CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

MacLeish is not an artist who writes about outworn dogmas and conventions that turn man's thought and life backwards. He is a progressive writer who has developed a dynamic personality which invites all progressive thought and new ways of expression. He has changed himself and the direction of his art according to the changing conditions in the modern world. In the words of Henrich Straumann, "MacLeish's talent in adjusting himself to changing conditions betrays a soundness of constitution that no pragmatist will hesitate to admire, and what is more important, the sincerity of those changes cannot be doubted." He has discarded his early poetry of despair and disillusionment which he wrote under the influence of Pound and Eliot and adopted a positive line of thinking which has led him to affirm the rich American democratic tradition and its avowed humanistic values. He envisages democracy not merely as a political doctrine but as a spiritual force that binds all the people of his nation in a common purpose of achieving individual freedom. In a number of his articles that appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, MacLeish expresses his view that democracy is a political expression of the symbolic journey of man's biological beginnings of

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1 American Literature in the Twentieth Century (London: Hutchinson House, 1951), p. 134
common sleep towards individual consciousness and separation of the individual from group conformity.

It is this central humanistic conception of life that, in fact, informs all MacLeish's work, both dramatic and non-dramatic. Though his social and political plays, Panic, The Fall of the City, Air Raid, the Trojan Horse and Scratch, ceding to the demands of the present, point sharply to the socio-economic and political wrongs committed in the contemporary world, they, in fact, transcend this purely socio-political context of demonstrate as to what happens to human life in general and the life of the individual spirit in particular, when the people cease to believe in the individual freedom and feel spiritually and emotionally powerless. This MacLeish does by manipulating historical and mythical parallels to the contemporary political and social situation. In so doing, the poet has brought a philosophical and a transpersonal perspective to the contemporary themes, a perspective, indeed, which many American plays on contemporary themes do not possess. In this regard, MacLeish can be compared to Thronton Wilder who, like MacLeish, employs myth, allegory, chorus and other anti-realistic devices like stylization of action and dialogue to simplify the contemporary materials and to impart in universal significance to the contemporary phenomenon of World Wars in The Skin of Our Teeth.
Even in plays dealing with such metaphysical and abstract themes as the problem of meaning and justice in an indifferent universe, the dangers of transcending the human world of sympathy and love in the pursuit of abstract ends and the dubious idea of romantic happiness versus human suffering and pain, the poet presents his humanistic thesis with existential overtones of man's ultimate responsibility to give order and meaning to his life without depending upon God or any other external "dependencies". Man must explore his inner resources of courage and love in himself to endure the tragic condition and the lack of any objective meaning for human life. MacLeish's conception of the human dilemma as reflected in his J.B., This Music Crept by Me Upon the Waters, Nobodaddy and Herakles can be summed up as follows: Man's very "lostness," or call it "Fall", is the key to his humanity. As long as he has "belonged" or enjoyed harmony with the world outside him, he has abdicated his manhood and ceased to be an "existent." In this state, he is no more than a passive, vegetative being at the mercy of forces outside himself and beyond his control. And the forces which offer him a secure environment in exchange for obedience and conformity --society, the authority of religion, the state, and the tradition-- have been, in fact, created by man himself. They have no existence of their own except by virtue of man's existence. Therefore, he is free from all
outside authority including God to determine his fate. He has nothing on which he can lean for support but himself and the love he bears towards other human beings and his female partner.

This conception of MacLeish regarding the answer to the question of order and meaning in human life is quite consistent with the modern existential philosophy and the Jungian psychological theory of "individuation" which he describes as "the gradual realization of the inner, complete personality through constant change, struggle, and process."² For MacLeish, "reality" is not something to be "known", it is to be "lived". Man can embody reality in his consciousness through degrees, in the process of living and struggling against the external world for order, but he cannot know it as the realization ultimate reality, through degrees of consciousness, is a process:

   Eternity is what our wanders gather,
   Image by Image....³

   This sort of balanced view of life in which the dialectical relation of the opposites is recognized as part of reality is certainly more than relevant in a time like ours where man swings between one extreme of hope to the other extreme of despair. From this point of view it is unfair on the part of

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Randall Jarrell to charge MacLeish with "something consciously neo-primitive" in "his eager adoption of the optimistic voluntarism of frontier days...."\(^4\) Indeed, MacLeish's view of life as reflected in his plays is tempered with an intellectual awareness of the limitations of human life. The playwright sees the "dark forests" beyond "the familiar safe stockade," and "the green volcanoes/lurking in this smile of trees."\(^5\) He sees the face behind the mask, the reality behind the delusion, with the wide-opened eyes of Nickles:

Every human creature born
Is born into the bright delusion
Beauty and loving-kindness care for him.\(^6\)

