

DIETER MEINDL

## Modernist Novellas: European Reflections on Thomas Wolfe's Short Novels<sup>1</sup>

*In my heart do I love only life . . . !*  
(Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*)

In his famous review of Hawthorne's tales, Edgar Allan Poe, who, though Boston-born, was a Southerner by upbringing and temperament, depreciates the novel as objectionable "from its length," as incapable of the unity of effect or impression that the short prose narrative produces in the reader. Poe – as a forerunner of modernism a very important American writer for Europe – regarded novel and short narrative as by nature distinct. Yet, modernist American literature was to carry on an intense commerce between the two genres. Stories were regularly integrated into novels.<sup>2</sup> The short-story cycle – an intermediate form between the mere collection of stories and the novel – has come to figure as a key modernist genre, paradoxically representing an artistic whole consisting of independent parts. It is well represented in Southern fiction (Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* [1942] and Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* [1949] readily come to mind) and, since the 1970s, has received considerable scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Another intermediate narrative genre has fared less well with American critics: the short novel, also referred to as 'novelette,' 'novella,' 'long story,' and even 'long short story.' Though certain specimens (among them such modernist Southern texts as Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" [1939] and Carson McCullers's "The Ballad of the Sad Café" [1943]) are held in high esteem, there have been few serious generic treatments since, in 1932, Ludwig Lewisohn called the short novel "a form with which, in the English-speaking world, neither editors nor publishers seem ever to know what to do, trying to palm it off now as a short story and now as a novel" (Holman, Introduction ix). The present writer, in dealing with Thomas Wolfe's short novels,

focuses on those that are most amenable to treatment in the light of European novella criticism and, simultaneously, are quite expressive of Southern literary modernism. Concerning the latter, its philosophical roots are traceable in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, as this essay on Wolfe, which also contains numerous references to William Faulkner, demonstrates. Referring to Wolfe's short novels, Hugh Holman once claimed that "Wolfe's natural method of writing was in reasonably brief and self-contained units" (*Loneliness at the Core* 49). Apparently, the medium-length narrative curbed the penchant for exuberant formlessness imputed to Wolfe's big novels, into which most of his short novels were integrated by the author and his editors, becoming more or less fragmented in the process.

## II

With no tradition of novella theory comparable to that in France and Germany to support it, the medium-length narrative in English lacks critical acclaim. On this situation, the English literary term *novel* constitutes an historical gloss. Derived from Italian *novella* and designating a realistic rather than romantic story of middle length in the manner of the *novelle* in Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Decameron*, English *novel* lost this meaning (retained in French *nouvelle* and German *Novelle*) when, in the eighteenth century, the long narrative genre appropriated the term and its realistic connotations to distance itself from the romance. However, medium-range narratives continued to be written in English. This necessitated the re-introduction of the word *novella* as well as promoting the other coinages mentioned (see Gillespie, Kern).<sup>4</sup> Is there, then, something specific about the short novel, apart from it being "longer than a short story and shorter than a novel" (Cuddon 608).<sup>5</sup>

Howard Nemerov's "Composition and Fate in the Short Novel" is a rare example of a stimulating generic discussion. He ascribes to the genre a parabolic quality, a design emphasizing "rhythmic intensification," "boldness of . . . venture into generality," and "intention of discursive profundity" (229, 235). The short novel is described as a demanding form, adept at interweaving circumstance and motive, a succession of events and a series of symbolic details. "The compression, intensification, and austerity and economy of form which Nemerov suggests as necessary to [its practitioner]" (Paine 61 f.) causes the genre to concentrate on action rather than description and

comment. Here, short-novel research converges with European novella theory, which is highlighted by Goethe's statement that the *Novelle* is about *eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit* – “an event which is unheard of but has taken place” (Cuddon 444). Similarly, Nemerov's emphasis on the fateful expressed by the short novel points to the novella's concern with the irremediable past. According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the novella revolves around a central mysterious event: “Everything is organized around the question, ‘What happened? Whatever could have happened?’” In this context, they re-introduce a generic distinction long prominent in European novella theory, the distinction between *Novelle* and *Erzählung*, *nouvelle* and *conte*: “The tale is the opposite of the novella, because it is an altogether different question that the reader asks with bated breath: What is going to happen?” Hence, the tale is related to suspense and discovery, whereas the novella is linked to mystery and secrecy: “it places us in a relation with something unknowable and imperceptible” (192 f.).

