Chapter 2

The Riddle of Existence

A study of the ambivalent elements in R. S. Thomas’s poetry entails a comprehensive view of what the term ambivalence encapsulates. The second chapter takes up a critical survey of the disparate structuring of ambivalence in order to fix its orientation within the range, history and individual expressions of integral contradictions in a worldwide framework. The discussion extends to how ambivalence has moulded the fabric of the society and includes a glimpse of its permeations in the fields of psychology, theology, philosophy and literature.

The Chamber’s Twenty-First Century Dictionary edited by Mairi Robinson defines ambivalence as “the concurrent adherence to two opposite or conflicting views, feelings etc about someone or something” (37). Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary defines the ambivalent attitude as being “uncertain or subject to change, especially because affected by contradictory emotions or ideas” (Marckwardt 46). Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language points to an “uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by inability to make a choice or a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite things” (46). A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary defines ambivalence as “the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or
thing” (Burchfield 73). The word *ambivalence* is derived from two Latin roots: *ambo* ‘both’ and *valens, -entis*, ppr. of *valere* ‘be strong,’ ‘be worth.’

The term *ambivalence* has been applied diversely in literary and general works. It has been associated with what social anthropologists call “plural belonging,” and what literary critics call “ambivalence of attitude.” Lionel Trilling in his *Matthew Arnold*, mentions that ambivalent love was predominant in the nineteenth century, where lovers were often distanced by the variability of human emotions (115). M. Joos’s *Acoustic Phonetics* refers to the principle of ambivalence, which governs the simultaneous emitting, and absorbing of acoustic powers by certain things (23). Bertrand Russell in his *Marriage and Morals* claims that Christianity has viewed the family from an ambivalent point of view (140). The term *ambivalence* is the condensed version of what the proverb calls having your cake and eating it.

Life in its various hues is enriched by the phenomenon of ambivalence. Almost all aspects of life – persons, things, events, burning issues, etc. are fraught with ambivalence. Would a scientist make a good president? Did the Princess of Wales deserve the treatment meted to her by the royal family? Was Osama Bin Laden sufficiently provoked throughout the years to mastermind the demolition of the twin towers? Burning issues like abortion, euthanasia, terrorism, cloning, war strategies, infertility treatment, capital punishment, etc. elicit mixed responses from the public. The use of certain things like antibiotics, drugs, fertilizers and pesticides, antidepressants,
cosmetics have their own advantages and disadvantages. The presence of internet cafés, fast-food restaurants, beauty parlours, etc., a common feature in developing cities, is viewed with mixed emotions by sensitive individuals.

Human relationships: husband-wife, parent-child, teacher-student, employer-employee and other relationships as that between neighbours, friends and casual acquaintances are coloured by myriads of emotions. Historical occurrences, governmental policies, educational strategies, industrial rules and regulations and social mores and folkways are topics that are hotly debated by the enlightened masses. Even an ordinary activity like buying a new shirt or deciding what to cook for the day can leave one in a state of ambivalence.

The term ambivalence originated in psychiatry, when Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist described the ambivalent complex to be a peculiar state of mind in which the patient evinced conflicting attitudes – love and hatred – towards his doctor. Bleuler called it an initial state of schizophrenia “... because he thought the condition was characterized primarily by disorganization of thought processes, a lack of coherence between thought and emotion, and an inward orientation away (split off) from reality” (Carson 428). The synchronous laughing and crying manifested by the patient was a partial manifestation of schizophrenic ambivalence. These ambivalent complexes chiefly influenced pathology.
Sigmund Freud later took up the term and it became prominent in his system of psychoanalysis. He traced this back to the childhood stage when the Oedipus complex dominates.

It is easy to see that the little man wants to have his mother all to himself, that he feels the presence of his father as a nuisance, that he is resentful if his father indulges in any signs of affection towards his mother . . . . Observation is often obscured by the circumstance that on other occasions the same child will simultaneously give evidence of great affection for his father. But contrary – or, as it is better to say, ‘ambivalent’ – emotional attitudes, which in adults would lead to a conflict, remain compatible with each other for a long time in children, just as later they find a permanent place beside each other in the unconscious. (Freud, The Complete 332)

According to learning theorists, a change in the characteristics of the impulsive life of a child results in ambivalence. It is an “important feature of normal children during the anal-sadistic developmental phase; children feel both love and murderous hate toward the same object, sometimes simultaneously” (Kaplan 611). The conflicts that the child has with the parent over retaining or expelling faeces in toilet training gives rise to increased ambivalence. Freud was also fascinated by the coalescence of contraries in dream work and discussed it in his lecture on “Uncertainties and Criticisms.”
While discussing the causal intricacies of melancholia and other obsessive-compulsive disorders, Freud has highlighted the dominance of ambivalence in the patient’s doing-undoing patterns of behaviour and in the paralysing doubt, which emerges in the face of choices. The Freudian notion of ambivalence entails not merely the static opposition of warring emotions, but rather an ever-changing dynamics of drive and prohibition. In *Totem and Taboo* he states:

> The drive is constantly shifting in order to escape from the impasse and endeavours to find substitutes – substitute objects and substitute acts – in place of the prohibited ones. In consequence, the prohibition itself shifts about as well, and extends to any new aims, which the forbidden impulse may adopt. Any fresh advance made by the repressed libido is answered by a fresh sharpening of the prohibition. The mutual inhibition of the two conflicting forces produces a need for discharge, for reducing the prevailing tension, and to this may be attributed the reason for the performance of obsessive acts.

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The psychoanalytic theory attributes the obsessive-compulsive disorder to a regression from the Oedipal phase to the intensely ambivalent emotional state associated with the anal phase. The mother-child relationship is also fraught with ambivalent elements. A mother invariably has to impose restrictions and
use compulsions and the child reacts when he feels that his liberty is threatened. “A powerful tendency to aggressiveness is always present beside a powerful love, and the more passionately a child loves its object the more sensitive does it become to disappointments and frustrations from that object.” (Freud, The Complete 588).

