Thomas Wolfe, Transnationalism, and the Really Deep South

Like Thomas Wolfe himself, readers and critics of the author’s fiction have been preoccupied with looking homeward. In 1938, when Margaret Mitchell learned of Wolfe’s early death, she wrote to a friend to express a “distinct feeling of shock,” suggesting that “if ever there was a comet in these Southern skies, [Wolfe] was it.”¹ Mitchell’s metaphor is emblematic of the way in which many contemporary critics perceive Wolfe’s decline: as a curious and luminous blaze in American literary history who disappeared abruptly, vanishing soon after he arrived. But many who argue for his enduring significance have reinforced Mitchell’s designation of “Southern skies”: Wolfe as the Southern man of letters, or as a “product of Appalachia.”² This impulse to cloister the novelist within a tradition of regional exceptionalism, or to predict his final and ultimate exile from literary debate, has led to the current state of critical disavowal, perpetuating a profound mishandling of the facts of Wolfe’s reputation and influence. Rather than addressing Wolfe’s current scarcity within broader discussions of American literary culture, this paper addresses that first impulse—the homeward gaze in critical discussions of Wolfe—in order to expand the interpretive framework that has been typically applied to Thomas Wolfe.

I argue that there is a continuing need to look beyond what is merely homeward in the work of Wolfe and to argue, along with Wai Chee Dimock in Through Other Continents (2006), that although American literary studies began with the premise that literature is a “discrete entity”—the “product of one nation and one nation alone, analyzable within its confines”—what we call “American literature” is better seen, in Dimock's words, as “a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures.”³ This paper takes up Dimock’s expansive conception of American literature by demonstrating how Wolfe’s fiction has weaved and crisscrossed through Australian literature, situating his work along a transpacific axis.
Ultimately, my article claims that by exploring Wolfe’s influence within this hitherto unexplored terrain, Wolfe emerges as a novelist of global importance.

In doing so, I follow Brian T. Edward’s recent suggestion that the American “text artifact” must be understood as taking part in an “explosion of decenterings,” arguing that there are myriad ways in which both Wolfe and his fiction have been appropriated, reworked, reimagined, and even revived, in a conscious attempt to move beyond stable boundaries like “the South” and “America,” in order to explore Wolfe's complicated literary legacy. By introducing the previously unexplored transpacific axis into a discussion of American literature, I am also intersecting with a recent critical turn in Australian and American literary studies that suggests Australian literature is “best seen in a series of relations with other literatures, not least American.” Here I take my lead from Paul Giles, who argues in his recent Antipodean America (2013) that the cultural histories of Australia and the United States have “long been imbricated within each other.” But in tracing this transnational link with what I have termed the really deep South, I am careful to avoid simply uncovering an unexamined shadow of the U.S. within the Australian imaginary, reinforcing what Giles identifies as “simple assumptions of unilateral, one-way cultural traffic”; rather I hope to broaden the scope of Wolfe’s reception across the Pacific and outside the circle of “the South,” introducing a work of Australian fiction—Christopher Koch’s The Boys in the Island (1958)—that explicitly engages with, and reimagines, the work of Thomas Wolfe. This comparative reading challenges an exceptionalist approach to themes that have been read, in the past, as endemic to U.S. literary culture. Here I am specifically referring to ideas of home, homesickness, longing, and alienation, characterized in 1940 by Carson McCullers as being “as native to us [Americans] as the roller-coaster or the jukebox.”
Reception in the *Really* Deep South

