CHAPTER III

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL THEMES

As already pointed out, in his expatriate years, MacLeish started writing in the tone and mood of disillusionment. Following Eliot, Pound and the French symbolist poets he expressed his disillusionment in new methods and techniques. In this period, he was obsessed with the problem of his own relation to the universe. In this ego-centric phase the themes that attracted him for poetic treatment were the passing of time, the transitory quality of Love and beauty and the meaning of life in the endless repetition of the cycle of birth-death-birth. He formulated, in this period, his own poetic theory in his poem "Ars Poetica":

A Poem should be equal to:
Not true.

............................................
A poem should not mean
But be

The poem clearly reveals his position as an artist who believed in the "art-for-Arts'-sake" tenet. The poet recognizes the independent existence of art free from social considerations.

---

A change occurs, however, in the direction of his poetry with the economic break-down in American followed by the advent of Hitler to power, and the outbreak of World War II. The political upheavals abroad and the economic disaster at home had aroused the latent patriotism of the poet and brought him back to America to concentrate on the contemporary problems beset by the economic collapse and the political turmoil engendered by the rise of Hitler to power. During these years, MacLeish "turns away from the introspective probing into his own thoughts and feelings and from the wishful reliance on abstract intuition as the source of truth, Trans from these to the social and political ideas agitating the minds of these contemporaries."² Now, he is concerned, to use MacLeish's own words, with "no longer A Man against the stars. It is Mankind: that which has happened always to all men, not the particular incidents of particular lives. The common, simple, earth-riding ways of hands and feet and flesh against the enormous mysteries of sun and moon..... Not the 'great,' the 'leaders,' the brass-voices, but these men, these lives, and now death taking them."³

As his poetic interests have been widened to the study of the common men and the problems confronting them in the modern political state and the complex capitalistic economy, it is no wonder that MacLeish should switch on

³ MacLeish, A Time to Speak (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), pp. 57-58
to drama which had always been an ideal medium through which the playwrights had expressed the common ideals, values and the problems of their people. A similar concern for the common people had stimulated W.B. Yeats to establish an Irish national theatre. In England, we have Auden, Eliot, Spender, Macneice who turned to drama for more or less similar reasons. Eliot, for example, writes: "The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre." Commenting on the younger poets - MacNeice, Sepender, Aduen, Lewis - Moody E. Prior points out: The younger poets seem also determined to leave the waste land. For the most part they showed an early inclination toward communism. What apparently inspired them in the new social experiment is the possibility which they perceived in it of making an art of political life, of controlling social forces toward a beneficent and just end. This has given them as human beings a sense of direction and of active participation in the modern scene. As artists, however, they have realized the danger which they run in their enthusiasm for what is still a revolutionary program for political action, and they have been careful to explain that they have no inclination

---

4 Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 146
to subordinate to their poetry of outright propaganda.⁵

And theater provides them with the an opportunity for "active participation in the modern scene" and to control "social forbes toward a beneficent and just end." Though MacLeish is a not a communist, his humanistic concern for the problems of the common people and his search for concrete values in his immediate social realities and his turning away from the Waste land school of Eliot and Pound, link him with the younger poets of England.

The social and the humanistic concern for the pressing economic problems confronting the common people in America brings all those literary artists, who have maintained their isolation from the moribund capitalist society and its materialistic values, together in a common protest against the economic system which has thrown millions of people out of employment. To quote Henry Steels Commager:

This all but unanimous repudiation of the accepted economic order by its literary representatives is one of the curious phenomena of American culture. The tradition of protest and revolt had been dominant in American literature since Emerson and Thoreau, but the

⁵ Prior, The Language of Tragedy, pp. 346-347.
protestants had by no means monopolised the stage, and their protests had been, for the most part, political or social rather than economic. Never before in American literature and rarely in the literature of any country had the major writers been so sharply estranged from the society which nourished them and the economy which sustained them....

The stock-market crash of 1929 awakened the Americans to the painful fact that their long-held doctrine of individualism and unhampered private enterprise would only lead to economic insecurity and the subjection of man's fate to the uncontrollable laws of the abstract market. The Americans believed from the early days of the colonial period, in the ideals of "success" and "self-help" which exhorted acquiring of wealth with spiritual realization. The pursuit of wealth was equated with the pursuit of happiness. They believed that

a man can accomplish more good with money than without it, that money is practically a prerequisite for happiness, and that .... no man is more pleasing unto God than the morally upright millionaire.

---

This "success myth" of the American tradition is the underlying ethic of American capitalism with its insistence on economic individualism and private enterprise.

The capitalist realizes himself in the process of acquiring more and more capital. In the process of acquiring more capital, he becomes an abstract expression of the growing capital and growing production. The acquisitive urge of the capitalist constantly revolutionizes the modes of production and increases the rate of production to make more and more capital for the future production. However, production in terms of market value rather than consumer value of the public alienates the interests of the capitalist from social interests. Then, acquisition becomes an end in itself and the market becomes an abstract force controlling the laws of production. The economic depression of the 1930's was partly the result of overproduction divorced from current consumption. "The period 1929-1941 began with a domestic debacle which stemmed from many causes, but perhaps the most basic was selfish blindness to the bond between group welfare and the satisfactions of the individual."8

MacLeish explores this problem of the relationship of the individual to society, individual freedom to social responsibility in his verse play Panic (1935). The play deals with the predicament of the capitalist, MaGafferty, the

---

protagonist of the play, in the face of mysterious economic forces which he can neither understand nor control. It is an attempt to show that tragedies can be written out of the contemporary situation and social conflicts. Regarding the possibilities of tragedy today, John Gassner has persuasively argued thus:

Why indeed cannot's 'Social drama' be tragedy?
It can be that.....if the protagonist looms humanly large among his fellow-creatures of the play and if his values, however deplorable in their particular results, magnify rather than diminish him as a human being. If the sympathies asserted by the author favoring the common man and emphasizing social causation do not cheapen life;
And if the struggle involving the principal characters has in view issues whose references are not less personal than social.⁹

Panic follows the classical dramatic structure in starting at the crisis. It opens with the crowd in the street reacting to the mounting economic crisis which was a result of the closing of the banks in different parts of the country. The action takes place in McGafferty's office in New York and in a street before an "electric news bulletin" that informs the crowd of the gradual failures of the banks in the country. In order to give the impression of a crowd, MacLeish selects a woman, A Man an old man, A young man, A Girl- both

male and female in their varying ages. The crowd, like Greek chorus provides us with the background and the situation from which the dramatic action and conflict spring up:

An Old Man:

Slowly the thing comes.
There are many sings: there are furnaces
Dead now that were burning
Thirty years in a town -
Never dark: there are foundries -
Fires drawn: trestles
Silent. The swifts nest in
Stacks that for generations
Flowed smoke. The patience of
Hawks is over the cities:
They circle in clean light where the
Smoke last year frightened them.

..................................................
..................................................

A Man:

From what ill and what enemy
Armless shall we defend the
Evening - the night hours?¹⁰

In the next scene, laid in McGafferty's office, McFafferty sits at the head of the head of the long table and around the table on straight chairs sit the

Bankers, the business partners of McGafferty. He asks the Bankers about the causes of the mysterious closure of the banks. But, the Bankers do not know anything more than the crowd in the street:

Bankers:
What's behind it!
Who knows what's behind it?
Who can tell us?
Ask the economists! Ask the professors - the best of them!
Ask the man in the plowed lot - the farmer:
The owners of famous Wells: successful merchants:
Men accustomed to great risks at sea:

Ask the fishermen fast to their winter cables -

All afraid - and of what? For God's sake fearing
What with their haltered ships and their cancelled Orders?
They don't know it to tell. They've never seen it.\(^{11}\)

Both the crowd and the Bankers who "speak in rotation - first one and then the next"\(^{12}\) are not human figures but are intended as the concrete expression of the abstract socio-economic forces against which MaGafferty comes into conflict. They represent the social necessity against which the protagonist struggles until his death. Though there is an external conflict

\(^{11}\) MacLeish, Panic, p. 9.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 8.
between the capitalist and the Unemployed, capital and labour free will of the individual and social necessity, the real conflict springs in MaGafferty himself. What Lukacs has said about the protagonists of modern drama has a special relevance to McGafferty:

The heroes of the new drama - in comparison to the old- are more passive than active; they are acted upon more than they act for themselves; they defend rather than attack; their heroism is mostly a heroism of anguish, of despair, not of bold aggressiveness. Since to much of the inner man has fallen prey to destiny, the battle is to be enacted within. We can best summerize by saying that the more the vital activating center is displaced outward (i.e., the greater the determining forces of external factors), the more the center of tragic conflict is drawn inward; it becomes internalized, more exclusively, conflict in the spirit.\(^{13}\)

The action of the play is a dramatic sequence of the psychological stages by which McGafferty learns that there were forces beyond his comprehension. McGafferty belongs to banking generation which believed in its "luck" and power of will to conquer the external circumstances. It believed that through "willpower sloth could be transformed into industry, wastefulness into frugality,

---

\(^{13}\) George Lukacs, "The Sociology of Modern Drama, "The Tulane Drama Review, 9, no. 4 (Summer 1965), 150-151.
and intemperance into sobriety. To the man of vigorous will, there is little impossibility. It mattered little whether the obstructions consisted of defects of character or defects of circumstances, for a strong will could conquer all." He believes in a strong will that conquers everything that opposes it. For him it is always one man against the world and always one man creates the world:

- Christ it's always one man makes a world:
- One man called Magellan: called Lenin:
- Called Cromwell, Rothschild: Leonardo:
- One man making one man's bed to sleep in:
- Making his bed in the brown water - De Soto:
- The trees float on it: making on foreign streets in the
- Dangerous cities his cold bed: exiled:
- Cancer eating him: running his own risk:
- Raising his face in the sun...

This world of "one man" of McGafferty is at stake when

- The thing comes pursing........
- Creeping as death creeps in an
- Old man: as sleep comes:
- ........................................
- ........................................
- Leaving on land nearest......
- Wagons abandoned: milk cows
- Slaughtered for no sickness:

---

15 MacLeish, Panic, p. 50.
Rigs rusting at pit-heads:
Pumps frozen: switches
Green with the rain: the oil
Thickened: scale in boilers --
Good gear all of it:
Sound metal: faultless:
Idle now: never manned.\textsuperscript{16}

as a result of the bank crisis.

Now, the protagonist must struggle against panic to preserve his world of "one man" which is gradually passing into the hands of the "nameless" and "faceless" men. He must find out the causes of the crisis and exercise his will to stop it.

There's nothing secret - mysterious:
Nothing men with human brains can't handle.
Smoke's a sign of fire....\textsuperscript{17}

Therefore, he declares "No? Well I will gentleman. I'll learn it."\textsuperscript{18} He proposes to carry the wrecked banks by raising the cash:

Look here -
A hundred million's easy round this table.
A hundred million does it - stops the runs -
Flattens the fear out.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} MacLeish, \textit{Panic}, pp. 5-6.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 10.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p. 24
But, the Bankers, his business partners, decline to cooperate with him in this venture. Deserted by his colleagues he struggles all alone against the crisis. Yet McGafferty declares:

    Do as you like! I'll stay! I will stay and fight it!
    Christ I'll fight it! One will!  