Carl Jung based his ideas on the functioning of psychic energy, which fuelled the work of the personality on the principles of opposites, equivalence and entropy. “I see in all that happens the play of opposites” (qtd. in Schultz 80). He observed the existence of opposites in physical energy (heat/cold, height/depth etc.) and also in psychic energy (every wish or feeling implying the presence of its opposite). Jung believed that this antithesis between polarities was the chief propagator of human nature. Tendencies, under the stress of emotions, were balanced by their opposites – thus giving an ambivalent character to their expression.

The sad truth is that man’s real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites – day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil. We are not even sure that one will prevail against the other, that good will overcome evil, or joy defeat pain. Life is a battleground. It always has been and always will be; and if it were not so, existence would come to an end. (Jung, Man and Symbols 75)
Thus Jung believed that the essence of life lay in the tensions created by oppositions between the ego and the shadow, the ego and the personal unconscious, between the collective unconscious and the ego and between the collective unconscious and the persona. The feminine element in a man, that is, the anima, frequently intrudes the masculine nature. Similarly the masculine element in a woman, the animus, frequently has a say in dictating the activities of the feminine nature. Jung held that the polar elements sought one another, for the purpose of existence. The transcendent function enabled the synthesis of these components. A smooth operation of the transcendent function resulted in the formation of a rich, balanced and integrated personality.

For a culture to be aesthetic it must be androgynous not only in the Jungian sense of every man having a share of womanliness (anima) and every woman, a share of manliness (animus) but in the sense the human is neither man nor woman taken separately but man and woman taken conjointly. That is why women’s liberation cannot be achieved without men’s liberation. (Kappen 52)

Zygmunt Bauman’s Modernity and Ambivalence is a comprehensive reflection on the quest for order in the modern world. He explores the social construction and self-construction of ambivalence, its privatisation as manifested in the growth of public expertise and concludes with prospects of
coexisting with irresolution in the post-modern world. The possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category evokes mixed responses. The inability to read the situation in a logical manner and to prioritise between the contradictory responses leads to acute anxiety. Yet, the knowledge that the phenomenon concerned can be grasped comprehensively, only when it is viewed in different aspects, lends a positive dimension to the concept of ambivalence. The essential richness of a thing can be evaluated only when it is segregated and the components are meticulously analysed. This, of course, implies that the world consists of distinct entities, each of which belongs to a group of similar entities that can be set apart from others.

The naming function that language is meant to perform, places itself between a concrete, orderly world fit for human habitation and an ambiguous, random world. However, a problem arises if the thing or situation cannot be encompassed in a linguistically distinguished class or if it falls into several classes at the same time. The indecisive factor that arises tends to a probability of loss of control. This calls for other segregations that are more exact and precisely defined. Thus the process is both self-destructive and self-propelling. It poses new problems in the course of resolving them.

Modern existence and modern intellect grope towards clarity and certainty. The flux of a complex amalgam of elements of order and chaos in life is a process in which each element struggles to gain mastery over the other and yet is interdependent of the other. An insight into the ambivalence
of chaos is crucial in conceiving and defining order as a vision and purpose in life. There should be chaos, if only to go on creating order. Modern consciousness is a propagator of restless action. The process involves an awareness of the inconclusiveness of extant order. The hate-love relation between modern existence and modern culture acts and reacts upon each other in the course of history. The desire for a grand vision of order is the cause for the fragmentation that characterizes modernity. A plethora of minor manageable problems seems practical in dealing with the functioning of the given state. However, people turn multifunctional because of the division of activities, and words turn polysemic as meanings are distributed. Thus, periodically, ambivalence emerges as a genuine force to be reckoned with in modern life.

The problems encountered when we are placed in an alien culture leads to uncertainty as to how the situation ought to be read. Territorial and functional separation offers a means of dealing with this perplexing situation. People stepping into new territories usually seek aid from enclaves, purposely constructed for their use, and also seek the services of functional mediators. Socialization becomes possible when strangers are redefined as friends or enemies. The national milieu attempts to “nativize” strangers by inculcating a sense of common mission and common destiny in them. However, when these attempts fail, a cultural fence may develop, and stigma may be attached to dealing with the stranger. The social organization leads to ambivalence that is
particularly painful to the stranger. Ethnic regional-cultural strangers frequently counter this by attempting to embrace means by which native ways can be absorbed and assimilated, but often find their efforts to be fruitless. Thus the ambivalence associated with strangers as a cultural phenomenon is a universal phenomenon that has taken root in many parts of the world. This rootless, cosmopolitan, alien state into which the stranger is driven, leads to suspicious and vigilant scrutiny on the part of natives. The modern intellectual who becomes a universal stranger is now able to gain a total perspective. Questions are asked as to whether one ought to make compromises with regard to self-definition and self-identity. The surrender of one’s autonomy implies the surrender of one’s authority to make one’s life meaningful. Rootlessness relativizes everything, and the resulting ambivalent existence is infused in universality and relativism.

The ambivalence associated with the public sector is also transferred to the private sector. The burden of shouldering this responsibility calls for artificial supports: maps, signposts, experts and enclaves set up for specific purposes. It is up to the individual now to strive for clarity of purpose and meaning. The expert is consulted, and he brings his skill to finding a practical solution to differences between social choices and personal needs. The success of psychoanalytic sessions, psychoanalytic counselling, group therapy, marriage guidance etc., is based on the fact that one can seek for support and approval from the expert without repaying in kind. This
impersonal relationship brings the desired result without the accompanying complication of a guilty conscience or the stigma of selfishness. Thus, a vast network of public expertise is spawned at the growing insufficiency of the individual, and modern society has reconciled itself to the omnipresence of ambivalence. Bauman concludes:

Modernity could dismiss its own uncertainty as a temporary affliction. Each uncertainty came complete with the recipe for curing it: just one more problem, and problems were defined by their solutions. . . . The passage from uncertainty to certainty, from ambivalence to transparency, seemed to be a matter of time, of resolve, of resources, of *knowledge*. It is an entirely different matter to live with the post-modern awareness of no certain exit from uncertainty, of the escape from contingency being as contingent as the condition from which escape is sought. (237)

The history of philosophy, theology and literature reveals numerous instances of ambivalence that become fundamental in a comprehensive and thorough study of knowledge and human nature. Aristotle believed that the love of knowledge was embedded in mankind. This basic desire, inherent in the core of human nature, has manifested itself in various ways throughout the history of human existence. It has prompted man to turn inward, into his soul and outward, into the world. Man has scaled the heights of reason and
imagination, and delved into the abysses of the heart in an attempt to pursue knowledge. Epistemological quests have also led to journeys, voyages and discoveries. Thus knowledge incorporates a vast corpus including self-knowledge, knowledge of others and the objective knowledge of empirical facts sought by sciences.

The attempts to attain self-understanding can be traced back to the mythological state of thought. The hermeneutics of myth have cast a spell on many a scholar. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were attempts to rationalize myths. Man sought to examine and extract concrete intelligible phenomena, which later gave birth to stories. These stories were later supposed to be appended with imaginative and fanciful decorations. However, this approach was discarded as new ideas arose. Others treated myths, allegorically, as vehicles of metaphysical truths. Others highlighted the etiological strands in mythology, as accounting for the origin of events and institutions. Recently, however, attention has been focused on myths as centring on man’s life and thoughts. These symbolic expressions are projections of inner needs and their outer manifestations in actions. The transience and mortality of human existence that formed the framework of eschatological myths enabled him to gain a wider perspective of life on earth. Confronted by the mystery of existence, the tensions and paradoxes that are inherent in it, man wrestles to find answers and ambivalence emerges, as he,
as in Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man*, is “in doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast” (8).

Around 500 B.C., man ascended from the hazy world of mythological mentality to a higher realm. The worldwide restlessness of the human spirit gathered momentum as the process of critical thought was sharpened. Radical questioning pervaded all areas of human history. Elements of rationalism, atheism, theism, the study of nature and man’s study of himself sprouted in various parts of the world.

What is new about this age . . . is that man becomes conscious of being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void, he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing his limits, he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence. (Jaspers, *The Origin* 2)

The three major areas of culture that developed during this period were crucial factors in deciding the course of the future. They included the Hebrew religious thought, the classical Greek culture and Eastern religious philosophy. In protesting against the dehumanising elements in pagan culture, the Hebrew prophets from Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah to the prophets of the exile strove to inculcate a sense of responsibility. They
believed that man should be conscious of the finiteness of his being. His guilt about his sins should lead to a turning to the future. The flourishing of Greek culture had a potent impact in the field of philosophy, literature and politics. Thales, Heraclitus and Parmenides were great Greek philosophers, to be followed by other eminent men like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates focused attention on man as the pivot of philosophical inquiry. Other great poets and dramatists brooded on human destiny and the clash between the being of man and the being of the cosmos. The natural and historical sciences appeared and the growth of culture was also directed to a great extent by the scepticism and radical questioning of the sophists. Rationalism and an intellectualistic attitude pervaded the spirit of the times. Yet the ambivalent thread ran alongside, through the course of history as the enigma associated with the irrational continued to invite excitement. E. R. Dodds states that “the men who created the first European rationalism were never – until the Hellenistic Age – “mere” rationalists: that is to say, they were deeply and imaginatively aware of the power, the wonder and the peril of the irrational” (17, 254). The third cultural area was that of Asian philosophy which blossomed during the time of Confucius and Lao-Tzu in China, the time of Zarathustra in Iran and the time of the Upanishads and later of the Buddha in India. The preoccupation of the East and the West with several common themes led to comparative studies in similar areas of interest. The encounter with “nothingness,” that formed an integral part of the changing times, was of
particular interest to many a scholar. The illusion that community brings security was shattered as man began to ponder on the existentialist element in his “being.” The insecurity and anxiety in the face of a new reality was fraught with ambivalence. This genuine and open search for understanding, enhanced in quality by the spiritual upsurge of the time, paved the way for a richer, more reflective and fuller life.

The rise of Christianity called for responsible and inward obedience in the desire to gain one's authentic being. The prospect of the end loomed large in the face of existence and lent a sense of urgency to the short and powerful words of Jesus – “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it” (Mark 8.35); “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9.35).

The conversion of St. Paul bordered on faith. The ambivalent strand often appeared in the Pauline theology, especially with reference to the law. St. Paul’s statements about the law would appear to be in flat contradiction with each other. In its favour he says that it is one of the privileges of Israel (Rom. ix. 4), and that it has been a kind of tutor (paidagōgos) in charge of us till Christ should come (Gal. iii. 24). Against it, he urges that it intruded to multiply law-breaking (Rom. v. 20), and that those who rely on obedience to it are under a curse (Gal. iii. 10). In subsequent
Christian theology the word ‘law’ has been associated almost exclusively with moralism. This one-sided expansion makes it difficult, to understand the ambivalent, ‘love-hatred’ attitude of St. Paul to the law. We must not regard the law as an independent entity, but consider its place in the total life-pattern of those who used, or sometimes abused, the law as a lamp to their feet and a light to their path (Ps. cxix. 105). (Whiteley 76)

The indeterminate quality associated with faith persisted throughout the ages, even when the dogmatic, metaphysical type of theology was rampant during the patristic period. Often what was true appeared false, and what was certain, appeared doubtful. The existential interpretation of faith reflected in the writings of St. Ignatius and St. Athanasius, and later found powerful expression in the writings of St. Augustine (354–430). St. Augustine believed that man’s heart was so deep and so profound that the conflicting emotions, feelings and attitudes were prerequisites to live a more enlightened and perfect life. Augustine understood man’s self-transcendence as directed towards God. “With a hidden goad thou didst urge me, that I might be restless until such time as the sight of my mind might discern thee for certain” (qtd. in Przywara 75). He believed that God is present to us at the core of our own being that he is identical with us and yet transcends us. Thus Augustine held the conviction that the universe was the creation of a good God for a good purpose. Everything that existed was good in its own way, and evil was not
created by God but represented the distortion of something that was inherently valuable. The equivocal quality associated with the origin of evil remained a fascinating question for many a scholar.