Before addressing the specific legacy of Wolfe’s work in Koch’s *The Boys in the Island*, it is worth noting that Wolfe’s fiction has been circulated and read in Australia since the Heinemann publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1930. While this statement is starkly obvious in its simplicity, it is a testament to the overwhelmingly U.S.-centric critical response to Wolfe that this sphere of reception has been hitherto unexplored. While Wolfe is now virtually unknown and unread in Australia, in 1930, *Look Homeward, Angel* received a modest—though enthusiastic—transpacific reception. *The Sydney Morning Herald* characterized Wolfe’s novel as “a strange book with a strange title,” which was ultimately a “forerunner of further work of strength,” rather than a work of genius. Unlike the novel’s American reception, however, Wolfe’s vision of provincial life seemed too overwrought in the mind of the Australian reviewer: there was not enough narrative to justify the verbose portrait of uncomfortable and “mean relations,” a “drunken father [. . .] a penurious, avaricious mother,” and a principal character filled with “repressed desires and fantastic dreaming.”

*The Brisbane Courier* suggested that “the novel would have been better if there had been a rigorous condensation,” while *The Queenslander*, in a column on American writers, reprinted F. Tennyson Jesse’s backhanded compliment that Wolfe’s was a “vital though turgid book.”

The most thoughtful review of *Look Homeward, Angel* came from *The West Australian*, in an article from September 13, 1930. While the reviewer acknowledged the aforementioned criticisms of Wolfe—conceding that his novel was “immensely diffuse” and conceived on so large a scale that “his canvas strikes the reader as being overcrowded with characters”—they also praised his “spaciousness of style, a manifest gusto in the use of words, and, above all, a method by which he expresses himself in prose which not infrequently nearly approaches perfection.” While such reviews in many ways reprised the
American critical consensus—namely that Wolfe’s fiction contained exquisitely lyrical passages, but was overdrawn and verbose—what is important to note is the very existence of this reception history in Australia, which has not been acknowledged in any of the criticism on Wolfe since his death.

In the years following Wolfe’s death there are some more superficial examples of Wolfe’s lexicon entering the popular imagination in Australia: the familiarity with his work was such that a local paper like the Goulburn Evening Post could borrow “Look Homeward, Angel” as an ironic title for its front-page story about a woman leaving her husband for an evangelical preacher, while Douglas Wilkie, on May 9, 1950, chose the same title for his story on atomic power in The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA).14 More substantially, in 1947, Leon Gellert, the South Australian poet and journalist, wrote that those Australians who had reached their “imperturbable period of your existence—your mid-thirties [by 1947]” would remember the arrival of Look Homeward, Angel as a period in which “there flamed above your literary horizon a new and brilliant star.”15 Wolfe’s impact on this young generation, according to Gellert, induced “a strange excitement” that shed a “warm light on unsuspected burgeonings in the mind’s undergrowth.”16 Wolfe’s writing took “the commonplace things and spread them out like toys, and [made] them splendid for our reawakened delight.”17

In these post-war years, however, Wolfe began to suffer a similar decline in popularity as he had in the United States. In a 1950 article on Wolfe published in Woroni—the journal of the Canberra University Student association—one Australian critic lamented that “it is somewhat astonishing that one of the few really great American novelists, perhaps the only one who possesses that indefinable quality of genius, should remain comparatively unknown and little read,” encouraging Australian readers—already unfamiliar with Wolfe scarcely a decade after his death—that the novelist “must be read by all who would
understand American literature and America itself.” Nearly twenty years later, in a column for *The Canberra Times*, another Wolfe aficionado praised Heinemann for finally reissuing Wolfe’s four novels in Australia, writing that “for many years English and Australian readers have been able to buy only his first novel” and noting that Wolfe “is still damned with faint praise,” in spite of “some recent attempts to revive his reputation.”

Indeed, although a 1952 Heinemann edition of Maxwell Geismar’s *Selections from Thomas Wolfe* introduced some of the author’s other writing to an Australian audience, Wolfe’s work was remarkably hard to find in Australia for years after the novelist’s death, and has remained scarce since. Recently, however, the University of Adelaide Press has collected *Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, and *You Can’t Go Home Again* as ebooks in their online curated collection of classic, public-domain works, providing free access in Australia even though the novels remain under copyright in America. While most of the ephemera regarding Wolfe’s life remains solely published in the United States, the growth of resources like Project Gutenberg and eBooks@Adelaide offer an unprecedented level of access to Wolfe’s fiction in Australia, albeit at a time when the novelist is all but forgotten.

