known, and I would tear your letters open with trembling fingers, and think they were the greatest, grandest, straightest words of a clear and faithful spirit I had ever read, and I would feel awkward and wonder how I could get the "thread of gold" in me, or learn "the clear design" or "make a music".

Well its no good Aline. I haven't got the "thread of gold", or "the clear design" or the "flights of pigeons". And I have only learned a little — enough to tell you at last that I loved you and that you were the best, the greatest in the world — not enough yet to stop from feeling the old bitterness. Maybe you are right about the clear designs and flights of pigeons, and maybe you have found this peace and beautiful life of love you speak about, but it is still far and strange to me. Maybe, also, the life of which you are a part, and that seems to me amoral and corrupt, the society of wealthy trivial and perverse people around you, the stockbrokers, art theatre actors, precious boys, professional widows, lesbians, pederasts, New Yorkers, etc has had no effect on you, and ugly Westchester homes and Park Ave. apartments are conducive to these visions of pure love and flights of pigeons you write about. — Aline, in the last three years I have lived in Brooklyn and I have seen men pawing through garbage cans for food, and I have seen a man beaten to death and another young man without work jump from the 14th floor against an iron lamp post so that his head was gone and his hairs shot out upon the pavement and the lamp post as if shot out of a compressor hose. And I have seen enough misery, horror, injustice, rotten privilege, jeering corruption to fill my nostrils with its dirty stench and do me for ten thousand years — and I want to tell you that I have no use for stockholders and Bergdorf Goodman rodents and people who walk around in 35 pairs of hand made shoes a year and have the wonderful art theatre sentiments about clear designs and flights of pigeons. I have seen grief and misery and desperation all around me so that any decent person who has wealth and luxury should be ashamed of it to the roots of the soul — as Maxwell Perkins honestly and

genuinely is ashamed of it. And I have seen my own family, including my mother whom you called an old bitch, included by this general calamity, so that the whole history of it is written in that one family. My sister is running a cheap boarding house in Washington and her husband is a dazed and foolish man who never knew what hit him and never will. My mother at 74 has lost everything, and must depend for her food on the money one lodger gives her: the man gets \$5.00 a week and gives her four and with this she buys and cooks the food that both eat. My older sister in South Carolina has seven children and a husband who has had no work for years: she keeps the family going on the wages of her 19 year old son, who earns \$9.00 a week for working 14 hours a day in a grocery store, and her 18 year old daughter who is working in the basement of a Washington department store and living with Mabel also sends part of her \$9.00 earnings. My Brother Fred who has the mind and heart of a child and needs the companionship and affection of people more than anyone I know, has had to leave home and the girl he wants to marry and is now trying to sell farm machinery in the country districts of Pennsylvania. When he gets through paying for oil and gas and supplies for the Ford he has to drive, he has fifty cents a night left to sleep in one night joints and seventy five cents a day for food and tobacco — and never a complaint out of him! If you and your Bergdorf Goodman friends think that is liberal and easy for a healthy six foot man, just try it sometimes.

So to hell with flights of pigeons and threads of gold and all these beautiful lines of love and art theatre sentiments that I can not understand. The great and beautiful woman that I loved, who came and cooked for me, and was the jolly, delicate and noble creature of perfect knowledge and power was not like this. She was not ashamed of me for what I was, and she knew if anything good ever came from me, it would come from what I was, and not from flights of pigeons and clear designs. I will tell you this again — the person who writes me these letters about the beautiful life she is leading and the peace and serenity she has achieved, — I have achieved no peace and serenity and I would not consider it a beautiful state of love but a very base one that floated around in art-theatre Bergdorf Clouds while the rest of the world is filled with such anguish, pain, ugliness, cruelty, poverty and suffering as would drive a man mad to look at it. — And I will tell you this, as well — I cannot join you in these rare heights of beautiful living you have attained and as for "the great creature dormant in me" — why, he'll be dormant until doomsday if I wait for "clear designs and flights of pigeons" to bring him forth. Alike I am the son of a stonemason, and I have all the fury, despair, hope, anger, drunkenness, joy and misery that my father knew, and if there is any "great creature dormant in me" he will rise not because I am not as other men, but because I am compounded of the same base sweaty stinking clay of blood and agony that my father and all other men have been made of. The woman that I loved, the one that loved me, who came to my rooms and cooked and did not have the beautiful art theatre sentiments would have known this.

— I have nothing left, and all that I know is that the years flow by like water and one day it is Spring again. I know I shall not die yet, I know that by faith and labor I shall live again, and I shall make out of all the ruin, despair, and confusion that I knew another beginning.

Goodbye, Aline. I want to write and tell you that I loved you, and I have told you that and added other things as well I did not mean to say. For you and me there is no return, but for me there will never be anyone so beautiful, generous, and rare as you were, and after all these years of pain and trouble I know it, and have written to tell you that I do.

Tom

Isn't it a strange and incredible thing that it still means enough to me to write so long a letter? I am still young and still mistaken — but "throw away the worser part of it, and live the purer with the other half!"⁵

Thomas Wolfe never wasted any of his writing: material from his notebooks found its way into his letters, and the vast arena of his life he eventually transformed into his fiction. This final 1933 letter is significant, for it represents Wolfe's fullest statement of the events that had affected him during the two years since he had last written to Mrs. Bernstein. In addition, it is possible to trace in this letter themes and symbols that he was using during this time in his fiction, in particular material from *Of Time and the River*, *The Web and the Rock*, *You Can't Go Home Again*, and his short stories "The Web of Earth," "Death the Proud Brother," and "The Four Lost Men."