Then, the Unemployed led by the Blind Man enter McGafferty's office and The Blind Man pronounces does on him:

    Against Fate
    Even the strongest have not overcome.

                      
    The will is made in your own mind to die.  

From this moment he subconsciously suspects that The Blind Man may be true. Now, he becomes critical about himself and the power of his will. There is a psychological change from a McGafferty who could confidently say,

    God you talk like girls that see a ghost!
    There's only men and whether in this world:-
    The rest is wishing. you can stand and fight or
    Run and not fight but your choice will choose it.

    

    to a McGafferty who becomes Violent and confused:

    Tell me which one did it! Who's against me?
    God I'd break him for it if I knew! 

---

20 MacLeish, Panic, p. 43.
21 Ibid, p. 34
22 Ibid, p. 13
23 Ibid., p. 47.
His lack of confidence is reflected in the use of violent language. His will gradually weakens as the banks come to be closed one after the other. Now, his attitude is defensive rather than aggressive. He passively reflects over the words of The Blind Man and the unemployed:

What makes their hearts so sure?
Who told them? How can they know? Who'll destroy us?
................................................................
................................................................
After so long so dark are they so certain?
How do they know so surely the day's come?
Who told them so?  

McGafferty is obsessed with the thought that his world has come to an end. The pressure of reality drives him into his own thoughts. He asserts the viability of his world of the individual against the world of men who sacrifice the individual in the name of humanity:

Men who love humanity are men who
Hate the man: who'd first destroy him: that kind:
Their kind shrieking at us.  

Now, be becomes conscious of the vastness of the forces which he can neither control nor understand. Still he declares, "Christ! We'll teach them how

---

24 MacLeish, Panic, p. 50
25 Ibid., p. 49
the future's told"\textsuperscript{26} His fight is desperate. He is aware that the reality is stranger than himself and yet he cannot accept it because it is always "one man/who/makes a world".

At this juncture, MacLeish introduces lone, McGafferty's mistress, as a contrast to the idealistic and ambitious hero. Ione represents a receptive female soul sensitive to the concrete human need for sympathy and love while the hero is devoted to high and abstract objectives. Ione is not worried about the abstract problems. To her love is enough, man and woman in each other's arms, whatever worlds may crash. She attempts to divert McGafferty from his desperate fight against the mysterious forces by her warm love and sympathy:

No but come with me. I've made a fire:
   Four logs and a pitch-pine knot. We'll see the
   Shadows after softly on the ceiling.\textsuperscript{27}

For a few flickering moments she succeeds when McGafferty says,

To Hell with it! To Hell with cries and courage
   Facing the darkness on an empty stair!
   I'll close the door! With you I will!\textsuperscript{28}

But, he cannot surrender his dream of fame and greatness so easily. It is as if he had left the Hawthornian "magnetic circle of humanity" in his attempt to fight against the mysteries of time and there is no going back. He has alienated

\textsuperscript{26} MacLeish, \textit{Panic}, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. p.77
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. p. 79.
himself from the human world of sympathy and love forever. To accept the human world of sympathy, love, pity and the other tender feelings, is to accept his defeat. Therefore, he rejects Ione. Ione realizes that he had gone too far for her to save him:

They won't let you.
They won't let you come; I knew they wouldn't.
No. I knew they wouldn't let you.29

The news of the death of Shelton, a steel company lawyer, comes as a shock to McGafferty because he had considered him a man of iron will:

Even Shelton!
Dead in a urinal...30

Now, he is convinced that there has been forces intent on bringing about his destruction. He comes to see that the Panic is real, that it is not accidental but wished by some forces looming "like the wind in curtains."31

McGafferty follows Shelton in committing suicide. Before he dies, he declares in despair,

Well there's one that won't
By God there's one that won't - the grinning gangster -
Teeth through the tongue and silence and refuse!
Insolent and refusing!32

29 MacLeish, Panic, p. 82,
30 Ibid. p. 86,
31 Ibid. p. 89.
His death is a spiritual victory. He realizes his dream in his death. The play ends with a march of the crowd to a new order. But, the play contains no assertion of what this order shall be.

John Gassner, commenting on the impediments of writing a social tragedy, has observed:

The real impediments to the writing of social drama are want of talent and want of intelligence. Want of talent will result in the absence of life in the work, in abortive character-creation or even total absence of individualization. Want of intelligence will result in failure to surmount thesis. The playwright will be incapable of realizing the implications of the social situation and of letting his mind carry the initial social issue beyond its journalistic immediacy. The playwright will see case histories rather than humanity, problems rather than the human condition; he will be unable to see the forest for the trees.\textsuperscript{33}

If we read the play, \textit{Panic}, in the light of the above statement, MacLeish, it is true, succeeds in lifting the play beyond its social implications. He transforms the journalistic material and the realistic details of the situation into a tragedy of

\textsuperscript{32} MacLeish, \textit{Panic}, p. 97.
man against the inexorable laws of his destiny by exercising his imagination and poetic insight.