Charting this Australian perspective does not merely add another theatre of reception but instead reveals a broader tendency within American literary studies to exclude “transpacific” reception histories. In American studies, the focus on Wolfe’s German connection has been a fruitful avenue for reconceptualizing Wolfe within a global perspective—most recently in Waldemar Zacharasiewicz’s *Images of Germany in American Literature* (2007) and Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr.’s *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930–1950* (2009)—though the overwhelming critical impulse has been to read Wolfe inside rigid Southern—or even Appalachian—boundaries. Further extending Wolfe’s boundaries of influence across the Pacific is not intended to confer an exceptional status on Australia, but to demonstrate the substantial influence of Wolfe’s fiction beyond his native soil. Although there has been scholarship on Wolfe outside of
Europe and America—for instance, in 2000 an anthology of articles by Japanese scholars, *Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (2000), was released for Wolfe’s centennial, while in 2010 an essay appeared in *Thomas Wolfe Studies* by Lan-Ming Wang, discussing a recent Chinese translation of *Look Homeward, Angel*—such studies have invariably been limited investigations into Wolfe’s global impact. Discussing work in translation is often problematic—in the case of Wolfe’s Chinese legacy, four translations of *Look Homeward, Angel* have been published since 1987, while there are no translations of *Of Time and the River*—but in Australia, readers encountered Wolfe as he was published in the Heinemann editions, while he was also a fixture in the literary news.

**Christopher Koch**

Beyond this broad reception history, one place where Wolfe’s unexplored, transpacific legacy is particularly visible is in work of the Australian novelist Christopher Koch. In an essay from *Crossing the Gap* (1987), titled “The Novel as Narrative Poem,” Koch acknowledges that “it was Thomas Wolfe who caused me to become a writer.” Like so many readers before him, Koch saw in Wolfe a novelist who “carried one away, who said things that one had never believed anyone else could feel, let alone say” and at sixteen, believed no one had “ever written of these secret things before.” For Koch, the intense experiences of childhood and youth became the theme of his first novel, *The Boys in the Island* (1958), and his recollection of Wolfe’s impact on his early reading life bears the signs of revelation:

Later in life we may admire greater literature, we may have better taste and discrimination; but never again will we know the intense excitement of those first revelations in print. This was how it was for me with Wolfe; and above all, he showed me what the novel could be: that it could do far more than tell a story; that it could wave the poetry of my world; my time.
In *Antipodean America*, Giles argues that when relations between the United States and America are considered within the academic context, it is usually “in the context of the supposed ‘Americanization’ of the southern continent,” a paradigm that ignores the manifold ways in which Australasia has formed a shadow self in US national narratives, and the fact that “these two cultures have never been so entirely distinct or disconnected.”

In what follows, I hope to avoid what Giles identifies as “simple assumptions of unilateral, one-way cultural traffic,” and instead broaden the scope of Wolfe’s reception and influence across the Pacific and outside of the narrow circle of “the South,” arguing that the narrative of Eugene Gant’s youthful flight from a small southern town is reimagined in Koch’s tale of Francis Cullen, a young Tasmanian boy longing for the Mainland. Koch’s self-conscious transposition of Wolfe’s themes of alienation and longing—so often characterized as being endemic to U.S. literary culture—challenges the exceptionalist approach to both Australian and American literary studies. A comparative reading not only situates Wolfe’s involvement within the frequently overlooked cultural exchange between the literatures of America and Australia, but also challenges any implicit regionalism in protecting our Australian literature from going “to buggery” (as Australian critic C. A. Cranston has written), instead situating Koch’s work within a global exchange of myths.

