

"THE ALL-EMBRACING SYMBOLIC BIRD"
A STUDY OF GLENWAY WESCOTT'S "THE PILGRIM HAWK"

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"THE ALL-EMBRACING SYMBOLIC BIRD"

A STUDY OF GLENWAY WESCOTT'S "THE PILGRIM HAWK"

"We are all hunters," wrote Glenway Wescott in "The Dream of Audubon," "and our heart's desire, whatever it may be, is always somehow a thing of air and wilderness, flying away from us, and subject to extinction in one way or another."¹

"The Dream of Audubon" was published in 1940. In that same year appeared Wescott's masterful short novel, "The Pilgrim Hawk," a story--really two stories--about "our heart's desire." Wescott subtitled it "A Love Story," and it is certainly that; in fact the main fabric of the novel is woven of the entangled threads of love and jealousy, fulfillment and frustration, freedom and captivity. But to read "The Pilgrim Hawk" as a love story only is to overlook the more subtle--and for the student of literature, the more fascinating--story of the story-teller (Tower), who like Wescott himself, is an American, an expatriate, a pilgrim (wanderer), and a writer. As Howard Moss remarked, "We are dealing with two things at once: the story Tower tells and Tower's story. The effect is something like watching a movie whose main character turns out to be the cameraman."²

"The Pilgrim Hawk," then, is a novel about the quest--and the questioning--of "our heart's desire," whether that desire be fulfillment in romantic love or in the craft of writing. The hawk symbol, which fascinates the narrator, gives shifting meaning to the unfolding drama, and dominates the novel, certainly includes a commentary on Wescott as a writer. All interpretations radiate from the perch of the pilgrim hawk, which Wescott refers to as "the all-embracing symbolic bird."

A detailed analysis of "The Pilgrim Hawk" will be developed shortly. But first I will sketch those events in Wescott's life and writing career which, I believe, will better enable the reader to understand the symbolic relationship between the pilgrim hawk and the narrator in the novel. The hunter-bird analogy, with its suggestion of flight, quest and frustration, which is given explicit statement in "The Dream of Audubon" passage and which underlies the action of "The Pilgrim Hawk," will provide me with a criterion of selectivity in dealing with Wescott's background.

Wescott's flight to Europe was preceded by shorter flights indicative of his restless and questing spirit. He left his birthplace in Kewaskum, Wisconsin, in 1917 and entered the University of Chicago in that same year. Here he became interested in poetry and joined a poetry club. After a year and a half he withdrew from the university and traveled to New Mexico with Ivor Winters. In 1920 he returned to Chicago and published his first work, The Bitterns, a collection of eleven short poems in the Imagist manner. He was then nineteen years old.

The next five years were very busy and productive ones for Wescott. He wrote reviews for Poetry (1921-22), The New Republic (1923) and The Dial (1923-25). In 1921 he made a pilgrimage to Europe which lasted nearly a year. He published his first novel, The Apple of the Eye (1924); he wrote two of the stories which later appeared in Good-Bye Wisconsin, and he began The Grandmothers.

In 1925 Wescott left for an extended eight-year stay in Europe. By this time he was an author of some experience who had expressed his frustration and disappointment with the United States. That he was drawn into his expatriation for deeply personal and artistic reasons was made explicit in his article in The Transatlantic Review (1925). Here he decried the plight

of the literary artist. He wrote that the literary situation in America was really dismal, that the artist in America was an expatriate. The article suggested that his dedication to art compelled him to leave America. "'It seems necessary,'" declared Wescott, "'to do something--to deliver a lecture, to commit suicide, to take the next boat to Paris.'"³

Frederick J. Hoffman gives two principal reasons for the migration of the young American artists in the twenties:

France was to them [the expatriates] a great center of literature and art, and its nineteenth-century achievements were as fascinating to the American writer and artist as the Russians had found them at an earlier time; and, second, the withdrawal of young writers to Paris was part of the general strategic retreat from what they called puritanism.⁴

Wescott was rejecting the Puritanism of his background even before he left the United States. The Apple of the Eye is a novel of three rather loosely connected long stories which is a working out and liberating of Dan Strane (Wescott's persona) from the evasion of experience advocated by his mother, his religion and his region in general. In the course of the novel, Dan completes his maturing and realizes that all that remains is departure from the home and region in order that he might live, i.e., apprehend life in its fullest. He realizes that to avoid being victimized by regional Puritanism he must leave Wisconsin. The Apple of the Eye, according to William Rueckert in Glenway Wescott, is the reversed Genesis myth which is a recurrent theme in anti-Puritan literature:

The myth is reversed by making the bitter apples of experience the food of the self; if there is to be life, the self must pick and eat the apples. Not to pick and eat--to obey the commandments referred to on the title page in the quotation from Proverbs ["Keep my commandments, and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye."]--is to evade experience by theory, to starve the self to death. Or . . . to eat while still under a compulsion to obey the commandments, is ultimately to be destroyed by a death-dealing theory⁵

The Apple of the Eye is significant in Wescott's development, not only because it is his first novel, but also because it introduces the region from which--despite his expatriation--he cannot separate his works for the next six years: The Grandmothers (1927), Good-Bye Wisconsin (1928), The Babe's Bed (1930). Further, it shows that Wescott had apparently found the form, subjects and themes for much of his future writing. There is also the embodiment of the writer in his works as the character Dan Strane (who was renamed Alwyn Tower in Wescott's later autobiographical fiction). The four mentioned works comprise Wescott's Midwest regional fiction.