Of the five texts contained in Holman's collection of Wolfe's short novels, the two later texts – “I Have a Thing to Tell You” (1937) and “The Party at Jack's” (1939) – are tale-oriented, with their tense actions taking place in what are, respectively, Third Reich and Great Depression settings. As is well known, Wolfe, though considered a modernist here, developed a realist strain as his social and political conscience matured into a “commitment to expose man's inhumanity to man” (Idol 45). In the two tales mentioned (both of which were worked into his 1940 posthumous novel *You Can't Go Home Again*), Wolfe manifests his acute awareness of historical catastrophes, anticipating the full revelation of the terrorist nature of Hitler's regime and subtly conveying the shakiness of the American social fabric during the depression. Yet, for all their being derived from the realist dispensation,<sup>6</sup> the two tales also feature elements that can be associated with modernist mythologizing and concern for craft. Witness how “I Have a Thing to Tell You” counterpoints the degradation of Germany and its magic aura personified in “wizard Faust” and “dark Helen” (277 f.); and observe the symbolism that, in “The Party at Jack's,” serves Wolfe to convey his criticism of American capitalism and spell his warning of a social revolution. Aptly, the building in which the shallow and sumptuous party is staged undergoes periodic tremors from underneath (the subway tunneling under it) and catches fire in the basement service area. Both texts generate suspense: with respect to a German Jew about to be arrested by the Gestapo and on

account of a fire threatening the working and partying inmates of a New York high-rise. Generally, the forward-drive of their actions links these short novels to the tale as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari. In contrast, the three earlier short novels – “A Portrait of Bascom Hawke,” “The Web of Earth” (both 1932), and “No Door: A Story of Time and the Wanderer” (1933/34) – tend toward the mysterious novella. To these three narratives can be added a fourth, the thematic experiment “Death the Proud Brother” (1934). The modernist quality of the four texts, novellas properly speaking, is not so easily determined. We might provisionally say that they express an urge to convey general human rather than social experience and evoke the impenetrability of man’s fate. Why mystery is germane to modernism will appear in the next section.<sup>7</sup>

### III

In attempting “to reestablish Thomas Wolfe’s importance to literary modernism” (Holliday 5),<sup>8</sup> a general concept of modernist fiction will be offered here, stressing its background in European philosophy. The most wide-spread reading of modernism conceives it “as an inveterately avant-garde and experimental ideal” (Matthews 8), as a literary tendency to treat, formalistically, language as its content. Significantly, Michael Levenson speaks of modernism as “the regime of technique” (3). The intense concern with the formal qualities of their art on the part of modernist writers has been described as follows:

... writers focused on *how* language functioned in poetry or prose. They refused to accept that it held any absolute meaning in itself; by questioning traditional uses of it, and by stretching it to the limits of intelligibility (and beyond), modernists shifted the emphasis away from “content” to “form.” (Gillies 110)

No historical or philosophical motivation is cited for what consequently appears as a mere shift to formalism. This emphasis on the autonomy of the modernist text easily shades over into the typically post-modern notion of a linguistic ‘turn.’ Thus, Michael Bell says that “by the early teens of the [twentieth] century . . . rather than describing or reflecting the world, language was now seen to form it” (16). However, such a view makes havoc of Wolfe’s and Faulkner’s totalizing approach to reality, their conscious attempt to convey all of life and time and their endeavor to exceed the limits of consciousness. To this reader, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is a modernist statement because, in that novel, the Sutpens first emerge “in notlanguage” (9):

as authorially and authoritatively rendered bizarre ghosts taking shape at some depth in Quentin Compson's mind, as mysterious shades pointing, on the one hand, to existential depths and giving rise, on the other, to a complexly layered narrative process that, in postmodern fashion now, (re-)constructs the Sutpen saga as 'historical' reality. It is in accompanying existential thought on its 'downward' course, in which art, in a Heideggerian fashion, figures as an intuition of Being, that we perceive the European derivation of Southern modernist fiction's philosophical framework.

According to Sanford Schwartz, a central aspect of modernist philosophy is its insistence on the opposition between conceptual abstraction and immediate experience. He points out that "Bergson's 'real duration,' [William] James's 'stream of consciousness,' [F. H.] Bradley's 'immediate experience' or 'feeling,' and Nietzsche's 'chaos of sensations' all refer to a realm beneath the forms that organize daily existence" (5). A new theory of knowledge permeates the thinking of these philosophers of the turn of the century: "Announcing a major 'inversion of Platonism' in Western philosophy, they claimed that reality lies in the immediate flux of sensory appearances and not in a rational order beyond it" (12). Closely considered, the notion of lived experience, which was central to those thinkers, de-emphasizes the rational content of consciousness, but, in doing so, still remains associated with the individual mind. The sensory flux appears subjective on the one hand, and as directly participating in the flow of life, on the other. Depending on the philosophical opinion in question, it was viewed as still partaking of, or as preceding, the distinction between subject and object that structures thought and speech. This transitional nature of the experiential stream is suggested by William James's famous formulation "*the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life*" (233; his emphasis). In fact, the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique – seemingly such a subjective scenario – really reaches beneath consciousness in suggesting not so much a private experience as a continuous existential totality: somebody's present impinged upon by the at least potentially more than personal past and projected toward, and conditioning, an existentially interrelated rather than an individual future. A focal transition from the sensory stream to life's flow is registered in the very configuration of Bergson's evolving thought, the shape of his oeuvre, in which he proceeds from *Les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) to *L'évolution créatrice* (1907), books in which he focuses on, respectively, a person's sense data and

