



# The outline of Thomas Wolfe's last book

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# The Outline of Thomas Wolfe's Last Book

Patrick Miebe

AT HIS DEATH in 1938 Thomas Wolfe had completed and left in the hands of his editor, Edward Aswell, an immense draft for a novel concerning the life of a fictional character named George Webber. Aswell, finding this work unfit for publication, subsequently altered and rearranged the posthumous manuscript to such an extent that it emerged from his office as no more than a jumble of discrete segments. The original novel as conceived by Wolfe was lost, apparently irretrievably. Twenty-five years later, however, in the appendix to his critical study, *The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe*, Richard S. Kennedy reprinted what he termed "Thomas Wolfe's rough outline of his last book,"<sup>1</sup> a document best described as being a veritable table of contents. Furthermore, Mr. Kennedy claimed that the outline "was left with Wolfe's final manuscript in the hands of Harper editor Edward Aswell. Each piece in the manuscript bundle was labeled according to its place. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

The outline,<sup>3</sup> if Mr. Kennedy's claims are authentic, at last provides a key to the structure and substance of the posthumous manuscript as it was before Edward Aswell extensively revised, cut, and reordered the work to form what are now three novels: *The Web and the Rock*, *You Can't Go Home Again*, and *The Hills Beyond*. With this key one could theoretically rebuild Thomas Wolfe's manuscript from the debris left by Edward Aswell's editing. This significance, however, hinges on Thomas Wolfe having indeed been the outline's author, and having indeed left it with a well-labeled draft — assertions Mr. Ken-

<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Kennedy, *The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe* (The University of North Carolina, 1962), p. 415. The outline itself is reprinted on pages 415-437.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>3</sup> The outline in question is in the Houghton Library and has the call number BMS Am 1883 (1336).

THE WEB AND THE ROOT

Part I

The Hound of Darkness  
(1793 - 1916)  
Book I

(1) The Web And The Root  
(1793 - 1881)

Chapters:

- 6. The Prologue
- 7. Old Catawba
- 8. Old Catawba- The Sons of Martha, etc. (a variant)
- 9. The Joyner Genealogy
- 10. A Digression On Myths
- 11. There's Always Hercules (How Libya Hill Got Its Name)
- 12. The Division Of The Tribe (The Great Joyner Schism and How It Came About)
- 13. Cosmopolis: How Certain Joyners Went To Town
- 14. The Pjured Knight: Theodore (In Which Town Joyners Achieve, For The First Time, A Gentleman)
- 15. The Battle Of Hogwart Heights
- 16. Theodore's Children

Part I

The Hound of Darkness  
(1793 - 1916)

Book

(2) The Last Reunion (March 18, 1878)

Chapters:

- 17. Chickamauga: Rance Joyner's Tale
- 18. Rance Joyner's History (Two versions)

Part I

The Hound of Darkness  
(1793 - 1916)

Book II

The Web And The Wheel  
(1881 - 1906)

Chapters:

- 19. A Stranger Whose Sermon Was Brick
- 20. The World Lost But Not Forgotten

PLATE I

FIRST PAGE OF THE OUTLINE



nedy offers without substantiation. For the past ten years, Wolfe scholars have been willing to take his claims at face value. I believe it is time the pertinent manuscripts were examined.

There is, for example, Edward Aswell's description of the circumstances in which he obtained the manuscript, a description which fails to align with Mr. Kennedy's statements that Wolfe gave Aswell a carefully outlined and titled draft:

On the evening he was to leave I went to his room in the old Chelsea Hotel on 23rd Street to get the manuscript. The writing was done, and when I arrived Tom was sorting and arranging the pages. He sat at a table in his shirt-sleeves with a pile of manuscripts a foot high in front of him. He had already sorted at least twice as much before. Rapidly he went through the remaining sections to make sure everything was in order. . . . Now and then he would decide that a chapter or section didn't belong in the book and he would discard it, throwing it on the floor. All around him the floor was littered with discards. . . . Tom did not know at the time, and I do not know now, whether it is to be published as one book or as several books. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Thereafter, whenever Aswell described the posthumous manuscript he repeatedly emphasized its chaos, *never* mentioning an outline or labels.

As for the outline itself, the following clearly establishes its true author:

(1) The outline never formed a part of the William B. Wisdom collection of Wolfe manuscripts but was given to Houghton Library by Edward Aswell himself with this preface, "These are notes I made to help bring order out of chaos while editing the posthumous MSs. of Thomas Wolfe."<sup>5</sup>

(2) The outline's typeface mirrors the typeface of manuscripts that are definitely the product of Edward Aswell's typewriter.

(3) The outline, as well as the labels to which Mr. Kennedy refers in the posthumous manuscript, occasionally contains as part of the typed title such parenthetical descriptions as "a variant" or "duplicate" — terminology Edward Aswell as editor would easily use but quite untypical of any titling by Thomas Wolfe.

There is no doubt that the outline reprinted in Mr. Kennedy's otherwise brilliant book is the work not of Thomas Wolfe but of Edward Aswell, and that the enticing attributions made by Mr. Kennedy are at best no better than wishes.

<sup>4</sup> Houghton Library, bMS Am 1883 (1337).

<sup>5</sup> Houghton Library, bMS Am 1883 (1336).

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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