The rise of a new style of mysticism during the medieval period had a role in the growth of philosophy. The prevailing rationalistic approach seemed to oversimplify life, which was too complex to be tied up in neat packages. Unnerved by the wars that shook the foundations of society, and ravaged by plagues and socio-political events, man sought for other means to find a meaning in life. Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), the German preacher and mystic, explored the relationship between man and God, in an attempt to unveil the ambivalence that enveloped this relationship. He separated the unconditional Godhead known in ecstasy from the personal God who was the object of devotional religion, and who represented a humanization of reality. Eckhart believed that all things were merely nothing, and this emptiness gave birth to God. It was God’s nature to be without a nature, and man could only approach God by getting to know himself first.

The Renaissance and Reformation blossomed, and new enterprises were undertaken with great vigour. The protests against scholasticism and ecclesiastical corruption spurred thoughts about the freedom and dignity of man. The euphoria associated with the new consciousness of man’s inner worth was tempered by his sense of importance in the wake of the discovery of a new cosmology. The work of Roger Bacon, Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler,
Gilbert, Vesalius, Harvey and Newton revealed startling new insights about
the world. The scepticism of belief in a central system finds echoes in Yeats’s
words: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (3). The earth had been
thought to be the centre of the universe, but now astronomers claimed that
there was no absolute centre to the universe. Man’s belief in God was
undermined as he continued to ponder on the new predicament. A new
Christian piety developed as philosophy and science gradually separated from
theology. Some ecclesiastical reformers like Erasmus chose to remain within
the Roman Catholic Church. Others like Martin Luther questioned the
excessive importance given to religious customs and dogmas. Luther did not
believe that man received God’s forgiveness and redemption from sins
through church rituals. It was achieved through faith, by understanding the
acts of God “for us.” The Scriptures were the source one could depend on, to
arrive at a personal relationship with God.

This theme of God as *deus absconditus*, ‘the hidden God,’ found in
Martin Luther, was expressed clearly by Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*.

It was not then right that He should appear in a manner
manifestly divine, and completely capable of convincing all
men; but it was also not right that He should come in so hidden
a manner that He could not be known by those who should
sincerely seek him. He has willed to make Himself quite
recognizable by those; and thus, willing to appear openly to
those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart. He so regulates the knowledge of Himself that He has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.

(118)

Pascal believed that man could cure himself of disbelief by emulating the ways of the faithful. Pascal’s “Wager” – “Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is” (67) – profoundly irreligious as it seemed to many religious believers, nevertheless mirrored the ambivalent character of existence in the universe, and hence was seriously adopted by other thinkers.

The twentieth century has witnessed the greatest crisis humanity has ever known. The dehumanising effect encountered in the aftermath of two world wars and an ever-present threat of a third, has left the sensitive human being floundering in a bewildering age ridden with suspicions and doubt. Radical technological advances and the emergence of nuclear powers accentuate the loneliness and anonymity that emerges. Religious faith is constantly battered and gradually begins to crumble as more things are incorporated within the purview of science. Man is left in the dark, groping
for a rounded philosophy of life as belief in the Creation by a Divine Being.

wrestles with the challenges posed by historical and rationalist criticism. In

the wake of these enigmatic predicaments, the Existentialist style of

philosophising appeared in the post-war scenario, with its first roots in

Germany. “In the existentialist view there are always loose ends. Our

experience and our knowledge are always incomplete and fragmentary; only a
divine Mind, if there is one, could know the world as a whole – and perhaps
even for such a Mind there would be gaps and discontinuities” (Macquarrie 13).

The chaos and disillusion that followed the Russian Revolution and the

First World War undermined the optimism and development, which had been

prominent in the nineteenth century. The Hegelian system was criticized as

being irrelevant to the personal life of the individual.

The existentialists laid stress on man, his existence. The nature of this

existence and the whole range of his being were more important to them than

man considered as a “thinking subject.” Sartre put it in this way – man’s

existence precedes his essence. St. Thomas Aquinas had distinguished

between existence and essence as “the act by which a being is” and “what a

being is.”

The idea of essence may be reached by the mind speculating

upon the inner nature of things. But existence is something

lived, concerning what we are. Existence is in terms of the

actual situation in which we find ourselves, where we love and
hate, where we make actual decisions. Whereas essence is something possible, which might be arrived at by thought; existence is something actual, which we experience. (A. O. Dyson, Existentialism 7)

Some recurring themes in existentialism included freedom, decision, responsibility, finitude, guilt, alienation, despair and death. The exercise of freedom that distinguished man from other creatures enabled him to venture on a quest of authentic existence. “In making a choice, it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses. Thereby the personality announces its inner infinity, and thereby, in turn, the personality is consolidated” (Kierkegaard, Either / Or 141). In the process of making a choice, man often meets with resistance, which often leads to frustration. The consciousness of the pitting of puny mortal existence against the vast, inexorable laws of the inanimate world is one ripe with the possibilities for ambivalence and tragic conflict. The emotional life of man was another significant area that the existentialists dealt with. Along with intellectual, rational scrutiny, man, being a psychosomatic unity, had to have his feelings analysed too. Thus states such as anxiety, boredom, respect, guilt, fear, anger, love, joy, etc. were inherent and inevitable elements of the human predicament and hence had to be taken into account. Along with these themes, the existentialists also inquired about the intricacies of language, and the role of the society rooted in a particular
historical background. The ambivalent thread that wove its way in and out of these themes was particularly evident in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard.