This tragic awareness of human life and its limitations for MacLeish does not necessarily lead to the absurdist conception of life. On the contrary, it is only "when the human heart faces its destiny and notwithstanding sings - sings of itself, its life, its death -- that poetry is possible."\(^7\) Permeated with such humanistic spirit and tragic awareness of human life at large, MacLeish's plays and themes are more relevant to our modern context than the Christian themes of Eliot. Unlike Eliot, who turns to the medieval ideals of self-sacrifice, expiation, and acceptance of a burden of guilt, MacLeish

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\(^5\) MacLeish, *This Music Crept By Me Upon the Waters*, p. 7.
\(^6\) J.B., p. 49.
visualizes the dilemma of the modern man in the light of reason and the scientific understanding of a psychologist and a rational philosopher.

In presenting his themes, both socio-political and moral, in artistic and dramatic terms, however, the playwright fails to bring depth and intensity we find in the plays of O'Neill, Miller, Williams and Elmer Rice. For this, four reasons can be suggested. Firstly, MacLeish fails to establish a concrete human action in which the events and the characters are dramatically related to each other. The dramatic action in his plays very often tends to be "illustrative" rather than "progressive." There are a number of passages in his plays which are divorced from the immediate context and situation of the play, thus giving the static impression. Secondly, in his eagerness to achieve a universal significance to the dramatic action, the playwright, fails to impart a historical perspective to his plays as we have seen in Panic. In all his plays, except in J.B., the events and the characters are not motivated in terms of the contemporary events and forces. In emphasizing the abstract and the universal rather than the concrete and the contemporary, the poet dilutes the solid effect of the play. Thirdly, his characters are abstractions. Excepting a few characters like McGafferty, J.B. and Sarah, his characters are a Woman, A Man, A Young Man, The Sergeant etc.
Finally, MacLeish's dramatic poetry suffers from an over-literary quality and bareness of imagery. He very often tends to state or generalize rather than concretize his ideas in terms of images as we have seen in *Herakles*. All these short-comings of MacLeish pointed out above certainly reveal the limitations of a playwright in comparison with such highly technical and brilliant playwrights as O'Neill, Miller and Williams. However, there is a marked difference between writing a verse play on a contemporary theme and a prose play on the same subject. While the prose dramatists had a rich dramatic tradition initiated by Ibsen and other subsequent writers, the verse play on a contemporary theme and a prose play on the same subject. While the prose dramatists had a rich dramatic tradition initiated by Ibsen and other subsequent writers, the verse playwrights did not have any tradition that could point them the lines on which a modern poetic drama could be written. The nineteenth century attempts by Shelley, Byron, Tennyson and Browning instead of showing the directions to be taken by the modern writers had only aggravated the difficulties.

In addition to this lack of a dramatic tradition, the modern poets are confronted with the problem of making verse acceptable on the stage. Unlike the Elizabethan audience, the modern audience is not attuned to hear verse on the stage. Furthermore, the complexity of the modern industrial life
becomes amenable to poetic treatment only after stylizing the action and dialogue. On the contrary, prose, by its very nature being rational and logical, has been quite consistent with the temper and spirit of the modern times. To quote Moody E. Prior, "There are no established traditions which permit a dramatist a free use of the full resources of language in play writing. The idea of "poetry" has largely come to mean almost exclusively lyric poetry, and the contemporary poetic idiom is in many ways ill adapted to the uses of a play. The modern poet who aspires to be a serious playwright has formidable artistic and psychological difficulties to overcome. He may envy the ease with which an Elizabethan poet could turn to the theatre and there adapt his verse and diction to the extremes of lofty tragedy or realistic comedy, but he is excluded from this paradise. He can no more solve his difficulties by deciding to imitate the freedom of these writers than can modern man resolve the complexities of his industrial life and scientific society by deciding to return to primitive life with the noble savage."

Under these circumstances where there is no viable dramatic tradition and where the complex industrial life is unsuitable for poetic treatment and the audience not responsive to the "poetry" of the play, it is certainly more

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8 Mody E. Prior, The Language of Tragedy, p. 396.
difficult to write a verse play on a contemporary theme than a prose play. From this point of view, if the poets have achieved a limited success in this genre and if their dramatic construction reveals less ingenuity than the prose writers, the reason can be found in the unfavorable circumstances of the modern industrial world on the one hand and in the experimental nature of their work on the other. Even Eliot, with all his powerful dramatic style and complex imagery on the one hand and a sound sense for the contemporary speech rhythms on the other, has achieved only a partial success in establishing a poetic theater in England. In the words of Carol Smith,

His goal of developing a new theater,
and training an audience to respond to it,
had ...... been frustrated by the inability of his current dramatic methods to reach the emotions of his audience, on the one hand, or to fascinate and stimulate their intellect, on the other.\(^9\)