Hoffman, in his comprehensive book The Twenties, effectively and accurately places Wescott in the total context of the twenties in a chapter entitled "Critiques of the Middle Class." Within this chapter Wescott is treated in the subdivision, "The Midwest as Metaphor."

Hoffman shows Wescott as the typical Midwesterner who had to go east to search for both moral maturity and artistic maturity. For these regional writers

the Middlewest had become a metaphor of abuse; it was on the one hand a rural metaphor, of farms, villages, and small towns; on the other a middle-class metaphor, of conventions, piety and hypocrisy, tastelessness and spiritual poverty.⁶

Referring to the works of these Midwest regional writers, Ford Madox Ford wrote that he "'was appalled at the sheer boredom of the lives rendered.'"⁷

Hoffman's outline of the treatment of the Midwest metaphor in literature is worth reproducing for it provides a summary of the themes in Wescott's regional fiction:

The hero grows up ("is reared") on a farm, in a village, in a colorless, monotonous small town of merchants and ministers In one way or another he discovers his parents, realizes them as an alien, elder generation, who have been taught to adhere firmly to a code that seems inappropriate to the circumstances of their living. The hero proceeds along two lines of education; his parents (or so he thinks) have had only one. He is forced to obey the tradition of

the fathers; he searches for another tradition. Books, music, the arts, become valuable sources of the new--the real--education; but good literature and good art are hard to come by. There are "sympathetic souls": a school teacher perhaps, an aging or defeated musician or sculptor; an "intellectual" (often a lawyer, a doctor, a professional of some sort, rarely a minister); or a girl who is vaguely dissatisfied with the choices available to her.

As the second education grows in importance, the young man sharpens his talent for moral classification; he rejects the pattern of the community--as tedious, hypocritically moral, without taste or love of beauty, life-defeating, timid and resentful; he chooses instead an imaginary world (a pattern of fictions made out of what he has read, heard, imagined of a non-Midwestern society), and his growth consists chiefly of his effort to translate this second world into an actual occasion. At this point there are several possibilities: the hero may be frustrated in his efforts to break away, may suffer the fate of a "trapped sensibility"; he may try to sustain the second world within the first; he may simply lose his awareness of the second, or forget his earlier zeal for it, become the second-rate citizen he despised in others; or he may (and frequently does) get away--in which case, he begins his journey east. A little money, carefully saved by a loving mother, a will or an insurance policy from an unexpected source, an accommodating countess, a scholarship; the means of escape are various, but the impulse to leave is invariable.⁸

Wescott's escape to Europe apparently did not lead to the fulfillment that he had anticipated. Perhaps his heart's desire eluded him because it was a thing of air and wilderness. This we do know: after eight years he returned to the United States.

Wescott's works, too, reflect a continuing quest. As Marjorie Brace observed, his writings are a "kind of aesthetic pilgrimage, resembling nothing so much as a story Henry James might have written."⁹ Wescott moved with great rapidity and ease through various phases of his development.

His first published work was The Bitterns (1920), a book of eleven short poems of a cold, decorous formality characteristic of the Imagist movement. It was followed by a similar work in 1925, Natives of Rock. For Wescott the latter work completed his Imagist writings and showed him to be a disciple

of Pound's "direct treatment," "exactness," "accurate, precise and definite descriptions."¹⁰ Rueckert concluded in his book-length study of Wescott that the aspiring poet had the theory of Imagism "in his head and was working toward the perfect realization of it in his poems, that he was consciously writing a particular kind of poetry, deliberately experimental and, at the time, very new."¹¹ As one reads more deeply into the Imagist theory, especially after having read several of Wescott's prose fictions filled with the author's ubiquitous, thinly disguised self, it is obvious why Wescott turned from this experiment with Imagism. He must have come to the realization that he had a naturally lyric impulse, and that he could not continue to create, conforming to the denial of self. There are no more books of poetry by Wescott after 1925 and very few single poems.¹²

Between the writing and final publishing of Natives of Rock when he was in his early twenties, Wescott was writing reviews for the "little magazines." His Dial reviews in this period are significant for they showed early that Wescott was a highly subjective and introspective writer--a writer naturally inclined toward abstraction and generalization.¹³

Wescott first gained recognition through his regional fiction. The Grandmothers, a kind of Spoon River Anthology with Alwyn Tower as the sole narrator, received the Harpers Prize in 1927. After publication of Good-Bye Wisconsin (1928), a collection of ten short stories, he was recognized as "one of the golden boys of American Letters," and a most promising young author.¹⁴ Even though Wescott had written his literary good-bye, he returned yearly to Wisconsin. After his return to Europe in 1930 after such a visit, he wrote and published his last regional work, The Babe's Bed, which was his last complete work of fiction for ten years.

Before Wescott left Europe in 1933 to become an "exile returned," he published two works which were immediate failures.¹⁵ Fear and Trembling, according to Rueckert, was cultural criticism on a grand scale, a "truth-telling book which would convey both specific and summary truths about the present and future conditions of 'Christendom' and of mankind in general."¹⁶ A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers was for all purposes ignored by the critics. This chronicle of saints shows people who died for God, or denied the world for love of God. Because of their fanatical idealism the saints met horrible deaths in which they were tortured, boiled, flayed, quartered. Those who were not tortured imposed self-mortification in extreme forms, all for the love of God.¹⁷

And then silence. These two books were received with either adverse criticism or silence. For seven long years Wescott answered silence with silence which was surely nurtured by his disappointment and bitterness. Before 1940, several reasons were advanced for Wescott's non-production, chief among which was that he was a regional writer who had used up his material. Malcolm Cowley points up the dilemma facing Wescott and other American authors in the early thirties.

