

## THE SARTREAN LOOK AND THE OTHER IN THOMAS WOLFE'S *OF TIME AND THE RIVER*

*Daniel Kamenov*  
*Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*

Thomas Wolfe's second novel, *Of Time and the River*, is a tale about a young man, his clash with the world outside his hometown, and the people inhabiting it. The current article will make use of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Look" and examine Eugene Gant's relations with the existential Other as an attempt at justification of his own being-in-the-world. Eugene's Faustian hunger is present throughout the book: it creates a problem of purpose that can only be answered through the verification that Others can give. This study is an overview of his attempt at such acknowledgement.

**Key words:** Thomas Wolfe, Sartre, Other, Existentialism, the Look, Dialogue

After the success of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), Thomas Wolfe begins the bumpy adventure of writing his next novel. What would later become *Of Time and the River* (1935) went through many edits and transformations, all of them meant to turn it into the mythological Great American Novel. The result, however, was an overly long and fractured work following the ups and downs of a young man in his twenties in the period between the two World Wars: his years at Harvard as a student, his return home, his wanderings around Europe, his tenure as an English teacher at New York University, and the various exchanges with the people in his life. While Wolfe's grandiloquent rhetoric turns what might have been a wonderful continuation of the Eugene Saga into a prolonged slog of an adventure through adulthood (or its rejection as a whole), it is not without its merits. What the novel does succeed is to serve as an excellent study of character and relationships, and what one wishes to get out of said relationships. Here I shall employ the idea of the Sartrean "look" (explained below), and, in particular, one method of using the Sartrean "look" provided by Steve Martinot, to explore a selection of Eugene Gant's relationships

with other characters in an attempt to see how the existential “Other” may be applied to further examine Wolfe’s characters, ideas, and writing.

Before examining “the look” and the way Martinot transforms it into a theory of dialogue, I must discuss the philosophical Other: it is a subject outside of our own being, with the same autonomy; a subject such as ourselves, a competition to our own freedom. It is also, however, a necessity in defining our self; in existentialist terms, one of the key methods in understanding the self is through the Other. Edmund Husserl introduces the Other in the context of intersubjectivity as an *alter ego*, and later Heidegger later picks it up and develops the idea as a faceless co-being in the world of *Mitsein* (being-with) (Honderich 2005: 673). In this case, I shall use the term in an ontological sense, pertaining to Jean-Paul Sartre’s definition, adopted from Heidegger’s. According to him, “the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me” (Sartre 1978: 222). This means that through the Other I understand my position in life and the limits of my own freedom. And I would also argue that as such, in a world of two subjects with supposed equal freedom, there will always be a(n inner) conflict, a battle for authenticity.

This brings me to Thomas Wolfe’s struggle for authenticity, as it is always a motif in his works, and especially in *Of Time and the River*. Wolfe was concerned with meaning, with purpose, and, ultimately, with his place in the world. His second book (just as Wolfe refuses to call his works “novels”, so I shall respect his choice of words and call it as he does: books) is one very concerned with authenticity and a person’s place in the world. The subtitle of the book is “A Legend of Man’s Hunger in His Youth”. A hunger for what? Literarily speaking, within the book he speaks of and references Faust enough times to know that he means Faustian hunger for knowledge and experience. In a philosophical sense, I argue that all this is a struggle for authenticity, an ontological sign that one has been in the world. Eugene Gant, the protagonist of the book, pursues knowledge like a man possessed, and travels through Europe between the two World Wars and roams through the big cities, devouring books and experiences as if he does not have enough lifetime to see everything. His problem, however, lies deeper, in the field of validation and justification. Who is to know that he achieved all this knowledge? Who is to acknowledge his feats and admit them reasonable and necessary for one’s life and thus, authentic?