Though MacLeish, like Eliot and Yeats, has failed to solve the problems of the modern poetic drama once for all, he like them reveals a strong concern and sincerity in experimenting with the modern speech rhythms and employing such anti-realistic devices as masks, choric passages, stylized movements and dialogue, the symbolic setting, and the

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mythical parallels, to bring depth and magnitude to the modern poetic drama. In the United States, MacLeish is the lonely figure who strives persistently to write a verse play of high standard. Indeed, he does come to write an effective verse play in J.B. which John Ciardi praises as the "classic" of the modern times. Though Anderson's dramatic output quantitatively surpasses that of MacLeish, his slavish imitation of the Shakespearean themes and situations by stripping the contemporary events of all their realistic connotations and his adoption of a blank verse line, the rhythms of which are contrary to the modern speech rhythms, do not suggest any fresh approach or provide a viable dramatic and verse form suitable to the temper of the modern times. It is only MacLeish's and E.E. Cummings' work that can suggest the ways and means of writing a poetic play in modern terms by a young American writer because these poets unlike Anderson have attempted to explore the poetic possibilities in the modern life and culture and used the poetic idioms that are very close to the contemporary idioms. In this regard, all MacLeish's plays are a contribution to the modern American drama in general, and the American poetic drama in particular.

Added to this general contribution of the poet, his specific contribution to American radio drama can be observed in adopting the radio
announcer as an artistic device to interpret, to describe and comment like the Greek chorus on the action of the play. This device of the poet serves as cohesive force. The fragmentary nature of a radio drama calls for such a device. Without the interpreting and connecting-link role of the radio announcer, the radio drama is no more than a string of unrelated events and scenes picked up at random without either meaning or logic whatsoever. Through the radio announcer or narrator MacLeish directly talks to his audience and also brings the didactic force of the play into focus. The radio announcer has been a very influential figure over the radio in presenting the facts with credibility and with human significance. Edward Murrow, for instance, had surprised his veteran journalists by his persuasive and passionate "rooftop broadcasts" during the Second World War. The secret of his success has been, as William Stott puts it, his "subjectively objective" style. "It dealt with public fact in concrete and human terms."10

MacLeish uses a similar "subjectively objective" style for his Announcer in The Fall of the City and Air Raid. Praising the effectiveness of this style MacLeish said to Murrow,

You burned the city of London in our homes and we felt the flames that burned it. You laid the dead of London at our doors and we knew the dead

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were our dead.\textsuperscript{11}

This is what, in fact, the poet attempts to do through his radio Announcer in \textit{Air Raid}. By describing the hoarse noise of the droning of the planes and the mechanical nature of the Fascist air warfare, "They move like tools not men:/ You'd say there were no men:/ You'd say they had no will but the / Will of motor on metal...."\textsuperscript{12}, against the innocent and unconcerned attitude of women towards the war, the Announcer achieves the effects of horror and pity-pity for the innocent victims and horror for the mechanical warfare devoid of all human sympathy.

Following the example of MacLeish in \textit{Air Raid}, Norman Corwin does the same in his \textit{They Fly Through the Air}. In his use of such sound effects as the throbbing airplane motors, gun shots, and the dull explosion of bombs far off and also the shrieking voices of the victims, Corwin certainly reveals the influence of MacLeish on him. In addition, he follows MacLeish's pattern of contrasting the mechanical and brutal nature of the Fascists with the simplicity and innocence of the victims. Thus the play opens with the people or rather symbols of peaceful domestic living -- a house where a girl is practicing the piano, where a baby is fretting in her crib, where a mother makes toast in the kitchen, while the bombers are busy

\begin{tabbing}
\textsuperscript{11} MacLeish Quoted by William Stott in \textit{Documentary Expression}, p. 28. \\
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Air Raid}, p. 34
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with adjusting their machine guns. After the bombardment, the Narrator's voice comes with,

It is acknowledged that the baby sleeps.
It is acknowledged that the toast is burned.
It is acknowledged that the Piano's out of tune.
O Winged victory!
The Spartans would have coveted
The courage of your combat!
Just think:
Ten thousand savage roof tops, tarred and tiled,
Against a single plane.\(^{13}\)

A comprises of these lines with MacLeish's in *Air Raid* reveals how closely Corwin follows MacLeish in detail and description:

Strange and curious these times we live in:
You watch from kitchens for the bloody sings:
You watch for breaking war above the washing on the lines.
In the old days they watched along the borders:
They called their warfare in the old days wars
And fought with men and men who fought were killed.

