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Prometheus unleashed : Poetry and the Exploitation of the Earth in Thomas Clayton Wolfe's novels.¹

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Thomas Clayton Wolfe, is strikingly less famous than he should be, in spite of Falkner's praise and a recent Hollywood movie featuring Colin Firth and Jude Law ("Genius", 2016). Since he died young, aged 38, he only wrote four novels. But they are about three times the length of most novels in the 1920s. His first, originally entitled *Look Homeward, Angel*, was 1, 113 pages long. Although his publishers trusted him and he was occasionally helped by famous writers, like Fitzgerald, critics were taken aback by what they called his "sprawling" novels. They reproached him with a lack of artistic control, with overusing and misusing autobiographical material, and they claimed that Wolfe's editors made too many artistic decisions that should have been made by the author. They reproached him with an overindulgence in lyricism to the detriment of dramatic action or well-wrought structure. We now know on the contrary that the unusual structure of his novels was not due to a lack of concern for form, nor that he was unable to control his volcanic type of writing, but that he was an experimentalist, a modernist. As such, he did compose in a sort of musical way, developing variations on a central theme, lyrically, poetically. As in a fugue. And some of these central themes, are relevant to the subject of this conference. I have identified the following: motion, America, the Earth – each of which comprises sub-themes such as trains, ships or speed; constructivism, wealth or greed; open space and the fantastical beauty of nature. I believe that what I call the Promethean side of his art tells us something about this "fossil-fuel addiction" that features in this conference's call for papers. My point here is to highlight a fundamental tension between this side and the more obvious Orphic, lyrical side of his work.

What I find fascinating in these novels is the way the author tries to redeem everything, even the ugliest aspects of what he sees. It is as if he were attempting to find beauty, strength and power in a world that, like a river, carries a flow of mud at the bottom. The river is beautiful eventually but it wouldn't be as beautiful if it didn't carry all that fertilizing mud. Such is the feeling one gets on reading what he has to say on machines, for example. Wolfe is almost always ambiguous about

¹ The novels referred to here are *Of Time and the River* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984), *The Web and the Rock* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972), *You Can't Go Home Again*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), respectively shortened as OTR, TWR and YCGHA.

machines, now raging against the dehumanization that they bring along with them, now accepting the soothing oblivion they provide.² Machines are here to distract man from an essential truth about himself – and Wolfe’s novels are always about this quest for truth, about this quest for a door into the dark self – and yet he may also take comfort in them. But among these machines some are even practically always described in a positive way. Such is the case for trains and ships. Like many Wolfean images, trains and ships are parts of a structure that can be seen as oppositional in its essence. They belong to the horizontal world, as opposed to the vertical big city of lights. Wolfe’s characters are always fascinated by steaming engines, by their web-like intricacies. They see beauty in them. These machines speak of Man’s genius, of his ability to be the master of fire.³ Trains are a key element of this hunger for movement that Wolfe’s heroes are haunted by, and can be opposed to a tantalizing and simultaneous quest for peace and home. In his last novel Wolfe writes that “perhaps, this is our strange and haunting paradox here in America – that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement” (YCGHA, 58). Trains, and at the time they were fuelled with coal, are a promise of departure, but they are also symbols of American man’s true nature: a restlessness which Wolfe often calls “hunger” or “fury” but in a fairly positive way, however painful it may be.⁴ American man – more than American woman, interestingly enough – is driven by an obscure desire for movement and activity. There is no freedom but in movement. In a way, the raw material that has made it possible to build these mighty and fast machines is the source, the spring, the well that makes one free. And it comes from the bowels of the earth. It comes from fire, the fire that both sets in motion and destroys.⁵ Fire is life as well as death. D.H Lawrence who was writing at the same time as Wolfe, said that fire, “our elemental fire”, was “dearer to us than love or food”⁶; similarly Heraclitus held that it was the core principle of the world. Wolfe most certainly agrees with both of them on this subject. Fire is Prometheus’ gift to Mankind, hot and hurrying, but it comes with a price, a pain and a loneliness.

² “The great roar of the city, and of its mighty machines, by which man has striven to forget that he is brief and lost, rose comfortingly around them.” (TWR, 360).

³ “Adamowski and George stepped out on the platform to inspect the locomotive (...). It was beautifully streamlined for high velocity (...). It seemed to be a honeycomb of pipes. One looked in through some slanting bars and saw a fountain-like display composed of thousands of tiny little jets of steaming water. Every line of the intricate and marvellous apparatus bore evidence of the organizing skill and engineering genius that had created it.” (YCGHA, 629).

⁴ Of wandering for ever, and the earth again. Brother, for what? For what? For what? For the wilderness, the immense and lonely land. For the unendurable hunger, the unbearable ache, the incurable loneliness (...). For a savage and nameless hunger. (OTR, 985-986).

⁵ Watching among the crowd of passers-by a building going up in flames, the narrator of *You Can’t Go Home Again* comments on “the strange, wild joy that people always feel when they see fire” (YCGHA, 277).

