Chapter-V

RHETORIC OF AMBIVALENCE

An attempt is made in the present chapter to explore the context of rhetoric and ambivalence and their interrelationship. As there cannot be any final statement regarding either ambivalence or rhetoric, the study has attempted to trace the history and meaning of rhetoric and ambivalence, and to observe the issue from psycho-analytic, Derridean and post-modern perspectives, contextualizing readings of self, subjectivity and articulations in narrative discourse.

According to the *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol.15, 1980), *rhetoric* has been traditionally applied to the principles of training communicators – those seeking to persuade or inform others. In the twentieth century it has undergone a shift of emphasis from the speaker or writer to the auditor or reader.

From the traditional point of view, *rhetoric* might be limited to the insights/terms developed by rhetors/rhetoricians in the classical period in ancient Greece, about 5 century B.C., to teach the art of public speaking to their fellow citizens in Greek republics, later to children of the wealthy in
the Roman empire. Because some sort of public performance was regarded as the highest reach of education proper, *rhetoric* as a discipline or as a principle of pedagogy and learning was at the center of the educational process in Western Europe for 2000 years — well into the nineteenth century. *Institutio oratoria* (before AD 96; “The Training of an Orator”) by ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian — was a book on rhetoric. In the present day emphasis has changed from creative instruction to effective communication in the form of writing/narrative.

In a general sense, *rhetoric* can be described as the study of language in its practical uses, focussing on the effects of language, especially persuasion, in order to achieve desired effects on readers. From Aristotle to post-structuralism, ‘rhetoric’ as the means of communication has undergone radical changes in meaning and function. In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined rhetorical discourse as the act of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case, and focused on the means and devices that an orator uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on an audience that will persuade them to accede to his point of view. Most of the later rhetoricians of classical era concurred
in the view that rhetoric concerns the principles of that type of discourse whose chief aim is to persuade an audience to think or act in a particular way.

A rhetorical approach to literature is a highly traditional approach to texts. The great classical critics – Aristotle and Longinus were rhetorically oriented. There were great practitioners, like Cicero and St. Augustine who further developed on the theory of rhetoric. According to Cicero, rhetoric developed out of the need for complicated arguments concerning restoration of property to uncertain rightful owners after the expulsion of tyrants from Sicily. It was then a necessary and practical art, and so it remains at core.

Rhetoric has from the beginning been looked upon as an instrument of dubious morality. The earliest rhetorician on record, Corax of Sicily, failed in a political career and therefore turned to teaching rhetoric. His pupil Tisias sought to evade paying tuition fee, and argued in court that he owed nothing because if Corax had indeed taught him the art of persuasion as agreed, he could persuade the jury to let him off paying; if he could not persuade them, Corax had not performed his part of the contract and did
not deserve to be paid. To this Corax replied, "If you do persuade the jury, I have taught you the art and you owe me the fee; if you do not persuade them, they will order you to pay the fee" (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 1). Invoking the proverbial wisdom that bad eggs come from bad birds, the jury contemptuously dismissed the case.

Rhetoric has since often been dismissed as sophistical machinery for making the worse appear the better reason, or as an empty parcel of words artfully ornamented but signifying nothing. Usually it is the other party's proposal that is denounced as 'mere rhetoric'; one's own is a statesmanlike response to the situation. If a politician advocates some particular course of action, he is likely to proclaim self-righteously that 'the time for rhetoric is past'.

Thus rhetoric has a long history of being sneered at and distrusted, as concerned with the specious rather than the true, style rather than substance, words rather than deeds. Even Plato in his Gorgias called it a mere knack (although he thought more highly of it in the Phaedrus), and the Rhetorica ad Alexandrum (once ascribed to Aristotle) defined rhetoric as the art of cheating. Rhetoricians were sometimes associated with
Sophists and held to be dangerous to the State; in the second century BC the Greek practitioners of rhetoric in Rome were exiled by a decree. Centuries later John Locke thought of rhetoric as “that powerful instrument of error and deceit” (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 2) and Yeats remarked that “sentimentality is deceiving one’s self; rhetoric is deceiving other people” (Ibid. 2). Today many editorials condemn the hollow-rhetoric of the over-thirty generation and, like Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas, activists often go away declaring themselves convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences.

Despite this history of suspicion and contempt, rhetoric has survived and flourished. Aristotle produced a *Rhetoric* as the counterpart of logic and begins with the inescapable point that must ultimately justify rhetoric: *all men in some way use rhetoric*. Aristotle’s work became the basis of studies by Cicero, Quintilian and Erasmus, and the root of rhetoric’s honourable place in the *Trivium*, the foundation of medieval education, composed of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. St. Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric; William of Auvergne wrote a *Rhetorica divina* that offered to
teach men the art of persuading God to forgive their sins. Renaissance schoolboys read Cicero's *Orator* and Quintilian's *Institutes* and Erasmus' *Copia*. Notable among derivative vernacular manuals of rhetoric are Leonard Cox's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetorike* (1524) and Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetorique* (1550). John Prideaux, a Churchman, produced in 1659 *Sacred Eloquence: or, the Art of Rhetoric as It Is Laid Down in the Scriptures*. In the eighteenth century Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* and Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Letters* are notable, as is Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* in the nineteenth. Much of the earlier rhetorical energies were devoted to analyses of style and delivery. In the last decades there has been a resurgence of vitality in the field of rhetoric. Not only have critics like W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Wayne Booth applied rhetoric to literary criticism, and Edward Corbett and Dudley Bailey revived an interest in classical rhetoric, but pioneers like I.A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, and Francis Christensen have tried to develop a "new rhetoric". All the while, of course, even those who condemned rhetoric as deception or evasion have been indulging in their own brands. Modern activists who insist on "telling it like it is" are using rhetorical persuasion in street oratory and the underground. More than
that, the law’s recognition of verbal assault emphasizes the fact that rhetoric is not just escape from action – it can be action.

Over the ages, the definition of Rhetoric has both widened and narrowed. For Corax and his contemporaries it was the practical power of persuasion. Aristotle elevated it to the theoretical realm by defining it as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion under all sorts of circumstances, aimed at persuading hearers that something is expedient or inexpedient, just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable. Therefore, Aristotle would have the speaker know something about human character, human emotions, and the rules of dialectic. Rhetoric, Aristotle thinks, ought to be used to defend truth and justice, but it can be employed on the other side by the skillful speaker.

Aristotle’s criteria for style were clarity and propriety. Cicero added ornament, and the point is often made that each style is appropriate to special situations – as Quintilian put it. Gradually rhetoric acquired its alternative meaning of stylistic ornamentation, in the context of a less vigorous and democratic age, when rhetoric was no longer so central to the life of the city but more related to the artifices of the schools. Dubley
Fenners' *Artes of Logike and Rhetoricke* (1584) calls rhetoric the “arte of speaking finely” and divides it into “garnishing of speech” and “garnishing of the manner of utterance.” (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 4)

Invention, arrangement, style and delivery were the generally recognized branches of rhetoric in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The rising scientific spirit wanted either no rhetoric at all or a rhetoric of perspicuity. The Enlightenment, while upholding reason and clarity, also rediscovered Longinus and the sublime of thought and style. John Holmes represents a school of rhetoricians who meant by rhetoric the art of the moving figure, polished inflection, and forceful gesture. Some of them reduced their discipline to elocution.

By another of the directions of the eighteenth century, Locke contended that man could know only what had come to him through his senses. This led to a rhetoric built on the psychology of the day: Associationism. George Campbell in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) attempted to provide a tolerable sketch of the human mind and from the science of human nature try to ascertain with greater precision, the radical principles of that art, whose object it is, by the use of language, to operate
on the soul of the hearer, in the way of informing, convincing, pleasing, moving or persuading.

The importance of persuasion has remained central among English rhetoricians, whether their concern is the most pleasing flourishes of style, as with elocutionists, or the arguments best calculated to exploit the patterns of the human mind, as with the psychologists.

Kenneth Burke, the most original modern explorer of the 'new rhetoric', defines rhetorical language as "inducement to action" (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 7) and studies the means of identification or con-substantiation that permits successful persuasion. As he puts it in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) — "You persuade a man only in so far as you can talk his language by speech, gestures, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his." (Burke, 1950: 55; quoted in Jordan, 1971: 7)

Are all means of persuasion rhetorical? Bribery? Blackmail? Crossing the right palms in an appropriate manner can be a most efficient inducement to action. And how about force? Does rhetoric come out of the barrel of a gun? Slang suggests as much in calling a pistol a "persuader".
What of subtle means of persuasion, including treating a client to a good dinner or plying a girl with flowers? Perhaps the colouring of blossoms to attract birds and insects for purposes of pollination might be called nature's rhetoric. None of these means, crude or delicate, is likely to be recognized as rhetoric unless it lends itself to a stylized form of communication.