*The Boys in the Island*, first published in 1958, follows Francis Cullen, a young boy growing up in rural Tasmania, who chronicles his childhood longing for the “Otherland”—a mythical place that signifies his longing for escape and transformation—as well as the loss of first love, and ultimately the impossibility of the Mainland ever satisfying his longing. Upon its release, *The Boys in the Island* was viewed as a vision of youthful Romanticism, particularly the opening chapters of Francis’s childhood, which John Quinlem described as containing themes that “are lived by all men, consciously felt at the time by some, and remembered afterwards only by a few—the sensitive few [. . .] the equal of the type since Wordsworth.” Writing in 1959, Rosemary Wighton praised Koch’s novel as bucking the
trend of “realistic novels” in Australian literature, a convention that she saw as tacitly proposing that “a novel, to be truly Australian, must be ‘realistic’ in this sense.”

The Boys in the Island, according to Wighton, provided a subtle, poetic connection between “scenes and peoples as seen through Francis’s eyes, and his inner desires and torments.” As such, it was “a welcome contrast to the endless and pointless descriptions of objects complained of earlier.”

As in both Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River, Koch’s The Boys in the Island charts an internal geography—what Wolfe, following Matthew Arnold, called “The Buried Life”—and, like Wolfe’s novels, The Boys in the Island follows the movement from provincial to metropolitan space, signifying a transition from an unidentifiable longing to an ultimate dissatisfaction. It is in this movement, and the corresponding yearning that such wandering evokes, where the connection between the two novels is most immediately obvious; indeed, Koch has written that Wolfe’s story of a provincial youth longing for the city matched his own early experiences in Tasmania:

No other writer will give me what he gave me, if only because the experience of which he wrote so uncannily corresponded to my own. A boy growing up in the cool hills of North Carolina in the early years of this century, dreaming of the great cities in the North that he would some day discover; a boy listening at night to the lonely cry of the train that would one day take him there: this was what Wolfe wrote of. And these things miraculously matched the dreams of a boy listening to the train-cry in the cool hills of Tasmania in the 1940s, imagining unknown cities on the mainland of Australia he would one day see. I don’t doubt that Wolfe’s evocation of longing and promise matched the experience and the dreams of country boys and small town boys everywhere; but few writers in this country then gave them utterance. Wonder and joy, the vision of optimism and innocence, came to me from the northern hemisphere.

Like Eugene Gant, for whom the “Tantalus mocker of a city [. . .] duped his hunger with a thousand phantom shapes of impossible desire,” Francis Cullen’s childhood belief in the promise of the “Otherland”—sought after in The Boys in the Island via the mainland city of Melbourne—remains forever out of reach:

It was the suffocation of all promise, slain on the gleaming St. Kilda tramlines of a sulky Sunday, on the empty Parade before the silent house whose faces did not know him.
But even now he could not be free of a suspicion that another city, the city of the promise, lay locked just out of sight. The tough, implacable and utterly indifferent Mainland city he knew now he could never love had put on him a great melancholy, which was its own, masking the unfound pockets of joy. And yet, yet, there was something in this very melancholy, in the melancholy itself, to disturb him with the notion of something unfound, stirring in his bowels.

He went down onto the beach, and out along a concrete sewerage pipe to the water’s edge, and dropped a stone with an echoless plop into the oily water, and stared at the motionless wide-flung arm of Port Melbourne around the Bay, at the chirruping distance-dance there of the countless red and grey buildings; they chirruped softly and danced in the afternoon emptiness with a merciless cheery life. He watched them, and whispered to himself: ‘Melbourne, Melbourne, Melbourne,’ as though the name might unlock the withheld enigma; but nothing opened up, the afternoon continued timelessly, the suffocating, melancholy blanket did not lift from him.35