Writers on existentialism have often differentiated between Christian and atheistic existentialists. However, this oversimplified division fails to account for the highly complex relationship of the existentialist to his Christian faith or to his atheism. True faith is built on a foundation of doubt. A staunch atheist cannot fail to acknowledge the impact of random moments when faith is posited.

Nietzsche was a staunch atheist. Even though he was bred in a religious background – he belonged to a clerical family – Nietzsche conceived Christianity as mutilating the human spirit and its freedom. The “death of God” in Nietzsche’s thought has been widely discussed: “. . . God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! . . .” (qtd. in Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke* 9). Christianity could be overcome by putting in its place the doctrine of the superman: man surpassing himself. Man had separated two sides of himself; one very paltry and weak and one very strong and astonishing, into two spheres and he called the former, man, and the latter, God. Nietzsche believed that the flaw or imperfection in the way man was constituted, not only made deterioration possible, but also the possibility of an advance towards a superhuman state. This self-affirmation, in a sense brought by the “death of God,” however had its dark sides. Macquarrie states that “. . .
man’s desire to be God is essentially self-contradictory and self-frustrating” (58). It brought one into an age of nihilism. Nietzsche was aware that the West had come into a nihilistic period. He wanted to get beyond this nihilism, but he has been regarded as being caught in its tentacles. “He knew that he was himself the nihilist he accused, but he believed that he differed by carrying nihilism to its final consequences and thereby initiating its conquest” (Jaspers, Nietzsche 91).

Yet, Christianity continued to fascinate him. Karl Jaspers has pointed out that “His opposition to Christianity as a reality is inseparable from his tie to Christianity as a postulate. And he himself regarded this tie as positive – not merely as something to be severed” (Jaspers, Nietzsche 6). Atheism, for him, was by no means incompatible with belief in value. The terrible mental anguish caused by these unresolved leanings ravaged his sensitive mind and finally, it led to madness. In his keen appreciation of suffering and self-sacrifice as indispensable conditions of self-perfection, Nietzsche seems more Christian than most philosophers.

Kierkegaard was preoccupied with becoming a Christian. He protested against the philosophy of ideas that cut off intellect from the sources of human existence, which alone could nurture it. He believed that the progress of the human self is from the aesthetic, through the ethical to the religious stage, but this could not be rationalized. Christianity itself, according to him, was a paradox and demanded the leap of faith. “According to Fear and
Trembling, all Christianity is rooted in the paradoxical, whether one accepts it as a believer, or rejects it precisely because it is paradoxical” (Kierkegaard, Concluding 96). His passionate attachment to the Christian faith was simultaneously accompanied by an equally passionate hostility to the conventional religious doctrines and ceremonies current in the nineteenth century in Denmark. He violently criticized the Christian institutions towards the end of his life, perceiving Christianity as the personal decision of the individual.

Christianity in the New Testament has to do with man’s will, everything turns upon changing the will, every expression (forsake the world, deny yourself, die to the world, and so on, to hate oneself, to love God, and so on) – everything is related to this basic idea in Christianity which makes it what it is – a change of will. In Christendom, on the other hand, the whole of Christianity has been transferred to intellectuality; so it becomes a doctrine, and our whole concern is with the intellectual.

(Smith 266)

Scholars believed that this mode of thought was not an aberration but a natural consequence of his earlier pattern of thinking. Thus, the branches of theology and philosophy provide ample instances of the ambivalent pattern of thought.
The concept of ambivalence can be associated with several literary devices e.g. paradox, irony, binary opposition, contradiction and *aporia*. It has been adapted into the colonial discourse theory by Homi Bhabha. It is also reflected in Coleridge’s critical insights, in Brooks’s “The Language of Paradox” and Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

Coleridge defines poetry as the expression of the imagination. Thus he attributes to the human mind the active power not only to create but also to respond creatively to the impressions that constantly filter into it. Coleridge has given us the classic description of the nature and power of the creative imagination in his *Biographia Literaria*:

> It reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order . . . . (174)

Thus Coleridge states that poetic excellence lie in reconciliation or blending of ambivalent qualities into a unified whole by the synthetic power he attributes to imagination. His views regarding the concept of organic form and this idea of a blending of opposites has influenced twentieth-century critical concepts and terminology, e.g., ambiguity, tension, paradox, irony, etc.
The seventh type of ambiguity, enumerated in William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, is closely related to the concept of ambivalence. Empson describes the seventh type as that which arises when “. . . the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer’s mind” (225). Quoting examples from English poems, Empson elaborates on Keats’s use of this type of ambiguity to arouse intense sensations. “Ode to Melancholy” unites joy and melancholy, pain and pleasure, death and sexuality, a desire for eternity of fame and irresponsibility of oblivion in bittersweet lines. Empson, who attempts two interpretations of the poem, religious and sexual, has also examined Crashaw’s “Hymn to the Name and Honour of the admirable Sainte Teresa.”

Indeed the way in which a person lives by these vaguely conceived opposites is the most important thing about his make-up; the way in which opposites can be stated so as to satisfy a wide variety of people for a great number of degrees of interpretation, is the most important thing about the communication of the arts. (256)

Empson claims that such opposites had an important consideration in Freud’s analysis of dreams. Referring to Hopkins’s “The Windhover,” Empson says that the first three lines of the poem is a clear example of
. . . the Freudian use of opposites, where two things thought of as incompatible, but desired intensely by different systems of judgments, are spoken of simultaneously by words applying to both; both desires are thus given a transient and exhausting satisfaction and the two systems of judgments are forced into open conflict before the reader. Such a process, one might imagine, could pierce to regions that underlie the whole structure of our thought; could tap the energies of the very depths of the mind. (262)

Empson states that the juxtaposition of opposite elements need not always imply conflict. They may be harmoniously held in equilibrium by the skill of the poet. The proud, helpless suffering of the afflicted soul in “The Windhover” conveys an “indecision, and its reverberation in the mind” (260). However, the various types of conflicts in the Christian doctrine of the sacrifice of Christ are superbly reconciled by the doctrine of atonement in George Herbert’s “The Sacrifice.” The pathetic tone of Jesus, who states that he has not understood why people treated him so cruelly is beautifully resolved in a mature resigned acceptance of God’s will.