I.A. Richards takes a semantic approach to rhetoric, asserting that it is or should be "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (1936: 9) and argues that "the whole business of Rhetoric comes down to comparisons between the meanings of words." (1936: 37)

Henry James maintains that to make the imagined picture of reality glow with more than a dim light, requires the artist's finest compositional powers. And, since any sense of composition or selection falsifies life, all fiction requires an elaborate rhetoric of dissimulation. His talk about rhetoric is mostly about how to increase in each work the reader's pleasure derived from qualities sought equally in all his works.

Wayne Booth addresses the question whether rhetoric is compatible with art. In treating technique as rhetoric, he seems to have reduced the
free and inexplicable processes of the creative imagination to the crafty calculations of commercial entertainers. The whole question of the difference between artists who consciously calculate and artists who simply express themselves with no thought of affecting the reader is an important one, but it must be kept separate from the question of whether an author's work, regardless of its source, communicates itself.

Booth observes that all of the clichés about the natural object being self-sufficient are at best half-truths. Though some characters and events may speak for themselves their artistic message to the reader, and thus carry in a weak form their own rhetoric; none will do so with proper clarity and force until the author brings all his powers to bear on the problem of making the reader see what they really are. The author cannot choose whether to use rhetorical heightening. His only choice is of the kind of rhetoric he will use.

Donald C. Bryant was assigned the task of surveying "Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope" for the Quarterly Journal of Speech in 1953. He defined it as "the rationale of informative and suasory discourse" (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 8). His overall view of rhetoric is in the Aristotelian
tradition, taking on the substantive role of invention and psychological inclusions:

So far as it is concerned with the management of discourse in specific situations for practical purposes, it is an instrumental discipline. It is a literary study, involving linguistics, critical theory, and semantics as it touches the art of informing ideas, and the functioning of language. It is a philosophical study so far as it is concerned with a method of investigation or inquiry. And finally, as it is akin to politics, drawing upon psychology and sociology, rhetoric is a social study of a major force in the behaviour of men in society (quoted in Jordan, 1971: 9).

This is rhetoric at its most comprehensive. Recently, Francis Christensen has been developing a *generative rhetoric* adapted from generative grammar, which uses the principles of addition, direction, level of generality, and texture in a pragmatic investigation of something like the ancient concept of amplification. Similarly, Richard E. Young and Alton L. Becker have drawn upon theories of tagmemic grammar in their article/works “Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Contribution”. Agreeing with Burke that rhetoric aims at identification with the reader, they suggest the writer use internal discovery patterns analyzable into particles, waves and fields.
Thus rhetoric renews itself in various ways. It has meant and continues to mean many things to many people. Its history has been sometimes the story of the human search for truth and meaning sometimes in the form of the effort to mislead and manipulate. Always it has been concerned with man and his relations to his fellows. Plain or ornate, it is a humane discipline.

Edward P.J. Corbett comments:

...rhetorical criticism is that mode of internal criticism which considers the interactions between the work, the author, and the audience. As such, it is interested in the product, the process, and the effect of linguistic activity, whether of the imaginative kind or the utilitarian kind. When rhetorical criticism is applied to imaginative literature, it regards the work not so much as an object of aesthetic contemplation but as an artistically structured instrument for communication. It is more interested in a literary work for what it does than for what it is [quoted in Guerin & others (ed.), 1999: 320].

While dealing with the work itself (hence, “internal”), rhetorical criticism considers external factors in so far as it “uses the text for its ‘readings’ about the author and the audience. Particularly important is the effect of the work on its audience (what it does). This is not surprising, in that the original emphasis on rhetoric was on persuasion and for that we go back to the classical Greeks.
As a matter of fact, literary criticism itself really had some of its beginnings in rhetorical analysis, for our early critics — Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Horace were devoted students, indeed formulators, of rhetoric. As late as the eighteenth century, rhetorical considerations played an important role in criticism, for learned men and women still knew and practised formal rhetoric. Today much of the criticism of Medieval, Renaissance and Neoclassical English and Continental literature can still profitably explore rhetorical strategies. Recently, however, the conscious and often impressive efforts to realize once again the advantages of rhetorical analyses of literature have not been limited to such earlier works. Today's new rhetoric may be expressed either in terms of classical rhetoric or through the insights gained in practical rhetoric without the use of Greek and Latin terms. Creative writers may address themselves to the 'audience', while 'arranging' their 'argument' and working within a 'style', without realizing that these are parts of traditional concerns of rhetoricians.

A rhetorical approach helps us to stay inside the work, although we may go outside it for terms and naming strategies, being always aware that
the original author was a person who chose between available options. In this methodology, then, rhetorical analysis, on the one hand, is similar to and supportive of the formalistic approach, but, on the other, may go beyond it. Among the questions raised by the rhetorical approach are: What can we know of the speaker or narrator? To whom is he or she allegedly speaking? What is the nature of that addressee, that audience? What setting is established or implied? How are we asked to respond to the situation created? Are we being asked to make a distinction between the ethos (the ethical stance) of the author and the statements of the central character (for example, a distinction between the comprehensive view of Mark Twain and the limited view of Huckleberry Finn?). As persuasive discourse, the rhetoric of a literary work requires or invites the reader to participate in an imagined experience. The awareness of rhetorical features and structures of words tells us a great deal about the author and the created voice. Our response to manipulated language tells us even more about the meaning of the work and quite a bit about ourselves as registers of meaning.
Rhetorical ambivalence in the works of Thomas Clayton Wolfe is self-evident. It is a statement of his attitude to life which was all-inclusive. He wanted to project a totality of experience in his works. But the method he adopted of juxtaposing opposites is very much rooted in a projection of paradoxical self-awareness.

Wolfe’s attempt closely resembles what Virginia Woolf advocated:

The novel should not imitate objective life by means of a plot, but should present the “luminous halo” or “semi transparent envelope” of consciousness, the unsequential and perhaps irrational form in which life is really experienced (Quoted in Ellmann and Fiedelson, ed., 1965: 12-13)

The dominant themes in Wolfe’s writing, as discussed in Chapter III are alienation, time and death. He himself claimed that his works are autobiographical. And his declared intention was to present a national consciousness to establish an American identity. His romantic temperament was in striking contrast to his penchant for social criticism. Likewise, his lyrical exuberance ran counter to his acute realistic observation. Though the desire for unity and synthesis of the multiple worlds is an awareness in Wolfe, a careful study of his works reveals that a sense of ambivalence is evident in most of his works, while he tries to
solve the insoluble contradictions and paradoxes of life by embracing and devouring all experience available.

In his magisterial observation, Ezra Pound maintains that "good writing" should be "perfectly controlled" in which the writer says "just what he means" (1968: 5-6). Eliot profoundly echoes Pound when he discovers lack of integration between the theme and style in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* stating that the protagonist lacks "objective correlative" (1966: 101). Both Eliot and Pound favour classical order and precision in style. They were critical of and opposed to what Pound calls the "blurry" and "messy" style of romantics. As Susan Langer puts it: "The primary function of art is to objectify feeling" (quoted in Selden, 1988: 317). So it all depends on the choice of language that carries the weight of the feeling. If language is used to express/objectify feeling, it also reveals the person's character whose feeling(s) it expresses or gives shape to. In this sense, the saying that "style is the man" becomes very significant. It points at both the nature of the artist, his psychic make up and his ability to handle language.
Walter Pater, in his famous essay on “style”, while discussing various aspects of style and comparing the stylistic differences of creative writers, implies that man is the marker of his style. In appreciating Flaubert’s style of writing excellent letters, he discovers one Madame X who, in fact, was the source of his inspiration. It is, therefore, understood that style reveals the man, his personality, and his artistic convictions. In his words:

In this way, according to the well known saying “Style is the man”, complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things, the purity of this medium, its laws and tricks of refraction, nothing is to be left there which might give conveyance to any matter save that. (1967: 24)

The romantics, with their natural contempt for anything prescriptive argue that the orator or his literary counterpart lack sincerity for their discourse is tutored by prescriptions and norms. The romantic poets stake claims to originality for abandoning all rhetorical conventions and speaking out from the heart. Twentieth century criticism has often abandoned this romantic faith in hoping for a possibility of authentic and original utterance.
From the Freudian revisionist Lacan comes the notion of the Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which the child has not yet differentiated himself/herself from the mother and has accordingly not yet learned language. The Oedipal crisis marks the entrance of the child into a world of symbolic order (language) in which everything is separate, including conscious and unconscious, self and other, words and actions. This transition also marks entry into a world ruled by the "Law of the Father" where "isms" or rules confine us; Lacan calls it the phallo-centric or phallogo-centric universe (by which he connects maleness to the power of the word he believes men control — "phallus" and "logos"). The Imaginary is the realm of the feminine and the vital source of language that will later be tamed and codified by the laws of the father.

Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language; like language its power arises from the sense of openness and play of meaning. When we read language we may identify gaps in what is signified as evidence of the unconscious, for language is a mixture of fixed meanings and metaphors.
The Bakhtin School is concerned with language or discourse as a social phenomenon. Voloshinov maintains that words are active, dynamic social signs, capable of taking on different meanings and connotations for different social classes in different social and historical situations. The Bakhtin School considers verbal signs as an arena of continuous class struggle. Every speech act is an implicit acknowledgement of its situatedness, its conflicted or co-operative production. Every instance of speech is always inherently reflexive, social and meta communicative.

Roman Jakobson’s study of “aphasia” (speech defect) and its implications for poetics provide the practical critic with a fertile ground for interpretative applications. A given sentence may be viewed either vertically or horizontally. Each element is selected from a set of possible elements and could be substituted for another in the set. The elements are combined in a sequence, which constitutes a parole. This distinction applies at the levels of phoneme, morpheme, word and sentence. Jakobson noticed that aphasic children appeared to lose the ability to operate on one or other of these dimensions. ‘Contiguity disorder’ results in substitution in the vertical dimension as in metaphor, while ‘similarity disorder’ results
in the production of parts of sentences for the wholes as in metonymy. Jakobson suggested that normal speech behaviour also tends towards one or other extreme, and that literary style expresses itself as a leaning towards either the metaphoric or the metonymic. The historical development from romanticism through realism to symbolism can be understood as an alternation of style from the metaphoric to the metonymic back to the metaphoric. David Lodge applied the theory to modern literature, adding further stages to a cyclical process: modernism and symbolism are essentially metaphoric, while anti-modernism is realistic and metonymic.

Deconstruction arises out of the structuralism of Roland Barthes as a reaction against the certainties of structuralism. Like structuralism, deconstruction identifies textual features but, unlike structuralism, concentrates on the rhetorical rather than the grammatical. Whereas structuralism finds order and meaning in the text as in the sentence, deconstruction finds disorder and a constant tendency of the language to refute its apparent sense. Hence, the name of the approach: texts are found to deconstruct themselves rather than to provide a stable identifiable
meaning. Deconstruction views texts as subversively undermining an apparent or surface meaning, and it denies any final explication or statement of meaning. It questions the presence of any objective structure or content in a text. Instead of alarm or dismay at their discoveries, the practitioners of deconstruction celebrate the text’s self-destruction, that inevitable seed of its own internal contradiction, as a never-ending free play of language. Instead of discovering one ultimate meaning for the text, as formalism seems to promise, deconstruction describes the text as always in a state of change, furnishing only provisional meanings. All texts are thus open-ended constructs, and sign and signification are only arbitrary relationships. Meaning can only point to an indefinite number of other meanings. Thus deconstruction involves taking apart any meaning to reveal contradictory structures hidden within. Neither meaning nor the text that seeks to express it has any privilege over the other, and this extends to critical statements about the text. When deconstruction denies connections of mind, textual meaning, and mythological approach, it represents for structuralists only nihilism and anarchy.
Deconstruction opposes logo-centrism, the notion that written language contains a self-evident meaning that points to an unchanging meaning authenticated by the whole of western tradition. It would demythologize literature and thus remove the privilege it has enjoyed in academe. In deconstruction, knowledge is viewed as embedded in texts, not authenticated within some intellectual discipline. Since meaning in language shifts and remains indeterminate, deconstructionists argue that all forms of institutional authority shift in like manner. Since there is no possibility of absolute truth, deconstructionists seek to undermine all pretensions to authority, or power systems, in language.

The most important figure in deconstruction — Derrida claimed that the western tradition of thought repressed meaning by repressing the limitless vitality of language and by moving some thought to the margin. Yet while Derrida argued to subvert the dominant western mind set, he also recognized that there is no privileged position outside the instabilities of language from which to attack. Thus, deconstruction deconstructs itself; in a self-contradictory effort, it manages to leave things the way they were,
the only difference being our expanded consciousness of the inherent play of language-as-thought.

This continual change of perspective is a post-modern condition which foregrounds instabilities of the structure or language system. Language constitutes reality, but the focus is on decentralization. The Self no longer is the center of the system. The Self therefore no longer uses language to express itself. Rather, language speaks through the person. The self becomes the medium of culture and language. This pluralism and heterogeneity, discontinuity and indeterminacy creates split personalities or schizophrenics.

Nietzsche's belief that language is essentially figurative and not referential or expressive was taken up by the key theorists of post-structuralism notably Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White and Paul de Man. There is no original unrhetorical language, discourse is always shaped by 'desire' which is in turn communicated in tropes and figures. Paul de Man develops this argument about rhetoric to its fullest extent. He takes the views that figure of speech (tropes) pervade language exerting a force which destabilizes logic and meaning.
Paul de Man maintains a belief in the referential power of literature — its ability to act in relation to an outside, however unsubstantive that *no thing* may be. Poetic language is in fact defined in terms of action: it is not the eruption of nature into consciousness, or consciousness into language, but a continued attempt to figure a void, rather than face the *nothingness of being*. He asserts that

> poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. (*Blindness and Insight* quoted in Sim, Stuart, 1995: 99)

His later work, however, engages more fully with contemporary semiotics. It indicates an anxiety of reference, a reluctance to view reference as anything more than a linguistic function, and one amongst many. Grammar, for de Man, operates machine-like, without regard for position or the body, with pathos emerging as a mere effect of language. The creative potential of language which might be made available in what Geimas calls *a zone of entanglement*, or in what Kristeva calls *signifying practice*, is not possible from de Man’s point of view because the complicated link between logic and grammar is compromised, finally, by
rhetoric: “considered as persuasion, rhetoric is performative but when considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance” 


De Man’s thinking is everywhere concerned with the question of the status of the self: its complex insinuation into language, and the structure of a knowledge produced and internalized from this desire for a ‘human’ principle of unity. For de Man, criticism has traditionally overlooked the problem of the structure of self-understanding by remaining blind to the absolute gulf between signifier and signified. In “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, a ground-breaking essay written in 1969, de Man mounted a formidable challenge to the mainstream English and American historians of romanticism. Beginning from this insight that there are no necessary link between sound images and concepts — and, indeed, that conceptual categories themselves do not correspond across linguistic and discursive boundaries, that they are especially subject to temporal displacement — he effectively deconstructed the assumptions that lay behind what have been taken as the self-evident constructs of that period. Coleridge’s efforts in theorizing a precise referential relationship between self-consciousness
and nature are seen as having succeeded only retrospectively, since this assumption survives unexamined in modern criticism.

Hence de Man's later work focuses on the materiality and self-reflexivity of language, its repeated attempt to give a shape to a self which culminates in ever more sophisticated figurations standing in place of a failure to do so. Whereas in his earlier work de Man was concerned to undermine the theological impulse behind traditional criticism (a criticism still controlled by romantic mythologizing) by showing how romantic texts indicate a new insight regarding the relationship between consciousness and nature — a relationship defined not by a clear distinction between inside and outside, but by a tension which exists internal to a structure of intentionality — his later work focuses on figures relating to selfhood (prosopopoeia, for example) and how a self is produced by them.

The insight that reconciling the phenomenal and psychic with the world and the word is an inevitable impossibility, yet the ethical necessity of continuing this attempt even despite the knowledge that language will always strive to efface the signs of its failure to achieve such a correspondence, is the driving impulse behind de Man's writing. Reading,
rather than being a journey through the materiality of the letter which at some point produces a flash of insight, a promise of totality in which the meaning of a text is revealed in all its cohesiveness, is in fact, for de Man, the arduous confrontation with aporias, conflicts and contradictions which inevitably add up to nought. Thus it can be nothing more than an allegory of the process of signification which stops short of thematic or narrative recovery by dint of constant negation.

Besides the epistemological questions involved in analyzing rhetoric, we must give attention to ‘desire’ and ‘style’. ‘Desire’ has a deeper implication in creative endeavour and is directly related to the artist’s psychic world. Very often an artist attempts to achieve something he possibly cannot because of a tangible incompatibility between his psychic make-up or ‘desire’ and his ability to express that ‘desire’ in language. The lives of talented men and women abound in episodes of “filling up” and “breaking through again”. This disequilibrium has been assumed to be intrinsic to genius. A successful artist is one who manages to camouflage his personal ambivalence in the form of stylistic flourish. The communication of one’s self can become more inhibited where there
is more to communicate; a greater degree of self-revealing is the artist’s business in life whether or not he writes in the manner of Joyce or in the manner of Dickens.

Freud emphasizes the unconscious aspects of human psychology. He asserts that most of our actions are motivated by psychological forces over which we have limited control. Freud maintains that the human mind is structured like an iceberg so that its great weight and density lie beneath the surface (i.e. below the level of consciousness). That most of the individual’s mental processes are unconscious is thus Freud’s first major premise. The second is that all human behaviour is motivated ultimately by what we would call sexuality. Freud designates the prime psychic force as *Libido* or sexual energy. His third major premise is that because of the powerful social taboos attached to certain social impulses, many of our desires and memories are repressed (i.e. actively excluded from conscious awareness).