The resonances with Wolfe in this passage are manifold: the impossible promise of the city, the notion of something “unfound”—a word repeated six times in Look Homeward Angel as part of Wolfe’s symbolic refrain “a stone, a leaf an unfound door”—even the desire stirring in “his bowels,” echoing Of Time and the River, where “the bowels of youth are yearning with lost love.”36 An English reviewer for the Times suggested that there is “a kind of frustrated lyricism both in Francis and in the writing” and, revealingly, in later editions of The Boys in the Island this same passage is trimmed of many of such “Wolfean” flourishes:

Promise lay slain on the St Kilda tram-lines of Sunday; but even now he could not be free of a suspicion that another city, the city of the promise, lay lacked just out of sight. He went down onto the beach and walked to the water’s edge and dropped a stone with an echoless plop into the oily water, and stared at the motionless, wide-flung arm of Port Melbourne, around the Bay. He whispered to himself: ‘Melbourne, Melbourne, Melbourne,’—as though the name might unlock something. But only melancholy made itself felt, containing the memory of another city just out of sight.37

Following this revision on “the city of promise,” Koch also excised entire passages from the original novel, including further ruminations on the nature of “melancholy”: the “monstrous, faceless, yet almost poignant” melancholy that was “the memory of another city just out of sight [. . .]. The memory (not his own) of its meaning was all around him, but he could never get to it.”38 This reiteration of an unreachable and nameless desire—an evocation of Francis Cullen’s alienation that mirrors Eugene Gant’s, written in the style of Thomas Wolfe—still remains in Koch’s revised edition, but without those verbal clues that point to
the heritage of longing in *The Boys in the Island* as being closely aligned with Wolfe’s own evocation of yearning desire. Koch has written about the revisions he made to his first novel, noting that “the young man who wrote it, reveling in the excesses of youth, never used one word where ten would do.” Koch’s renunciation of Wolfe’s stylistic and thematic influence here is one more example of the way many other writers have described being in thrall to Wolfe at an early stage in their career, only to cast off his influence in later years.

**Tasmania and “the South”**

In *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007), Graham Huggan argues that Koch’s work—particularly his non-fiction—demonstrates a “customary cocktail of geographical determinism, racial essentialism, and gender-specific language” that makes for “highly questionable cultural politics.” Citing a line in Koch’s essay “The Lost Hemisphere” (1987)—“a writer can’t finally escape his own country”—Huggan argues that the author’s work reflects a recurring anxiety about place, specifically the notion that there is a definable “Australian” or “Tasmanian” community whose character is best expressed and understood from within those communities. This form of exceptionalism shares commonalities with the Southern Agrarian experiment in the 1930s, and new southern studies’ arguments around the invention of “the South” are equally applicable to the figure of “Australia” or, in Koch’s case, “Tasmania.” Just as representations of “the South,” as Jennifer Rae Greeson notes, are deeply connected to the “the needs and expectations of a broader American imaginary,” Koch’s “Tasmania” is characterized in opposition to “the Mainland.” Writing on Koch, Peter Pierce suggests that “no Tasmanian, writing of Tasmania, has more fully exposed, knowingly and subliminally, the attachments and repulsions that the place engenders; the binding emotional ties which war against the desire to venture away that the intense parochial experience of Tasmania also creates.” Back in
the mid-1960s, Charles Higham wrote a “Letter from Sydney” to the New York-based *Hudson Review* in which he noted that “*The Boys in the Island*, set in the island state of Tasmania, shows how it is possible to be a colonial within an intellectual colony: the boys long to escape to the ‘big city’ of Melbourne.”

