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**ARTS & LETTERS**


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*Editorial License*

"The Making of Thomas Wolfe's Posthumous Novels" by John Halberstadt, in *The Yale Review* (Autumn 1980), 1902A  
Yale Station, New Haven, Conn. 06520.

When is a Thomas Wolfe novel not a Thomas Wolfe novel? When, like *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), it was published posthumously—and edited by Edward Aswell. So writes Halberstadt, a former English instructor at Northeastern University.

Wolfe (1900–38), a North Carolinian who won fame at age 29 for *Look Homeward, Angel*, was a man who could dash off handwritten letters 130 pages long. In a 1935 essay for *The Saturday Review of Literature*, he breezily admitted that Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Scribner's, routinely lopped 40,000 words out of his manuscript chapters, whittling them down to 10,000. But shortly afterward, the temperamental prodigy confided to friends, "Every time [Perkins] took out a word it was as though he turned a knife in my heart." About then, Wolfe began a mammoth new novel, an epic of American history revolving around his life and the saga of his pioneer ancestors. Stung by critic Bernard de Voto's charge that he was a creation of the "assembly line at Scribner's," he switched publishers.

On New Year's Eve, 1937, Edward Aswell of Harper and Brothers bought Wolfe's upcoming novel "sight unseen" for \$10,000 and a contract permitting "no changes" without Wolfe's written consent. Five months later, Wolfe handed Aswell a million-plus-word amalgam of previously published and unpublished novellas, short stories, passages deleted from published works, and brand new chapters. Wolfe called it an "enormous skeleton" of a novel; Aswell called it a "mess." In September, however, Wolfe died of tuberculosis contracted during a summer train trip through the American West. Eager to publish, Aswell soon found an "out" in Wolfe's contract, which, he reasoned, barred "detailed editing" but permitted wholesale cutting.

Aswell set to work. He created *The Web and the Rock* by combining 50 chapters from the master manuscript with at least eight wholly new ones fashioned by chopping and pasting chapters, passages, and fragments that Wolfe had left behind. Aswell added his own transitions. In 1940, he grew even bolder. In addition to cutting and rearranging, Aswell created several new characters for *You Can't Go Home Again*. Tim Wagner, for example, the town sot turned real estate oracle, is a hybrid of Wolfe's Tim Weaver (a millionaire turned town sot) and Rufus Mears (a cocaine addict turned real estate oracle).

Did Aswell "fundamentally" change the nature of Wolfe's work? Even Wolfe scholars are confused, after praising and panning passages that simply are not Wolfe's. Halberstadt recommends publishing Wolfe's original manuscript, so that the public may distinguish "the vision of Wolfe from the editorial administration of Aswell."