The *Encyclopaedia of Psychology* defines ambivalence as “the existence of two (possibly contradictory) values, goals or directions ... the simultaneous occurrence of two antagonistic emotions” (Vol. I; 1972: 47-
Ambivalence is a poignant and fundamental feature of human nature. It is a truism that ambivalence of thought and emotion on the part of an artist on most occasions bear upon his works. It seems that ambivalence has been Wolfe’s second self, a fact which his works reveal in abundance. Wolfe is a dreamer as well as a realist. The enormity of his uncontrolled creative energy makes him a writer, lost in contradictions, projecting paradoxical worlds without being able to harmonize them. It might be that this is the real source of creative art in which the real becomes unreal, fantasy presides over reality and the artistic self becomes multiple selves. In this sense, Wolfe has produced an aesthetics of radical situatedness, which at one level affirms and at another level negates subjectivity. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has the characteristics of a romantic artist who perceived his own self as a product of the available experiences. He thus situates his self in an imminent teleology where mind comes to itself through loss of itself as subjective possession and recovery through being in the world. Thus it is necessary to examine Wolfe’s psychological ambivalence which is a product of his turbulent life and which in turn bears upon his works.
Wolfe's works are almost universally recognized to be his own experiences in the world presented under the transparent disguises of his protagonists. As his works have been intensely autobiographical, it may be said that the sense of ambivalence, which has been central to his genius, has been very much a part of his growing up which moulded his psyche. His attachment to his mother, his adoration for, yet hatred towards his father, his mother's rejection of his father, and Wolfe's relationship with others both men and women are psychologically significant. The insecurity during the influential developmental years of childhood and adolescence structured a fractured psyche as discussed in Chapter II. And later on, when he attempted creative activity, he could only produce works of ambivalence. His fixation for contradictions and paradoxes, his tendency to develop intense relationships and quite as suddenly to sever ties, and his dreams of harmony can be directly sourced in his psychology.

Wolfe's works are so paradoxical and ambivalent that they project a multidirectional attitude. This multiplicity of possibilities is a typically post-modern stance, since ambivalence at the rhetorical as well as psychic level deconstruct the apparent significance or surface meaning of the
works. As Beep says (Fadiman, *The Wolfe at the Door* in Holman, 1962: 39): “What is it that we speak so well and cannot know?” — Wolfe might have concurred. There are gaps and silences in the text, which are ambivalent. Articulation and desire often do not go hand in hand.

Wolfe’s ambivalence is probably best demonstrated in his attitude towards the Negro and the Jew. The Negro is invariably a “nigger”, and as discussed in detail in Chapter-IV, a Negro is associated to all things inferior and evil. This sentiment was a part of Wolfe’s growing up in the South of America, and was ingrained in his psychic attitude. Wolfe thus ‘otherizes’ the Negro, who is non-white, has come originally from Africa, lives in ‘nigger town’, etc. Contradicting this attitude, we find Wolfe a champion of the Negro, and vociferous in the unfair deal meted out to him. Wolfe — in a burst of nationalistic pride in the democracy of America, declares: ‘... to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining golden opportunity ... this, seeker, is the promise of America.” (1987: 483-4)

Remarkably, as in the Dick Prosser episode in *The Web and the Rock*, the Negro is afforded Wolfe’s gargantuan sympathy. Dick was a model servant, meek and amiable to the children. But when he explodes in
wrath, he deals out death indiscriminately. He is both a child and a tiger — as evident from the title “The Child by Tiger”. Yet when the posse of white men butcher Dick, whose ammunition has run out, and display his ‘carcass’ in a shop window, Wolfe’s sympathies are with Dick. Dick is being deprived of the treatment even a dead enemy deserves. His body, referred to as ‘carcass’ attains the status of a slain animal in a shikar and people gloatingly point out the holes their bullets made.

“That’s where I got him. Hell, after that he didn’t know what hit him. The son-of-a-bitch was dead before he hit the ground. We all shot him full of holes then .... We sure did fill him full of lead. Why, hell yes,” he declared positively, with a decisive movement of his head, “We counted upto 287. We must have put 300 holes in him.” (1939: 154)

But while Dick receives Wolfe’s sympathy, he is still the other; for to be sympathetic is to be on a higher position from where one can afford benevolence. And to be sympathetic, is to treat the object of sympathy as the “other”, for one cannot be sympathetic towards oneself. The claims of Wolfe expressing his ‘self’ through his writings come back with an added force.
The Negro gets Wolfe’s sympathy in dealing with Judge Bland who mercilessly entraps them in loans for which they have to pay perpetual interest. But the ambivalence comes out in Wolfe’s treating of the Negro woman as a sex symbol. Eugene’s thoughts as a newspaper route boy reveal this repressed desire for the negro woman: May Corpening. And later, when trying to exact newspaper dues from Ella Corpening, Eugene trembles with desire. Ella, sensuous and knowing, tells him that a “white gent’man” (1929: 252) is going to give her a dollar. Eugene is also white, though he is just a boy who cannot afford a dollar. In the undeclared bargain – the silence in the text – Eugene is invited inside by Ella and bestowed sexual favours. No mention is made thereafter of the money due for newspapers. But when Eugene rushes away from the stifling embrace of Ella, he rejects the black ‘other’ as degrading and below standard:

He strained back desperately against the door, drowning in her embrace.
“Get-’way nigger, Get-’way”, he panted thickly. (1929: 253)

Wolfe never allows an unambiguous unidimensional approach. The terrible attraction of a negress remains, though Eugene/Webber gets involved with a number of white women. It is notable that
Eugene/Webber never tries to bond emotionally with a black woman. His involvements with white women, however, never prove to be fulfilling. The chief among them deserve mention: Louise, the little waitress in a hotel in Charleston (1929: 298); Else Von Kohler in Germany (1940: 507); Ann in France (1935: 759); the lion-hunters who sought him during his period of literary fame (1940: 269). May be Wolfe did not even realize that the white woman was the better alternative to the black by virtue of racial superiority, but his ambivalence would never allow any woman to be anything but the other. Finally, in the culminating event of his involvement with Esther, beginning towards the end of Of Time and the River and continuing through The Web and the Rock, the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion on various levels surfaces: it is love at first sight; when Eugene sees Esther, “he only knew that from that moment his spirit was impaled upon the knife of love” (1935: 911); Esther is a Jewess, and Webber’s anti-Semitism hurts her, and often she hits back; Esther is much senior in age, and motherizes Webber. While the protagonist welcomes Esther’s affection, her praise, her culinary expertise, the almost oedipal relation with her, he revolts against her attempts to guide and mould him. He happily accepts financial support, but throws her out of the flat she has
rented for him. In “The Quarrel” (The Web and the Rock), they part forever:

“Done to you!” he said. “Why, God-damn you, I’ve given my life to you! That’s what I’ve done to you! You’ve grown fat and prosperous on my life and energy. You’ve sapped and gutted me; you’ve renewed your youth at my expense — yes! And given it back again into that old painted whore-house of a theatre. ‘Oh, deary me, now!’ he sneered, with an insane and mincing parody of her complaint. “ ‘What have you done to me, you cruel brute?’ What have you done to this nice, sweet, female American maid who hardly knows the difference between sodomy and rape, she is so pure and innocent! What did you mean, you depraved scoundrel, by seducing this pure, sweet girl of forty when you were all of twenty-four at the time, and should have been ashamed to rob this Broadway milkmaid of her fair virginity? Shame on you, you big country slicker, for coming here among these simple, trusting city bastards and wreaking your guilty passion upon this innocent, blushing bride before she had had scarcely twenty-five years’ experience in the ways of love! Shame on you, you bloated plutocrat of a two-thousand-dollar-a-year instructor, for enticing her with your glittering gold, and luring her away from the simple joys she had always been accustomed to! When you met her she had scarcely three Pierce Arrows she could call her own — but she was happy in her innocent poverty”, he sneered, “and content with the simple pleasures of the Jewish millionaires and the innocent adulteries of their wives!” (1939: 567)

This torrent of rhetorical ambivalence and irony is possible only in Wolfe.

The rhetorical violence that the protagonist, Webber, indulges in seems to have a sensual pleasure in the utterance of hurtful words breeding words, a
precise example of logo-sexuality. The basis of rhetoric being persuasion, rhetoric imbues the speaker with power. In the logo-centric world, if we posit power in rhetoric as originating from Logo-Dei, the male-oriented power paradigm is complete.

Wolfe’s realization of the power of rhetoric and the adulation it affords immensely gratifies his male-ego. There is a narcissistic bent in his psyche - for he was arguably in love only with himself, the magician of words, but never clearly understood it and attempted to discover a fulfilling love in his various entanglements, and possibly this ambivalence never allowed any relation to attain fruition. Neither can any definition be fixed on his rhetorical style, for he experimented with the entire gamut of rhetorical manoeuvering within his capacity — normal speech, lyrical outburst, impassioned exhortation, dialectical jargon, Negro lingo, Jewish vocabulary, slang, abuse, etc. etc.