For Koch, Tasmania was a peripheral space defined by its geographic difference, both latitudinal—Tasmania is the southernmost state of Australia—and also by its island character. Lawrence Buell, discussing the “atlas of the provincial imaginary,” has noted a swathe of novels concerning “lives led in isolated locales remote from metropolitan centers imagined as culturally quaint and thin to the point of grotesquerie,” and while *The Boys in the Island* does dwell on the provincialism and isolation of Tasmania—calling it “a fragment separated from the parent continent by a wide stretch of sea”—the imprint of colonialism on Koch’s Tasmania also reveals the complexly transnational nature of the island, configured as a displaced England. A prominent concern of Koch’s early work was the “semi-fiction” of the “Commonwealth” as something Australians took seriously in the 1950s, stemming from the cultural displacement he felt in being “both” Australian and British. In his essay “Crossing the Gap,” Koch notes: “Like many another writer, I was concerned with dualities. Perhaps an Australian writer must be a little more concerned with them than others are, since he is bound to find duality deep within his spirit. A European, he is forever severed from Europe, and unlike an American, is even severed from his ancestral hemisphere.” In his novel *The Doubleman* (1985), Koch captures this internal contradiction through a description of Tasmania’s geographic and climatic difference from mainland Australia:

The whole of dry, Time-flattened Australia lies north of latitude forty, its climate Mediterranean and then sub-tropical. But small, mountainous Tasmania, filled with lakes and rivers, is south of latitude forty, and this makes it different. Politically, it is part of the Commonwealth of Australia; physically, it is not.

The island lies in the track of the Roaring Forties, the westerly winds that blow from Cape Horn. In the upside-down frame of the Antipodes, it duplicates the Atlantic cost of Europe; and Brian Brady and I were children of a green, marine
landscape: subjects of the stern winter cold. Our spirits were conditioned by the blood-thrilling Westerlies; snow fell in our mid-winters; we walked to school through London fogs. As Danielle Wood contends in “Writing Tasmania’s ‘Different Soul’” (2008), this theme of an isolated and marginalized Tasmania was “unproblematically available to writers writing about Tasmania in the middle of the twentieth century,” in the same way that many inventors of Southern identity in the United States uncritically courted ideas of regional exceptionalism. Paul Sharrad has argued that Koch’s significance to Australian letters from this period lies in his contribution to national self-understanding concerning the “closeted collective psyche of ‘fifties and ’sixties Anglo-Australia,” attitudes which Sharrad also links to Koch’s waning cultural status.

Viewed from this perspective, Koch’s engagement with Wolfe’s fiction of estrangement and escape—particularly as he conceives “miraculous” resonances with the author’s story of Eugene Gant—uncovers not only the hitherto undiscussed presence of Wolfe’s “lost and lonely South” in The Boys in the Island, but also points to a deeper antagonism in literary criticism toward fiction that documents unpalatable convictions that were, in their time, less contentious. In Finding Purple America (2013), Jon Smith, channeling Žižek, denounces “white southern melancholy” as a predominant failing of old southern studies, a desire for an object—usually for the “past” or some southern “essence”—that “leads us to desire it even as we may not know the reason for our desire.” Rather than simply forget these objects of desire—which leads to the object remaining “overpresent” and so still desired as a “lack”—Smith admonishes “southernists” to try and “understand what leads them to seek out such objects in the first place and invest so much in them.” In light of Smith’s caution, the value in my own comparative reading of Wolfe and Koch is not simply a rehearsal of melancholic desire—either the “South” of Wolfe or Koch’s lonely island of Tasmania—but rather an investigation into the performance of melancholic desire as enacted in The Boys in the Island. Instead of either vindicating or censuring Koch’s
provincialism in this early novel, it is far more productive to note the ways in which Koch approaches Wolfe’s fiction—as many critics still do—as an ur-narrative of the Provincial Youth longing for escape, noting how Koch’s nostalgic reminiscences of reading Wolfe as a young man impacts his own writing on adolescence. What Smith does not explicitly point out in his withering critique of “old southern studies” is the degree to which new southern studies remains skeptical of any texts—like Wolfe’s—that have been tethered to this “melancholic” way of reading. My contention is that such antipathy can be similarly extended to the more recent disavowal of Koch in some circles of Australian literary studies, as a reaction against what Dixon and Birns see as a reliance on “nationalist tropes.”