They had been uprooted from something more than a birthplace, a country or a town. Their real exile was from any society to which they could honestly contribute and from which they could draw the strength that lies in shared convictions.¹⁸

In 1933 Granville Hicks wrote that there was no promise for Wescott who was "looking the world over for his ideal people."¹⁹

In 1940 the silence was broken, and because the year was a highly productive year for Wescott, we can look at the silence as a gestation period. Ideas had been working toward fruition for the author, and as a man he had successfully found his home in the United States. He had never really left his home, for his work was filled with it. The year 1940 was the year of

Wescott's finest work and of his finest single work, "The Pilgrim Hawk." Other publications included the ballet libretto "The Dream of Audubon," and the poem "Summer Ending."

In 1945 Wescott published his war propaganda novel, Apartment in Athens, which I rank as his second best work. This novel is different from Wescott's other work. The objective third-person narration does not contain autobiographical material. The straightforward, realistic war story's simple grandeur reminds one of Malamud's The Fixer. Like Malamud's hero, the Helionos are essentially unheroic people who act in heroic ways. Wescott uses these simple Greeks and their part in the Nazi resistance to show what resources of spirit and mind the individual could call upon in the belligerent forties. Much of the appeal of the work is surely due to man's need for a reaffirmation of his resources under any or all oppressions. The didactic purpose of the novel is to show that fascism has disastrous effects on society because it is dehumanizing. The political testaments of the two ideologies, democracy and fascism, are given in two lengthy discussions between the German officer and the middle-class Greek.

After another publication drought of seven years, Wescott published Images of Truth (1962). This collection of eight critical and personal essays makes apparent that Wescott had moved away from writing books to writing about books. The work is a summation of the images and truths seated deep within himself. The entire work is united by the author's voice rather than by any formal principles of criticism or systematic theory of literature. There is as much in the book about Wescott personally as there is about the prose fiction of the six authors he discusses at length. As scholarly criticism, the book is disappointing; it is filled with personal anecdotes about the authors and not particularly concerned with them as writers, and it is generally about what

Wescott liked rather than what he judged good within a canon of criticism. Only if one is interested in Wescott's ideas on the novel, ideas which are idiosyncratic and personal to the extreme, is the book of value.

The entire work has a powerful irony for Wescott denies the very art that underlies his best work, the lyric, deeply involuted personal narrative, "The Pilgrim Hawk." The following succinct statements of the conclusions which are drawn from the first two essays in Images of Truth show to what extent Wescott, late in his career, denies the type of novel he is best able to write. Wescott asserts that novels should present realities with "prosaic simplicity . . . brevity and explicitness." Truthful realities, he maintains, are distorted by "brilliancy of ego, headstrong and headlong display of intellect, powers of elaboration, poetical afflatus and that frenzied and exalted artistry which is like drunkenness."²⁰ Images, behavior, actions, and plot, with an absolute minimum of intrusive comment by the author, provide the direct non-abstract communication of the ideal "truthful narrative." This maximum impersonality can only be achieved by means of a "disengagement from the autobiographical point of view, the pride and willfulness and narcissism and excitability by which the lifework of most modern fiction writers has often been beclouded, enfeebled, blemished."²¹ Complete objectivity and maximum impersonality, according to Wescott, are essential to a truthful narrative.

Many writers and readers look upon Wescott's position as untenable. They are in agreement with Hugh Kenner's statement that national assent, but no real belief, was given to Eliot's tradition of the anonymous. The tradition of the anonymous is essentially the theory Wescott is presenting in Images of Truth. Kenner writes that we do not really assent to the idea that a poem comes into being . . . untouched by the personality that held the pen. In a perfectly anonymous work one is lead "to intuit behind the words on a page

a person and an intention: if necessary, invent that person and extrapolate that intention."²² The point to be made, then, is that Wescott's art has received and will continue to receive wider acceptance than his theory of narrative technique.

In 1945 Wescott did successfully create within the bonds of the theory he recorded in Images of Truth, but no other works have followed.²³ One is tempted to many speculations about Wescott's position and creative problems at this point in his career. The fact remains that after 1940 he denied both in practice and theory the mode of storytelling he had so obviously mastered in "The Pilgrim Hawk." "The Pilgrim Hawk" is a testament to Wescott's mastery of the lyric form. But it is more than that. It is a testament to Wescott's continuing quest and frustration as a literary artist.

THE PILGRIM HAWK

". . . It was in France that I met them . . . in May of 1928 or 1929; before we all returned to America" ²⁴ In the opening passage of "The Pilgrim Hawk" it is apparent that Wescott is using his usual first-person narrative technique, and before very long there is definite proof that the work is autobiographical. Alwyn Tower, the narrator, was established as Wescott's persona as early as 1927 in The Grandmothers. That the narrator is the author is further evidenced in the initial paragraph. Alexandra Henry of the story is Barbara Harrison who married Wescott's brother in 1935. Wescott and his companions, Barbara Harrison, Monroe Wheeler and George P. Pynes, did in fact return to the United States in 1933.