The power of logos in the logo-centric male-dominated structure of the world, where the woman is the ‘other’, who must conform, satisfy, serve — and one form of serving is as Milton would say in “On His Blindness” — “They also serve who only stand and wait” (Milton, 1994:
It may be noted that unless there is an ‘other’ as object, the violence cannot erupt. There is sexual fulfillment in devising rhetorical abuse – and if there is no ‘other’, there is no rhetoric. The source of creativity thus stands on this binary structure – and Eugene’s father W.O. Gant’s daily invective upon his wife Eliza (quoted in Chapter-IV) beautifully explicates the point. And later in life, Eugene/Webber – who hates his father, emulates his father’s rhetorical invective on the mother-figure of Esther, the ‘other’. One is tempted to equate the separation of Eugene’s parents to the separation between Webber and Esther. Instability resulting from insecurity had become a deep-rooted fixation.

Wolfe could not comprehend anything unless it had been brought forth in its contradictoriness. The binaries of life caused him ambivalence, and he titled the book quoted above in terms of binaries: *The Web and the Rock*. The constant displacement of the subject in the process of negotiation in Wolfe’s fiction brought about this ambivalence.

Like the Negro, the Red Indians get their share of ambivalent gaze from Wolfe. A childhood friend Nebraska Crane is afforded love and
affection, and sympathy when he muses about impending retirement from
the pinnacle of fame and fan-following as a baseball star, but the death of
an unknown Cherokee is subject for mirthful comment: “Another Redskin
bit the dust” (1929: 276). The Jew, too, describes Wolfe’s ambivalence at
various levels. In classroom, the amber flesh of Jewesses is deeply
disturbing — terribly attracting, as also terribly repulsing:

Their dark flesh had in it the quality of a merciless tide which
not only overwhelmed and devoured but withdrew with a
powerful sucking glut all rich deposits of the earth it fed
upon: they had the absorptive quality of a sponge, the power
of a magnet, the end of each class left him sapped, gutted,
drained, and with a sense of sterility, loss, and defeat, and in
addition to this exhaustion of the mind and spirit, there was
added a terrible weariness and frustration of the flesh: The
potent young Jewesses, thick, hot, and heavy with a female
odor, swarmed around him in a sensual tide, they leaned
above him as he sat there at his table … (1935: 478)

Among the male students, Abe Jones is accorded generous literary space,
and Eugene’s relation with Abe deserves separate mention. Abe never
approved of Eugene’s teaching, and always had plenty of critical
suggestions to offer for the betterment of the instructor’s performance.
Everyday after class he would follow Eugene: “the gray-faced Jew beside
Eugene made the weary lights burn dim: he gave a tongue to weariness, a
color to despair" (1935: 443). Even though Eugene squeezed himself dry in an effort to enlighten his students, Abe never had any satisfaction:

He took those swarthy swarming classes and looted his life clean for them: he bent over them, prayed, sweated, and exhorted like a prophet, a poet, and a priest — he poured upon them the whole deposit of his living, feeling, reading, the whole store of poetry, passion and belief: he went into the brain of a dullard like a surgeon, and he blew some spark of fire into a glow in even the least and worst of them, but that gray-faced Yiddish inquisitor hung doggedly to his heels, the more he gave, the more Abe wanted; he fed on Eugene’s life, enriching his grayness with an insatiate and vampiric gluttony, and yet he never had a word of praise, a sentence of thanks, a syllable of commendation. (1935: 444)

Abe’s complaints got on the nerves of Eugene, and one day he exploded his wrath on Abe, and threatened to throw him out of his class. This turned the scales, and Abe begged and wept not be turned out, because, he confessed, it was the best class he had. This satisfies Eugene’s ego, and the relation is drastically transformed.

When Abe is thoroughly subjugated and cowered down, he becomes worthy of a patronizing affection, the ‘other’ as an object of sympathy. Eugene condescendingly visits Abe’s home, and Abe’s family members all become objects of sympathy, even admiration, for their tenacity and ability to fight against odds. Abe’s brothers fought tooth and claw to resist
gangsterism in Boston; Abe’s sister Sylvia gradually climbed the business ladder to progress from salesgirl to owner of a hat-shop. Her having an illegitimate son who never called her mother elicits sympathy from Eugene. The tragedy of betrayal in love and its consequences bring forth Wolfe’s sympathy on Sylvia, as also on Louise, the seductive waitress in a hotel at Charleston, who also is landed with an illegitimate child.

Illegitimacy – the binary opposite of legitimacy, had a deep fixation in Eugene’s/Wolfe’s psyche. Presumably the home atmosphere during his growing up – his father’s activities outside of wedlock, the atmosphere at Dixieland, his mother’s boarding house which had a reputation of a “chippy house” (1929: 119), the activities of his siblings Steve, Luke and Ben, all together inculcated a strange fascinated repulsion towards illegitimacy. It is very difficult to grasp the tilt of the scales, the subtle shift of mood of ambivalence. Eugene’s/Webber’s love for Esther is by far the most fulfilling, longer-than-the-rest emotional involvement. It is sometimes idyllic as a romantic poem; sometimes naturalistic in visual details. Ethically, Eugene’s/Webber’s love for Esther and her response are legitimate to Eugene/Webber, all the while Esther being a married woman.
The protagonist accuses Esther of being disloyal in love—and identifies her to her Jewish race, himself becoming a representative of a Gentile. His manuscripts are refused and returned by all publishers, but when Esther sends him to a publisher who, too, refuses Webber, he associates the refusal to the publisher being a Jew. Jewishness comes for derision, but he starves until Esther comes to his lodging and cooks him delicious Jewish food. Webber suffered from financial crisis—and he admired the world of the rich and affluent with longing in “The World that Jack Built” (in You Can’t Go Home Again), bitterly aware that the financial world was controlled by Jews. Simultaneously, the vacuity and meaninglessness of life of the idle rich necessarily comes to the fore. The death of two liftmen goes unnoticed and the rich are concerned with the protection of their property from fire. The discrepancies of society erupted as ambivalent binaries to Wolfe, and C. Green lying exploded on a New York street on account of his suicide jump from a high rise merits only nine lines of print in the “Times” to be served with coffee at breakfast.

He was life’s little man, life’s nameless cipher, life’s manswarm atom, life’s American—and now he lies disjected and exploded on a street in Brooklyn! (1940: 363)
Much of the criticism of Wolfe's work has centred on its seemingly uncontrolled and formless exuberance, and it has become almost a critical truism that he possessed great talent but little control, a magnificent expertise over language but a limited awareness of the demands of the plot, a sensuous recall that was nearly total but an almost shocking unwillingness to subject his material to critical elision.

It has also been leveled against Wolfe that there is no sense of proportion in his writing, that the sight of a rusty iron railing evokes as much emotion in him as the death of his father, an absurd and even monstrous lack of discrimination. But if such is the reaction, why not acknowledge it? And from the standpoint of an artist, use it? Many respected critics, Yvor Winters among them, seem to believe that there exists a kind of limiting factor that says that one event, one subject, one involvement must be superior in importance to another. That certain emotions are legitimately the result of certain events and that there is some kind of inflexible criterion that determines this, some standard that we can discover and use. Winters assumes that there is or should be a definite
proportion between what is observed and experienced and the emotional reaction it evokes, a kind of law, a totalitarian censor.

Scott Fitzgerald wrote: “The more valuable parts of Tom were the more lyrical parts, or, rather, those moments when his lyricism was best combined with his powers of observation” (Dickey 1987: XIV). This is evident in various works, as at the end of Of Time and the River:

The ship was now wholly anchored: she lay there in the water with the living stillness of all objects that were made to move. Although entirely motionless, outwardly as fixed and permanent as any of the headlands of the coast, the story of her power and speed was legible in every line. She glowed and pulsed with the dynamic secret of life, and although her great sides towered immense and silent as a cliff, although the great plates of her hull seemed to reach down and to be founded in the sea’s bed, and only the quietly flowing waters seemed to move and eddy softly at her sides, she yet had legible upon her the story of a hundred crossings, the memory of strange seas, of suns and moons and many different lights, the approach of April on far coasts, the change of wars and histories, and the completed dramas of all her voyages, characterized by the phantoms of many thousand passengers, the life, the hate, the love, the bitterness, the jealousy, the intrigue of six-day worlds, each one complete and separate in itself, which only a ship can have, which only the sea can bound, which only the earth can begin or end …

And above this, her decks were ablaze with light. Her enormous superstructure with its magnificent frontal sweep, her proud breast which was so full of power and speed, her storied decks and promenades as wide as city streets, the fabulous variety and opulence of her public rooms, her vast
lounges and salons, her restaurants, grills, and cafes, her libraries, writing rooms, ball-rooms, swimming pools, her imperial suites with broad beds, private decks, sitting rooms, gleaming baths — all of this, made to move upon the stormy seas, leaning against eternity and the gray welter of the Atlantic at twenty-seven knots an hour, tenanted by the ghosts, impregnated by the subtle perfumes of thousands of beautiful and expensive women, alive with the memory of the silken undulance of their long backs, with the naked, living velvet of their shoulders as they paced down the decks at night — all of this, with the four great funnels that in the immense drive and energy of their slant were now cut sharp and dark against the evening sky, burned with a fierce, exultant vitality in the soft melancholy of this coast. (1935: 905-6)

This is the rhetoric of Thomas Wolfe who undertakes complete immersion in a scene, and accepts imaginative surrender to whatever a situation or a memory evokes in which the sense of life as submitted to and entered.