⁶ « Fire », in *Le Navire de mort et autres poèmes* (selected poems translated by Frédéric Jacques Temple), Chatenois-les-Forges, La Différence, collection Orphée, 1993, p. 73.

Ships belong to the same area of meaning as trains, and are also fuelled with that Heraclitean kind of fire. Wolfe has a lyrical chapter about them in *The Web and the Rock*. There are clear Promethean undertones to paragraphs like this one:

Men felt those thirty thousand tons swing under them like ropes, and suddenly that great engine of the sea seemed small and lonely there, and men felt love and pity for her (...) They loved her because she filled their hearts with pride and glory: she rode there on the deep an emblem of the undying valiance, the unshaken and magnificent resolution of little man, who is so great because he is so small, who is so strong because he is so weak, who is so brave because he is so full of fear (...), who tries to give a purpose to eternity, man, that wasting and defeated tissue who will use the last breath in his lungs, the final beating of his heart, to launch his rockets against Saturn (...). For men are wise: they know that they are lost (...) and they know there is no answer, and that the sea, the sea, is its own end and answer. Then they lay paths across it (...) they launch great ships, they put a purpose down upon the purposeless waste (TWR, 342-343)

This paragraph (evocative of Pascal's "*roseau dans l'infini*") is of course metaphorical of man's place in the universe according to Wolfe (a ship lost at sea), but one may also perceive Wolfe's sheer admiration for man's ability to build machines that will quench his thirst for adventure, or fulfil his hunger for movement across the earth and the universe. However, strangers on the earth as human beings may be (one thinks of Rimbaud's claim: "*nous ne sommes pas au monde*"), or hungry and furious as they are: hunger has to be reconciled with home, the horizontal dimension must be reconciled with the vertical one, or motion with immobility, as transpires from these words:

The whole earth (...) would all be his: flight, storm, wandering, the great sea and all its traffic of proud ships, and the great plantation of the earth, together with the certitude and comfort of return – fence, door, wall and roof, the single face and dwelling-place of love. (TWR, 187).

The effort to escape, the hunger, the wandering, the furious quest, the frantic building and using and doing is a dream that is counterbalanced by another dream: that of dwelling, of resting, of loving. One might have thought that this dream of home and place would be compatible with a "return to nature" kind of ideology which even then was popular, particularly among the "Agrarians". But Wolfe, though he was a great poet of nature and the earth, has no kind words for the Agrarians, on the contrary. He does not believe in the benefits of renouncing the unnatural domain of the city and returning to the good earth, to one's so-called roots.⁷ He wants to reconcile the cosmopolitan and constructivist hunger with the quiet and soothing feeling that home provides. He wants to be both a "figure of outward", to put it in Charles Olson's words, to wander about landscapes and mindscapes furiously, and to have a place to live and love, with a fence, door, wall and roof.

⁷ See TWR, 280-281.

Yet, and paradoxically perhaps with regards to what has just been said, the city is no place to rest. We are talking about New-York City, here. New-York City is where the Wolfean hero spends sleepless night after sleepless night erring about the streets, taking it all in, listening to the languages and accents, watching the rich and listening to the stories of the poor, listening to the music of time and of the earth that they are all playing together. On his arrival to the city, the young man brings along with him the memory of his fathers and of the earth, as all other people do, and this makes up a clamour, a song: a song of the earth. Ultimately, there is no real difference between the big city and the earth but a *continuum*:

And finally he brought to [the city] the million memories of his fathers who were great men and knew the wilderness, but who had never lived in cities (...). Their voices had seemed to well out of the everlasting earth (...) "Whoever needs the earth may use the earth. Go dig us up and there begin your bridge (...)". And the memory of their words, their triumphant tongue of deathless silence, and the full weight of the inheritance they had given him, he brought back again out of the earth into the swarming canyons and the million tongues of the unceasing, the fabulous, the million-footed city, and it seemed to be the city's complement – to feed it, to sustain it, to belong to it. (OTR, 478-479).

The human spark of Promethean fire also comes to the big city with the mad hope of subjecting it to its will:

Proud, cruel, ever-changing and ephemeral city, to whom we came once when our hearts were high, our blood passionate and hot, our brain a particle of fire: infinite and mutable city, mercurial city, strange citadel of million-visaged time. (OTR, 584).

Wolfe's city is always "million-something". It is an image of the multitude that never stops, that never sleeps, a place where a young man will try to "make it", to become a hero, an artist, to achieve something great, anything. Rock-like and swarming as it is, the city is still a web-like place of never-ending movement and of solitude.⁸ The paradox of the city is that it offers all, but it is the great No-Home of the earth. It contains the highest aspirations and the basest desires. It is a huge accomplishment and a constant flow of unfinished things getting done. It has that modern kind of poisonous beauty: cruel and lovely, tender and savage. Above all its beauty is vertical. It was erected by man's passion in defiance to the sky. In the city, Wolfe writes, even "the night is vertical" (OTR, 531). The poetic qualities of Wolfe's city are derived from a sense of the terrible and a sense of fascination: "*tremendum*" and "*fascinans*" are also the core elements of the sacred, according to

⁸ Perhaps this sense of restlessness, loneliness and hunger is intensified in the city (...). In the terrible streets of the city there is neither pause nor repose, there are no turnings and no place where he can detach himself from the incessant tide of the crowd, and sink into himself in tranquil meditation. He flees from one desolation to another (...) he lashes about the huge streets of the night, and he returns to his cell having found no doors that he could open, no place that he could call his own. (TWR, 269).