The term paradox is derived from the Greek word paradoxos. It is a statement, which, though seems to be self-contradictory, yet contains a basis of truth. It provides a reader a particular point afresh, as when Shakespeare says, “Cowards die many times before their deaths” (Jul. 2.2.32). The
paradox had been widely used in seventeenth century metaphysical poetry and was also used in devotional prose and religious poetry as a way of expressing the Christian mysteries, which transcend human sense and logic. It was established as a widely used critical term with the publication of “The Language of Paradox,” in Cleanth Brooks’s The Well Wrought Urn (1947). Brooks argued that the language of poetry was the language of paradox. He believed that the main way in which the poet managed to blend ambivalent elements together to create a unified whole was through the use of paradox.

Few of us are prepared to accept the statement that the language of poetry is the language of paradox. . . . Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational. Yet there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. (Lodge 292)

The ambivalence that permeates Wordsworth’s “Sonnet Composed upon Westminster Bridge,” is cited as an example. Brooks claims that the poem becomes powerful only because of the paradoxical situation in it. He is awed that “grim, feverish London,” can “wear / the beauty of the morning” (4-5). The river habitually disdained for its squalour, its crowded, cluttered state is now a sight for sore eyes – gliding naturally, peacefully and serenely. The city that now is in a death-like sleep awakens the poet’s senses to its real nature – the throbbing, pulsating “life” that constitutes its majesty. Referring to several
other poems, Brooks argues that a poet often has to employ paradoxes to faithfully depict the discrepancies and overlapping, evident in several states of human emotion. Consequently, ambivalence becomes an integral component of the language of poetry.

The term irony is derived from the Greek eironeia ‘simulated ignorance.’ It is a figure of speech in which what a person says is the opposite of what he means. Thus ambivalent position saves the speaker from committing himself to a positive position and enables him to maintain a detached attitude. There are many kinds of irony. “Socratic irony” refers to a manner of argument employed by Socrates in which he simulated both ignorance of and sympathy with the position of a supposed expert on some topic. Romantic irony, associated with early nineteenth-century German philosopher-poets, evokes ambiguity, uncertainty and fragmentation of meaning. Friedrich Schlegel believed that everything should be both innocently revealing as well as deeply hidden in irony. This emphasis on the indeterminate nature of interpretation of a text was, according to Barthes, the essence of a piece of writing. Other New Critics later developed I. A. Richards’s observation of irony as the equilibrium of opposing impulses.

The concept of binary opposition, one of the underlying tenets of structuralism, refers to two mutually exclusive terms such as left / right; man / woman; nature / culture, etc. Structuralists argue that such oppositions are inherent in all cultural phenomena, including everything from speech to
housekeeping. More narrowly, structuralism argues that meaning itself is
interrelated: that is to say, we only know the meaning of the word “up” by
virtue of its contrast with the word “down.” Structuralism, in the 1960s,
aimed at an almost scientific analysis of the codes and conventions operating
in literature. An ambivalent purview of things came into play here.

The term contradiction was later used in post-structuralist criticism to
point to two or more meanings that could not be reconciled or resolved. It was
often used when exploring the politics or ideology of a text to highlight
apparent incoherencies in a text. Both feminist and Marxist critics were
interested in the ways in which the seeming order of texts was deeply troubled
by irreconcilable impulses.

Aporia, a term taken from Greek rhetoric, was traditionally used to
describe a figure of speech in which a speaker or character deliberates on an
irresolvable question. Deconstructive critics have in recent years, taken up the
term. Deconstruction begins from the premise that language itself is an
endless chain of meanings. It does not come to any fixed, final position. The
final meaning is always deferred and differential and it forms an endless
chain. Deconstructionists postulate that texts can never be coherent or stable.
In other words, deconstruction seeks to undo the binary oppositions proposed
by structuralism, and emphasizes the plurality of differences. The
deconstructive critic tries to pursue within the text the aporia, or contradiction
that disrupts its seeming unity, and to show how the text’s meanings are, in
fact, not specific. This is not normally used in a negative sense, but rather to point to sites within a reader’s experience of a text in which he or she is given the freedom to play with the text by the insolvability revealed at its stress points or fault lines. When Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, adopts and develops the term contradiction, he uses the ideas of contradiction and deferral of meaning in language to dissemble what he calls “logocentrism.” Derrida criticises the way in which Western philosophy has tried to make meaning seem full and unified. He opposes the penchant for what he calls the “transcendental signified,” i.e., a stability of meaning, which takes root outside language. For Derrida, there is only language and différance – that is meanings, which are always differential and deferred. Alan Bass, the English translator of Writing and Difference, says that Derrida’s concept of meanings “can only be conceived as neither this nor that, or both at the same time – a departure from all rules of logic” (Derrida xvi). Thus, he sees a plurality of differences in which opposites always bear traces of each other.

Deconstructionists search for the aporia in a text to indicate a point where we are faced not by a simple choice of readings but by a constant sliding of “undecidable” meanings. The deconstructionists are thus concerned with the ambivalence that emerges from the aporias, and the moments of self-contradiction in a text where a “gap” or lacuna opens up between what a text hopes to convey and what it is constrained to say.
The term *ambivalence* has also been adapted into the colonial discourse theory by Homi Bhabha. It disrupts the simple relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, by displaying a fluctuating relation. The colonized subject often alternates between resistance and compliancy, i.e., between mockery and mimicry. Bhabha’s theory highlights the fact that the ambivalent relationship generates the seeds of its own downfall. The colonizers do not expect the colonized to be exact replicas of them. This conflict within itself disables its monolithic dominance. The concept of ambivalence is also related to hybridity. Bhabha conceives of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate: “For a willingness to descend into that alien territory . . . may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based . . . on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (38).

