CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Poetry is but a powerful medium of expression of emotion or feeling articulating poet's passionate urge for truth, beauty and experience within the limitations of its structure, and using the required imagination and fancy, and modulating at times its language to give authenticity and to foster a 'new' flair for poetry and its humanistic elements. Poetry, as poet is more self-conscious and singularly sensitive to consciousness, springs from his seeking to resolve with his sensibility, the tensions of his conflict with his milieu or his age. Poet's exceptional openness to emotional impressions, and his deep awareness of things in society, nature and universe, entail imagination and thought and an urge to translate his emotion to artistically communicate to his readers.

The post-war American poetry greatly influenced by science, ignored the decadent romantic tradition to give stark realism of life and living, mostly prosaic, with common place things as suitable subjects of poetry. The heavy thud of bus traffic, the creaking of tramcars, the rattling noise of railway trains, the drone of an aeroplane and the squalor and dinginess of industrial civilization find expression in modern post-war American poetry.
Further, the imagery and the poetic diction of modern American poetry is influenced by science and civilization. Realism in subject matter has made the modern American poet reject the highly ornate and artificial poetic style of the romantics and use the language resembling closely the language of every-day life. Modern American poetry is characterized by the use of colloquial idiom, speech rhythms and prosaic words. This realism in diction and versification and in subject matter is a marked feature of the poetry of T.S.Eliot, Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren, Sylvia Plath and other post-war American poets.

Reacting against the romantic insistence on poetry being a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, Eliot advances, his theory of impersonal poetry. He observes: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality".1 The greatest art is objective: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates".2 In fact, the poet who has no personality, is merely a receptacle, a shred of platinum, and a medium which fuses

2. Ibid., p.21.

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and combines feelings and impressions in a variety of ways. Further, Eliot has contended that it is wrong to suppose that poetry is concerned merely with the beautiful. The subject of poetry is life with all its horror, its boredom, and its glory. It is the poet's consciousness of the human situation - the human predicament, which has been the same in all ages - which should inspire poetic creation as in 'Gerontion', 'The Waste Land' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. It is the intensity of the poetic process, and not the romantic spontaneity, which is essential in poetry.

Most of Eliot's poems are set in some metropolis, the hub of modern industrial life. His poems 'Love Song' and 'The Rhapsody on a Windy Night' speak of sordid city streets, and "the muttering retreats" of lonely men. 'The Waste Land', besides other urban features, presents 'unreal city' with dissipated London crowds. Gerontion resides in a decayed city tenement and the scene of 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales' is a city underworld. Further his characters are all city people. Sweeney, Prufrock, the Lady (in 'The Portrait of a Lady'), Gerontion, Mr. Appollinax, Aunt Helen, Cousin Nancy, all typify, one aspect or the other, of the gross and decaying urban society in which they live.

Unlike Eliot, Robert Frost confines himself to a study of the New Englanders, mostly rural whom he knew intimately. And even the realistic and vivid portrayal of
the life of common men and women is without much glorification and idealizing them. Frost knew humanity from close around him and studied it in stony pastures, art and literature. Marcus Cunliffe has rightly observed: "His poetry has cropped out of his farmer's world, every part of which he knows, and knows how to render it in words with a brilliant, off-hand ease".3

S.C. Dubey has observed: "Robert Frost's poetry is in a sense encyclopaedia of human thoughts and human characters. He is at best when he describes esoteric animal and human beings in confrontation. As a keen observer of human life, he possesses not just opinions, but also knowledge and deep wisdom".4 Thus Frost is regional and at the same time a universal poet. His memorable and humble characters fully represent the aspect and situation to which they belong. 'After-Apple Picking' picturesquely describes the human condition after apple-picking and at the same time philosophises the situation.

"For I have had too much
Of apple-picking : I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired".5


Thus the post-war American poetry has devoted itself to the bare and explicit truth of human life and human character.