Much had happened to influence Wolfe during the two years since he had written to Mrs. Bernstein. After his Guggenheim year, he returned home to a country battered by the Depression. He settled immediately in Brooklyn, and this crucial decision amounted not only to his breaking away from Aline Bernstein, but from all that she, her friends, and ultimately Manhattan itself had come to represent for him. Wolfe became increasingly isolated during his stay in Brooklyn: ironically, however, it appeared that during this time his feeling for humanity in general heightened. He was becoming more conscious of the plight of the common man as he roamed the streets of Brooklyn during those desperate years, observing the suffering young and old alike, homeless and cold, foraging in garbage cans for food. He had seen, he wrote to Mrs. Bernstein, "enough misery, horror, injustice, rotten privilege, jeering corruption to fill my nostrils with its dirty stench and do me for ten thousand years." In *The Story of a Novel* Wolfe would later write of these years in Brooklyn and their effect on him: "People have sometimes asked me what happened to my life during these years. They have asked me how I ever found time to know anything that was going on in the world about me when

⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, iv. 156-157.

my life was so completely absorbed by this world of writing. Well, it may seem to be an extraordinary fact, but the truth is that never in my whole life have I lived as I did these three years when I was struggling with the giant problem of my own work."⁶

In addition to his struggle to come to grips with the great body of material with which he was wrestling, Wolfe was beset by other worries. He was aware not only of the suffering of those who existed around him, but of his family, which had lost virtually everything to the Depression. As Professor Kennedy notes in *The Window of Memory*, these adverse times had brought Wolfe and his family closer than at almost any other time in his life. The tide had begun to change as early as 1931, when Wolfe offered a nonrepayable loan to his brother, Fred, and began to communicate more frequently with his sisters Mabel and Effie and their families, who were barely subsisting during the Depression. His newly tolerant attitude toward his mother would express itself in "The Web of Earth," written and published in 1932. Wolfe was to become, during these years, increasingly preoccupied with themes concerning his father in his fiction. In 1932 he visited his father's family in York Springs, Pennsylvania, for the first time. He became preoccupied with his father's past and turned aside in the summer of 1933 to write his short story, "The Four Lost Men," which deals with this theme. This preoccupation is also evident in his 1933 letter where he devotes a full paragraph to his father, this "Yankee, a wandering stonemason who had drifted South" to begin a new life, much as Wolfe was attempting to do. In *The Story of a Novel* Wolfe once more draws the symbolic connection between himself and his father, the stonemason. Here the stonemason represents not only the common man, but the force of creation itself, able to mold from the block of experience a new epiphany: "now I really did get the sense at last that I was working on a great block of marble, shaping a figure which no one but its maker could as yet define, but which was emerging more and more into the sinewy lines of composition."⁷ It was, of course, with the theme of the quest for a father that Wolfe was also preoccupied as he struggled to come to terms during this time with the huge manuscript that was soon to be entitled *Of Time and the River*.

⁶ Thomas Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964 [1936]), pp. 57-58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

By October, Wolfe was frantically moving from one episode to another. He was working simultaneously on the Jacobs material that would later become part of "A Vision of Death in April," from *The Web and the Rock*. Much of what Wolfe wrote to Mrs. Bernstein in the final draft of his paranoid, nightmare vision of New York and of the "false" Aline Bernstein echoes his fictional account from Book IV of *The Web and the Rock*. Although he was opposed to those who quoted stylishly from Eliot's lines and had coined the term "wastelanderism" to express his disdain, in his letter to Mrs. Bernstein, Wolfe referred to her as "this one who belongs to rats alley where the dead men live." In *The Web and the Rock* Wolfe wrote of a similar world: "this great rats alley where the dead men were."⁸ The rest of the passage sounds hauntingly like Wolfe's final letter as he catalogues the horrors of this nightmare world:

the great street of the night lit with its obscene winks of sterile lights and swarming with a million foul, corrupt, and evil faces — the faces of rats, snakes, vultures, all the slimy crawls and sucks and eyeless reptiles of the night, the false and shoddy faces of the accursed actors, with all the sly communication of their obscene whispering — he was driven mad again with horror, doubt, and unbelief. It seemed incredible that this vital, beautiful, and wholesome looking woman with her fresh, jolly, noonday face of flowerful health and purity and joy could be joined in any way, could be connected by any filament, however small, to this evil nighttime world of shoddy filth and death.⁹

Yet, it was not to revile Aline Bernstein that Wolfe wrote; it was to communicate to her — beyond the pain and suffering and the nightmare visions — his inviolate and undying love: "For you and me there is no return, but for me there will never be anyone so beautiful, generous and rare as you were, and after all these years of pain and trouble I know it, and have written to tell you that I do." Indeed, in his fiction as in his letters Aline Bernstein would remain always for Thomas Wolfe the calm center of the storm.

⁸ Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (New York: New American Library, 1966 [1938]), p. 588.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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