What MacLeish sees in the economic situation of the 1930s is not the economic problems of man but the human condition in the face of the mysterious economic forces which surpass human understanding and reasoning. The situation suggests to him an eminently tragic condition of man. The play is an exploration of this tragic situation, a penetration of its emotional meaning. What the poet sees is the "forest" and not the "trees" The ultimate impact of the play "is far more 'classic' than 'revolutionary'"\textsuperscript{34} This is to say that it is not a propaganda play taking sides but a dramatization of man's fate in the twentieth century. MacLeish's attitude is essentially poetic and he does not express indignation and condemnation towards his characters in the play. Thus McGafferty is not a "culprit" or a "villain" but a human being who suffers because of some lapses in his character, though his very convictions are the cause of mass suffering. "Condemnation is especially limiting because it simplifies everything to the point of banality. The greatest of all moral tragedians was Aeschylus. But Aeschylus would have had little stature as a tragic poet if the \textit{Agamemnon} had amounted to nothing more than a demonstration that it is wrong for a woman to murder her husband...... The

\textsuperscript{34} Joseph Wood Kritch, "Man's Fate" \textit{Nation}, Vol. 140 (March 27, 1935), pp. 369-70.
moral imagination is a form of understanding, whereas indignation is judgment signed and sealed."35

The play, Panic, is not a demonstration that the capitalist, McGafferty, is responsible for the economic crisis, though it implies that. McLeish is interested in the heroic struggle of McGafferty who has been conscious that reality is stronger than himself and who yet fights until his death. The theme of the play is as old as the Greek tragedies in which man had no remedy for his fate. That is what the play, Panic says:

Neither may strongest men by
Great wealth nor with power of
Will nor of force defend us --
They also now --
By time's flooding river
Swolen with ancient storms in the
Upland years before us are
Borne down- delivered to
Sudden and terrible swiftness of
Turbulent waters lifting the
Ancient trees : drowning
Cities on holy ground.36

The condition of man in the twentieth century is the same as it was in the Greek ages. The originality of the dramatist lies not in devising a new theme but

36 MacLeish, Panic, p. 61.
in realizing the same universal theme in different combinations and in selecting a story and a dramatic structure which assimilate the theme completely. "The broad scope of the playwright's range of possible invention in indicated by the fact that the same theme has often served as the basis of several great plays, by different authors, whose stories has shown no obvious resemblance of each other." 37

The situation of the hero in Panic is an traditional as the theme of the play, the heroic individual against fate. But, the plot is novel. It is this "old wine in the new bottle" that stimulates in us the reaction of surprise. "The play appeals in two ways to an audience. In so far as its component situations are traditional, it calls forth the response of recognition, and in so far as its compounded plot is novel it stimulates the reaction of surprise ....the emotion of recognition is more profound, and therefore more enjoyable, than the titillation of surprise." 38 Thus, we recognize that the situation of McGafferty and his destiny and through him our own are the same as that of Oedipus, Lear and Hamlet. This recognition of the universal human element in life increases our experience of the world and ourselves. MacLeish, to be sure, succeeds in raising the play from its purely topical interest and its journalistic relevance to a

38 Ibid. pp. 159-160.
tragedy of man in which the human condition is as pathetic and as tragic as it was in the ancient times.

The other impediment to write a social tragedy as pointed by John Gassner is "want of talent". According to him, "want of talent" results in the "absence of life in the work, in the abortive character-creation or even total absence of individualization". Here, MacLeish falls prey to his "want to talent" which results in the failure of characterization. In Panic, all the characters, except McGafferty, are symbolic figures or abstractions. They are not humanized. They are intended to supply the focus for the forces against which McGafferty fights. They are A Woman, A Young Man, The Blind Man, The Bankers, A Man and not individualized human beings who have a life of their own. Their roles are fixed and their actions are controlled. "This failure to visualize or humanize the people", Malcolm Cowley points out, "who surround McGafferty is, I think, the real weakness of the drama,"

MacLeish, by attempting to lift the play beyond its contemporary immediacy, fails to impart the historical perspective to the play. The characters are detached from their immediate social environment. The result is the unreality of the characters. The "feel" is detached from the "fact", the character

---

is detached from the action. In that case, the characters do not speak through their immediate social environment. What MacLeish neglects is the fact "that 'society' is a power and a mystery of custom and inside the man and surrounding him, as the fish is in the sea and the sea inside the fish..."\textsuperscript{41} Even McGafferty speaks as though he is a man outside time and place - an eternal man:

Only forgetfulness! Only forgetting! Only the
Trick time plays us with his side - show mirrors
Twisting the thing to come until it's vast:
Larger than life: grotesque: inhuman: threatening -
Glozing the thing behind until the small
Familiar image glimmers like a hearth: the
Hurt all out of it: the harm gone: charming -
And yet the two are one thing: our own selves:
Our own shapes twice repeated: once behind us:
Once before us in the left - hand glass!\textsuperscript{42}

It is for this reason that he fails to supply the focus for the capitalistic civilization and life for which he fights. "There is no dramatic relation", as Cleanth Brooks observes, "between the civilization which is going to pieces and the central character of the play, the banker McGafferty."\textsuperscript{43} The lyricist in

\textsuperscript{41} Miller, "Introduction", \textit{Collected Plays}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{42} MacLeish, \textit{Panic}, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Modern Poetry & the Tradition} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 120.
MacLeish dislocates the characters from their social environment of sing the eternal tragedy of man.