Confessionalism is another salient feature of the Post-War American Poetry sustained by the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologizing of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor. Confessional poetry, emphasising the sensitivity of the poet, offers a personal vindication barely more sustaining than the social structure it implicitly scorns. Moreover, a somnambulistic strain drifts through the tones of the confessional poet. This finds its fullest expressions in Sylvia Plath, where the voice of narcotic numbness mixes with a sort of slow-motion hallucination in poems like 'Tulips' and 'Yew Trees'. The oft-quoted lines from 'Lady Lazarus' point up the equation of consciousness and pain as sharply as any:

"Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well".6

In the confessional phase the emergence of a new self in each of the poetic sequences of Roethke, Lowell and Plath, means a rupture with their earlier self and phase of poetry. Roethke's "The Lost Son", Plath's 'The Bee Keeper's Daughter' and Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' are the poems where the quest

or a new self is more pronounced. Death pervades the ances-
tral home of Lowell situated in '91 Revere Street'. In
Plath, love and death form part of the same reality. Poetry
for her, is the blood jet, that sustains and drains life.

Another dominant characteristic of the Post-War
American poetry is humanism. It is the quintessence of
American tradition and culture. The Post-war American poets
like Eliot, Frost and Warren display it in abundance in their
poetry to heighten consciousness. Humanism, as the word
connotes, is a philosophy of mankind glorifying the dignity
of man. It "is an attitude of mind, a system of thought,
which concentrates especially upon the activities of man,
rather than upon the external world of nature or upon reli-
gious ideals".7

T.S. Eliot, as a humanist, upholds the dignity of
man and places him at the center of all actions and values.
He clarifies his position in this regard when he recognizes
the strengths and weaknesses (greed, lust, selfishness,
cruelty, and insensibility) of man and advises him, time and
again, to 'make perfect his will'. It is 'the perfection of
will' which enables a man attain the beauty of life and
spiritual regeneration. It is this that renders him "the

7. A.F. Scott, Current Literary Terms, Macmillan, St.Martin's
whole man" and helps in the creation of a healthy, happy, society. In 'Choruses from the Rock', we find Eliot's repeated insistence on what man should do:

All men are ready to invest their money  
But most expect dividends  
I say to you: Make perfect your will.  

With the perfection of will only it is possible to prevent the mad arms race and power rivalry, violence and hatred, extremism and terrorism, bloodshed and butchery, between nation and nation, between man and man. There is a perpetual struggle between 'Good' and 'Evil', but the good man chooses to side only with 'Good', rejecting all worldly temptations and material accumulations. Eliot is quite clear about what will brighten man's prospects on earth, and says:

"We build the meaning:  
A church for all  
And a job for each  
Each man to his work". (CP, p.165)

As Christian poet, Eliot, administering his sermons, holds aloft the banner of humanity in unmistakable terms. He is of the view that the Higher Religions of the world lead men "from light to light, to knowledge of Good and Evil". (CP, p.176) He visualizes a tug of war going on between the Church and the world and fondly expects that "the visible Church (will) go on to conquer the World?" (CP, p.183)

In this connection it is apt to mention that the virtues of love, sympathy and self-control, as stressed in 'The Waste Land', cannot be attained without humility and spiritual discipline. Speaking of the significance of humility, Eliot in Chorus I observes: "Let me show you the work of the humble". (CP, p.163) In 'Four Quartets' he emphasises the necessity of cultivating the virtue of humility:

"The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless". (CP, p.199)

Humility is great in itself and does not generate sharp reactions or counter accusations. This is not a sign of weakness but strength in man, embodying immense tolerance and composure.

Frost also is an emphatic defender of humanism and in his works he has asserted the worth and nobility of the individual. He also asserts that humanism is inseparable from the natural order of the world and impossible outside of it. In the words of Radcliffe James Squires: "Frost is a poet not because he is affected by nature or because he has lived on a farm, but because he speaks to men about men".9

About 'The Humanistic Idealism of Robert Frost'
Hyatt Howe Waggoner has observed: "He neither nurses false

hopes nor agonizes over false despairs. His realism rests on a foundation of faith in man and in life...... It is 'humanistic' in that it does not confuse man with nature and in that it bases its faith in man and in life on man's essentially human attributes and opposes the tendency of naturalistic interpretations of science to 'explain away' man's humanity."10

The Post-War American Poetry displays a passion for truth, which is a feature of humanism. For Eliot, truth is eternity. In 'Burnt Norton' (from 'Four Quartets') he deals with the theme of time when the distinction between the past, future, and present vanishes. What is real is the present moment of consciousness. But this moment of consciousness is the moment when eternity touches time, and gives its meaning.

"Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, what is always present".11

This moment or present is the time of Divine revelation that is omnipresent. Hence Eliot refers to it as 'the still point of the turning world', 'the moment in the rose-garden', 'the still-point where the dance is', etc. Time can be conquered


only through time for it is in this moment that the Eternal reveals itself, and thus making the moment eternal.

In 'The Black Cottage', Frost says that there is no reason for a man to give up one’s belief and that a belief, that seems to have ceased to be true, may turn true again.

"For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes".12

Robert Penn Warren says:

"To have truth something must be believed
And repetition and congruence,
To say the least, are necessary".13

Again, in the poem 'Court-Mail' (from "Promises") he observes:

"That only the truth is true,
That life is only the act
To transfigure all fact,
And life is only a story
And death is only the glory".14

Wallace Stevens affirms that contact with reality is 'the great blessing' of life. In the poem 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans' the "angel of reality" proclaims:

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"...I am the necessary angel of earth
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash..."15

The angel is the angel of reality. In 'Poem Written at Morning' he observes: "The truth must be / That you do not see, you experience, you feel". (TCP, p.219)

In the case of Sylvia Plath, truth as passion, blossoms forth into poetry as 'blood jet'. In 'kindness' her own awareness of the dangerous sources of her poetry is expressed in two lines which capture both a sense of release and a hint of the final tragic outcome:

"The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it".16

Further, in "Tulips" she asserts, "I am a nun now, I've never been so pure".17 It is the purity of a peace that is all-embracing. Her struggle to find her voice in writing becomes the central desire of her life and texts.

Humanism in the Post-War American Poetry cherishes love of beauty. Truth is beauty and beauty is bliss.


17. Ibid., p.161.
Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' brings out a clash between love of beauty and sense of duty. On the surface it tells of man's temptation to answer the strange call of the woods by getting into it and of his resisting the temptation by thinking of the promises he has to keep.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep".18

In 'Birches', the arched trees are compared to girls on hands and knees, throwing their hair before them over their heads to dry in the sun. "You may see their trunks arching in the woods/ Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground/
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair/ Before them over their heads to dry in the sun".19

Wallace Stevens immortalizes beauty in the following lines in 'Peter Quince At the Clavier':

"Beauty is momentary in the mind -
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.
The body dies, the body's beauty lives".20

Illuminating and lovely is the description of spring. In 'Of the Surface of things' he says: "The spring is like a belle undressing".21

The Post-War American Poetry also exemplifies the beauty of love spontaneously. Love enkindles life. It makes human beings 'humane'. Love expands; it does not limit itself to boundaries. Love as Thought is Truth; Love as Action is Right Conduct; Love as Understanding is peace; and Love, as Feeling is Non-violence. In 'A Prayer in Spring' Frost, the poet while praying to God, asks for sensual pleasure from flowers, orchard and the darting bird. But he realises that the best way to love God is by loving His creation.

"For this is love and nothing else is love, The which it is reserved for God above The sanctify to what far ends He will But which it only needs that we fulfill".22

The poem 'The Master speed' asserts that true love can be found only between man and woman, a natural phenomenon.

"Two such as you with such a master speed Cannot be parted nor be swept away From one another once you are agreed The life is only life forevermore Together wing to wing and oar to oar".23

21. Ibid., p.57.


23. Ibid., p.392.
Love in Sylvia Plath is more akin to a sense of well-being than romantic passion. Even while she is talking about death and horrifying dead bodies, she can talk about Brueghel’s painting and sketch a love scene on it in a quiet, unperturbed voice:

"He afloat in the sea of her blue satin Skirts, sings in the direction Of her bare shoulder, while she bends, Fingering a leaflet of music, over him, . . . . . . . . . . . . Of the death's-head shadowing their song. These Flemish lovers flourish, ....."24

'Morning Song' relating to the children expresses:

"Love set you going like a fat gold watch".25

In a highly poetic passage in 'Four Quartets', T.S.Eliot utters aloud as if the 'fire' of divine love and the 'rose' of human love are seen working in complete unison - "The complete consort dancing together".26

"And all shall be well and All manner of thing shall be well When the tongues of flames are in-folded Into the crowned knot of fire And the fire and the rose are one".27