We call it peace and kill the women and children.
Our women die in peace beneath the lintels of their doors.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) Norman Corwin "They Fly Through the Air" in *Radio and Television Writing*, ed. Max Wylie (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1950), p. 574

\(^{14}\) *Air Raid*, p. 6.
In both the passages, the writers are underscoring the mechanical and inhuman wars of mass-scale destruction of the modern world against the courageous and human wars of the ancient days. However, the straightforward lines of MacLeish have an impact other than that of Corwin's lines charged with irony and satire. Also, Corwin employs images and similes that resemble MacLeish's.

For instance, both the writers compare the plane to a bird. "Look; it's circling as a bird does! / It circles as a hawk would circle hunting!"\textsuperscript{15} of MacLeish's lines in \textit{Air Raid} have their counterpart in Corwin's following line, "Is this a sparrow rushing down upon a frightened hawk?"\textsuperscript{16} Further, both MacLeish and Corwin obtain an ironic contrast by manipulating nature imagery versus machine imagery. Thus in \textit{Air Raid}, the Announcer refers to "sun," "morning," "clouds," "sea," "mountains," "poplar trees," "linden trees," "streams," "wind" etc. against the "motor throbbing" sounds of the planes and such machine images as "fuselage," "wheel," "siren," "steel," "shearing metal," etc. Similarly, "a great shriek of laughter" of the women's voices and the Singing woman's voice are compared to the "hoarse" and "deafening" noises of the siren and the alarm whistles. In so doing,

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Air Raid}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{16} Corwin, "They Fly Through the Air", p. 578.
MacLeish reiterates his ironic commentary on the machine civilization which has proved to be more damaging and destructive than creative.

Similarly the Narrator in Corwin's play refers to the "mists," "clouds," "lightning's," "moons," "galaxies," "rainbows," "sunlight," "curving earth" against which the machine images such as "earphones," "bayonets," "trigger tips," "filter gun," "corkscrew," etc. acquire a market contrast, thus underscoring the highly technical and mechanical nature of the modern air warfare. Like MacLeish, Corwin introduces the Paino music, "slow movement of a Beethoven sonata"\(^{17}\) to serve as a contrast "to motor noise inside plane" and the "noise of the bomb-release mechanism."\(^{18}\)

However, Corwin differs from MacLeish in using verse for the Narrator and a perfectly colloquial prose for the bombers. While MacLeish uses verse throughout, Corwin manipulates the denotative powers of prose and the connotative powers of poetry to make the play an instrument of varied and eloquent expression. The close similarity of the subject and the technique on the one hand and the use of Announcer or the Narrator as the interpreting voice of the author himself on the other, in Air Raid and They Fly Though the Air, certainly point to the influence of MacLeish on Norman Corwin.

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17 Corwin, "They Fly Through the Air," p. 572.
18 Ibid. p. 574.
By experimenting with the choric role of the Announcer who achieves dramatic effects by tonal variations and by simplifying the dramatic materials through stylized antiphonal lyrical chants and the elliptical verse lines as well as through such expressionistic elements as the Dead woman rising out of the tomb in *The Fall of the City*, MacLeish has brought lyrical beauty, dignity and nobility to the radio drama. By fusing the human voice with music and both with the sound effects of the machine guns, sirens and whistles in *Air Raid* he has extended the range of the expression of the emotions through the radio medium. It is not wonder then that Gassner should thus remark regarding *Air Raid* and *The Fall of the City*:

> These short dramatic pieces in verse set high literary standards in radio drama and were of a quality never excelled and but rarely equaled by himself and others.\(^{19}\)

In terms of the achievement in modern poetic drama, though MacLeish cannot be placed among such writers as Eliot, Yeats and Bertolt Brecht, he can be befittingly placed among W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender and the other Left-wing Poet-playwrights of England. In using the stage and the radio for dramatizing the social and political issues of their times and in restlessly trying to find out new methods and techniques

\(^{19}\) *Best American Plays: Fifth Series, 1957-1963* p. 590.
to present their themes with all the dramatic force, all these writers including MacLeish reveal a common purpose and a similar direction. The social and political note in their plays links them with the great tradition that is coming from Aeschylus, Euripides, through Shakespeare, Ben Johnson and Milton into the modern literary world.

By bringing his language of poetry closer to the language of conversation, by using a poetic idiom that is very close to the contemporary idiom and by experimenting with verse rhythms closer to those of contemporary speech, MacLeish has proved that poetry is not incompatible with public life and common interests. With all his technical innovations and bright opinions about man, he has given a sense of direction to American life caught in the general crisis of the modern times. He is not only an artist who has exhibited his esthetic interests in experimenting with varied forms of dramatic technique and method but also a moralist and a humanist who has shown active interest in the socio-political upheavals of his times to find positive values for the people in crisis. MacLeish is certainly a rare artist in whom we find a delicate balance between the claims of society and the artistic vision.