Here we return to the existential theme of the Other. It is the answer to all of Eugene Gant’s worries in *Of Time and the River*. In a general sense, we live in a world of Others, a *Mitwelt*, as introduced by Martin

Heidegger. In Heidegger's philosophy, the *Mitsein* is everydayness, we are social animals that live in a social world and Others are not merely "useful things at hand, or nature objectively present" (Heidegger 1996: 111). Others are subjects in the world, beings possessing the same freedom as ourselves. In Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology, they are other beings-for-itself, other consciousnesses. That means that "by the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (Sartre 1978: 222). This "judgment" comes by creating a dialogue between what Sartre calls myself and the Other, and this dialogue erupts from "the look".

Through "the look" we gain perception of others and other things as objects, and, in turn, being looked at, or "being seen" means that we ourselves are treated as objects through the eyes of a subject. In Sartre's own words, when *seen* "all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other" (Sartre 1978: 260). Steve Martinot uses Sartre's ideas and argues that "the look" appears in a confrontation between subjects "in a space that is both one's own and not of one's choosing" and that in this space that "dialogue becomes possible" (Martinot 2005: 44). In other words, when I engage somebody in a discussion and we acknowledge one another as subjects (equals), we create the opportunity for dialectic. And in that dialectic one can seek answers about one's authenticity. Eugene Gant's anxiety and existential problems all come from his obsession with existential authenticity: Am I *what* I claim I am? Do others perceive me as I wish to be perceived? Am I acknowledged for what I am trying to do? Am I doing something because I wish to do it or am I settling or conforming to the crowd that is the Other? The dialectic that Martinot's theory suggests is the key to Eugene's troubles. Martinot argues a "Sartrean Dialogic" in which "what one's words mean will be discovered in the other's responses [...] When the other responds, the look goes the other way. One is seeing the Other in the Other's intentionality to be seen" (Martinot 2005: 57). In short, the Sartrean "look" provides a simple means of communication. The status of being "seen" allows the Other to return "the look" and, in turn, act as a subject, thus providing both subjects with a connection, a plane of intersubjectivity where the being-for-others may manifest. Thus, "the look" can be succinctly applied to Eugene's search for authenticity: "being seen" can be used as recognition of the Self as authentic. Here I have used this theory in several encounters of Eugene's in *Of Time and the River*,

providing us with a result that is ontologically satisfactory to the character's pursuit.

Throughout the book Eugene has many encounters with a variety of people, each seen from a different perspective and he demands acknowledgement from them all. I shall now visit some of his encounters and analyze Eugene's reflections and what they mean for him as an authentic being. One of Thomas Wolfe's scholars, Leo Gurko, claims that "in *Of Time and the River* there is a persistent undertow *away* from him [Eugene]" (Gurko 1975: 81) as a subject of exploration and he becomes more of an observer. If that is the case, Wolfe ends the development of the Eugene character and we can view his second book as an appraisal of his accomplishment. Another way to view this work, as an autobiographical novel, is an attempt at self-evaluation of the author himself in his twenties through the eyes of others. This, I reckon, makes possible the study of Eugene's authenticity through the theory of the Look and its dialogue as now "the world around him is in perpetual motion, yet he remains absolutely still" (Gurko 1975: 94) and Eugene turns his reflections towards the Other and their reactions toward himself. There are only too many encounters to choose from in the 900+ pages of *Of Time and the River*. Thomas Wolfe provides us with yet another large body of work crammed in a single volume recounting Eugene's adventures around Cambridge, his last days in Altamont, his work days in New York, his travels around Europe, and his trip back to the USA. All these adventures are also "of a youth trying to find a mooring for his trusts and beliefs" (Walser 1961: 74). I shall not go through these adventures in a chronological order as the book itself barely has a chronology to follow, it is one of those works which a reader can open at any random chapter and lose nothing of importance, and Eugene's lack of development as a character does not invite us to follow some kind of personal evolution. His meetings, however, can be ranked in terms of importance to the character and "the look", so I shall go from what I consider his least important encounter to the most important.