**Wolfe and the “Otherland”**

Koch’s earliest configuration of Tasmania not only reflected those colonial attitudes that he sees as “hidden in our unconscious,” a response to the summons of the mother country that was “waited for as an adolescent waits for love,” but, crucially, it was also conceived under the spell of Thomas Wolfe. Paul Genoni rightly points out that “Koch’s Tasmania, is not England, any more than it is Australia,” writing that “its temperament may be European, but its location is Antipodean, and it is therefore a hybrid ‘other.’” Adding to this “hybridity” are the looming shadows of the hills of North Carolina; Koch claims that his earliest impetus for creation came from the belief that “I could try, as Wolfe had tried, to tell what had never quite been told, to chart that dream-country which we all carry within us, and which, unattended, will dwindle on the horizon and disappear.” As previously quoted, Koch insistently saw his own experiences in light of Eugene Gant’s, evoking the “cool hills of North Carolina” and “the cool hills of Tasmania,” while in another piece Koch remarked that both he and Gant were “pent in by hills.” In *The Boys in the Island*, the first example of Wolfe’s influence is in the description of Tasmania: “[It] is different from the hot
Australian mainland; it has a different weather and a different soul, knowing as it does the sharp breath of the south, facing the Antarctic.” The “weathers of man’s soul” is a Wolfean phrase, first used in *Of Time and the River*, and that novel’s opening description of “two images” is equally applicable to Koch’s picture of Tasmania: “These two images—call them rather lights and weathers of man’s soul—of the world-far, lost and lonely South, and the fierce, the splendid, strange and secret North were swarming like a madness through his blood.”

Koch’s description of early childhood is particularly influenced by *Look Homeward, Angel*, both heroes—Eugene Gant and Francis Cullen—have unusually cogent perceptions as children. It is in this state of inarticulate wonder that both boys learn to desire something beyond reach, laying the foundation for their later yearning for those things lost in childhood. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene glimpses something like the world of faery while riding in a train: “Eugene watched the sun wane and redden on a rocky river, and on the painted rocks of Tennessee gorges: the enchanted river wound into his child’s mind forever. Years later, it was to be remembered in dreams tenanted with elvish and mysterious beauty.” Near the opening of *The Boys in the Island*, Francis is sitting alone in a car, listening to passing trains, and in this isolated moment Koch similarly reflects on the unseen within the real world:

> Here, in this long grey-bitumen road, with its lights going off forever, its clanging dangerous trams, and the important hoots of trains coming out of the dark from the station nearby, he suddenly smelt and knew of vast areas of otherness, the other places of the world he had not seen, beginning. They were all around, far yet near, areas high and amazing and unseen; areas of otherness but nearness. They were very near Gooree: here in Gooree was the closest you could get to them. Their fierce breath panted around him, through the dusk-blue screen of the pulsing outbreaks of night, a night on fire with unseen incredible cities beyond his six years, beyond the island.

The hoot of the train in this passage is similarly evocative of Wolfe’s writing on longing, and in his essay “The Novel as Narrative Poem” Koch notes that “listening to the train-cry” linked his own biography with Wolfe’s Eugene. Like “a stone, a leaf, an unfound door,” the
sound of the train’s whistle in Wolfe’s oeuvre is a Romantic clarion call, as in *Of Time and the River* when Eugene finally leaves Altamont for “the North”: “Down in the city’s central web, the boy could distinguish faintly the line of the rails, and see the engine smoke above the railroad yards, and as he looked, he heard far off that haunting sound and prophecy of youth and of his life—the bell, the wheel, the wailing whistle—and the train.” Writing on this very connection to Wolfe, Koch noted that “Like Eugene Gant in *Look Homeward, Angel*, I had never in my life seen a big city [. . .]. I too lay awake at night gripped by joy and expectancy as the lone, drawn-out whistle of the steam train came across the dark, going north towards the world.” The specificity of this particular reproduction highlights both Koch’s profound indebtedness and the extent to which Koch interpreted his own experiences through the lens of Wolfe’s fiction.