the creative *élan vital* that pervades all life. Two considerations suggest that turn-of-the-century philosophy was caught up in a large evolution of 'downward' existential metaphysics trying to transcend the mind's individual perspective in contemplating life as a whole. First, turn-of-the-century philosophy, which permeates modernism, can be related to "the human sciences . . . undergoing a global shift from the developmental (or 'before-and-after') paradigms of the nineteenth century to the structural (or 'surface-and-depth') paradigms of the twentieth" (Schwartz 5). Second, the philosophical impetus analyzed here can be viewed as ultimately opposed to the subject-object split that structures the mind and had dominated western philosophy since Descartes. Seeking to overcome *Bewußtseinsphilosophie*, which gave epistemological precedence to either the cognizant subject (idealism) or the world of objects (materialism), a current of nineteenth-century thinking arose that is nowadays aptly called *Lebensphilosophie*, life philosophy. Arthur Schopenhauer's basic reality-concept is the blind, unreasoning *Lebenswille*. Bergson bestows priority on the *élan vital*. Nietzsche emphasizes the Dionysiac and the will to power in life, "the unexhausted, procreating life-will" (196). Heidegger's fundamental concept is all-encompassing Being – *Sein* as opposed to *Dasein*, the subject capable of thinking of Being. He summarizes the existential metaphysics in question in his "Letter on Humanism" (1947):

. . . thinking overcomes metaphysics [that is, subjectivist, Cartesian metaphysics] by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where man has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous and more dangerous than the ascent. The descent leads to the poverty of the ek-sistence of *homo humanus*. (230 f.)<sup>9</sup>

Man is never "simply a mere subject which always simultaneously is related to objects, so that his essence lies in the subject-object relation. Rather, before all this, man in his essence is ek-sistent into the openness of Being" (229). Modernism, whose culture hero was Freud, typically associates life as such with a descent from consciousness, the always single and subjective mind, and, in that context, often invokes such pre-rational phenomena as myth, epiphany, and the unconscious. Of this whole 'downward' existential metaphysics, distrust of reason in modernism is but the other side of the coin: distrust stemming from disenchantment with the Enlightenment project, the realization that man's rational constructs, originally conceived to preserve the self, have come to control (to cite from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by

Horkheimer and Adorno) “that self-same vital force from which all that is achieved in the name of self-preservation uniquely derives.”<sup>10</sup>

The form/flux, or mind/life, dialectic instrumental in the rise of modernism seems to have crystallized around the turn of the nineteenth century, when the crumbling of Christian belief – the West’s metaphysical superstructure – resulted in the typical *fin de siècle* sensibility, a split sensibility featuring, on the one hand, art, which became an ersatz for religion, and, on the other, a valorization of life as such (cf. Arata). This antithesis of aestheticism and vitalism is reflected in modernism by a profound concern with the writer’s craft and an impulse to convey life *in toto*, an impulse particularly strong in Southern modernism. Did not Faulkner rate Wolfe first and himself second among contemporary American novelists for having most magnificently failed in attempting the impossible, for having “tried to reduce all human experience to literature” (Meriwether 81)? Not surprisingly, the mystery around which Wolfe’s modernist novellas revolve is nothing more – and nothing less – than Life.

#### IV

Wolfe’s expansive mode as a writer, his urge to say it all, has European life and existential philosophy as its background.<sup>11</sup> He, who, like Faulkner, was a rhetorical novelist and, again like Faulkner (and many other modernists), a reader of Bergson, is so wordy not because language, on the postmodern plan, forms the world, but because, like other modernists, he labored hard with language in order to make it tell what evades telling; for the totality of life cannot be conveyed by narrative, which, by definition, renders life in specific and selective terms and which, as language, differentiates between reality’s concrete scenarios. Actually, not only does life, life as such and in general, elude narrative portrayal, it is also preverbal in the sense that, as all-embracing Being, as *Sein*, it underlies *Bewußtsein*, the always individual mind, which, phenomenologically considered, alone speaks, actualizing language as speech.

By and large, Wolfe approached the task of articulating the existential totality more naively than Faulkner. In his fiction, he likes to comment upon time as the stuff and scaffolding of life, thus approaching the problem of conveying the existential dimension directly and discursively. Also, his narrator-protagonist demonstrates a hunger for life that translates itself into a desire to verbalize all, which, on the



stylistic plane, makes for descriptions and catalogues. However, like other modernist masters, Wolfe also used certain literary techniques so as to imply what cannot be portrayed. Typically, these stratagems are less conspicuous in his bulky novels than in his finely wrought short novels. For him, whose expansive bent is marked, the shorter form apparently became a self-disciplinary exercise. His novellas in particular contain narrative strategies similar to those found in other modernists and protomodernists, certain interrelated devices that, in conjunction with the parabolic quality of the novella genre, enable him to convey total existence with words.