The first encounter discussed here is one with a larger-than-life character, Eugene's Uncle, Bascom Pentland. Eugene meets Uncle Bascom four times throughout the whole novel, each chapter concerning him entirely devoted to a description of Bascom Pentland, his surroundings, his habits, his home and wife, his workers, and his story, and after their last meeting he is never to be heard from or mentioned again. The first chapter of their meeting is entirely spent on describing Bascom's physical appearance, and stinginess, and his eating, dressing, and street-crossing habits and barely at the end does Eugene finally come face to face with his

distant uncle for the first time. And that is where the scene ends. Bascom gets one wall of monologue before Eugene turns his attention to “the people in his uncle’s office” and his “dingy offices” (Wolfe 2016: 126 – 7). Next time we meet Bascom is in a chapter of 15 pages of bombast rhetoric, where Eugene recounts his uncle’s interactions with others in his office, but his own presence is revealed at the very end, in a single uncharacteristically short paragraph about his loneliness and meditation about himself. In the third chapter Eugene admits visiting his uncle many times, but discloses nothing more of their meetings. Here Bascom is still the one talking, and he eventually invites Eugene to his house amidst his ramblings about the biblical meaning of “man” and his days gone by. Eugene finally takes agency and admits wishing to “speak to him as people never speak to one another... to say and hear things the things one never says and hears” (Wolfe 2016: 168). He makes the effort to reach his uncle, touch him physically, as if to prod the conversation to start... and he leaves immediately after receiving no reaction. The fourth chapter follows Eugene’s stay in his uncle and aunt’s home, the story of their life, their meeting, and their relationship at that point. Eugene is only present for a few laconic answers, but is, again, ultimately, merely an observer and listener, until finally leaving the house out into “the Northern cold, the ragged bloody sky... [and] Sunday tedium and dreariness all around him” (Wolfe 2016: 218).

These meetings are important due to several factors. Firstly, being around Bascom Eugene cannot exercise his typical grandiloquence of speech. Secondly, these chapters are among the few that lack his meditations and inner monologue. And finally, here he feels inauthentic as Uncle Bascom denies him “the look” as an opportunity to have a conversation as an equal. As I mentioned, Bascom Pentland is described as a larger-than-life character, one whose being fills the pages with a life well-spent, but barely has time to regard anyone outside of it. Eugene might be family, but he is green around the ears and hardly deserves his attention. Eugene is intimidated by this grand figure of a man and turns his attention from him in their first meeting, feeling unworthy. Then he mostly listens, craves more information about what made this man so great. At the end of one of the chapters he reaches for his uncle, desiring to give away his youth to hear more, to speak to him as an equal. Yet, he is again denied “the look” and ignored as a subject. The chapter of their last meeting opens with Eugene finally in an agent role, describing his time as one of “fury, hunger, and unrest, when he was trying to read all the books and know all the people... to eat and drink the earth” (Wolfe 2016: 198), as if all in

preparation to finally stand up to his uncle as an equal. Yet, the description he gives of Bascom's voice is a "high, husky and yet strangely remote yell" as he asks Eugene, "Is that *you* [sic]?" (Wolfe 2016: 199), and then Eugene is again only a viewer, taking a back seat to his uncle's ramblings of poetry, philosophy, religion, and politics, a distant observer of the remote voice. His aunt's eyes are the only place where he would experience the Look. Despite managing to converse seemingly as an equal with her husband, on Eugene's way out "he would note, with a swift inchoate pang, the sudden mad loneliness in Aunt Louise's eyes, doomed for another week to the grim imprisonment" (Wolfe 2016: 217). Perhaps it is the realization that Bascom Pentland is no man to match experience or authentic lives with, perhaps what he sees in his aunt's eyes is revelatory to the fact that it is not worth to even try, but Eugene's attention turns back to the escape of books and his uncle and aunt are never mentioned again.