Wolfe once characterized himself, in contrast to the “Flaubertian ‘taker-outer’, as a great ‘putter-inner’, of the company of Balzac and Sterne” (Wolfe’s letter to Scott Fitzgerald; quoted in Dickey, 1987: XI). He wants to include anything and everything that is relevant to his presentation — selectivity is secondary to inclusion. If we take a situation where two writers treat the same subject, the first with the classical purity of under-statement, the incisiveness and technical balance of a skilled
poet, and the other with the length and copiousness of Wolfe, we might gain insight into two opposite ways of doing things. Quietly and with telling understatement and balance, Edwin Arlington Robinson speaks of prostitutes, those 'veteran sirens':

But they, though others fade and are still fair,  
Defy their fairness and are unsubdued;  
Although they suffer, they may not forswear  
The patient ardour of the unpursued.  
(Quoted in Dickey 1987: XI)

This observation is incisive and powerful as Baudelaire's poem on the same theme, "Le Jeu". It leaves out a great deal, but the details it touches on, the quiet, resigned quality of the rendering imagination, the use of the devices of traditional poetic form combine to make the passage one of the most memorable evocations on the subject. But Robinson omits much that could have been retained. Here are some prostitutes from Wolfe's "The Face of the War":

And this timid, yet inherent desire for some warmer and more tender relation even in the practice of their profession was sometimes almost ludicrously apparent as they moved warily about among the tables, soliciting patronage from the men they served. Thus, if a man addressed them harshly, brutally, savagely, with an oath — which was the customary form of greeting — they would answer him in kind. But if he spoke to them more quietly, or regarded them with a more kindly
smiling look, they might respond to him with a pathetic and ridiculous attempt at coquettry, subduing their rasping voices to a kind of husky, tinny, whisper, pressing against him intimately, bending their bedaubed and painted faces close to his, and cajoling him with a pitiable pretense at seductiveness somewhat in this manner:

‘Hello there, big boy! ... Yuh look lonesome sittin’ there all by yourself ... whatcha doin’ all alone? ... Yuh want some company? Huh?’ ... whispered hoarsely, with a ghastly leer of the smeared lips, and pressing closer — ‘Wanta have some fun, darling? Come on!’ — coaxingly, imperatively, taking the patron by the hand — ‘I’ll show yuh a big time”.

(1987: 233)

This passage has a fullness of effect that concentration, brevity and restraint cannot afford. The concision of Robinson may suggest the essence of the whores’ meaning, their sadness and serio-comic condition, but it does not, and cannot, to the extent that Wolfe’s comprehensive treatment does, give the physical actuality of their situation, what it feels to be among them, to listen to them, to look at them in detail, to experience being near them and with them. This kind of fullness demands amplitude and specificity. Only by a process wherein nothing was omitted could Wolfe convey what he wanted to communicate, trusting that each subject, each event, would have its truthful say, through him, only if he did not stand in its way with cautiousness and paraphernalia. In a changed
rhetorical style, Wolfe, in the same story, records his sympathy and pity for the pitiable fallen women. He depicts the extreme exhaustion they suffer, as also the genuine tenderness they are capable of:

The girl, who was tall, slender, and very lovely, was, save for her shoes and stockings, naked, and she lay extended at full length on the untidy bed, with one arm thrust out in a gesture of complete exhaustion, the other folded underneath her shining hair, and her face, which had a fragile, transparent, almost starved delicacy, turned to one side and resting on her arm, the eyelids closed. And the eyelids also had this delicacy of texture, were violet with weariness, and so transparent that the fine network of veins was plainly visible.

The other woman went softly over to the bed, sat down beside her, and began to speak to her in a low and tender tone. In a moment the girl turned her head toward the woman, opened her eyes, and smiled, in a faint and distant way, as if someone who is just emerging from the drugged spell of an opiate: "What? ... What did you say, darling? ... No, I'm all right', she said faintly ..." (1987: 235)

This sense is totally bereft of the harsh and vulgar association of soliciting with its typical jargon. The tenderness that is exchanged between a sufferer and a fellow-sufferer is deeply touching. This exuberant rhetoric is Wolfe's very own. Everything he sees, touches, and remembers, come to him in absolute abandon regardless of the consequences, for every second of his writing life and actual life move together to give the world his best shot. Nothing can be missed. The process is, in a way, a kind of morality.
This process presents the million possibilities and particulars of life all at once — even when they are mutually contradictory and exclusive. This generates a sense of ambivalence that becomes the core of his works.

Actually Wolfe was struggling throughout his career toward some solution in the making of a democratic yet patriotic artist. As Alexis de Tocqueville had perceived in 1830 that in democratic communities, where men are all insignificant and very much alike, each man instantly sees all his fellows when he surveys himself. The poets of democratic ages, therefore, can never take any man in particular as the subject of a piece. Walt Whitman had attempted to sing the nature of America by celebrating the American he knew best, hoping to find in his own generic experiences an image of the national self. Thomas Wolfe set much the same objective. Having given expression to his national self, usually through a powerful evocation of time, place and action, employing to its fullest his intensely sensuous style — almost literally rubbing the objects of experience against the readers' nerve-ends — Wolfe seldom felt that the evocation of feeling was enough. He added rhetorical exhortation and explanation, reasserting
in rhythmic prose the meaning of what he had earlier written powerfully in a dramatic scene:

“Yeah. He died on Sattidy. When he went home on Friday night he was OK.”
“Oh, Yeah?”
“Yeah.”
And for a moment they were balanced in strong silence.
“Gee, dat was tough, wasn’t it?”
“Yeah. Dey didn’t find him till duh next day at ten o’clock. When dey went to look for him, he was lyin’ stretched out on duh bat’room floeh.”
“Oh, yeah?”
“Yeah. Dey found him lyin’ deh,” it said.
And for a moment more the voices hung in balanced silence.
“Gee, dat’s too bad ... I guess I was away when all dat happened.”
“Yeah. Yuh musta been away.”
“Yeah, dat was it, I guess. I musta been away. Oddehwise I woulda hoid. I was away.”
“Well, so long, kid ... I’ll be seein’ yuh.”
“Well, so long!”

A window closed, and there was silence; evening and far sounds and broken cries in Brooklyn, Brooklyn, in the formless, rusty, and unnumbered wilderness of life.

And now the old red light fades swiftly from the old red brick of rusty houses, and there are voices in the air, and somewhere music, and we are lying there, blind atoms in our cellar-depths, gray voiceless atoms on the manswarm desolation of the earth, and our fame is lost, our names forgotten, our powers are wasting from us like mined earth, while we lie here at evening and the river flows ... and dark time is feeding like a vulture on our entrails, and we know that we are lost, and cannot stir ... and there are ships there! There are ships! ... and Christ! We are all dying in the
darkness! ... and yuh musta been away ... yuh musta been away ...

And that is a moment of dark time, that is one of strange, million-visaged time’s dark faces. (1987: 76)

In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe maintains:

... in the cultures of Europe and of the Orient the American artist can find no antecedent scheme, no structural plan, no body of tradition that can give his own work the validity and truth that it must have ... the labour of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him. (1936: 92)

In his quest of a complete language, Wolfe experimented in treating the same theme in various situations. Death, which fascinated Wolfe, may be cited as an example of diverse rhetorical treatment of the same theme:

Ex. (1) October had come again, and that year it was sharp and soon: frost was early, burning the thick green on the mountain sides to the massed brilliant hues of blazing colours, painting the air with sharpness, sorrow, and delight. Sometimes, and often, there was warmth by day, and ancient drowsy light, a golden warmth and pollinated haze in afternoon, but over all the earth there was the premonitory breath of frost, an exultancy for all men who were returning and for all those who were gone and would not come again.