MacLeish, however, humanizes McGafferty by introducing the love scenes between him and Ione. Had it not been for the love interest McGafferty would have become a simplified abstraction. In the beginning of the play, he is no more than a typical capitalist proposing to struggle against the crisis and chiding his partners for their cowardice and arguing with the radicals that his world has been secure and everlasting. His character, at this stage, is thin, simplified, and lacks the complexity he acquires in arguing with his mistress, Ione. A comparison between McGafferty proposing to fight at the beginning of the play and the McGafferty arguing with his mistress is revealing. "There is nothing secret - mysterious" for a McGafferty who wills to fight and for him the Bankers "talk like girls that see a ghost!" There is only self-assertion and no critical attitude in his speeches at the beginning. But, his attitude becomes critical when he talks about love and argues with his mistress. He becomes a "life-like", complex human being torn between the conflicting thoughts:

You've taken him! You've taken what? You think
Greatness of a man's at least a man?
Yes. Or a man at last is only greatness: an
Empty shoe and the foot gone from it: vacant: the
Shape a woman makes of him to love:
Named and the face gone: kept as girls keep favors:
Fragile and flimsy as the brittle ash that
Once was water-leaves but lines a book no:
Crumbled as easily as that. You'll find the
Scurf of greatness underneath your nails and
Think with loathing of the man who touched you.\textsuperscript{44}

And he appeals to our humanity when he appeals to his mistress:

Why laughing! It's thing to laught at
What hurt would you feel if the words were true?
What grief would touch you if the time's against me--
The chance gone wrong: the turn of the earth unkind?
What pain would touch your heart? Old men are
Old men's ills are laughable. Old men's loves are laughable.
Old men's ills are laughtable. Old men's loves are
Always to be laughed at.\textsuperscript{45}

It is a desperate human voice protesting against the ills of time. It is the
voice of a disillusioned old man who cannot persuade himself to think that his
mistress has loved him even after his defeat. It is the anguish of a strong,
powerful man who has been made to realize that he is a powerless aging man at
the mercy of the woman he had once commanded. In this and other speeches of
the later part of the play, McGafferty becomes alive when he examines himself

\textsuperscript{44} MacLeish, Panic, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p. 68.
closely and when he becomes aware of his old age after all his glory and fame have vanished.

In spite of its attempt to achieve the heights of a poetic tragedy, it is pertinent to examine how for *Panic* approximates the works of the ancient masters. It is true; the play conforms technically and thematically to the classical standards. We have a hero, McGafferty, who is a noble and powerful man possessing a strong will-power as in the classical tragedies. And he suffers destruction because of *hubris*, his "tragic flaw". As in the Greek tragedy, we have a Chorus in the form of a street crowd which comments on the wider significance of the action of the play. Like the Greek tragedy, the play alternates between the Chorus and the events of the play. It also maintains the classical unities of time and place. It also maintains the classical unities of time and place. In short, *Panic* is structurally a tragedy. But, merely conforming to the blueprints of a classical tragedy does not automatically create a tragedy of a high standard. To quote Heilman: "It ought to go without saying that genre and excellence are not identical, that a work may technically be tragic and yet be inferior."\(^46\)

There is no doubt that MacLeish has a tragic vision and that he organizes his materials from a tragic point of view:

The sense of reality determines the point of view and hence the central form of the work. In conversion of raw material into drama, the writer will produce melodrama if he adopt one point of view, tragedy if he adopts another... if for the artist the center of reality is the victim of evil, and it is victim's perspective of events that determines the form, the result will be a melodrama of disaster or a problem play; but if the artist finds reality centering in the consciousness of the doer, and communicates with us primarily through that consciousness, he will write in the tragic form.\(^{47}\)

In the light of the above observation, MacLeish focuses his attention not on the victims of the economic depression but on the morally sensitive capitalist hero-villain, whose will power to control the crisis gradually gives way to a realization of his helplessness in the face of the inimicable economic forces. In fact, the play centers its interest in McGafferty's psychological conflict between his belief in man and his power to control the things outside him and his subconscious awareness of the reality contrary to his expectations. This is to say that the premises form which MacLeish starts to write and the conception that transforms the raw materials into drama are tragic. But in realizing this tragic

---

conception and the vision of life in dramatic terms, he fails to bring depth and intensity to the play.

In the first place, the play lacks an action which would have its own integrity and also portray the character within its limits. Instead, MacLeish uses the action and the events of the play merely as a sort of background against which the hero enacts his moral dilemma. The action is "illustrative" rather than dramatic. There is no interaction between the hero and the external events which he wants to control. He acts less than he is acted upon. Though he declares that "Christ I'll fight it!"48 and the author gives us the sense of his fighting in such lines as "Call Chicago. Have him draw for fifty./Draw on him for fifty. Kite the checks./Load the banks that need it. Keep them kited./Three days ought to see us through!"49, the picture does not carry conviction. In this connection, we should consider the views of John Von Szeliski on tragedy:

True tragedy is dramatic in its picture of a desperate attempt to avoid catastrophe. Poetically, the unhappy end is of course assured, but the hero does not assume this at the start of the proceedings and instead fights until it is too late.... contemporary vision, on the other hand, often expects and welcomes an end to the troubles of existence; instead of tragic struggle,

---

48 MacLeish, Panic, p. 43.
49 Ibid. pp. 51-52.
therefore, we see the act of waiting for the end.\textsuperscript{50}

Thus, McGafferty gives us the impression of a hero who passively awaits his destruction rather than a hero who actively fights against his fate.

Secondly, the play evaporates into an abstract generalization by eliminating the socio-economic details of the contemporary economic crisis. Like Maxwell Anderson \textit{Winterset}, MacLeish's projection of the contemporary situation is not adequate to convince us that \textit{Panic} is a contemporary play dealing with a modern problem. It is true, as in every great tragedy, the materials must be "simplified" so as to lift the play beyond its contemporary relevance and the socio-economic aspects must be subordinated to the treatment of a more basic issue of the human life. But, simplification should not outreach its limits to make the play lose its sensuous impact. As Ronald Peacock puts it, simplification must be achieved from "the predominant sense of unity derived not from the absence but from the mastery of complexity, the restraint laid upon variety."\textsuperscript{51} Gassner expresses a similar idea when he says, "A major confusion is caused, I believe, by extreme, romantic interpretations of the idea that a tragedy must have 'universality'. The assumption is made that this can be achieved only by escaping from the actual action or substance of a play, from a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
specific context of reality, into the vast inane generalizations about life and spirituality.”  