One of these strategies is the grotesque. "A Portrait of Bascom Hawke," Wolfe's first short novel, focuses on its title figure, a mean and miserly but also impressive old eccentric.<sup>12</sup> Bascom is presented by the narrator, his young nephew David, as an avatar not only of his country's past, but of all time: "... he came up from the wilderness ... from a time that was further off than Saxon thanes, all of the knights, the spearheads, and the horses" (67). He is endowed with a special novella trait: an only partly ridiculous "sense that he was 'fated' ... that his life was pivotal to all the actions of providence, that, in short, the time might be out of joint, but not himself" (29). For all his grotesquerie, Bascom is a universal figure – or, rather, his very grotesqueness ultimately achieves that effect. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque is expressive of "life as a whole" (50). Tonally, it spans the comic and the tragic or terrible; imagistically, it encompasses and conflates the realms of human, animal, and plant life as well as the animate and inanimate spheres. In a general fashion, it indicates existential totality, counterpointing the mind's specificity and rationality. Bascom is depicted in plant, animal, and inanimate terms, being "tough as hickory" (9) and possessed of "big horse teeth" (27) as well as appearing "rubbery" (12) of lip and "cadaverous" (4) of figure. Yet, the story's narrator seems in fuller possession of the continuum of life than its title figure. David contrasts the tiredness of his uncle with his own hunger for life. He purveys catalogues of impressions – sights of harbor, market, and female figures – and insists on his attunement to life: "... I was joined to the earth, a part of it, and I possessed it ... I would feel unceasingly alternate tides of life and dark oblivion; I would be emptied without weariness, replenished forever with strong joy" (71). In a carnivalesque manner, young David is wedded to the present and oriented toward the future. Also, he has a stronger "sense of union with the past," particularly that of the



South, than his weary, disheartened uncle, who keeps muttering “So long ago” (67). Nonetheless, it is in Bascom, the text’s grotesque protagonist, that Wolfe really enacts the notion of existential totality. In this, the text is reminiscent of Melville’s novella “Bartleby” (which it emulates in drawing up an array of scurrilous lawyer’s office figures). Like “Bartleby,” “A Portrait of Bascom Hawke” is a parable signaling man’s fate. Bascom is the “fated man” (5) who, after a career as an avid Harvard student, a multi-denominational minister and seeker, and a real-estate agent on the prey, loses his grip on life past, present and coming. He is a singularly static person that nevertheless mysteriously evokes the human condition – like Bartleby (“Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” the narrator exclaims in the last paragraph of Melville’s text). Bascom has come to an existential standstill. A man in a million, as his experience-wolfing nephew calls him, he has congealed into his own family gallery portrait, as it were: “A Portrait of Bascom Hawke.” With this text, the modernist Wolfe subtly adapts and transforms “La Nouvelle: genre de l’événement,” to cite the title of Camille Dumoulié’s essay on the novella genre. He conceives general life, its flow and change, as an event that cannot be directly narrated, but may be counterimaged forth and thus adumbrated *ex negativo*: as a still life, as it were, a picture of an old man immune to life’s changes – not to *his* life’s changes, for these no longer come to pass.

Generally, the grotesque passes across rational boundaries, linking up distinct spheres of life and alluding to its undifferentiated entirety. In such figures as the cadaveresque Bartleby and fatalistic old Bascom, the animate turns inanimate, in the manner of the grotesque, which, in these instances, is refined into a very potent technique for conveying existential totality. This technique – that of the *mort vivant* (cf. Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics*, passim) – can be traced in protomodernist and modernist fiction. Henry James, for one, used it in various turn-of-the-century *nouvelles*, such as “The Altar of the Dead” (1895) and “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903). There, he has his protagonists miss out on life, which is thus rendered in an indirect or negative manner, as an absence of life’s essential qualities on the part of aesthetes who temperamentally lack mobility and emotionally shun marriage as a form of existential interconnection. Theirs are empty, ‘unlived’ lives, haunted by routine and fixed ideas, conveying by contradistinction the quality of life in general, its flux and change, and doing so more accurately than any specific active lives the protagonists might have chosen to live could have done. Similarly, Faulk-

ner's trademark is the use of 'frozen images,' uncanny tableaux of arrested motion that represent artistic crosscuts in the stream of life, as it were; for, to cite Faulkner, "[t]he aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed" (Meriwether 253). In *Absalom, Absalom!* such images as the "schoolprize water color"-like "man-horse-demon" Sutpen (8) accumulate in the novel's first chapter and subsequently dissolve, as it were, in the (re-)construction of an accreting family saga. Wolfe, too, must have sensed that, given the unavoidable circumstantiality of narrative, life as such is best evoked by characters counterpointing and negating it, which is what, by the very spectacle of his mad and misogynic old age, Bascom does, deploring the "delinquencies" (13), as he calls them, of his ever-impregnating mountain-man father, thus adding a judgmental component to the iconic elements through which his "anti-life stance" is conveyed.