Several English poems that have cast a spell over their readers owe their attraction and brilliance to the subtle shades of emotions and feelings that are deeply embedded in them. A random sampling of some poems written in different centuries reveal traces of ambivalence, which lend depth to the poems and contribute to their perennial appeal.

The ambivalence that reflects in Shakespeare’s sonnets hinges on his uncertain relationships with his “friend” and the “Dark Lady.” Dogged by infidelities on both sides and rooted in a wordly-wise attitude, their love is nevertheless mature, fulfilling and stimulating. It is ultimately perceived as a
lasting universal force. Sonnet 54: “O how much more doth beauty” presents compelling images with the friend compared not only to “sweet roses” but also to the “canker blooms” as well. Sonnet 130: “My Mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” defies conventional Petrarchan patterns, yet seems all the more authentic and genuine. The seemingly mocking references to her dull eyes, her pale cheeks and the stink in her breath recedes as the warmth of the penultimate line, “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare” (13), conveys his true emotions. The contradictory elements of human love, spiritual and physical, elevating and corrupting is presented in Sonnet 144: “Two loves I have of comfort and despair / which like two spirits do suggest me still” (1-2). Sonnet 110: “Alas, ’tis true I have gone here and there” reveals the conflicting frustrations and triumphs that characterize an actor-playwright’s pursuit.

Donne’s “The Canonization” is a superb piece of artistry in which profane love and divine love are subtly fused in imagery invoking the Phoenix riddle. The life-in-death that emerges from the brilliant paradox at the end encompasses shades of varying emotions that add spice to life. In many of Donne’s poems the concept of ambivalence emerges as a fundamental structural device, which sustains the dialectic and argument of the poem. Herrick’s “Gather ye Rosebuds” and Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” analyse the transience of time with a powerful and compelling emotion while at the same time producing an intellectual scheme. Marvell’s “The Garden”
hinges on a central paradoxical idea. Herbert’s “The Pulley” acknowledges the grace of God in withholding “rest” from among the rest of the gifts given to man. The apparent stinginess of God masks His profound concern for his people.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* slides to and fro between contradictions inherent in the seventeenth century culture. He is concerned with the general paradox at the heart of Christian belief: how good grows from evil. His ambivalent portrayal of Eve matches the ideological contradiction that Johnson found in Milton between his revolutionary politics and his domestic oppression of women. Milton’s Eve reflects a crucial ambivalence by being associated in myths with the Mother-Goddess, fertile and protective, and also with the deceiver and destroyer. Hebraic myth suggests an alter ego for Eve, the dangerous Lilith. Milton’s delineation of Satan evokes vacillating responses. Satan, the epitome of evil, nevertheless, seems to command respect in *Paradise Lost*. The simultaneous figuration of Eve as Sacred Mary and a wanton Venus has spawned widespread critical commentary.

Alexander Pope propounds a study of the alternating aspects inherent in human nature in Epistle II of *An Essay On Man*. Short, pithy statements that verge on the epigrammatic are combined in a general statement about the condition of man:

The proper study of Mankind is Man

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic’s pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer. (2-9)

Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* expresses contrary states of the human soul: man with grace and without grace. The world of pastoral innocence is set against the world of adult corruption. The incredulous wonder inherent in the line, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (20), encapsulates the bewilderment evoked by the twin aspects of Christ – the meek virtue of Christ the Lamb and the darker forces of energy of Christ the Tiger. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake emphasizes the belief that traditional ideas of good and evil need reconsidering.

Wordsworth’s “The Child is father of the Man,” parallels Rousseau’s belief that a child ought to preserve its pristine innocence and early childhood memories for as long as possible. Adulthood thus becomes the alternate side of childhoodness. Shelley addresses the West Wind as “Destroyer” and “Preserver,” and believes that, in certain given situations, good could come out of evil. The Romantic Movement emphasized the search for individual definitions of morality. The images of evil, violence and death in the first two
sections of “Ode to the West Wind” later pave the way for a new birth of imagination, genius and creativity in the fourth and fifth sections. Shelley identifies himself with the Wind and beseeches it to work through him for the good of mankind. His keen sensitive nature, vulnerable to the contradictions in life and crystallizing in “To a Skylark” in beautiful lines: “Our sincerest laughter / With some pain is fraught; / Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” (89-90) is nevertheless resolved in “Ode to the West Wind” by the belief that “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (70).

Mathew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” delineate the conflict between faith and doubt and the hope and despair that marked the Victorian age. Painfully conflicting pressures left an indelible mark in the dark, personal poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins. The clash in Hopkins’s personality between the sensuous man and the artist he naturally was, and the ascetic Jesuit he had chosen to become, is embroiled in intensely wrought out lines of verse. “The Windhover,” aspires to the union of the soul with God in the Beatific Vision. The poem operates on several levels of ambivalences, as the wild beauty and instinctive self-discipline of the bird is likened to the partially repressed personality of the poet. The recognition and resigned acceptance of these jarring tendencies and the conscious attempts to resolve them in the active personality, embodies what Coleridge describes as the highest poetic imagination – the reconciliation of discordant qualities.
Yeats’s poems evoke his hidden allegiance to the Christian Church, even though he blatantly opposes traditional Christian rituals and customs. Scepticism and faith exist side by side, in his poetry. He shuns the orthodox interpretations that emanate from a bigoted viewpoint, but most of his symbols have an unmistakable Christian aura. The fusion of the worldly and the spiritual elements is accomplished through the deft use of images.