The poet's lack of efficiency in handling the complex materials can also be seen in his non-dramatic poetry. Cleanth Brooks, for example, points out the lack of dramatic tension and the complex attitude toward his materials in his poems when he finds MacLeish's best poems 'palpable and mute.... motionless in time'. Brooks goes on to add: "They are remarkably solid, but they are as static as statutory. They do not involve shifts in tone; there is little or no development in the poet's attitude." He further points out: "MacLesish's sensibility is rich but lacks principles. His poetry does not have the intricacy of idea necessary to the poetry of a poet like Yeats. One may sum up by saying that his poetry lacks dramatic tension."

Let us consider, as an example MacLeish's poem, "Men":

Our history is noble and tragic.
We trusted the look of the sun on the green leaves.
We built our towns of stone with enduring ornaments.
We worked the hard flint for basins of water.

We believed in the feel of the earth under us.
We planted corn grapes apple-trees rhubarb.

---

53 Modern Poetry & the Tradition, pp. 121-122.
54 Ibid., p. 119.
Nevertheless we knew others had died.
Everything we have done has been faithful and dangerous.

Our history is grave noble and tragic.
Many of us have died and are not remembered.
Many cities are gone and their channels broken.
We have lived a long time in this land and with honor.\(^{55}\)

The poem is typical of all men everywhere. It might be spoken by Greeks or modern Americans. It reveals the poet's skill in the use of imagery that does not date or locate the poem. But, it lacks complexity, it does not involve any shifts in tone and there is no change in the poet's attitude altogether. A series of parallel statements, with no effort at subordination or order, are juxtaposed. This piling up of detail after detail, image after image does not communicate any complex idea. The imagery as in *Panic*, stresses only those things which are the common denominator of all peoples at all times. The poem establishes that the history has its dignity and its simple seriousness and that "we have lived a long time in this land and with honor." Apart from that there is no meaning in the history of "Men."

Thirdly, the introduction of Ione, McGafferty's mistress, and the love interest between them is structurally defective. It distracts from the main action of the play and also dilutes the unity of impression. Oscar Cargill, for example,

---

points out, "Here, for a moment, Panic has some of the Aristophanic quality of Eliot's fragment."\(^{56}\)

Finally, the hero lacks tragic consciousness. "In tragedy, suffering is never futile, any more than it is accidental. It does not arise without a cause, the discovery of which is an aspect of the enlightenment attained in tragic drama."\(^{57}\)

The discovery that Oedipus makes about himself in Sophocles' tragedy gives us the greatest tragic scene in all literature. At the end of the play, after passing through intense suffering and confusion, he comes to realize his own guilt and violation of the established morality. He is struck with remorse:

\begin{verbatim}
Do not counsel me any more. This punishment
That I have laid upon myself is just.
If I had eyes,
I do not know how I could bear the sight
Of my father, when I came to the house of Death,
Or my mother: for I have sinned against them both
So vilely that I could not make my peace
By strangling my own life.

..............................................

    Ah Kithairon:
Why did you shelter me? When I was cast upon you,
Why did I not die? Then I should never
\end{verbatim}


\(^{57}\) Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times, p. 54.
Have shown the world my execrable birth.\textsuperscript{58}

On the other hand, McGafferty never acquires this tragic self-realization. Instead he puts the whole blame for his destruction upon abstract forces. To quote Heilman: "In tragedy we find responsibility and guilt; it is there we discover the source of evil, not in things, not in others, but in ourselves."\textsuperscript{59} Against this statement, consider the lines of McGafferty is his moment of despair at the end of the play:

\begin{quote}
O We know the signs by now- the adversities.
Pure and causeless and crank as a child's murder:
The punishment not for evil: wrongs rewarded.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

By denying his responsibility for his downfall, he becomes a helpless victim to be pitied rather than a tragic hero to be admired.

Thus, \textit{Panic}, because of the technical defects pointed above, falls short of achievement as tragedy by classical standards. Of course, as pointed out in Chapter III, when discussing the problem of writing a verse play under the modern conditions, the modern poets in writing a verse play or a poetic tragedy have been confronted with the problem of making verse acceptable on the modern stage. Moreover, the modern materials are so complex that they lend themselves to poetic treatment only after stylization of action and dialogue

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Tragedy and Melodrama}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{60} MacLeish, \textit{Panic}, p. 87.
which to some extent destroy the sensuous impact of the play. Considering these and other technical difficulties it must be admitted that Panic has been a worthy attempt by its author. Kenneth Burke, for example, writes:

   The success with which MacLeish has met the problem of writing poetic drama makes me very enthusiastic about Panic. I consider it no slight triumph for a man to take a current issue, surrounded with the most realistic connotations, and treat it in a style neither pompous nor lame.  

   Having discussed MacLeish's dramatic art in projecting the modern theme in dramatic and poetic terms, I, now, propose to discuss the socio-economic implications of the play. Though the play, Panic, contains as in all tragedies, no explicit message for the ills of capitalism, though the causes of the economic crisis are not dramatized, it implicitly chides the capitalists for their lack of concern for the welfare of society. As pointed out, Panic is not a propaganda play to arouse the masses against the ills of capitalism like the revolutionary plays of Odets and Irwin Shaw. Its end is "not action but realization, and the moral is not Marxian but Aeschylean...."  

