

**“THIS FINAL AND DEFIANT GESTURE”:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF C. GREEN IN THOMAS WOLFE’S  
*YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN***

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With his final, posthumously published, novel, Thomas Wolfe digs deep into the human condition and comes to the conclusion that people, as a group and as a collective, deny the importance of individual existence. All people are “nameless atoms” and as an individual existence each individual being serves only as an obstacle to others as a group. This article observes the life and death of one of those “man-swarm atoms” and explores what it means in a deeper philosophical and existential sense using Albert Camus’s philosophy of revolt.

**Key words:** Thomas Wolfe, Absurdism, Existentialism, revolt, rebel, Albert Camus

There is a certain character in Thomas Wolfe’s final novel *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940) whose life as a character in the novel ends before it has even begun and is present and “active” in merely several lines of text, and remains only a memory and reference in the next couple of chapters, after which he is never to be mentioned again. Initially, and in concept, the character of C. Green is Wolfe’s criticism of T. S. Eliot’s spreading ideology and popularity in the literary and academic world and, more specifically, a criticism of his poem “The Hollow Men”. To Wolfe, C. Green is a person who refuses to remain a statistic and his deed is one that should draw attention to the importance of human life. Here I will argue that the importance of C. Green is a matter of individual being and it is better understood through Albert Camus’ philosophy of revolt rather than a criticism of Eliot’s work.

An introduction to the Absurd is necessary before I get to C. Green. With the dissolving reality of modernism and people’s disillusionment at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comes one of the most frequently touched-upon themes in literature at that period: that of meaning. After WWI the world seems to be collapsing around people and there comes a

time of change in the values that people are used to. The very start of the century becomes “the beginning of the reconstruction of a livable and believable world out of the fragments”, but the builders are the modern men or the Hollow Men, as Eliot would have it (Waggoner 1943: 101). And these “modern men” were plagued by thoughts of existential dread and anxiety that signified what Albert Camus calls the Absurd. The first fifty years of this century could easily be described as the Era of the Absurd because of the overarching theme of ‘search for meaning’. Simply put, if alienation was the condition of modern man back then, then the Absurd was another word for the Weltschmerz around him.

Camus is the main figure when discussing the Absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) he calls the Absurd a “confrontation between the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 1979: 32) and dooms people to the Sisyphean role of going through constant cycles from their birth to their deathbed. The idea is not to sow despair, but rather one of enlightenment. He shares his theory of the Absurd at a necessary time – during literary modernism as social norms are grasping for purchase above an abyss of chaos, as reality is cracking apart. As Richard Sheppard notes, “the modernist sense that a once stable reality is running or beginning to run out of control generates texts that, through both form and content, aim to shock people into facing that realization with all its attendant consequences” (Sheppard 2000: 45). I believe that this collapsing reality is simply the next step in the crisis of faith, which at that point had already been through Pascal and Nietzsche, and that Camus’s theory of the Absurd is merely a way of perceiving the world without the concept of “faith”:

One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.  
(Camus 1979: 111)

In other words, one must go on, regardless of the lack of goal at the end of the road, or the lack of an end of the road whatsoever. Thomas Wolfe fits well in this category: a challenge for the reality of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He and his contemporaries are predecessors of, and maybe even a prelude to, the Absurd Novel that appears later, in the 1960s, where the author starts his narrative with the assumption that the Absurd is the new reality.

However, Wolfe’s challenge long before the Absurd Novel was how to cope with the inherent meaninglessness of the world. The Absurd is his enemy and he uses all his characters to note it, mark it as a target, and fight against it. The affliction of the absurd comes long before Wolfe’s and Camus’s time and it can be traced to earlier centuries, all the way to Shakespeare’s time. Macbeth’s famous monologue from the eponymous play is indicative of this fact:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time.  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5)

Already the 17<sup>th</sup> century had works that noted the shortness and emptiness of life. Dostoevsky sees the same state of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His social realism, seen through an existentialist’s point of view, is merely a description of the Absurd in which people live. The narrator of “Notes from the Underground” (1864) carries out a long monologue about people’s suffering in a world devoid of meaning and becomes the prophet to the Absurd in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, warning us early about the forthcoming sickness that becomes dangerous once an individual realizes it. Thomas Wolfe shares Dostoevsky’s views about the world – one resides in a meaningless world, a mechanical world where one is a slave to the “shell of custom” and “in the midst of a Faustian web--there was no food that could feed him, no drink that could quench his thirst” (Wolfe 2016: 155). To Wolfe, the reality of this fact is a nightmare – he keeps reassuring his readers that we are all lost, but shall be found. Just like the unnamed narrator in *Notes from the Underground*, so too does Wolfe see this “web” and hints at it being necessary for character growth and self-realization and thus continues down the path of revolt.