The quotation above initiates the lengthy recall that is the short novel "The Pilgrim Hawk." What triggers the remembering of an entire day so many years later? The 1940 story is explicitly about that by-gone day. The

narrator first mentions the Cullens, then Chancellor and Alexandra, but surely the hawk soars everywhere in the memory. Thoughts do not come tumbling out; there is an orderly, sequential narration of the dramatic events which leads to the conclusion that, even though there may have been dim or partial recollections of these events throughout the intervening years, after eleven or twelve years Wescott reconstructs the day in its entirety to make public why he cannot be the writer he wants to be. He shows how he habitually engages in building a labyrinth of symbolic meaning from what occurs about him which removes him further and further from reality. He sees this "kind of inexact and vengeful lyricism" as "the whisper of the devil" for the storyteller.²⁵ And his symbolic structure comes crashing down in the final dialogue when he is told that he had misunderstood the events of the day which to him means that he has not seen and perhaps is not able to see the truth around him. He thought he was educating the truth of love and marriage in his lengthy, self-conscious abstracting of meaning from the central symbol of the story--the pilgrim hawk.

The theme of love and marriage is given in the opening sentence when Tower says he remembers the Cullens' love, but the reader is everywhere exposed to Tower's interpretation of love. His tenderness toward Alex never develops beyond the nebulous suggestion of love which subtly titillates the reader looking for romance. It is impossible to say exactly how he feels about Alex, but there is a wistful regret pervading the passages wherein she is mentioned. It is evident he has a deep affection for her. Is there some hidden clue in the story of why this great friend Alexandra is his brother's wife? Isn't the reality of love as Tower sees it that day such that he cannot love or does not care to love? And with his near-sighted view of love it is understandable why he cannot love. The essence of the story is Tower's painful realization that his view of love and human relationships has been so out of focus that he

has failed to see reality. How then can he hope to be a writer? He must reject his habit of symbol making, which, ironically, he does so well in this story.

The action of the story takes place in France in either 1928 or 1929. The narrator cannot recall the exact year. Alwyn Tower, an American writer, has been the guest of his friend Alexandra Henry, and it is her villa that is the setting for the story. The Cullens, a perennially touring Irish couple, drop in to renew an old acquaintanceship with Alex. Mrs. Cullen has brought her pet hawk, Lucy, with her. Much of the action and conversation revolve around the hawk. As the afternoon passes revelations are gradually made about all the characters.

Mr. Cullen unburdens his problems on Tower as the men spend several hours at the liquor cabinet. Mr. Cullen drinks heavily, while Tower listens, observes, and analyzes him. It is apparent that Cullen is jealous of the bird, and while Mrs. Cullen is resting, he sets the hawk free. Mrs. Cullen skillfully retrieves the bird but is so upset that she cancels their plans to remain for dinner. The Cullens, their bird and their chauffeur make a hasty departure, but moments later they return. Mrs. Cullen jumps from the car, walks to a pond on the property and throws a revolver out into the water. In several constrained comments, she tells the surprised Alex and Tower that Cullen brandished the gun--to commit suicide, to kill her, or to kill the chauffeur, she does not know. She had managed to take the gun from him before he had aimed it. She steps into the car and they again depart. Tower and Alex comment briefly on the events.

A subplot--the age-old triangle--is worked out among the servants. Eva flirts with the co-operative Ricketts, Cullen's chauffeur, while her irate husband, Jean, looks on. He retaliates by going out to get drunk. Eva then

fears that she has overstepped her limits and that Jean will beat her when he returns. But their day concludes in a peaceful reconciliation.

It is not the action but the symbolic constructs which make this story most interesting. One such symbolic construct which gives the entire story a formal beauty is the paradox of love evolved from the hawk. The events of the day are all positioned in the love paradox. The paradox simply stated is that love is a tender trap, or the bliss of love is the enthrallment of love. Wescott illustrates this paradox by using falconry. He develops the analogy as follows: The normal state for bird (and man by implication) is a free and wandering state. The captive bird (the wedded husband) then is living in an unnatural state, but he is trained to this new role through his appetite (all o man's appetites must be considered). To tame either bird or husband one uses patience, gentleness and care. But occasionally the hawk will bate, i.e., make a futile plunge for freedom, but it is held tight by its jesses and the leash. Man's jesses then are either the marriage vow or an acquired dependence. The analogy is clear enough but Wescott makes it obvious in the closing scene. When Mr. Cullen "bates" for a second time in a dubious attempt at freedom, Mrs. Cullen says with some satisfaction, "He has bated, don't you know."

Ironically Tower is startled by Mrs. Cullen's transition "from hawk to human, objective to subjective" when in fact it is the interpretive pattern he will use all afternoon to impose meaning on the events of the day.²⁶ He takes the reader per visibilia ad invisibilia (Romans I, 20) as he uses the visible reality of the hawk's captivity to express the invisible bonds of love.

In the lengthy discussions of falconry, which come mostly from Mrs. Cullen's "voluble little lips," the hawk-human analogy is made clear so that it can elude neither reader nor story character. Mrs. Cullen hushes her husband or hawk with a soft murmuring. Later Tower comments that the hawk might have

been a baby and Mr. Cullen a lover, "or was it the other way around."²⁷ Mrs. Cullen also says, "Some of the mad people reminded me of hawks, exactly."²⁸ The analogy is continually developed throughout the story.