Rudolf Otto.⁹ Promethean man is both scary and fascinating, dangerous and admirable. Wolfe admires the people who work in the city, these hard men “born to brick and asphalt”, who curse as if “metallic clangours sounded from their twisted lips” (YCGHA, 41). He loves them, he loves their asphalt soul, the precision with which they work stirs in him a deep emotion of respect and humility. And this affection for workers is proportionate to his dislike of speculators who live gloriously in the high illuminated spires and cliff-like towers of the city without labour or production, increasing their wealth fabulously “with a mere nod of the head or the shifting of a finger” (YCGHA, 180). Usury and speculation, which brought about the 1929 economic crisis, are like the dark side of the Promethean dream. He sees a moral flaw and even a death wish in them. What these people who believed to have been selected from the common run because of some intuition “really hungered for was ruin or death.” (YCGHA, 135). And “when the bubble of their unreal world suddenly exploded before their eyes (...) they blew their brains out or threw themselves from the high windows of their offices into the busy street below.” (YCGHA, 183).

But the ultimate Wolfean city is New-York City. Not only because New-York City is majestic and big, but also because in the 1920s, when Wolfe started off as a writer, it was a unique and fairly new “melting pot” of populations coming from all around the world. Wolfe sees New-York City – and ultimately America itself – as a kind of laboratory. In America, Prometheus had another go at stealing the Olympian sacred fire. The country was young, wild, immense – an open range for Man’s desire and energy. So immense indeed that Wolfe always defines the Americans as lost, naked, lonely under immense skies, and homeless. New-York City epitomizes America, which is not just any odd place. Wolfe’s America has a destiny. Something happened there, as something once happened in Greece, that stands out in the history of Mankind and of the earth. First and foremost America is a landscape which is always evoked in the most lyrical way:

He was conscious of the grand enchantments of the landscape (...) which now (...) evoked that wild and solemn joy – the sense of nameless hope, impossible desire, and man’s tragic brevity – which only the wildness, the cruel and savage loveliness of the American earth can give (OTR, 541).

It would take long to describe Wolfe’s poetical vision of American landscapes, the chapters he devotes to rivers and hills, to time and the night, to the skies and the huge earth, flowing by the traveller who watches it through his train compartment window, “the rude earth, the wild, formless, infinitely various, most familiar, ever-haunting earth, the grand and casual earth that is so brown, so harsh, so dusty, so familiar, the strange and homely earth wrought in our blood, our brain, our heart, the earth that can never be forgotten or described [which is] flowing by us, by us, by us in the night.”

⁹ Otto, Rudolf, *Mystiques d’Orient et d’Occident*, Paris Payot, 1996.

(OTR, 47) But however beautiful and symbolic of the World America is, and for all Wolfe's modernist depiction of the beautiful machines and Promethean man, he senses something warped at the core, something that would have happened "within the last few years", he writes in 1935, towards the end of his short life:

He saw plainly that people had worn this look for several years, and that he did not know the manner of its coming. They were, in short, the faces of people who had been hurled ten thousand times through the roaring darkness of a subway tunnel, who had breathed foul air, and had been assailed by smashing roar and grinding vibrance, until their ears were deafened, their tongues rasped and their voices made metallic [...] These were the dead [...] eyes of men who had been hurled too far [...], who [...] had hurtled down the harsh and brutal ribbons of their concrete roads at such savage speed that now the earth was lost for ever, and they never saw the earth again. (OTR, 679).

America in the 1930s, is also dehumanized and is losing the earth. It breathes foul air in the dark and smoky Hades-like tunnels it dug into the earth, where people cannot hear, or see, or speak properly any more.

What I believe is interesting in Thomas Wolfe's work from the point of view of America and its singularity in terms of motion, in terms of its Promethean use of fire and its constructivist exploitation of the earth, is the fact that this exploitation is not necessarily or immediately negative. There is a savage and mythological beauty to it, as there is a savage and mythological beauty to American landscapes. And Wolfe as a poet (of course he was labelled a novelist but he crammed poetry into his pages more than anybody else at the time), seems outrageous, particularly with regards to our "post-scriptum", contemporary values. He goes too far. He is a modernist and a Nietzschean writer insofar as he holds that man is the "Lord of the Earth" – he could be a Cartesian one for that matter since Descartes defines man as master and owner of nature ("*maître et possesseur de la nature*"). But as an artist, like Orpheus he sings and praises the fantastical beauty of the earth, "everlasting" or "immortal earth" as he likes to say. Is the earth immortal, though? The conclusion of this paper can be formulated in a simple question: must we, and can we, reconcile mankind's Promethean hunger and fury with Mankind's Orphic thirst for contemplation?

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