My father was dead, and now it seemed to me that I had never found him. He was dead, and yet I sought him everywhere, and could not believe that he was dead, and was sure that I would find him. It was
October and that year, after years of absence and of wandering, I had come home again. (1987: 79)

Ex. (2) Nine floors above the earth, a little figure was deftly catching in a bucket the nails or rivets of red-hot steel which the man with tongs was tossing to him from the forge. For a moment, the feeder had paused in his work, had turned, tongs in hand, for a breather, and had spoken to a man upon another girder. The catcher, meanwhile, grateful for this respite, had put his bucket down and stood erect, a cigarette between his lips, the small flame of a match held in the cave of his brown cupped hands. Then the feeder, his throat still loud with some scrap of bawdry irrelevant to steel, turned to his forge, gripped with his tongs a glowing rivet, and his throat still trembling with its laughter, tossed deftly, absently, casually in its accustomed arc, that nail of fire. His scream broke in upon the echoes of his laughter, carrying to the glut of faultless and accurate machinery in the street below him its terrible message of human error.

His scream was “Christ”! and at that word so seldom used for love and mercy the startled eyes of the other man leaped from his match upon the death that whizzed toward him. Even in the six feet of life that still remained to him, his body had its time for several motions. It half turned, the knees bent as if for a spring out into space, the shoulder stooped, the big brown hands groping in a futile, incompletely gesture for the bucket. Then, half crouched and rigid, with palms curved out in a kind of grotesque and terrible entreaty and one foot groping horribly into thin air, he met his death squarely, fronting it. For a moment after the rivet struck him, his body paused, crouched, rigid, like a grotesque image, groping futilely and terribly into space with one clumsy foot, and with a wire of
acrid smoke uncoiling at his waist. Then his shabby garments burst into flame, the man pawed out in sickening vacancy and fell, a blazing torch lit by a single scream. (1987: 41-42).

Ex. (3) Then, as I put my coin into the slot and thrust on through the wooden turnstile, I saw the man who was about to die. The place was a space of floor, a width of cement which was yet one flight above the level of the trains, and the man was sitting on a wooden bench, which had been placed there to the left, as one went down the incline to the tunnel.

The man just sat there quietly at one end of the bench, leaned over slightly to his right with his elbow resting on the arm of the bench, his hat pulled down a little, and his face half lowered. At this moment, there was a slow, tranquil, hardly perceptible movement of his breath — a flutter, a faint sigh — and the man was dead. (1987: 45-46)

A fundamental concern with opposites is reflected in Wolfe’s literary style itself — in a balanced antithesis of shocking juxtaposition of images, and in his used of contradictory phrases, such as changeless change, splendid and fierce and weak and strong and foolish, of wandering forever and the earth again, and the web and the rock.

Wolfe’s tendency to see and to express things in terms of opposites represented, according to some critics, a failure of his mind to grapple adequately with a problem. To some extent, it was an expression of his
southern qualities, for a typical native of the southern states is fascinated by paradox, enamoured of ambiguity, devoted to the particular and the concrete, and, although a dreamer of grandiose dreams, seldom the articulator of effective larger structures. The southerners were, like Wolfe himself, caught between the romantic view of their own past and the realistic fact of their present condition. And over the years they have proved themselves capable of living with unresolved contradictions. Wolfe grew up with certain paradoxes which formed an important aspect of his life, and ultimately became part of his art. The following examples elucidate the point:

Ex. (1) But now that the time had come for parting, the woman and the dying man said nothing. Clasped arm to arm they looked at each other with a stare of burning and voracious tenderness. They embraced, her arms clasped him, her living and voluptuous body drew toward him, her red lips clung to his mouth as if she could never let him go. Finally, she fairly tore herself away from him, gave him a desperate little push with her hands, and said ‘Go, go! It’s time!’

... the train began to move slowly out of the station. And all the time the man was leaning from a window in the corridor looking at her, and the woman was walking along beside the train, trying to keep him in sight as long as she could. Now the train gathered motion, the woman’s pace slowed, she stopped, her eyes wet, her lips murmuring words no one could
hear, and as he vanished from her sight, she cried, 'Auf Wiederschen!' and put her hand up to her lips and kissed it to him.

For a moment longer, the young man, who was to be this specter's brief companion of the journey, stood looking out the corridor window down the platform ...

Suddenly she stopped. Someone out of the throng of people on the platform had approached her. It was a young man. The woman paused in a startled manner, lifted one gloved hand in protest, started to go on, and in the next moment they were locked in a savage embrace, devouring each other with passionate kisses.

... For a moment the young man looked intently at the beak-like face, the closed weary eyes, wondering if this dying man had seen that meeting on the station platform, and what knowledge such as this could now mean to him. But the mask of death was enigmatic, unrevealing; the youth found there nothing that he could read. A faint and luminous smile was playing at the edges of the man's thin mouth, and his burning eyes were now open, but far and sunken, and seemed to be looking from an unspeakable depth at something that was far away. In a moment, in a profound and tender tone, he said:

"That was my wife. Now in the winter I must go alone, for that is best. But in the spring, when I am better, she will come to me." (1987: 170-71)

Ex. (2) (Speaking of a Negro servant, a child's response is expressed):

He never boxed with us, of course, but Randy had two sets of gloves, and Dick used to coach us while we
sparred. There was something amazingly tender and watchful about him. He taught us many things — how to lead, to hook, to counter and to block — but he was careful to see that we did not hurt each other.

(Thereafter, it is reported):

“It’s that nigger. He’s gone crazy and is running wild,” — “It’s Dick!” ... “They say he’s killed four people.”

(And later, when pursued by the mob):

At the creek edge, he turned again, knelt once more in the snow, and aimed. It was Dick’s last shot. He didn’t miss. The bullet struck Wayne Foraker, a deputy, dead center in the forehead and killed him in his saddle. Then the posse saw the Negro aim again, and nothing happened. Dick snapped the breach open savagely, then hurled the gun away. A cheer went up. The posse came charging forward. Dick turned, stumblingly, and ran the few remaining yards that separated him from the cold and rock-bright waters of the creek.

And here he did a curious thing — a thing that no one ever wholly understood. It was thought that he would make one final break for freedom, that he would wade the creek and try to get away before they got to him. Instead, he sat down calmly on the bank, and as quietly as if he were seated on his cot in an Army barracks, he unlaced his shoes, took them off, placed them together neatly at his side, and then stood up like a soldier, erect, in his bare bleeding feet, and faced the mob. (1987: 333-45)
The most obvious of Wolfe's strengths is his competence in handling language. The word has for him unique powers; he was fascinated by language, enchanted by its rhythm and cadence and enamoured of its rhetorical powers. Language was the key he sought to unlock mysteries and to unloose vast forces; he approached it almost in the spirit of primitive magic. This aspect of language he expressed in the prologue to *The Web and the Rock* (1939):

Could I make tongue say more than tongue could utter! Could I make brain grasp more than brain could think! Could I weave into immortal denseness some small brede of words, pluck out of sunken depths the root of living, some hundred thousand magic words that were as great as all my hunger, and hurl the sum of all my living out upon three hundred pages – then death could take my life, for I had lived it ere he took it: I had slain hunger, beaten death! (1939: Prologue).

Thus rhetoric is an instrument to negotiate the processes of life, chiefly, the approach of death in an onrush of time. Wolfe rarely uses the concept of time without the qualifiers of its inevitability. Realizing and accepting the inevitability of death, Wolfe attempts to transcend it through images of vibrant vitalism. He describes characters who are enormous in figure, hunger, sexuality and disease. The aggressive positivism of the life-enhancing/life-satisfying processes are a gauntlet thrown in challenge to
the life-denying processes of disease and death. The example of tables
groaning with food seems to be a rhetorical wish-fulfilment:

Everyone was eating; everyone was drinking. A ravenous
hunger — an insane hunger that knew no appeasement, that
wished to glut itself on all the roasted ox flesh, all the
sausages, all the salt fish in the world, seized Monk and held
him in its teeth. In all the world there was nothing but Food —
glorious Food. And Beer — October Beer. The world was an
enormous Belly — here was no higher heaven than the
Paradise of Cram and Gorge. (1939: 668)

After the quarrel and parting with Esther, Webber leaves for Europe. But
ambivalently, he cannot: “He had come away to forget her: he did nothing
but remember her” (1939: 623). He reflects on what he had foretold
Esther:

“You are the best and truest friend I ever had. You are the
noblest, greatest, and most beautiful woman that I ever saw or
knew. You are the woman that I love.” These were the words
his heart had uttered. And then his head had coldly
interposed, with its reasons of which the heart knew nothing:
“And no matter where I go, or when I leave you, as I shall —”
thus the head; and then the heart again — “down at the bottom
of my soul I’ll keep on loving you forever.”

It was true — all true. The love and now the leaving —
all true together. (1939: 622)

Wolfe cannot find a solution to his fragmented feelings which however are
manifested in his narratives: “the shades, pauses, and interjections of
people who are unconscious of the world, or of their own words” (1939: 632).