Needless to say, when a caller arrives bearing Falco Peregrinus on her wrist the topic of conversation is set, and the entire scene takes on a subtle coloring of humor arising from the incongruity of it all--four adults completely absorbed or pretending to be absorbed in the hawk's every move and bodily function. It literally "rules the roost." At one point Tower comments, "I think Mrs. Cullen was the most talkative woman I ever met, and it was hawk, hawk, all afternoon."²⁹ Meanwhile enough background has been given about the Cullens to see, and Tower tells the reader certainly, that there is a double-entendre in much of what is said of the hawk and that Mr. Cullen is the obvious point of comparison with it. Mrs. Cullen says that hawks never die, they starve to death. There has already been a strong suggestion that Cullen is a love-starved husband. Mrs. Cullen continues:

They cease to be able to judge what quarry is worth flying at; or their flight slows up so that even the likely quarry gets away. Or, because they have lost weight, the victim is but stunned by their swooping down on it. Or when they have clutched it they cannot hang on long enough to kill. Day after day they make fools of themselves. Then they have to depend upon very young birds or sick birds, or little animals on the ground, which are the hardest of all to see; and in any case there are not enough of these easy conquests to keep them in flesh. The hungrier they get, the more wearily and weakly they hunt. And the weaker they get, the more often they go hungry, in a miserable confusion of cause and effect. Finally what appears to be shame and morbid discouragement overcomes them. They simply sit on the rocks or in a tree somewhere waiting to die, as you might say philosophically, letting themselves die.³⁰

For falcons, hunger is the greatest pain. The implication is that sexual hunger is the greatest human pain and the "aik-aik" of the hawk gets all confused with the "ache-ache" of the human lover. Tower reflects that sex "at least in good countries such as France and the United States during

prosperous periods like the twenties . . . must be the keenest of all appetites for a majority of men most of their lives."³¹

Perhaps a more personal analogy with the hawk was uppermost in the narrator's mind during Mrs. Cullen's remarks about old hawks. It is possible that he realizes that, as a writer, he is somewhat like an old hawk; he, too, can misjudge what quarry is worth flying at. When an author fails two successive times, has he made a fool of himself? One need only recall that the successes of Wescott's early regional fiction were followed by the failures of his next two works (Fear and Trembling, A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers). Not knowing if he should try again causes his miserable confusion. Another try could mean another failure; yet if he does not try, the author part of him would be like an old hawk sitting somewhere waiting to die.

Because of the multiple possibilities of interpretation, the whole of the hawk-human analogy is intellectually stimulating. C. E. Schorer finds the analogy "tantalizing":

One's difficulty lies in deciding how much of the hawk's apparent significance applies to the humans clustered animatedly about it. The difficulty with meaning here, that is, is not in simple grammatical matters but in the deeper and overall significance.³²

This mental stimulation, a most satisfying aspect of the story, comes about because there is always the suggestion that the analogy could be further developed or that the comparisons are just stepping stones to deeper analyses of love. There is much said in the story that troubles the reader and forces him to view the entire paradox in relation to himself. One such statement from the story that invites speculation and testing for validity is Mrs. Cullen's comment, "L'appetit vient en mangeant."³³

The reader accepts the truth of what Tower sees as one view, one side of the coin of marriage. Love and marriage, trapped and trained, appetites

and dependence, obviously present only one viewpoint. The reader knows these are the possibilities in a man-woman relationship, but for Wescott they are the only realities he sees in 1929. Tower comes to recognize that he can see only the one side of the coin. For some reason the coin is so weighted that he cannot turn it to the other side which shows the pleasure for the pain, the getting for the giving. Tower says that he learned early in life that

. . . unrequited passion; romance put asunder by circumstances or mistakes; sexually pretending to be love--all that is a matter of little consequence, a mere voluntary temporary uneasiness, compared with the long course of true love, especially marriage. In marriage, insult arises again and again and again; and pain has to be not only endured, but consented to; and the amount of forgiveness that it necessitates is incredible and exhausting. When love has given satisfaction, then you discover how large a part of the rest of life is only payment for it, installment after installment.³⁴

Even though Tower realizes that he sees only one side of the coin, to return to the metaphor once again, he does not come to terms with the fact that a successful marriage cannot be a continual balancing of the giving and the getting.

To this point the hawk has predominated the discussion. Such is not the case in the story. Although the hawk holds a pivotal position in the narration, all the narration becomes a reflection of the storyteller himself. Rueckert saw that "much of the force of the story comes from the reader's realization that a later self is examining an earlier one in action."³⁵ Once the reader has observed that everything that happens generally falls back to tell us something about the narrator, who is Wescott's fictional self, then "The Pilgrim Hawk" can be seen as an important chapter in Wescott's autobiography of himself as an author and as a person.

The choice of a first-person narration and the artful handling of time provides the author with unlimited opportunity to move from hawk to symbolic meaning, which he applies mostly to himself. His view becomes more and more

abstract which leads to the powerful conclusion of the story when Tower realizes that he has over-abstracted too often, too habitually. All this viewed from a post Apartment in Athens and Images of Truth position shows definitely why Wescott feels he fails as an author. The confession is in fact in the final scene when Tower finds that he has not seen the truth of the day's events; he has abstracted meaning from all that has happened and has missed the reality. "Half the time, I am afraid," Tower confesses after the final departure of the Cullens, "my opinion of people is just guessing; cartooning."

Again and again I give way to a kind of inexact and vengeful lyricism; I cannot tell what right I have to be avenged, and I am ashamed of it. Sometimes I entirely doubt my judgment in moral matters; and so long as I propose to be a storyteller, that is the whisper of the devil for me.³⁶

Tower, in fact, was fearful of the effect of the "fantastic bad object lesson" of the afternoon on Alex. "'You'll never marry, dear,' I said, to tease Alex." "'You're no novelist,' she said, to tease me. 'I envy the Cullens, didn't you know?'"³⁷ If he cannot see love for what it really is, Alex is right in telling him that he is no novelist. Ironically, both the narrator from his retrospective vantage point in later time and the reader know he is making one-sided, or lopsided interpretations of the events. We now have the answer to why one day from the past was so vividly recalled in 1940. It was the unhappy time when Wescott decided that he could no longer write (symbolically) as he had in the past and had no right to write in the future if he could not see truth.