25. Ibid., p.156.


27. Ibid., p.223.
The 'infolded flame' is the supreme God without form or Brahman without gunas. Superb and memorable is the line in Warren's 'Revelation; :

"In separateness only does love learn definition".28

Beauty of love finds supreme expression in the following lines:

"We must try
To love so well the world that we may believe,
in the end, in God".29

The proper study of mankind is man. For, man is the center of things. He has a special meaning, a special mission, a unique role. Truly he is Divinity, encased in human frame. He has the unique destiny of realising and appreciating beauty, truth, goodness, harmony, melody and conferring on himself and others love, compassion and sympathy. He can delve not only into the secrets of nature, but also into his own mysteries, and discover God who is within self and in nature. But today man has become selfish, greedy and arrogant. So the poets as humanists highlight, in their poetry, the prevailing chaos, frustration and disillusionment and suggest ways and means to cut across the forces of evil in order to achieve peace and prosperity, contentment and

29. Ibid., p.116.

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harmony, compassion and understanding. As the main purpose of human life is to realise one's true identity, the Post-War American poets like T.S. Eliot, Frost and Warren assert in their poetry, the essential goodness of man. They advise humanity to keep the forces of evil under control by religious discipline, by prayer and by divine grace. Anxiety and disillusionment have always been there in every age and the remedy has always been a restoration of faith in man's innate divinity. Divinity is man's real dignity. To Eliot the ultimate aim of man's life is the perfection of individuality, the attainment of sainthood. He has keenly desired the salvation of the individual soul. As a true humanist, he has remarked:

"The lot of man is ceaseless labour
Or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder,
Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant".30

which has elevated the dignity of man and labor and ultimately gives us hope of a better social and political order in the world around, the order that can be attained by a harmonious combination of "pure humanistic attitude" and "religious discipline".31 To Frost true virtue lies in the doing, not in what is done. In 'The Trial by Existence', he suggests:

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"... the utmost reward
Of daring should be still to dare",32 is the test of heroism of the human soul. He believes that the mystery of life can only be resolved and the ways of God can be understood only through absolute faith and not by reason. To him God is the Truth, ultimate reality and the Saviour of man. As a humanist, Frost does not consider the universe chaotic in spite of its many imperfections nor is he averse to human suffering. In 'Birches' he tells us:

"Earth's the right place for love". (CPRF, p.153)

His message to his fellow-men is to have

"... courage in the heart
To overcome the fear within the soul
And go ahead to any accomplishment". (CPRF, p.642)

To Frost, action determined and fearless, is essential for human salvation. He seems to suggest and respect the 'other-liness' of other individuals and he believes in the human relationship based on love, sympathy and fraternity and perfect understanding to solve the human problems. Likewise, Warren pleads to eschew the evil and cultivate the good. He advises us to have

"That hope : for there are testaments
That men, by prayer, have mastered grace".33


and achieve immortality. His 'osmosis of being' brings out the truth: "we're all one flesh, at last".34

which enables man know his true identity. Wallace Stevens expressing his love of survival-of-the fittest, optimistically offers his message thus:

"Everybody shares, nobody cares
When a fellow dies!
Nobody sins, everybody grins
When a fellow wins!"35
(Don't Worry')

Robert Lowell pays homage to the created world and human eye that comprehends the world creatively. The vision of the artist, he believes, "trembles to caress the light"36; it tries to possess life, not merely passively in the manner of naive empirical realism, but actively, imaginatively, lovingly.

The role of woman is universalized by Sylvia Plath. She cries out about her femininity, neither denying nor rejecting it, but assuming the burdens of its special condition— an incompleteness. Unable to bear the pressures

34. Ibid., p.262.
of life, we cryout for deliverance. Sylvia Plath too does the same:

"My body is a pebble ... They tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles, it must run over,
smoothing them gently..."37 ('Tulips')

In brief, Humanism is 'sumnum bonum' of Post-War American poetry. Jacques Maritian observes: "... humanism essentially tends to render man more truly human and to make his original greatness manifest by causing him to participate in all that can enrich him in nature and history".38

Memorable is the message of Sri Sathya Sai, the propagator of humanism today:

'The world will be a happy place
For every man of every race,
When the heart and mind are freed
From hatred, envy, pride and greed".39