Lawrence, in his poem “Snake,” examines his divided feelings towards the reptile. On one hand, it is a symbol of Mother Earth’s female power, enlightenment and wisdom and yet, its venomous nature and slithering movement are repulsive. The snake becomes the symbol of the “tension of opposites” in which, according to him, all things have their being. The conflict between Nature and Culture, which reflects in the writings of Levi-Stauss, Freud and Lacan, can also be perceived in the works of Lawrence. He admires the slow, dignified conduct of the golden reptile and has a natural inclination to describe its movements in detail. However, his so-called civilization prompts him to try to harm the creature and he regrets his impulsive gesture. His fascination and disgust at the coiling and uncoiling of the creature echoes the eternal vacillation between the soul and the libido. He resolves this by concluding in his essay, “The Reality of Peace,” that one should be able to accept the genuineness of horror experienced when confronting the serpents of secret and shameful desires, that forever swirl in the marshes of the soul.
Few poets have spoken with such clarity of vision and moral vigour about the senselessness and pointlessness of war as Wilfred Owen. The patriotism, glory and honour associated with war illustrated by the “early vision” poets gradually gave way to perplexing bitter attitudes towards the senseless slaughter. Owen’s enduring poems fuse powerful indignant emotions towards warmongers with feelings of pity and sympathy for the plight of the “undone years” of the ordinary soldier. “Strange Meeting” subtly merges two figures, the enemy and friend in a compassionate attempt to portray the tragic waste of war. The potency of the dialogue crystallized in: “The pity of war, the pity war distilled” (25) vividly brings out what these men could have achieved if only they had lived.

Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking” borders on understanding gained through sleep. As elsewhere in Roethke, the road to illumination leads first through the dark abyss and one has to embrace sleep in order to become truly awake. To sleep is to acquire the vision that releases us from the involvement of our intellect and helps us to drift into the acceptance of the twists in life. The speaker wakes to a perception of death, deeming it as another state of waking, not to be feared but accepted. W. H. Auden’s thoughts revolve around his struggle to decide whether life is more sinful than blessed. “The Unknown Citizen” depicts a keen awareness of the socio-political reality of the modern age. He wields satire as an effective weapon in delineating the ambivalent elements inherent in political conformism. A desire to conform to
the norms of the society and a readiness to accept all sorts of propaganda without doubt, leads man to become a cog in the wheel, a number in the files, a colourless and nameless entity.

The best known and most anthologised of Dylan Thomas’s poems “Fern Hill,” celebrates the green and golden days of innocent happiness associated with childhood memories. The carefree joy experienced in his childhood when he lived in his aunt’s farm, remains fresh and is a source of perennial joy. However, the poem depicts ambivalence with the introduction of Time and its gradual initiation to the shadowy world of death, which is darkly hinted in the poignant reality of the last three lines:

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,

Time held me green and dying,

Though I sang in my chains like the sea. (52-54)

Ted Hughes’s animal imagery, reflected in many of his poems, symbolizes the constructive and destructive energy that constitutes the fabric of human consciousness. Painfully aware of man’s fragile nature in a destructive, awesome world, Hughes believes that violence could be purposeful. Hughes’s animals embody both base, beastly qualities as well as noble, spiritual aspects. The Puritanical division of the spirit from the body, which plagues the modern world even to this day, is dealt with by the poet in sensitive, imaginative poems like “The Jaguar,” “The Thought Fox” and those in Hawk in the Rain. The dual nature of the cosmic energy that operates in
and outside the body cannot be denied. The suffering and endurance that results from attempting to control it in a creative way, gives life and meaning to those who are disciplined by it.

The personal anguish that marks many of Sylvia Plath’s poems stem from a number of factors. They include her warped relationship with the men in her life, her strained views of human sexuality, her sado-masochistic tendencies and the socio-environmental factors that moulded her personality. Plath had a bipolar relationship with her father Otto Plath. Following her first suicide attempt at the age of nineteen, she enumerated on her relationship with him. She claimed that she had adored and despised him and had probably wished many times that he were dead. When he died, she imagined that she had killed him. Though she still loved him unconditionally, she gradually became aware of his oppressive dominance in her life and compared him to a Nazi, a devil and a vampire in her poetry. This ambivalent, complex and troubled attitude strained her relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes. “Daddy” is a powerful and compelling attempt to exorcise tormenting emotions that haunted her throughout her life. Other poems, “Cut,” “Poppies in July” and “Lady Lazarus” reflect the schizophrenic nuances inherent in her bittersweet enjoyment of pain.

Death has exercised a strange fascination for many poets – Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda – throughout the centuries. Its randomness, inevitability and finality enhance human vulnerability and the
bleak nature of life. Yet many poets have longed to be enveloped by the warmth and shelter it seems to offer. Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* are characterized by a healthy robust faith that triumphs and “never taste death’s woe.” Alexander Pope’s “The Dying Christian To His Soul,” reverberates on “the pain, the bliss of dying!” (4). John Keats, “half in love with easeful Death,” longed to fly on the wings of poesy to the realm of the Unknown. Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” overshadowed by sombre tones, contrasts sharply with the whimsical tone that characterizes his “Ode On the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes,” both of which deal with the theme of the transience of life. The insoluble riddle of life that has puzzled mankind since time immemorial is generalized in Harold Monro’s “Living”:

> What have I done that I should be alive?

> O, can I not forget that I am living?

> How shall I reconcile the two conditions?

> Living, and yet - to die? (22-25)

The poem endorses the poet’s discovery of the joy of living. The shrill siren of the ambulance racing along roads creates disturbances in the minds of onlookers. The flow of normality that pauses for a chilling second, as the prospect of imminent death coupled with hope evokes empathy, is sympathetically portrayed in Philip Larkin’s “Ambulances.” Thus the grim
reality of death is enveloped in ambivalent overtones that attempt to come to
terms with the irrevocable aspect of its nature.

What is thus apparent from this survey is that a complex tapestry of
manifestations of ambivalence incorporates itself in the functioning of life.
The concept of ambivalence is too intricate and all pervading to be
conclusively fixed within the confines of a chapter. It accommodates
changing ideologies – individual, social, political, religious and economic –
that materialise with the progress of time. Resonances of ambivalence in the
literary genre itself are discursively constituted. Temporality and historicality
is an inevitable part of the process of understanding. Thus the true
significance of a person, an event or an idea can be grasped more
comprehensively by a thorough study of it from an ambivalent point of view.