Tower obviously is not the failure he makes himself out to be. This artistic story attests to the contrary. His psychological probing of his own mind shows the true loneliness, troubles and hurts that he was reminded of that day. The hawk's hunger leads him to other hungers, "mental and sentimental and so on":

For example, my own undertaking in early manhood to be a literary artist. No one warned me that I really did not have talent enough. Therefore my hope of becoming a very good artist turned bitter, hot, and nerve-racking; and it would get worse as I grew older. The unsuccessful artist also ends in an apathy, too proud and vexed to fly again, waiting upon withheld inspiration, bored to death . . . [Wescott's ellipsis]. My writing had gone badly all spring And highly sexed men, unless they give in and get married and stay married, more or less starve to death. I myself was still young then and I had been lucky in love. But little early quarrels and failures warn one; and in the confidences of friends and in gossip about other men, one discovers the vague beastly shape of what to expect. Life goes on and on after one's luck has run out. Youthfulness persists alas, long after one has ceased to be young. Love-life goes on indefinitely, with less and less likelihood of being loved, less and less ability to love, and the stomach-ache of love still as sharp as ever. The old bachelor is like an old hawk.³⁸

This particularly poignant passage is followed later with a phrase that flashes through the narrator's mind--"old bachelor hungry bird, aging-hungry-man-bird . . .," and then he makes an obviously personal comparison of a hawk's hunger and man's amorous appetite. He recognizes that he is like the old hawk, because since he was unsuccessful in love once, he fears that his judgment in falling in love or his ability to love has been impaired, and all he can do is fly back to his perch ashamed and frustrated. "Your cry of desire, ache, ache, rings in your own ears. No one else hears it; and you get so tired of it yourself that you can't wait to grow old . . . [Wescott's ellipsis]."³⁹

The portrait of a bitter young man emerges: a young man who could not communicate with his father, a young man disinclined to live, a man whose God has apparently failed him, whose writing is going badly, who has failed twice in love. His attitude toward humanity is reflected in the following statement: "Perhaps all pets, all domesticated animals, no matter how ancient or beautiful or strange, show a comic aspect sooner or later; a part of the shame of our humanity that we gradually convey to them."⁴⁰

Thus the internal monologues of Tower show that this story is not so much about the Cullens, their hawk, and the nearly tragic outcome of the day, as it is about a tormented author who is publicly examining the "self and author self." The reader cannot be long misled, and Tower certainly does not intend for him to be misled into thinking the main concern of the story was what happened to the Cullens in that far-off May. The ubiquitous author is writing about himself using an artistic technique whereby the older Wescott can analyze the younger Wescott.

This technique is one of the artistic highlights of the story. The retrospective, first-person narration makes a complex time order possible. To begin with, the first person allows for two lines of story progression: the actual dramatic movement and the psychological, internal movement of the story. In addition, Wescott capitalizes on the possibilities of time the retrospective view allows for. He establishes the present time and place of the narration (United States, 1940), but then the narrator immediately establishes France, 1928, as the time and place of the dramatic action. This mode is perfect for the involuted artistry of Wescott. Tower can tell us something which occurs in the dramatic present (1928-29), then mentally comment on it in that present; but he can also review, re-interpret, and comment on the earlier occurrences from his Olympian position of 1940. This artistic handling of time is what has enriched the book for many students of literature.

The formal beauty of the work lies in its coherence. There is an exactness of integration accomplished by the love theme and by the narrator's self. The hawk symbol further binds the work as it symbolizes various characters. Schorer thought that all seven individuals are thus symbolized, but he does not develop this thesis. To see this relationship for all seven characters requires much forcing that does not seem particularly justifiable

or satisfying. Wescott positively develops several character-hawk comparisons, and these after all are the most important. Much has been said already of Mr. Cullen and the hawk. One of the harshest statements with its strong suggestion of Pavlov's experiment comes from the narrator in his description of Cullen as a "greedy man, whose eyes turned golden when he looked at her, whose spit ran at the mere mention of his dinner."⁴¹ The hawk's try for freedom leads Tower to realize that "Alex wanted freedom more than anything."⁴² Just as the hawk's equilibrium is disturbed as she is jostled about by the necessity of circumstances, so is Mrs. Cullen's equilibrium disturbed by Cullen's insane attempt of murder or suicide, and they both jerk about with their hats askew. What the hawk symbolizes in Tower himself has been illustrated and is paramount to the story which is, in the final analysis, a creator for self-critique.

The love triangle is another unifying feature. There are three separate triangles. There is the triangle among the servants, Jean, Eva and Ricketts, which establishes the subplot of the story. At one time the narrator mentions the Cullens' triangle meaning the hawk, and Mr. and Mrs. Cullen. Because of Mr. Cullen's bizarre behavior in the car, another triangle becomes a possibility: Ricketts and the Cullens. There is also the rather nebulous triangle of Alex, Alwyn and his brother.