Wolfe's novella "No Door: A Story of Time and the Wanderer" culminates in a display of mort vivant figures, men somehow outside life. The text's last section features the cameo appearance of a Security Distribution Company official motionlessly staring out a window: "a timeless image of fixity and judgment, the impartial, immutable censor of all the blind confusion and oblivion of a thousand city days" (226). This is an emblem of unchangeability, a grotesque version of God surveying life even. Another figure looking out the window of an old house suggests "the immutable exile of an imprisoned spirit." His face is "the calmest and the most sorrowful" (228) one the narrator has ever seen. Evidently, this is another mort vivant conveying life's flow and change by contradistinction. The quality of "No Door" as an experimental existential parable is hinted at by its structure. This is a fuguelike text featuring four sections headlined "October: 1931," "October: 1923," "October: 1926," and "Late April: 1928," and focusing on episodes thematically related as manifestations of lostness and inaccessibility – episodes generating a novella aura of mystery. The text's last section is the penultimate one in terms of the narrative's interior chronology, which may suggest that life is interrelated and never reaches closure.<sup>13</sup> All four sections are notable for their existential thematics: The Wolfean narrator-writer has his solitary existence among strangely criminal-bourgeois Brooklynites sentimentalized as "life as it is, in the raw" (167) by a New York millionaire; he achieves an awareness of the irretrievability of the past as he spends a night in his childhood home after the death of his father; he evokes odd

English types and traits, focusing on the Coulsons, a mysteriously ostracized family he lodged with in England;<sup>14</sup> and he enviously contrasts the tough lives – attuned to the perpetuity of the present moment – of the employees of a New York shipping company with his own “wild and uncertain projects and designs” (222). As the narrator walks among the city people “as a phantom who can never grasp their life or make their time [his] own” (161), yet feeling something familiar impending, “only a door away and never found” (183), it is his very isolation, his failure to link up with others, that functions as the precondition of the intimation he achieves of “dark time” (180, 198), the totality of life.

Another indirect approach to total existence consists in a person's death. Wolfe's poetic novella “Death the Proud Brother” figures as a paean to death, sleep, and loneliness. The narrator-speaker, of the “great company of men who [live] by night” (17), recounts four cases of death witnessed by him during his wanderings in New York City. Three men die in accidents: On an April day, an Italian street-vendor is killed as his cart is smashed by a truck propelled by a swerving van; on a February night, a drunken vagabond bashes in his head as he wanders into a building under construction and falls forward across a pile of iron beams; on a May morning, a worker is hit by a glowing rivet as he stands aloft on a beam and is sent to his death. A fourth death occurs as a shabby-looking middle-aged Irishman dies quietly on a bench in the subway station beneath Times Square on a spring night. Unlike the others, this is a natural death, yet causes considerable interest and philosophizing in the crowd of generally callous or wisecracking bystanders. The emphasis put in the text on this occurrence suggests that it, more than the preceding fatal accidents, demonstrates that death is innate in man – a notion also supplied by the paradigm of death woven into the text, in which death occurs at night and in broad daylight, outside and indoors, up in the air, on the ground, and underground, and in ironic contrast to the season, imminent or prevailing, of the renewal of life and to new constructions and prospects in the city. Strictly speaking, the men dying in Wolfe's text are not individuals. In fact, individuality is what the man dead in the subway seems totally devoid of: “. . . had one sought long and far for the true portrait of the pavement cipher, the composite photograph of the man-swarm atom, he could have found no better specimen than this man” (43). The picture conveyed is that of a thoroughly undistinguished underling with “an ounce of brain,” a “thimbleful

of courage,” and a “huge cargo of . . . dull and ugly superstitions”: “Poor, shabby, servile, fawning, snarling, and corrupted cipher, poor, meager, cringing, contriving, cunning, drearily hopeful, and dutifully subservient little atom of the million-footed city” (45). How, then, is death man’s proud brother? Evidently, contrary to all appearances, death gives man back his dignity and pride. In essence, man dies alone and, doing so, becomes separate from the onlookers, being no longer a man of the crowd but their cynosure, thus affirming his difference from them as well as representing their common human condition: “. . . proud death, dark death, the lonely dignity of proud dark death sat grandly there upon man’s shabby image” (61). In Wolfe’s text, it is not the mind – unique, phenomenologically speaking – that establishes a man’s eminence, but the solitary act of surrendering it. In conferring upon the four dead the importance formerly denied them, the speaker underscores not their individuality, but the fact that, in dying, whether dramatically or peacefully, they become identified as humans enmeshed in the great net of the living that never dies: “I thought . . . how our lives touch every other life that ever lived, how every obscure moment, every obscure life, every lost voice and forgotten step upon these pavements had somewhere trembled in the air about us” (33). This existential context explains how Wolfe could simultaneously compose his novella as a salute to death and as an evocation of its horror. Witness how the speaker is affected when he observes the burning, screaming construction worker fall to his death: “I had the sense that all life was absolutely motionless”; there is an “illusion of frozen silence”; it seems to the speaker that “everything on earth [is] like something cut out of stiff paper, with no thickness,” that “everything [is] thin, two-dimensioned, without body and fullness”; “[b]lack ruin” is awakened in his heart – “the hideous world of death-in-life” (36-38). We are on familiar ground here. Death, which, in the final analysis, is always that of an individual or unique being, serves to counterpoint, and thus indirectly conveys, life in general. The Faulknerian imagery, supplying grotesque impressions of a thin, frozen, silent world, implies the fullness and mobility of life by arresting and disembodimenting it. In fact, the silhouette of the worker “paus[ing]” on the beam before slipping off into the void strikes the watching speaker as a “grotesque image” (35). Assuredly, this Wolfean construction worker is a contemporary of Faulkner’s two-dimensional demon Sutpen and a descendant of American fiction’s most famous and grotesque death-in-life-figure: Bartleby, of Melville’s protomodernist no-