   It can be maintained that tragedy, with its objectivity and impartiality as well as its disinclination to preach, is a form not "useful" in times of crisis and

reformation. Of course, this is not to suggest that MacLeish should have written a social drama exposing the ills of capitalism, the greediness of the capitalists and thereby mobilize the people to take action. In fact, the selection of the form of drama depends upon its author's philosophy and his outlook of life in general and his specific attitude towards society in particular. MacLeish's selection of tragic form is quite consistent, whether "useful" or not, with his views about the capitalistic economy and the welfare of the society.

As the Elizabethan writers wrote their tragedies to warm the kings by the concrete examples of their hero-kings who had fallen out of their power because of their lust for power, indifference to the welfare of their subjects and some such "tragic flaw," MacLeish writers his modern tragedy to warm the capitalists, the modern "empire builders", of the coming death of capitalism. Just three years before the publication of the play, Panic, MacLeish in an open letter, "To the Young Men of Wall Street," writes:

If you can create an ideas of capitalism which men will support with their hope rather than despair, you will inherit the world. If you cannot, you and your children and ourselves with you will vanish from the West.64

---

63 See Gassner, "Tragic Perspectives," pp. 15-16
In fact, the poet finds nothing wrong with capitalism in itself insofar as it regulates its economy within the limits of the bond between group welfare and the satisfactions of the individual. Once this bond is broken because of the selfishness and greediness of the individuals the welfare of the group is bound to be affected in which case capitalism cannot survive.

In this connection, the Blind Man in the play speaks for MacLeish when he warns McGafferty, "We are your body-sick that you may perish!/We are your anguish-paid that you may perish!"\(^{65}\) If the people are sick with poverty capitalism cannot survive. McGafferty committing suicide is another indication that capitalism would die of its own faults rather than any revolutionary forces. "You yourself in your minds will make the /Fate that murders you."\(^{66}\)

The tragedy of the capitalist, McGafferty, serves as an example to the modern financiers and the industrialists as to what happens to them or say capitalism when their acquisitive interests become divorced from group welfare of the society at large.

A closely related problem that finds casual reflection in MacLeish's plays is the problem of the impact of the material values like money, success, fame, etc., upon human relationships-social as well as personal. In McGafferty, for example, we have a typical capitalist who reduces even the love between a man and a woman to a commodity that can be purchased by wealth and high status

\(^{65}\) MacLeish, Panic, p. 30.
\(^{66}\) Ibid. p. 33.
in life. He has no value for feelings and emotions. The world he lives in is not
the human world of sympathy, kindness, love and other tender feelings, but an
impersonal world of business in which everything has meaning only in terms of
its value and utility. For him, love given without material gain is love "given in
charity." Consider the following conversation between him and its mistress, Ione:

McGafferty:
    You who need the weight of fame to
    Feel an old man's body on your body-
    What will you do when the fame is gone?
Ione:
    There'll be the man still.
McGafferty:
    And you'll take the man?
Ione:
    Why not? Why shouldn't I? I have taken him.
Mcgafferty:
    You've taken him! You've taken what? You think the
    Greatness of a man's at least a man?
    Yes. Or a man at last is only greatness: an
    Empty shoe and the foot gone from it: vacant: the
    Shape a woman makes of him to love:
    Named and the face gone: kept as girls keep favors.

This lack of human feeling in him has been the result of his obsession
with wealth and fame. In fact, this lack of human feeling alienates him from

---

67 MacLeish, Panic, p. 94.
68 Ibid. pp. 70-71.
that "magnetic circle" of the social relations. The break with his social relations is a necessary condition for a capitalist who produces his goods not in terms of the consumer value of the people but in terms of a "commodity" or market value. To quote Christopher Caudwell,

Seen from the viewpoint of the bourgeois; bourgeois society is a free society whose freedom is due to its individualism, to its completely free market and its absence of direct social relations, of which absence the free market is the cause and expression.\(^{69}\)

To accept love, therefore, without material base is to accept the human world of sympathy and social relations. To enter into the human relations, by the same token, is to come into conflict with the growing expansion of the capital and free market. Therefore, love cannot comfort McGafferty who is a symbolic expression of this market-oriented economy.

Similarly, in J.B., Sarah, the wife of J.B., the big business man of his times, complains to her husband:

You never even see my clothes.\(^{70}\)

What MacLeish seems to convey is that man in his endless pursuit of material success and fame transcends the human world to identify himself with the

material values and thereby becomes an impersonal entity ceasing to be a human being capable of warm feelings and tender affections both to his fellow-beings and to his female-partner.

In *Herakles*, we have Prof. Hoadley who becomes responsible for the destruction of his family life in his pursuit of discoveries in physics. Mrs. Hoadley always attacks the professor with her sharp irony for neglecting her and her family. She reminds him how his irresponsibility has turned his son into a homosexual and a wastrel. She reveals her dissatisfied life with the professor and laughs ironically over the Nobel Prize speech of her husband in which he praises the glory and achievement of science in the modern world:

Mrs. Hoadley:

........................

*Imitating*

'Our hands full of triumph: our mouths full of...

Agh!

What could it mean to *him*, that .... rhetoric!

Hoadley:

What it means to the rest of us, probably.

Mrs. Hoadley: *her voice rising*

The *rest* of us!

Hoadley:

Me, Than.

Mrs. Hoadley:
It wasn't said to the rest of us.
It was said to the king of Sweden....
In a public speech.... on television .... on the radio..... The news
papers.
And what did it mean to the king of Sweden?
..................................................
Well, what did it mean, Professor?
The greatest scientist the world has heard of,
lauréate of its most exalted prize,
confessing at the fabulous moment of his triumph,
His and history's, the world's......
...........................................................
..... the moment of my greatest happiness for you....

Hoadley :
........................
It wasn't me that spoke there.