These triangles set up contrasts, several of which develop in a triangular manner. In fact the triangle of women, Alex, Mrs. Cullen, and Eva, can be positioned opposite the triangle of men, Tower, Mr. Cullen, and Ricketts and Jean (combined to form one angle). This contrast shows, and the action seems to bear out the terrible "power woman has over a man,"⁴³ which is just another irony of the story, for the concluding events show that obviously Mr. Cullen has been bullying his wife, and Eva weeps in fear of Jean's possible

reprisal. Another such triangular comparison would be the upper-class husband who is not limited to intramarital relationships, the lower-class husband who is sustained by marital relationships and the unattached Ricketts who is always ready for a liaison. Eva's lower-class lustiness contrasts with Mrs. Cullen's sophisticated indifference to the bedroom. Tower sees Eva as the sensuous female who plays out her role as the daughter of Milton's Eve.

She had a way of obviously reveling in the sense of her own beauty whenever a new man appeared in the kitchen; a look of being at the mercy of circumstances, or perhaps at the man's mercy. Neighbor or workman or tradesman would appear; and casually Eva would come up, and stand close by, with a sleepy stare, letting her eyes drop sideways in their wide sockets and African eyelashes, giving off her sweetness like a flower bed--while Jean watched her, admiring and suffering, until his storm broke.⁴⁴

There are several interesting discourses within the work. When Lucy bates, freedom becomes the topic of conversation which has managed to remain banal most of the afternoon. Mrs. Cullen recalls "L'individu suel est esclave; l'espece est libre." Alex asserts that people are slaves en masse, that the freedom-loving man is the exception. Cullen speaks up to differ with Alex: "Love of liberty is the deepest instinct we have." And later he declares, "Independence is the only thing that is human about hawks." Tower ponders man's need for freedom but has no answer for the question he poses himself. "How much liberty is a true human motive, and how much is wasteful and foolish?" The subject is never raised again and it is a disappointment of the book that the narrator does not even attempt to formulate an answer to the always pertinent question of freedom, a question that was especially pertinent in 1940.

Tower's lyrical discourse on drunks is both thought-provoking and entertaining. The entire monologue is a cold, heartless dissecting of Cullen as an individual and as just one of so many men who lose themselves in alcohol. The entire scene illustrates Tower's habit of aloofness.

Much has been said here of how the author speaks through Tower, but now it is time to look at the author as craftsman. Glenway Wescott is recognized as a stylist and his exquisite use of the language in "The Pilgrim Hawk" shows why he has gained this reputation. He pared and polished each sentence until there is a crystalline economy in the entire work. The following passages illustrate the beauty of his sentences, especially his talent for vivid descriptions and the apt simile:

The moon that night was not a fine carved shape. It hung under a little loose cloud; only a piece of pallor, a bit of anti-darkness. ⁴⁶

We could hear their hunting horns which sounded like a picnic of boy sopranos. ⁴⁷

The movement of the following sentence effectively brings Tower down to the ground from the heights, the position from which he viewed what went on around him. The line moves from heaven to a hen house in a spiral motion:

The all-embracing symbolic bird; primitive image with iron wings and rusty tassels and enameled feet; airy murderess like an angel; young predatory sanguinary deluxe hen--now she was funny; she had not seemed funny before. ⁴⁸

Wescott's sharp wit occasionally enlivens his slow-moving, detailed descriptions reminiscent of those of Laurence Sterne. In the midst of one of these exact and vivid descriptions--this one happens to be of Mrs. Cullen--the reader is startled by the witty observation: "How rare pulchritude is among the Irish; therefore what a trouble is made when it does appear." ⁴⁹

A frequent comment on Wescott's style is that he has a penchant for aphorisms. This comment, with its suggestion of time-worn thought, can be misleading, for Wescott gives the aphorism a final flair or a midline twist that makes it both witty and interesting; or, in other instances, he uses only the skeleton of an aphoristic phrase:

Any woman greatly in love must know how a flattery in time saves trouble

All the world loves a lover, and especially I do.

There are a number of circumstances in which the truth does no good; and oh, this was one.⁵⁰

Satire, often manifested in a cliché improved upon, is another source of Wescott's wit: "People who know all about human nature, nevertheless prefer to converse about animals, perhaps because it is the better part of conversational valor."⁵¹ And the Cullens' sons were "still engaged in that great postponement, education"⁵²

Wescott's use of the language is just part of the artistry in his writing which led Marjorie Brace to write in 1945: "'The Pilgrim Hawk' is one of the most intelligently conceived and realized novels written by a contemporary American."⁵³ Few authors have accomplished their intended purpose in writing a work so well as Wescott has. He records for himself and his readers that he will no longer write personal narratives such as "The Pilgrim Hawk" is. But his commitment to objective literature is contained in his most personal of narratives which he suggests is another attempt to produce a good literary work. Will he again fail, he wonders, and then, like the old hawk who misses his quarry, withdraw and allow the artist in him to die?

In the light of Apartment in Athens and Images of Truth, we can conclude that Wescott, the author, like the hawk, is going to bate. He is going to free his works from his self. There has been no more fiction since 1945; therefore, we can just as validly conclude that he is trapped by what he can do, and does so well with his first-person approach, and that in his straining toward freeing the author, he is, ironically, destroying the author. He is like the hunters in the opening quotation: "his heart's desire . . . is always somehow flying away . . . and subject to extinction in one way or another."

FOOTNOTES

¹Glenway Wescott, "The Dream of Audubon, Libretto of a Ballet in Three Scenes," in The Best One-Act Plays of 1940. Ed. Margaret Mayorga (New York, 1941), p. 374.

²Howard Moss, "Love Birds of Prey," The New Yorker, (March 11, 1967), p. 184.

³As quoted in William H. Rueckert, Glenway Wescott (New York, 1965), p. 37.