Another aspect of Wolfe’s use of language is his accurate and vivid dialogue. Wolfe had a remarkable ear for folk-speech, and his characters speak personal dialects set down with great verisimilitude. His characters’ speech is always marked by distinctiveness in diction, syntax and cadence. Accuracy, however, is a less obvious quality of their speech than gusto and vigour are. There is a feeling of great energy in the speech of most of them, as evident in his short story “Chickamauga”:

The last charge happened jest at dark. We came along and stripped the ammunitions off the dead — we took hit from the wounded — we had nothin’ left ourselves. Then we hit the first line — and we drove ‘em back — we hit the second and swept over ‘em. We were goin’ to take the third and last — they waited till they saw the color of our eyes before they let us have hit. Hit was like a river of red-hot lead had poured down on us: the line melted thar like snow. (1987: 395)

Wolfe sought a language — a door — a tool of communication not only in the rolling territories of rhetoric but also in the sensuous images drawn from the world’s body, which is the distinctive aspect of the language of
lyric and dramatic writing. And here, in the concrete and particularized representation of the sensory world, he was triumphantly the master:

There had been rain the night before, and now the river was filled with the sweet clean rain-drenched smell of earthy deposits. He could see the delicate white glimmer of young birch trees leaning from the banks, and on the other side he saw the winding whiteness of the road. Beyond the road, and bordering it, there was an orchard with a wall of lichenched stone: a row of apple trees, gnarled and sweet, spread their squat, twisted branches out across the road, and in the faint light he saw that they were dense with blossoms: the cool intoxication of their fragrance overpowered him. (1987: 210)

Wolfe’s concern with language is so great that he might have said of his total work, as Whitman did of Leaves of Grass, that it is only a language experiment. Language or rhetoric is the logical expression of Wolfe’s sense of alienation which he generalized to be at the core of all human experience. He saw each individual in the world as living in a compartment, in isolation from his fellows and unable to communicate adequately.

Juxtaposing a vivid, dramatic scene, complete with mannerisms like gap-fillers and physical movement, with a lyrical incantation is Wolfe’s forte. In Of Time and the River, a group of young men are observed indulging in cheap liquor in a train compartment:
"Why, you'll kill yourself drinking that stuff raw! Don't you know that? You must be crazy! ... Wait a minute", he muttered suddenly, comically, dropping the bottle deftly into his pocket, as the swarthy, pompous little man named Wade entered, attired in blue pyjamas and a dressing gown, and holding a tooth-brush and a tube of toothpaste in his hand: “Good evening, Sir! ... Ah-hah! ... How d'ye do!” said Robert, bowing slightly and stiffly, and speaking in his grave, stacatto, curiously engaging tone. (1935: 67)

Some lines later, Wolfe engages in lyrical prodigality:

And outside, floating past their vision the huge pageant of its enchanted and immortal stillness, the old earth of Virginia now lay dreaming in the moon’s white light.

So here they are now, three atoms on the huge breast of the indifferent earth, three youths out of a little town walled far away within the great rim of the silent mountains, already a distant, lonely dot upon the immense and sleeping visage of the continent. Here they are — three youths bound for the first time towards their image of the distant and enchanted city, sure that even though so many of their comrades had found there only dust and bitterness, the shining victory will be theirs. Here they are hurled onward in the great projectile of the train across the lonely visage of the everlasting earth. Here they are — three nameless grains of life among the manswarm ciphers of the earth, three faces of the million faces, three drops in the unceasing flood — and each of them a flame, a light, a glory, sure that his destiny is written in the blazing stars, his life shone over by the fortunate watches of the moon, his fame nourished and sustained by the huge earth, whose single darling charge he is, on whose immortal stillness he is flung onward in the night, his glorious fate set in the very brain and forehead of the fabulous, the unceasing city, of whose million-footed life he will tomorrow be a part. (1935: 67-68)
Ambivalence presides at the very thematic level. Wolfe describes the controlling theme of his works as "the search for a father" (in Holman, 1975: 25), and defined that search as a search for certainty, an "image of strength and wisdom external to his (man's) need and superior to his hunger" (Ibid., 1975: 26). In one sense, this search is the seeking for an individual with whom communication can be established and maintained. The search grows out of Eugene's loneliness in his childhood and the sense of isolation which he has in his world. It is intensified by his inability to communicate his love to his brother Ben. In his later life, whether for Eugene Gant or for George Webber, it finds expression in the relationships established and broken with Francis Starwick, Esther Jack and Foxhall Edwards, to name only the few major figures. About all these relationships there is a recurrent pattern: the new person is approached with eagerness; an intense relationship is established; then a failure of communication and understanding occurs; and Gant/Webber rejects the friendship. The affair with Esther Jack is, perhaps, the clearest example of this pattern. It is debatable whether idea of the search for the father, with its suggestion of myth and fable, defines as well as does the representation
of loneliness — the fundamental theme of Wolfe, whether that loneliness he described as the search for “a stone, a leaf, an unfound door” (Ibid., 1975: 26), as the urge to wandering and the counter-tug of home (articulated in The Web and the Rock and Of Time and the River), or as the desire vicariously to be one with and to understand ten thousand men in the cities, towns and hamlets of America.

There are very few people in fictional works as alienated as W.O. Gant and his wife Eliza. Each is lost in an envelope of private experiences and each tries vainly to express himself — Gant through rhetoric, invective, alcohol and lust; Eliza through garrulity, money and real estate. The terrible incompatibility in which they live reaches its almost shocking climax when, at the last moments of Gant’s life, they finally speak across the void to each other, and Gant’s expression of kindness and remorse dissolves Eliza into tears.

“Eliza”, — he said — and at the sound of that unaccustomed word, a name he had spoken only twice in forty years — her white face and her worn brown eyes turned toward him with the quick and startled look of an animal — “Eliza,” he said quietly, “you have had a hard life with me, a hard time. I want to tell you that I’m sorry.”
And before she could move from her white stillness of shocked surprise, he lifted his great right hand and put it gently down across her own. (1935: 265)

Despite Wolfe’s epic intentions to represent the totality of the consciousness of America, the final outcome is fraught with ambivalence. His fragmentary work, which he failed to unite and synthesize, is ultimately the record of his self and only very partially that of a nation. Wolfe himself was aware of this when he called it a giant web in which I was caught, the product of my huge inheritance — the torrential recollectiveness ... which became a living, million-fibred integument that bound me to the past, not only of my own life, but of the very earth from which I came, so that nothing in the end escaped from its inrooted and all-feeling explorativeness. (in Holman, 1975: 36)

In Wolfe, imagination is as important as reality; fragments are important as well as the whole; lyricism and dramatic representation must have equal prominence. It is an impossible task to hold these together as he wants to be everything at the same time. The moment one is all-inclusive, giving equal importance to the million diversities of the world and is unable to choose and take one particular stance, ambivalence is inevitable. To the end Thomas Wolfe retained a childlike, pristine delight in the manifold shapes, colours, odours, tastes, sounds and multifarious textures of
experience and his work tries to communicate this delight of living rhetorically.

The shape of Wolfe's entire career reflects startling ambivalence because of his inability to resolve contradictions. From birth to death he was an alienated man, vainly seeking communion. He who would have written the definition of a nation, could only attempt to define his own self. When the self becomes verbalized, the conflict between the creative self and the lived self becomes apparent. This conflict creates a psychic schism that allows the author to drift without having conscious control over the narrative. The split self of the author does not allow an integrated subject representing the authorial self to command the narrative. It is because of this reason that the narrative very often begins with an inspired flourish, but gradually gets tamed into a kind of prosaic, laboured monotone. Having this aspect of Wolfe in mind, when we explore the articulated plurality, we find that Wolfe is a natural writer who, in fact, recreates himself in language in his works. Language creates its own reality. The frame of reference is determined by rhetoric. If language is central to life, it is central to fiction. Performative language creates something which is
not already existing. As we look for symmetry, we find disruption. This actually does not take place at the level of thought and writing: the text decides to be like that. Wolfe indulges in formlessness — it allows free play of rhetorical exuberance. Narrative disruption can be viewed as ambivalence. Metaphoric play may be attributed to the ambivalence in the authorial self. The ambivalence that is apparent at the rhetorical level not only reflects the personality of the author and his concerns, but the very making of writing itself that erases gaps in the body by the very device of language. Rhetoric, therefore, in Wolfe’s writing, is not only a device of creativity, but also a tool, and finally, a measure of the linguistic self of the writer as a human being. This position substantiates the Derridean concept that nothing is outside language. If we accept the thesis that language creates its own reality, it will be easier to appreciate Wolfe’s œuvres in that ambivalence becomes the very force that concretizes and disrupts the rhetorical narrative structure. Therefore, the so-called rhetorical ambivalence could be considered as Wolfe’s strength that can connect him to the postmodernist fictional trend. In this sense, he could be considered a proto-postmodernist.
Wolfe in his works, practically at every level — sentence, paragraph, scene, theme — centralizes ambivalence of rhetoric, both in its clarity and confusion. He remains a split personality who wanted to embrace all and represent all, and in his vehement refusal to choose and select, left behind a record of an ambivalent totality.

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