vella. As their lives are stilled in all these figures, life as such is conveyed in a privative manner.

Wolfe's finest novella may be "The Web of Earth." The title of this text as well as its former working title ("Mother Earth") refer to the modernist epistemological matrix, which bestows priority on the existential dimension, that abiding, ever changing totality designated by such words as life, time, and earth. The text also adopts traditional features of the novella, "[g]enre oral par excellence" and "événement . . . d'une voix" (Dumoulié 101); for "The Web of Earth" is told by Eliza Gant, an earth-mother-goddess figure and folk-narratress. In the latter capacity, besides employing "oral markers, such as idioms, interjections, dialect expressions" (Melloni 6), Eliza is above all digressive: a word that, in this life- and time-encompassing narrative, translates as connective, interrelating, associative. The organic craft of weaving has been identified as the chief metaphor of the text (Guzi). Early episodes reach back at least seventy years to the Civil War, and the narrative concludes with a stage direction-like "*Ships again!*" (154), a motion- and future-oriented reference to the locale where Eliza weaves her yarn, her son's apartment overlooking New York harbor. It is a story that has no real beginning – it actually begins with three dots – and defies closure. Everything Eliza recalls and reminisces about (early on she makes a claim to total memory) is grist for her mill: the return of the Confederate veterans evoked with Hemingwayesque simplicity ("the way the women cried as we stood in Bob Patton's yard, and the men marched by us, and the dust rose, and we knew the war was over" [79]); her husband's former marriages and philanderings ("he didn't stop to say his prayers when there was a woman around" [100]); his drinking-sprees and epic feats of strength, as well as his titanic fight with death. The story's plot (if plot it is) consists of Eliza confronting and partly reforming one of two murderers escaped from Altamont prison, who end up, one as a good citizen in Kansas, the other in misery and death in Mexico. This short novel, though focusing on the past-haunted and violence-prone mountain South (the primary local misdemeanors are not brutality and murder but alcoholism and extramarital sex), ranges – in conformity with the wanderlust Eliza ascribes to her husband, the male Gants, and men in general – all over America and beyond: it is nothing if not inclusive. In tone, again, it grotesquely opposes the tragic and the comic, ruined lives and lusty living, engendering true emotion as well as making fun of false sentiment. The desperate murderer behaves sheepishly under

Eliza's catechizing. Gant, whose gallantry with women hastens his second wife's death, is haunted by her reproachful ghost. Pre-eminent is the eternal couple: Eliza Gant, female fertility principle and source of stability, a woman who has eight children (not counting the babies who die) and who can grow anything out of the earth; Oliver Gant, the colossal and rhetorical husband, almost innocently attracted to drink, the fair sex, and roving, a good provider all the same, laying by gargantuan stores of food and entertaining a roaring fire in the hearth. These are mythic figures, larger than life and emblematic of life as a whole. Among the text's affinities with the novella (whose customarily tight, event-directed structure it so obviously shuns) is its use of a leitmotiv, a mystery, which turns out to be the key event of a text in which the totality of life figures both as epistemological premise and narrative goal. Eliza's narrative begins with, and keeps recurring to, the voices she heard in the year when the main, criminal action of her story occurred:

... In the year that the locusts came, something that happened in the year the locusts came, two voices that I heard there in that year . . . Child! Child! It seems so long ago since the year the locusts came, and all the trees were eaten bare: so much has happened and it seems so long ago. . . .