To understand the Absurd as an individual suffering, we need to do as the existentialists do and separate the individual from the masses by finally returning to the topic at hand and asking the question: Who is C. Green? The easy and unhelpful answer is: everyone and no one. So how

important is he? In the context of the Absurd, he is just another conscious character, a representative of the masses and a representative of himself, which is why using Albert Camus's philosophy is the ideal method to examine him.

In *You Can't Go Home Again* Wolfe presents the reader with two whole chapters that deal with the mysterious figure of C. Green. Foxhall Edwards (the fictional alter-ego of his editor, Maxwell Perkins) sits down one morning to read the morning newspaper and finds the following article:

An unidentified man fell or jumped yesterday at noon from the twelfth story of the Admiral Francis Drake Hotel in Brooklyn. The man, who was about thirty-five years old, registered at the hotel about a week ago, according to the police, as C. Green. Police are of the opinion that this was an assumed name. [sic]

(Wolfe 2011: 394)

Following that is a long soliloquy within the mind of Edwards who "edits" the news to give C. Green a more humane look: he presents the reader with a character who is a normal man who complains about the weather, bears the seasons, thinks about baseball, about life and death, arrives late for meetings, and has never been part of the great historical revolutions. He was "life's little man, life's nameless cipher, life's man-swarm atom" (Ibid., 399). Just another man who walks the streets and goes to coffee shops, who could read and write to a somewhat satisfactory degree, who could feel and think just well enough, who did not know his place in life and what awaits him next year. A man of no significance and with no distinctive features, one of the people, one of the many. As cynics would have it, a nobody; as Camus would label him: a modern Sisyphus.

So why then is C. Green of any importance? What makes him any special? The answer to this lies within the Absurd. This ordinary person is the personification of conscious man in the "irrational world", he has had a normal day before he stands "upon the verge of that grey window ledge for five full minutes – and [knowing] the thing he was about to do – and tell himself he *must* [sic] now! – that he *had* [sic] to!" (Ibid., 409). It seems at first that he merely took one of the escape routes that Camus presents to us in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The whole essay is, after all, a deliberation about suicide and how one can handle living in a godless world in which you have no inherent role. But within the essay there is another interpretation of suicide: as a way in which a person in revolt takes back control over his life. Camus uses Kirillov from Dostoevsky's novel *Demons* as an example of a person who takes his life in his own hands by actually taking his own

life, thus committing logical suicide with the idea to transcend life and prove that nobody controls his life other than himself. Thus, he repeats Nietzsche’s refrain: If there is no God, then man is God. It is no longer about the simple act of escapism or hiding from the difficulties of life – Kirillov uses philosophy to take a higher stance. He takes an existentialist stance, stating that freedom is above all and we are in charge of our own fate. Camus does not approve of such a solution as it is right up there with philosophical suicide: escaping the problem rather than facing it. Kirillov’s nihilistic point of view is, naturally, too extreme, yet he is a good example because he provides us with a sample of man’s limits within the existential dread that he has felt his entire life – dread that obstructs him and an enemy to his freedom. Kirillov says:

Everyone is unhappy, because everyone is afraid to proclaim self-will. That is why man has been so unhappy and poor up to now, because he was afraid to proclaim the chief point of self-will and was self-willed only on the margins, like a schoolboy. I am terribly unhappy, because I am terribly afraid. Fear is man's curse.

(Dostoevsky 1995: 620)

Fear is “man’s curse” because man is conscious of it, fear is either the guise of the Absurd or hides the Absurd, or at the very least prevents man from realizing it and thus allowing a freedom that allows us to decide what to do with our lives after that. Kirillov finds a way to break through this fear and conquer the Absurd, to live his life as he sees fit; or, as he states: “the attribute of my divinity is–Self-will!” (Ibid.). According to Kirillov, self-will, independence, and freedom are the tools man uses to show his place in the world of the Absurd and accept this as a choice, whether that choice is his own nihilistic suicide or any other way one sees fit to lead their lives. In that sense, C. Green is an absurdist character: he wishes that his life has meaning and takes life into his own hands.

Yet, he is no Kirillov, his act does not target faith, but the masses. Foxhall Edwards describes him as one of the many, as a nameless “cipher” and even coins a name for such people: “concentrated blotters”, as they are concentrated dots on the map of the world. C. Green’s solution to take his own life is his “final and defiant gesture and a refusal to remain a concentrated blotter” (Wolfe 2011: 409), but that is only an individual escape. The actual problem is that C. Green does not wish to be one of the many, refuses to remain among T. S. Eliot’s “hollow men” who cry out that

Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless.  
As wind in dry grass.  
(Eliot 1963: 79)

His is a blotter's revolt, his leap is towards freedom, and his reaction is one against meaninglessness. C. Green's deed, according to Wolfe, proves that there is nothing "hollow" or "dry" about him and about people – the chapter even contains a graphic description of entrails, spread around the street, of brain matter rather than a split skull, to underline that there was, in fact, something inside that man. Eliot's modern man is hollow and barren, he is nobody among the nobodies and this whole situation would be preposterous to him, where normal people are concerned. "[A] Standard Concentrated Blotter is not supposed to *be* places, but to *go* places" (Wolfe 2011: 407), tells us Wolfe mockingly as they must be victims of "an indescribable spiritual adventure" (Camus 1979: 99) as the rest of the people who are unconscious to the Absurd. That is why all the people Edwards imagines at the scene that have witnessed the act "turn away with nausea, hollowness, blind fear, and unbelief within" (Wolfe 2011: 409), and then those same people are indignant at the body because it dared to defile a public space where people walk – physically, C. Green is no longer a man so he is not to be treated as such, he is merely a remnant, a leftover of a former life.