⁴Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade (New York, 1955), p. 33.

⁵Rueckert, Glenway Wescott, p. 42.

⁶Hoffman, p. 328.

⁷As quoted in Hoffman, p. 30.

⁸Hoffman, pp. 328-9.

⁹Marjorie Brace, "Thematic Problems of the American Novelist," Accent, VI (1945), p. 50.

¹⁰For a more complete discussion of Pound and Imagism, see Hoffman, The Twenties, pp. 163-175.

¹¹Rueckert, p. 27.

¹²Although the value of such speculation is questionable, it is interesting to read that Rueckert (Glenway Wescott, p. 29) finds it "perfectly clear that, had he wished, Wescott could have gone on to become a poet; for there is no indication that he could not have mastered other poetic forms as quickly and thoroughly as he did Imagism."

¹³Rueckert, p. 33.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 76. Mr. Rueckert writes that Fear and Trembling received few reviews, most of which were extremely harsh. Harpers eventually pulped the book which sold only about 900 copies. A Calendar of Saints for Unbeliever was received and reviewed even more severely.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 85-6.

- ¹⁸Malcolm Cowley, Exiles Return (New York, 1951), p. 214
- ¹⁹Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War (New York, 1933), p. 291.
- ²⁰Images of Truth, p. 7.
- ²¹Ibid., pp. 35-6.
- ²²Hugh Kenner, "Eliot and the Tradition of the Anonymous," College English, XXVIII (May 1967), p. 559.
- ²³Glenway Wescott, Apartment in Athens (New York, 1945). To date there have been no further fiction works.
- ²⁴Glenway Wescott, "The Pilgrim Hawk," in Six Great Modern Short Novels (New York, 1954), pp. 253-322. All future page references will be to this edition.
- ²⁵"The Pilgrim Hawk," p. 318.
- ²⁶Ibid., p. 269.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 260.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 264.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 263.
- ³⁰Ibid., pp. 263-4.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 265.
- ³²C. E. Schorer, "The Maturing of Glenway Wescott," College English, XVIII (1957), p. 324.
- ³³"The Pilgrim Hawk," p. 286.
- ³⁴Ibid., p. 310.
- ³⁵Rueckert, p. 108.
- ³⁶"The Pilgrim Hawk," p. 318.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 322.
- ³⁸Ibid., pp. 265-6.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 279.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 313
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 274.

⁴²"The Pilgrim Hawk," p. 270.

⁴³Ibid., p. 294.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 320.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 269-71.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 321.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 312-3.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 255.

⁵⁰My underscoring.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 263.

⁵²Ibid., p. 260.

⁵³Marjorie Brace, "Thematic Problems of the American Novelist,"
Accent, VI (1945), p. 51.

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"THE ALL-EMBRACING SYMBOLIC BIRD"
A STUDY OF GLENWAY WESCOTT'S "THE PILGRIM HAWK"

by

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"THE ALL-EMBRACING SYMBOLIC BIRD"
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In Images of Truth (1962), Glenway Wescott wrote that a novel needed maximum impersonality which could not be achieved through an autobiographical point of view. He further asserted that the ideal "truthful narrative" must be a direct, non-abstract communication with the absolute minimum of intrusive comment. Thus Wescott, as critic, rejected the creative technique that he, as author, used in writing fiction from 1924-1940. The novels written during this period showed Wescott to be a highly introspective writer who was naturally inclined toward abstractions. Throughout the first two essays in Images of Truth, the author denied the very art that underlies his best work, "The Pilgrim Hawk." Ironically, this short novel succeeds as an involuted, personal narration and as an artistically developed symbolic structure.

"The Pilgrim Hawk" published in 1940 is really two stories. It is a love story played out or suggested by the people who surround the narrator at a country villa in France in 1929. It is also Alwyn Tower's (the narrator's) story, a story about the storyteller, who, like Wescott himself, is an American, an expatriate, a pilgrim (wanderer), and a writer.

All the conversation and all the events of the day evolve from the pet hawk of one of the visitors. Love, marriage, freedom, captivity are seen in relation to the hawk, which Tower calls "the all-embracing symbolic bird." As the external drama unfolds around the hawk, Tower interprets and reinterprets the events so that the meaning is always shifting for Tower and for the reader. The narrator sees the hawk's captivity as a symbol of marriage. He abstracts the "truths" of love and marriage from this central symbol, and as abstraction is layered upon abstraction Tower realizes that he can no longer distinguish the real from the imagined.

This habitual abstracting of meaning is the center of the narrator's story about himself. Tower tells the story of the day's events and of his failure to interpret them truthfully from a point in time more than a decade after their actual occurrence, so that there are two concurrent times in the story. The dramatic present of 1929 is reviewed and reinterpreted in the actual present of the narration, 1940. The latter narration is Wescott's confession that he is subject to a "kind of inexact and vengeful lyricism" which is the "whisper of the devil" for a storyteller. "The Pilgrim Hawk" is the author's farewell to writing the kind of fiction he is best able to write.

By focusing on this short novel, the reader discovers Wescott's expert craftsmanship in the handling of the dual times and in his ability to write beautiful lyrical prose. The central symbol is used effectively; both the love story and the author's story are developed from a hunter-bird analogy, with its suggestion of flight, quest and frustration. Much of the formal beauty of the work lies in the integration of the love analysis and the author's self-analysis. The reader who recognizes and accepts the artistry in the formal and thematic development of "The Pilgrim Hawk" can do no less than reject the author's denial of this kind of artistry several decades later.