The voices Eliza insists she heard said: "Two ... Two" and "Twenty ... Twenty" (76; ellipses in the text). Eliza eventually perceived the meaning of these words when, twenty days after confronting the murderer in her house, at twenty minutes to ten o'clock, she gave birth to twins.<sup>15</sup> A mystic touch has been attributed to great novellas (see Dumoulié 93). The reason-defying, premonition-confiding faith Eliza puts in her mysterious voices is in keeping with the prerational, mind-decentering existential realm Wolfe's text evokes. Birth, new life, is a trope for life as such, its continuity and change. In this sense, Eliza's giving birth, though logically unrelated to the events she tells about, is the event symbolically wrapping up everything told in Wolfe's novella. The very notion of a woman giving life to another human, one body becoming two or more bodies in the process, is, as Bakhtin explains, indicative of the life-affirming message of the grotesque, whose imagery thrives on those functions of the body by which, with its offshoots and orifices, it involves itself with other bodies and the earth, an imagery "refer[ring] not to the isolated biological individual . . . but to the collective ancestral body of all the people" (29). A woman giving birth is also a likely everyday epiphany for literary modernism to cultivate in its godless cosmos. Literally understood, nothing new or novel at all,

a birth symbolically denotes Newness or Novelty Incarnate. The genre nouvelle has in fact been associated with la Bonne Nouvelle, Good Tidings telling of hardship and blight overcome, of life going on and renewing itself. In the novella genre, Dumoulié says: “L'événement transfigure les signes” (102) – the mysterious event transcends the signs, language. The existential, bodily metaphysics of this modernist novella achieves such a ‘downward’ transcendence.

## V

Striving to convey total existence, Wolfe and Faulkner – the American South's eminent modernist raconteurs – acted in concert with European life and existential philosophy. As opposed to postmodernist theory – another European legacy, which, to a certain extent, shapes the critics' approach to Southern and, by implication, American modernist fiction – they do not propose that language grounds reality. Modernism, which materialized as “a constant and ever more dynamic revolution in the languages, forms, and tastes of art” (Jameson xvi), did not for all that generally conceive of language as fundamental reality but revolutionized language in trying to convey a basic reality that was essentially pre-linguistic. Thus, Wolfe's and Faulkner's rhetoric and peculiar iconography are aimed at overcoming the barrier of language before the existential nether-realm sustaining the mind and speech. In contrast, according to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism manifests “a commitment to surface and to the *superficial* in all the senses of the word” (xviii). It does without the notion of existential depths and, presumably, would consider that notion just another discursive formation.

Ironically, whereas modernism is partly assimilated by postmodern literary theory, some eminent philosophers belonging to the postmodern era, in an historicist fashion, succeed in giving literary modernism its due. Thus, Lyotard, in 1982, defined the modernist movement in a manner compatible with the view offered here. Basing his argument on “the incommensurability of reality to concept which is implied in the Kantian philosophy of the sublime” (an aesthetic phenomenon conjoining pleasure and pain, like the grotesque) and referring to Proust and Joyce as well as to abstractionism in modern art, Lyotard anchors modernism in “Ideas of which no presentation is possible.” Discussing such unpresentable concepts, he says: “We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity



to show an example of it" (78 f.). Wolfe's novellas, like other proto-modernist and modernist texts, precisely deal with the unrepresentable, using stratagems of indirection to convey the flow and change of life as a whole. Lyotard "define[s] *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), as a distrust of grand legitimating narratives such as the Enlightenment, Romanticism, etc. Another metanarrative, that of realism, revolves around the idea of social justice and affected Wolfe in his final phase. Using postmodern terminology, we might say that, principally, Wolfe, along with others, was obsessed with telling modernism's metanarrative: life as a whole. This master narrative of modernism can also be conceived as a last, ultimate, all-embracing essentialism. As such, it is subject to postmodern disbelief, but figures for all that as a powerful historical pattern of thought.

The concept of modernism advanced here posits a certain continuity between modernism and postmodernism. The former, in assigning epistemological priority to life as a whole, already decenters the cognizant and narrating subject, whose defining trait is death, which befalls the individual and marks him as such. In fact, the subject or mind, writing, and death are correlates ever left behind by ongoing life, the general existential motion in the face of which writers testify to a wish for presence. "All graphemes," Derrida, the late lord of postmodernism, said in a related context, "are of a testamentary essence" (69).

Wolfe's temporal reality-concept is typically modernist and has been well explored. Huntley states it succinctly: "The past endures into the present and affects the present (much like Bergson's concept of *durée*)" (34). It is the corollary of this concept that needs to be elaborated. The Wolfean narrator-protagonist, a writer by profession and/or temperament, is haunted by the whole past, all of life and time, and yet kept apart from it by the insularity and singularity of the mind. For all his volubility, he often lacks words. His rhetoric is triggered by the living whole he participates in, but can never fully express. In "No Door," he says of the stranded lodgers in the Coulson house: ". . . I felt that I had known them forever, and had no words to say to them – and no door" (203). This is, to use the title of a book by Deleuze, 'Bergsonism.' Commenting on Bergson's concept of memory, Deleuze says: "Everything happens as if the universe were a tremendous Memory" (77); yet, Memory is only virtual in actualizing itself in fragmentary and imperfect recollections that are bound up with present perceptions. This means that our experience contains differ-