It is in Koch’s descriptions of youthful longing that the novelist comes closest to straight mimicry or impersonation of Wolfe, wherein he takes the model of what he calls Wolfe’s “magic in commonplace things” to evoke Francis’s grasping for the “Otherland.” Like Wolfe’s heroes, who are forever knocking at closed doors and constantly attempting to articulate what is finally “unutterable,” Koch describes Francis’s yearning for this other place through a series of sensuous images:

But the Otherland near Gooree had no name, and was no place that could be explained: it was the sound of a tune, an afternoon light on the eastern hills, a car’s far hum out in the deeps of night, or the wild, lonely cry of plover going over: he could not tell about that to Lewie. But Francis waited for it, for himself. And at times he glimpsed it, at night when in the rain-fresh dark of that winter, absorbed in their talk and plans, he and Lewie wandered talking through Gooree after the pictures, through street after little street, the excitement of their talk making tiredness impossible; he saw it then in the deserted byways of that final suburb as they stood one night on the railway tracks and the twin gleam of the lines shot into the darkness. He smelt it in the mixed tang of urine and weeds out by the toilet [. . .] the cool-breasted dark carrying the whole murmur of the suburb evening like a tune out into the flat nearby reaches of the country; it was then and there, for brief moments; the Otherland, the areas of otherness and nearness [. . .].

In the revised version of this passage, Koch added in that Francis had “heard it in the thin-wired whistle of the train across the valley of Elimatta, calling as it had done all his life,
bereft yet exultant, promising the world,” as a clear homage to the same cry that calls to Eugene in *Of Time and the River*: “He heard the wailing cry of the great train, bringing to him again its wild and secret promises of flight and darkness, new lands and a shining city.”68 Such cascading images—descriptions of the commonplace that evoke the romantic yearning of Francis—very nearly mirror a particular passage from *Of Time and the River*:

> The sound of forest waters in the night, the rustling of cool corn-blades in the dark, the goat-cries of a boy into the wind, the pounding of great wheels upon a rail, the sound of quiet casual voices at a country station in the night, and the thorn of delight, the tongueless cry of ecstasy that trembles on the lips of the country kid as he lies awake for the first time in the night in the top berth of a Pullman car while the great wheels pound beneath him toward the city [...].69

Though this technique is common to Romantic literature, it is important to add that Koch himself identifies his use of “prose-poems” as originating with Wolfe, in his characterization of Wolfe as “a genius that produced sprawling, exuberant prose-poems about the U.S. that rival in their scope and lyric beauty the verse of Walt Whitman [...]
dreams and emotions I had never imagined could be set down in words.”70 Here was an Australian writer reveling in—and extending—the task that Thomas Wolfe had set himself: to thunder across America and produce “huge chronicle of the billion forms, the million names, the huge, single, and incomparable substance of America.”71 In “The Novel as Narrative Poem,” Koch claimed that Wolfe “showed me what the novel could be: that it could do far more than tell a story; that it could weave the poetry of my world; my time.”72 Wolfe’s specter in *The Boys in the Island* is one instance of literature’s “weaving in and out of other geographies,” evidence that only in looking abroad—rather than homeward—Wolfe’s profoundly *global* significance is finally brought into focus.

---

17

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
10. This rather prudish sensitivity was reflected in policy by the Irish Free State Censorship Board which banned Wolfe’s novel in 1931. The New York Times Book Review adds ironically that “somebody must have told the board that the book is not so devotional as its title might lead on to believe.” See “Books and Authors,” New York Times Book Review, April 26, 1931, 8.
12. “America and Her Writers,” The Queenslander, December 17, 1931, 44.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
31. Ibid, 3.
32. Ibid, 3.