Chapter-VI
CONCLUSION

Thomas Wolfe had Faust’s impulse to do everything limitless, and Whitman’s passion to put it all on paper. While still a student at Harvard and not a celebrity as a novelist, Wolfe wrote to his mother:

I know this now: I am inevitable, I sincerely believe that the only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease, or death ... I will go everywhere and see everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think of all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and will write, write, write. (Quoted in Moser, 1967: 225)

Few writers have immersed themselves in the turbulent stream of experiences more thoroughly than Wolfe. He lives through the variegated experiences of life and attempts to articulate the intensity of personal experience, which he sees as the fountainhead of creative process. As F.R. Leavis maintains about Swift: “He was, in various ways, curiously unaware – the reverse of clairvoyante. He is distinguished by the identity of his feelings ... and he certainly does not impress us as a mind in possession of its experience” (quoted in Steiner, 1969: 237). By mind in possession of its experience, Leavis implies the taking on of the pertinent, sombre precision of facts. In the flowing narrative of Wolfe’s works, the
sombre precision may be absent, but the presence of the author is felt at
every level recording everything in an impressionistic manner.

The formless, all-inclusive exuberant narrative pattern is the first
most noticeable characteristic of his works. The declared intention to
include all and experience all that life offers, necessarily generates
rampant confusion and disrupts/affects integration in Wolfe’s writing. Like
a romantic, Wolfe sees life as a condition of disjointed fragments – and
his frantic attempt had been to achieve some measure of unity. The
inspired artist is experiencing spontaneous pangs of creativity, producing
unrelated fragments and unsuccessfully struggling to harmonize them into
a whole.

Hemingway’s style of presentation is one way of looking at the use
of language where precision and objectivity matters most. On the other
hand, we have Joyce, Proust, Faulkner and Gunter Grass where use of
language is driven to its limits. Wolfe may be classified with the latter
writers. In Wolfe’s writing, words seem to flow in an untamed manner,
engendering other words in ungoverned profusion. Where he is in control,
Wolfe’s language has a thrust and vital sensuousness that carry all before
them. It might be that like Wittgenstein, he has a problem of escaping from the spiral of language. Wittgenstein’s entire work leans on the question whether there is any verifiable relation between the word and fact. That which we call fact may be a veil spun by language to shroud the mind from reality. Wittgenstein compels us to wonder whether reality can be spoken of, when speech is merely a kind of infinite regression, words being spoken of other words (Steiner, 1969: 41). Wittgenstein’s philosophic dilemma may be considered to be at the very core of Wolfe’s genius. He has not consciously pursued a philosophical inquiry into the relationship between the word and reality, but was caught in its irresolvable contradictions. Wolfe’s theoretical work The Story of a Novel is an indicator of that dilemma.

Wolfe understands life in patterns of opposites, and this gives rise to a sense of ambivalence that pervades his literary articulations. Ambivalence at the level of lived life and artistic endeavour has been the compelling force of Wolfe. Ambivalence has presided over his narrative articulations, holding together the seemingly uncontrolled, fragmented style. Being the most poignant and excruciating fundamental feature of
human nature, ambivalence has served as the origin of Wolfe's creativity. The simultaneous occurrence of two antagonistic emotions caused Wolfe's turbulent creative energy to project paradoxical worlds without wishing to, or being able to, harmonize and synthesize them.

This sense of ambivalence structures Wolfe's rhetoric. The rhetoric of Wolfe is part of his legend. Building a fury of signs, he elevates words and sounds to an intensity which is unique in his style; protean and boundless, he urges language into a wildness and power that signalizes his transcendent view of the world. Rhetoric in its metaphorical and metonymic possibility is central to our understanding of language creating its own reality. Wolfe, like the romantics, stakes claim to originality by abandoning all rhetorical conventions, and speaking out from the heart. But the incompatibility between his psychic make up or desire and his ability to express that desire in language leads to a rhetorical ambivalence. The torrential onrush of experiences attempting to involve and include the American nation in general together with the representation of his lived experience as the fountainhead of artistic creativity further enhance his ambivalence. Ambivalence is inevitable as Wolfe's all-inclusive world-
view attempts to project a totality of experience, a consciousness and identity of America, as perceived by his self. As style represents the man, Wolfe’s style of juxtaposing opposites reflects his own ambivalent self, a diasparaactive, fragmentary self-awareness.