ences in kind related to memory and perception: duration and extensivity. It is always a time-space mix. To put it simply: Everything there is can be remembered, but all is never remembered. To remember all of life and time would take pure, unmixed recollection, which does not take place as an experience and is hence virtual and unconscious. According to Deleuze, “Bergson does not use the word ‘unconscious’ to denote a psychological reality outside consciousness, but to denote a nonpsychological reality – being as it is in itself” (56). Life, in which we participate without being capable of presenting or remembering it all, is virtual; however, every experience in which it acts itself out proves that it is real. Wolfe was right in writing that “every moment is a window on all time”: “. . . our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years” (*Look Homeward, Angel* 3). He never got round to narrate all time and was painfully aware that there was no way in which it could be done, though, like other modernists and particularly in his novellas, he tried to open ‘doors’ through which that mystery, Life, could be glimpsed. His attempt to do so, according to Faulkner, was the greatest of failures – not the biggest, we should note. All time, the totality of life, duration, Being, were kindred notions entertained by European life and existential philosophy. They served Southern modernism well, as a pre-linguistic master narrative. Hence, we should be wary of the tendency of later Europe-inspired thought – postmodernism and language philosophy – to displace and obscure that older European philosophical heritage in Southern letters.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Gayle Goldstick, M.A., and Susanne Kollmann, M.A., for linguistic advice and perceptive comments.
- <sup>2</sup> In 1961, John Cheever quipped at that interchange with a collection of stories titled *Some People, Places and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961).
- <sup>3</sup> Another outstanding Southern specimen of the genre is Thomas Wolfe’s *The Hills Beyond* (New York: Harper, 1941) (see Meindl 1998). For the ‘discovery’ of the genre, see Ingram.
- <sup>4</sup> Wright’s 1996 article “on the Great Novel/Short Story Divide” is not even aware of an anglophone intermediate narrative genre: an implicit commentary on its ill-defined critical status. The generic ambivalence is reflected by the fact that often quotation-marks *or* italics are used in a text’s title. The present writer uses quotation-marks since short novels more often than not do not appear as books.

- <sup>5</sup> Dictionaries quantitatively define the genre as surpassing in length the short story – “[u]sually less than 15,000 words” (Lemon 4) – and as not reaching the novel’s starting-point at “between 60-70,000 words” (Cuddon 421).
- <sup>6</sup> The realist strain can also be observed in stories in the twenty-plus-page range: Wolfe’s “Boom Town” (1934), dealing with the 1920s real-estate speculation craze, figures as an early manifestation of Wolfe’s knack for social criticism; “Old Man Rivers,” a posthumous piece, is a satire of the publishing world.
- <sup>7</sup> Bibliographical data for the four texts: “A Portrait of Bascom Hawke” and “The Web of Earth” were first published in, respectively, the April and July 1932 issues of *Scribner’s Magazine*. According to Holman (Introduction xii f.), his editing of “No Door” conforms to Wolfe’s original intention by providing the complete text that the author had been obliged to divide into two stories, titled “No Door” and “The House of the Far and Lost,” for their publication in the July 1933 and August 1934 issues of *Scribner’s Magazine* respectively. Doten contests Holman’s claims. The Holman collection is used here for the three first-named texts, whereas “Death the Proud Brother” (originally published in the June 1934 issue of *Scribner’s*) is taken from Wolfe’s 1935 short-fiction collection *From Death to Morning*. Citations are indicated by parenthetical page references in the text.
- <sup>8</sup> Holliday emphasizes circumstantial detail and does not deal with Wolfe’s short novels.
- <sup>9</sup> The Heideggerian variant ‘ek-sist’ echoes Greek *ekstasis* and indicates the freedom of human existence.
- <sup>10</sup> The translation of the passage is taken from Sheppard (8).
- <sup>11</sup> William James, the only American philosopher mentioned in this essay, was much aware of the work of his European compeers, carrying on a debate with F. H. Bradley (see Schwartz 35).
- <sup>12</sup> For the following interpretation, cf. Meindl, “Companions in Modernism” 40-42.
- <sup>13</sup> Eichelberger claims that the reverse structure of the text, which swings back from the 1931 section, where “the writer protagonist still dreams of and hungers for an existence other than his own,” to successive earlier episodes in his life, reflects his “failure to find fulfillment in resigning himself to the only life he has, thus escaping aloneness by identifying his state with the mortal state of all men” (327).
- <sup>14</sup> The Coulson episode is the most novellalike part of the text. It features the enigma of a family’s ineradicable disgrace, presumably sexual and culturally determined, and conveys the fatality of something that has happened and cannot be helped. All this justifies the episode’s separate publication as “The House of the Far and Lost” in 1934.
- <sup>15</sup> The recurrence of the words throughout the text reminds one of what has been called a novella’s *Grundmotiv* or *Silhouette* or ‘Falke’ (falcon) in German *Novellen-theorie*.

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