“It is evil; it is beautiful; it is fascinating; it is bewildering”: Thomas Wolfe’s Paris of the 1920s

Ruptures in the America dream, fissures in what could be called the perfect New World of the 1920s drove many American intellectuals and artists to seek refuge in the Paris of the day. So it came to be that America’s expatriates flooded the “laboratory of ideas”, as Ezra Pound called the city of experimental writing. Amongst these artists was a gifted young author of the Piedmont South, Thomas Wolfe (born 1900), who first visited the city in 1924. His story was marked by disavowal and difference. As an outstanding writer from the transitional American South, Wolfe sought to distance himself from the so-called “Lost Generation” in Paris: “If I have been elected [to the group of the Lost Generation], it has been against my will; and I hereby resign. I don’t feel that I belong to a lost generation, and I have never felt so” (Autobiography 105).

Wolfe’s attitude towards American expatriates was characterized by his innate disdain for inclusion in the group, while concealing a contradictory desire to belong to it. His artistic credo was an antithesis to the collective thinking of his day. As a proto-individualist he was caught up in a dialectic of inclusion, yet was forced in style and ideas to distance himself from the work of his peers. Metaphysically Paris for Wolfe was a feast of foods in wax: in 1924 he would claim, “I am in possession of a beautiful fruit which I am unable to taste” (Notebooks I, 44). The city was at once the dreamed-of artistic capital but one that was to forever prove him incapable of integrating with the people he sought so painfully to describe. When he later visited the metropolis in 1928, he admitted that Paris “is essentially foreign to me. … It is not for me – this place” (Loneliness 167).

Wolfe’s recognition of Paris as “the Other” paved the way for his own individuality as an artist, a soloist of life. In Paris Wolfe would undertake to further his enduring search for authenticity. If we are to look for an account of what that means we can do no better than turn to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in particular his 1994 essay “The Politics of Recognition” where he argues that without proper recognition and authenticity there can be no identity, neither individual nor collective. To date, Taylor’s ideas have neither been applied to Wolfe nor his place in the American literary movement of the Twenties in Paris, but their seminal insights on how identities are created and how they are based on acknowledgement and authenticity are
pertinent to both. They show that a life of self-fulfillment can be led without harming our “significant others”, as Taylor quotes George Herbert Mead (Taylor 32). This theme runs like a thread through Wolfe’s life and art. Throughout his years, Wolfe struggled with non- or “misrecognition” (Taylor), as he did too with the challenge of finding an authentic voice for his own, and for the American, self.

My essay will focus on Wolfe’s second novel, Of Time and the River, in which several chapters deal with a stay in Paris and the resultant experiences; the protagonist is the author’s alter ego, Eugene Gant. In this text, Wolfe primarily deals with his first sojourn in the metropolis in 1924. In addition, I will consider a posthumously published manuscript, The Starwick Episodes. Since Wolfe was a pre-eminently autobiographical writer (“all serious work in fiction is autobiographical”, Wolfe in Look Homeward Angel, “To the Reader”), my interpretation will also be mirrored through his “factual” writings as reflected in his notebooks, letters and other autobiographical accounts. I will investigate how Wolfe’s experience of Paris and, to a greater degree, his encounters with representatives of the “Lost Generation” influenced his world view and writing.

Wolfe was critical in his attitude to Paris, and this resulted in prose which transformed the cityscape into a literary site whose representations teemed with ambivalence. In December 1924, after first arriving in Paris, Wolfe wrote in his notebook: “Someone has advised young men to see Paris before they reach the age of twenty five. I am here, therefore, in good season; and everything that has been said or written about Paris is true. It is evil; it is beautiful; it is fascinating; it is bewildering” (Notebooks I, 44).

Wolfe took the complexity of the megalopolis and rendered it in a text of doubt and ambiguity. The fact that his French was limited contributed to his feelings of “terrible and devastating impotence” (Notebooks I, 44). In The Autobiography of an American Novelist, he wrote that his pre-conception of Paris had been that of an El Dorado for American artists – his romantic expectations, though, had to be revised after his arrival in December 1924. One particular escapade was crucial in shaping his first impressions of the capital and its inhabitants – he lost a manuscript. His suitcase containing the manuscript of his play “Mannerhouse” which he was in the process of revising, was stolen from the lobby of his French hotel.¹ The hotel’s proprietors main-

¹ In 1922, Hemingway had a similar experience. His wife Hadley “lost a suitcase containing some of his earlier and more romantic manuscripts, carbons and all, when catching a train at the Gare de Lyon. This had a near-disastrous impact on their marriage, and marked a crisis in his writing life” (Bradbury 316). There is, however, no evidence that this experience had an influence on Hemingway’s image of Paris. Rather, Paris would stay “permanently in his mind as the ideal location of writing, the place of all his literary nostalgia” (Bradbury 328).