However, according to Thomas Wolfe, C. Green is victorious with his decision and act because he has "come to Life" (the call "Come to Life!" serves as a refrain within the chapter) – he has won because he acted in defiance and revolt against meaninglessness and insignificance, and has left his mark on the world, this is his refusal to remain a Blotter. Ventsel Raychev notes that for Dostoevsky, it is not important what a person represents to the world, but to himself – man is sick and this (Kirillov's suicide) is one of the cures (Raychev 1997: 600). Naturally, C. Green's revolt is just as nihilistic as Kirillov's – according to Camus, this action, as a moral one, from a Christian perspective is even a crime (as suicide is a sin) and is thus closer to the revolt of the Biblical figure of Cain, an insult to the values of human life (Foley 2008: 59). If C. Green is an example, if his "solution" is accepted as such, then at some point there will not be any people left to follow it. But that is not what Wolfe had in mind with C. Green. I believe that C. Green's importance is fully realized when we take a look at Camus's later work: *The Rebel* (1941). There, the philosopher tells us that "In order to exist, man must rebel" (Camus 1991: 22). As participants in a life without inherent meaning, we could repeat what Ivan

Karamazov said: “All is permitted”. But this way we run from responsibility to those around us. We don’t have an inherent role to play, but we could assign ourselves one: and this is part of the revolt against the Absurd. Revolt is a key word: to absurdism, this is the social tool against meaninglessness. That is, where the absurd hero only chooses to follow a path with the knowledge that it leads nowhere, the rebel has a responsibility to those around him as, in revolt, he eventually turns the absurd and its accompanying suffering towards them. Or, as Camus phrases it: “In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience“ (Camus 1991: 20). This rebellion is the affirmation of our role in life, our place in this unreasonable world. Through it, we perceive a meaning that affects us and those around us.

I believe C. Green’s role was to show that everybody matters as an individual of flesh and blood, with their own thoughts and troubles, and is not a “hollow being” as the modern man is presented at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Walser tells us that “In death, C. Green finds an identity and becomes a Man” (Walser 1961: 113). From an existentialist perspective, in the world of the Absurd, C. Green makes a decision to exercise his freedom, to become an absurd hero – he does not matter in the sense that his suicide is an example to others; he matters because he revolts against the Absurd condition in his own way. His suicide is not a universal solution, nor one of the escapes that Camus rejects in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He does not do it to “become God” like Kirillov, nor to challenge God or human values, such as Cain did. Oblivion is his own personal solution to being in an irrational world where people want you to “go somewhere else” rather than “be somewhere” – to be a part of the movement of nameless atoms rather than a being in life. But to Wolfe, he signifies an example as he does it to “come to life”, to prove that he is here, that he exists, to achieve a certain solidarity with the world. And so Camus tells us that

the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague. In our daily trials rebellion plays the same role as does the “cogito” in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. But this evidence lures the individual from his solitude.

It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel—therefore we exist.

(Camus 1991: 22)

Therein lies Thomas Wolfe's aim: to convey this struggle for existence, for being, and existential authenticity through the character of C. Green. This character lives in the Absurd, but takes a rebellious stand to create meaning for himself and show that this is possible. He is the happy Sisyphus in the works of Wolfe who, in turn, chooses literature as a means of creating meaning. And, as Germaine Brée says, according to Camus, literature is

an essential human activity, one of the most fundamental. It expresses and safeguards the aspiration toward freedom, coherence, and beauty, those components of man's relative happiness, an aspiration which alone makes life valuable for each separate transient human being. It defines that part of existence in which each individual is more than a social unit or an insignificant cog in the evolution of history.

(Brée 1964: 242)

In that, Camus and Wolfe are alike and this is also why themes presented in the works of the former can easily be examined in the works of the latter.

Thomas Wolfe created C. Green as a commentary on T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men". Philosophically, however, he is a much, much more important character, one that gives meaning to individual struggle. C. Green was just another man, but he was a man of flesh and blood, nonetheless, with thoughts and troubles, with ideas and personal solutions. His own solution to labels such as "nameless ciphers" was an argument against meaninglessness and, thus, an individual existential choice that needs to be understood as such, and not as a recipe. His deed as an act of rebellion, however, shows that every "nameless cipher" can "come to life" and this recognition is the beginning of the wholesome experience that Wolfe regards as an authentic life.

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