The second encounter discussed is the exact opposite of the first. Bascom provides Eugene with information about a girl he knows and Eugene takes up the opportunity to meet her and her family. Genevieve Simpson is a "tall, slender girl... respectable and antiquated... [with] a naïve stupidity in her manner", her brother is "a heavy young lout", and her mother is an ordinary, common woman (Wolfe 2016: 219 – 20). He initially takes a liking to them, or at least Genevieve, because of her "quaintness", but as their conversation goes on, he stops treating them as equals, as subjects. The reader meets with them in two chapters: in the first one Eugene is fascinated with their reaction to his Southern family's story so he exaggerates it to continuously shock them, turning their dialogue into a one-man performance for his own entertainment. In the very short second chapter he admits to making up outrageous "fables" and making the Simpsons "the butt of a joke" (Wolfe 2016: 234 – 5). Naturally, they sent him away, turning only into a memory in the mind of Eugene.

In this case we have the reverse of the Bascom situation. Now it is Eugene who refuses to regard the Simpsons as subjects. He considers them among the many "who have desired one life and followed another" (Wolfe 2016: 220), he regards them as not special, maybe not even worth his time, thus turning them into the object of his jests, denying them all subjectivity. In a philosophical sense, they are inauthentic to him, thus not equal to him. He himself turns them inauthentic in his mind and thus is dissatisfied with their acknowledgment for him as "authenticity... requires respecting and recognizing the freedom of other people" (Heter 2006: 17). The other family eventually recognizes his actual intentions, finally considering themselves as "seen" and the result is embarrassment, the Sartrean shame

that accompanies “the look” when one is made bare, looked upon as an object by the Other, and what Martinot describes as the “disruption of oneself” (2005: 44). As Martinot also says, “to speak is to take responsibility for being the situation in which to apprehend the Other as a subject” (2005: 57). However, Eugene takes no such responsibility and refuses being to others. All this is presumably a result of Eugene’s Faustian hunger of knowledge. He means to read everything and know everyone, and as soon as he establishes this family as one of “folly, falseness, and hypocrisy” (Wolfe 2016: 326) he feels that he has exhausted their ontological role of being-for-others and proceeds to do what Eugene does once he has met people: “he squeezed them dry of any warmth, then with boredom turned away from them” (Walser 1961: 77). The question is, does this answer his need to feel special, and does it fulfill the desire of authenticity? There is no definitive answer, but after both encounters – with Bascom and Genevieve – he is left alone, wandering the streets, with only a memory of his past encounter, now serving as merely a piece of his mural of America. In other words, an object.

Throughout the book there is one single person that Eugene considers an equal, and that is Francis Starwick. Eugene considers him a friend and fellow artist who also “wanted to tell the story of America” (Walser 1961: 78) and so gave him the agency he refuses in the latter situation. Eugene is fascinated by Starwick and his “rare and priceless quality that is seldom found in anyone, and almost never in Americans, of being able to give to any simple act or incident a glamour of luxury, pleasure, excitement” (Wolfe 2016: 113). In a broader sense, Starwick physically represents what Eugene visualizes as “an artist”, and an artist is a person of authenticity, someone who is remembered and known, someone who has spent his (life)time well. Their conversations are entirely being-for-others; they make up their own life, they consist of meaning and are thusly important for Eugene. In structuring his theory of dialogue, Martinot quotes Emmanuel Levinas, stating that “[T]he relation to the other is... not ontology... [it is a] bond with the other which is not reducible to the representation of the other, but to his invocation [voice]” (qtd. in Martinot 2005: 59). This “bond” is the understanding and the Other is irreplaceable in that sense as the being that constitutes the event that produces the bond. Wolfe’s depiction of their conversations goes as follows:

And how eagerly he waited for the answers of that other voice, quiet, weary, drawling--how angrily he stormed against its objections, how hungrily and gratefully he fed upon its agreement! What other tongue had had the power to touch his pride and his senses as this one had--how cruelly had its disdain wounded him, how magnificently had its praise

filled his heart with glory! On these nights when he and Starwick had walked along the river in these vehement, passionate, and yet affectionate debates, he would relive the scene for hours after it had ended, going over their discussion again and again, remembering every gesture, every intonation of the voice, every flash of life and passion in the face.