Mrs. Hoadley:

her laugh

Who? Mankind?71

She is aware that the discoveries of her husband are not going to benefit her
family. Rather, they have destroyed her family and deprived her of the affection
and care of the husband. Therefore, the Nobel prize speech has no meaning for
her as a wife and a mother of the family.

Apart from the problem of perverted relationships of the family and the individual, MacLeish points out the lack of feeling in the modern man for the personal life of a scientist whose discoveries are more important than the scientist himself as an individual having a name and a distinctive personality. The poet marks the impersonal attitude of the modern man when Hoadley complains:

............... They wanted
work --- a man at work ---- a scientist
caught at being scientist -- a discoverer
fresh from his discovery, his new found land.

When the discoverers come home
no one asks them who they are :
it's where they've been that matters --- what
continents, what islands, seas ......

Magellan
Known forever by that narrow water.
That's how they'll remember me__
not Hoadley but his voyage.....⁷²

The same lack of human feeling in the modern man can also be seen in the cameraman in J.B. who takes pictures of J.B. and Sarah at the instant they receive the news of the accident of their children. The camera records the shock

and anguish on their faces while J.B. tries to hide his face from the cameraman. J.B. responds angrily with, "You bastard!" The picture publicizes J.B. and Sarah's grief to the world. This illustrates how unfeeling the modern me can be towards others' misfortunes. The cameraman and the news reporter are after a news story which would be sold and read by millions of unfeeling people. Their commercial interests make them inhuman and impersonal in taking the picture of J.B. and Sarah in a cool and calculating manner.

To cite yet another example of callousness and lack of feeling for others in the modern society, the conversation of the old women in J.B. is worth reproducing here:

Mrs. Bolticelli:
    Look at them sores!
Mrs. Murphy:
    All that's left him now is her.
Mrs. Botticelli:
    Still that's something -- a good woman.
Mrs. Murphy:
    What good is a woman to him with that hide on him?--
    Or he to her if you think of it.
Mrs. Adams: Don't:
Mrs. Lesure:
    Can you blame her?

73 MacLeish, J.B., p. 69.
Mrs. Murphy: I don't blame her.
All I say is she's no comfort.
She won't cuddle.\textsuperscript{74}

Their conversation reveals their indifference to the lot of J.B. who suffers from sores on his body and the succeeding family disasters involving the death of all his children. They comment on his inability to be the sleeping mate for his wife at this juncture of his sufferings, both physical and mental.

In fact, MacLeish envisages the whole crisis at the heart of the modern civilization as concomitant result of the decline in the modern man's capacity to "feel" the things around him. In a number of articles, he points out the dehumanizing effect of science and its abstractions in depriving the modern man of his experience of himself and the world around him. In his article "Why Do We Teach Poetry?" he writes:

To the true child of abstraction you can't know apple as apple. You can't know tree as tree. You can't know man as man. All you can \textit{know} is a world dissolved by analyzing intellect into abstraction - not a world composed by imaginative intellect into itself.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} MacLeish, J.B., p. 105.
Influenced by science and its abstractions, the modern man has developed an objective detachment towards the other and a critical intellect which has destroyed all the human feelings and emotions. He does not know what he is and he often does not have a definite experience of himself as a human being gifted with rich spiritual and aesthetic resources. He does not either know what he feels or feel what he knows. This divorce between feeling and knowing, or to use Eliot's term, his "dissociation of sensibility", has resulted in confusion of the means and ends on the one hand and disintegration of the personality on the other.

Confronted with this crisis of values and the integrity of the human personality, MacLeish argues the importance of poetry as a medium through which man can once again rejuvenate his former spiritual vigour and vitality. "The time is past," writes MacLeish, "for the defenses of poetry. The defenses have all been written. The time now is for the challenges." 76 He remarks further:

This failure of the spirit is a failure from which only poetry can deliver us... For only poetry, of all those proud and clumsy instruments by which men explore this planet and themselves, creates the thing it sees. Only poetry, exploring the spirit of man, is capable of creating in a breathful of words the common good men have become

incapable of imagining for themselves.\textsuperscript{77} 

MacLeish asserts the poet's approach to reality over that of a scientist who dissolves the physical world into an abstraction. Instead of creating the living relation between the objective world and the viewer, the scientist detaches the viewer in the process of "knowing". On the contrary, the poet or an artist creates that living relation by revealing the object and the subject, the viewed and the viewer in their internal relationship. Thus, the poet by revealing his capacity to be moved by the world outside him, manifests the relationship between himself and the outer world. It is this relationship between himself and the world outside him which he reveals to us, makes us see who and what we are. Talking about the fallacy of the scientists who attempt to know the world through abstractions, MacLeish writes:

They are wrong because they do not realize that all true knowledge is a matter of relation: that we really know a thing only when we are filled with a wonderfully full, new and intimate sense of it' and, above all, of 'our relation with' it'.\textsuperscript{78}

To be ignorant of who and what we are, because we have cut ourselves off from poetry or art, is to become indifferent to ends. The choice of human ends is closely dependent upon the knowledge of what we are; and the

\textsuperscript{77} MacLeish, A Time to Speak (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), p. 4
\textsuperscript{78} "Who Do We Teach Poetry?,” Modern American Reader, p. 177.
knowledge of what we are involves a definite experience of ourselves as "human beings" and not a sum of atoms and abstractions such as a biological, socio-economic phenomenon as Marxism and science claims us to be.

The poet is convinced, therefore, that before there can be any social and economic reforms, there is the spiritual need to come alive again, to establish a humane world in which man can live again like a human being with the dignity of an individual. The social implications of all MacLeish's plays, in the ultimate analysis, are directed towards this end.