This ambivalent rhetoric creates plural possibilities in the reading of his texts. The multiplicity of possibilities is a typically postmodern attitude, as ambivalence at the psychic as well as rhetorical level deconstruct the apparent surface meaning of his works. Articulation and desire very often do not go hand in hand, and Wolfe loses control over the text as his rhetorical excess gushes out at random and the text structures itself. Language thereby creates its own reality. The frame of reference is determined by rhetoric. Wolfe indulges in formlessness – which allows free-play of rhetorical exuberance. However, this exuberance is disrupted, because of an inbuilt psychic ambivalence.

The ambivalence at the rhetorical level not only reflects the personality of the author but the very making of writing itself that erases gaps in its body by the very device of language. Therefore, rhetorical ambivalence could be considered as the very force of Wolfe’s writing that
connects him to the post-modernist fictional trend. We may, therefore, consider Wolfe as a Proto-Postmodernist writer.

Alienation, time and death are three major themes in Thomas Wolfe’s writing that are used in conjunction with each other. This feeling of alienation hinges on the romantic notion of the necessary and irreversible loss of a state of happiness and innocence, and it is only through this experience that maturity comes. With maturity comes the consciousness of alienation, and the human need for psychological support and dependence.

Wolfe could never form any lasting relation with anybody – whether male or female. His own life was anguished by fragmentariness and a fractured sensibility. His parents were alienated from each other, and Wolfe spent his childhood in a divided home. His brother Grover died in infancy, and Grover’s twin Ben in his youth; his father died when Wolfe was a young man. These experiences made him long for human love and warmth, but relations did not blossom into permanence. Nonetheless, he explored and experienced human relationships in various explosively different forms, but it is notable that all of them ended in fission.
Together with the insecurity that love and life are transient is the ever-present consciousness of the irreversible onrush of time and of the threatening approach of death. The hunger to see all, know all and express all comes into conflict with death. Death fascinated Wolfe in all its forms, all the more because it was so menacing and so vague. As Wolfe researched on the myriad possibilities and expressions of death, he sometimes condemned death, often eulogized it and sometimes showed a calm acceptance to its inevitability. The transience and mutability of life are directly controlled by the uncontrollable passage of time, and Wolfe seethes in frustration and alienation. While time allows Wolfe some space in attempting to actualize his massive programmes, suddenly time would irrevocably terminate that space. Thus Wolfe, in a mad frenzy, tries to experience more and communicate more in an attempt to defeat time. He suffers the frustrating anxiety of existence, being unable to find a route to freedom except through death. His writings are packed in an explosive abundance with an anguish over his situation, his sense of tragic incommunicability, of alienation, and his frenzied response to the crisis.
Wolfe’s works challenge us as readers in various ways. His works assail our consciousness and make vulnerable our identity and self-possession. His nostalgia for the lost world of childhood makes us scared at the inevitable loss. In a society where racial hatred is acute, Wolfe depicts a typically ambivalent attitude towards the other. There are instances of his vehement sympathy for the victimized Negro as in the Dick Prosser story, or when the Negro is the victim of Judge Bland’s avaricious usury. But the same Negro is denigrated by Wolfe as the social other, racially responsible for various evils in society; the Negro woman is projected as an amoral sex symbol. Similarly, Wolfe’s anti-Semitism seeps through in his works, but Wolfe befriends and patronizes the Jew Abe Jones and is indignant at the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany. The culminating point, however, is Wolfe’s passionate affair with the Jew lady Aline Bernstein – an ambivalent relationship of intense love and hate. Wolfe refuses to sieve and segregate for artistic purpose. His all-engulfing humanistic temper defies or enjoys defying social expectation when the young lady passionately embraces another man just after bidding tearful farewell to her dying husband. Wolfe is proud of America and at the same time hates its apathy to its own citizens. While he saw and experienced life
and gave it expression through an autobiographical self, he also saw himself as a social critic and spokesperson for America. His all-devouring appetite accepted everything which life offered, but his critical gaze exposed social hypocrisy, inhumanity, materialistic greed, racial discrimination, subjugation, scandal, adultery, murder and human baseness in general.

Wolfe elevates his life to the level of art. He gives expression to his personal, lived experiences without distortion or concealment. Caring precious little for rules and norms, Wolfe invoked the ire of literary critics, but his works remain a truthful representation of his life. If a limit was to be applied to exuberant spontaneity and inclusiveness, it would clamp a mechanical dead hand on true individual reaction and real emotion as it exists rather than as it is supposed to exist according to critical canons. The notion that there is some kind of inflexible standard that sets emotional proportions is a mistake, and a denial of the actual, spontaneous, even biological reflex out of which creation comes. The fact that Wolfe was moved with an aspiration towards the infinite cannot be denied. In this endeavour he deliberately wanted to set himself free of any norm. He
insisted on having total artistic freedom, which involved energy and excess, and transformed and transmuted the intense experiences of his life into art.

WORKS CITED