(Wolfe 2016: 311)

This is a description of the ultimate dialogue, one where both participants are equal, subjects, open to one another, sharing “the look” and immersing in a dialectic of authenticity. Their conversations establish Starwick as the ultimate authentic subject, Eugene’s equal, the one that could provide Eugene with the answers he seeks about his own place in the world and self-importance.

And so, three years after their initial meeting, they engage in a clash of characters. Eugene accuses Starwick of constant secrecy, of his authenticity being only one of clouded mystery, but otherwise barely consistent of anything. In a long, accusatory monologue Eugene says that Starwick is open to conversation about everything, but when it comes to his own “composing” – “Not writing, mind you, but composing with a gold-tipped quill” (Wolfe 2016: 358) – Starwick shuts himself off. For Eugene, as a writer, as an artist, the time of writing or composition is the time when the artist is most open, most authentic, most true, and he feels himself closed off from the truth of Francis Starwick, and, conversely, not worthy of it. “The look” is employed in full, and Starwick flushes as “seen.” Eugene accuses Starwick of compartmentalizing his friendships, thus making him knowledgeable of only part of the truth. He desires to converse with the Other, but feels like he has been conversing with only a piece of one. As he digs deeper, he eventually reaches the truth of Starwick’s hardship, namely, “to have the spirit of an artist and to lack his hide” (Wolfe 2016: 365). The conversation ends on friendly terms, but there is a certain noticeable alienation between the two. There is derision in Eugene with every following meeting. His friend’s lie is too evident for him and he feels the theft of all the answers he wanted. Or perhaps, equating himself with Starwick, he feels that he is just as inauthentic as his friend, which is in earnest the reason for his bitterness. Two years later, they meet one last time in Paris and, after a few days spent together, Eugene, completely disaffected, names Starwick curtly his “mortal enemy” (Wolfe 2016: 883), a sign of recognizing one’s equality. That is when Starwick finally bursts out, calling himself “still-born” of feelings and professing his envy of Eugene: “Oh, to feel so, suffer so, and life so! [...] I would give all I have and all you think I have, for just one hour of it. You



call me fortunate and happy. You are the most fortunate and happy man I ever knew” (Wolfe 2016: 884). After recognizing Starwick’s freedom, giving him the status of subject, sharing a being-for-others, and at the price of a friend, Eugene finally receives the acknowledgment of his efforts he has been seeking for the last five years.

*Of Time and the River* is a novel that follows Eugene Gant in his turbulent years and travels in search of authenticity, seeking an equal to “be seen” and acknowledged by. I consider that the encounters above lend themselves to an existential analysis focused on Martinot’s interpretation of the Sartrean “look”. Eugene’s search for acknowledgment and validation hits a dead end with Uncle Bascom, who denies Eugene the subjectivity he seeks; then he receives unsatisfactory results with the Simpsons who lack his approval as he refuses to accept them as equal beings. Finally, Eugene finds a peer in the face of Francis Starwick – both of them accept each other’s role of subject and only then does Eugene find the required acknowledgment as an authentic being. I find that this existential reading of Thomas Wolfe’s work allows a broadening of the scope through which his novels can be interpreted, and provides new ways of examining the author’s characters and themes.

## REFERENCES

- Gurko 1975:** Gurko, L. *Thomas Wolfe*. New York: Crowell, 1975.
- Heidegger 1996:** Heidegger, M. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. Translated by J. Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Heter 2006:** Heter, T. S. Authenticity and Others: Sartre’s Ethics of Recognition. // *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, 17 – 43.
- Honderich 2005:** Honderich, T. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Martinot 2005:** Martinot, S. The Sartrean Account of the Look as a Theory of Dialogue. // *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 11, no. 1/2, 2005, 43 – 61.
- Sartre 1978:** Sartre, J.-P. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated by H. E. Barnes. New York: Pocket Books, 1978.
- Walser 1961:** Walser, R. *Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961.
- Wolfe 2016:** Wolfe, T. *Of Time and the River*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2016.