

THE EVOLUTION OF MATTER AND SPIRIT
IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

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Frederick Philip Lenz

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Frederick Philip Lenz

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the Ph.D. degree, hereby recommend acceptance of the dissertation.

Louis Simpson, Professor
Department of English

Gerald B. Nelson, Associate Professor
Department of English

Paul J. Dolan, Associate Professor
Department of English

Sung-Bae Park, Assistant Professor
Department of Religious Studies

The dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Herbert Weisinger, Dean
The Graduate School

AUGUST 1978

Abstract of the Dissertation
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The principle theme in the poetry of Theodore Roethke is the quest for identity. Roethke sought to discover his identity by exploring the memories of his childhood, in his transcendental experiences with Nature, and through his sexual relationships with women. During his lifetime Roethke completed seven volumes of poetry, and he reflected his personal odyssey in search of identity in these volumes.

In his first book, Open House, Roethke reflected the battle within his consciousness between his spiritual aspirations and his sensual desires. During this period of his life he believed that it was necessary to rigidly control his physical desires in order to allow his spiritual aspirations to flourish. But the result of this rigid suppression was the opposite of his intention. He found that the intense depression and alienation that resulted from keeping his spirit "spare" inhibited his spiritual development.

In order to come to terms with this split within his psyche the poet returned to his "roots" through self analysis and meditative reflection. In his second book, The Lost Son, he examines the causes of the conflict between his spiritual aspirations and physical desires

by probing both his childhood and subconscious memories. He concludes that his initial sexual impulses were innocent and in accord with his spiritual self. But as he grew older his "innocent" sexual impulses were corrupted by experience and by a wrong understanding of their true purpose. This realization provided a sexual liberation for the poet and he was able to accept that his sexual desires were not essentially evil. In Praise To The End!, The Waking, and Words For The Wind he continued to depict his struggle for psychic unity.

In his last book of verse, The Far Field, Roethke presented his final vision of his identity. Towards the end of his life the poet felt that his body and his soul were "one," and that both the impulses of his body and soul were holy. He no longer believed that his physical body was a stumbling block to higher spiritual realization, and he acknowledged that simply suppressing his physical desires would not lead him to the enlightened states of consciousness that he sought. He had come to realize that instead of suppressing his physical desires, he had to transcend them. By doing this he believed that he would eventually attain a state of mystical illumination.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Sri Chinmoy and Alo Devi.
Without your constant love, encouragement and guidance its creation
would not have been possible.

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PREFACE

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Louis Simpson, for all of the inspiration and guidance he has given me since I started my course of study at Stony Brook. I originally chose to study at Stony Brook because I had read many of his poems, and I wanted the opportunity of studying with, and being exposed to, a great poet. I would also like to thank Professor Gerald Nelson, Professor Paul Dolan, and Professor Thomas Rodgers for all the time and encouragement they have given me. Each of them has been a shining light in what has often been a black night of graduate study. I hope others are as fortunate as I was in finding their way through their office doors.

I must also acknowledge my gratitude to Professor Yakira Frank, who taught me to love poetry, to Professor Charles Owen, who refined that love, and to Barbara Johnson who first introduced me to the poetry of Theodore Roethke.

Last but not least I must thank my father, who has constantly encouraged me to continue my education over the years, and without whose encouragement and support I would have given up long ago.

INTRODUCTION: WAKING TO SLEEP

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, – a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.¹

Theodore Roethke's father, Otto Roethke, died when Theodore was only fifteen years old. The first evening following his funeral Theodore sat in his father's place at the dinner table, and from that day forward he assumed as many of his father's duties as his age permitted.² Otto Roethke's death exerted a profound influence upon his son, and the search for his "lost father" is one of the recurring themes in Roethke's early poetry.

In her book, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master, Rosemary Sullivan has suggested that because Theodore Roethke's father died during an antagonistic phase of his relationship with his son, the death of his father became the major theme in his poetry. It is her belief that if Otto Roethke had lived for several more years a reconciliation between father and son would have taken place.³ While it is true that Roethke's father's early death did cause him to actively seek other models for a father figure, it is an error to believe that the search for the lost father is the essential theme throughout Roethke's poetry.

The principle theme in the poetry of Theodore Roethke is the quest for identity. Roethke believed that: "The human problem is to

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. William H. Gilman (1965), p. 310.

² Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (1968) , p. 43; hereafter referred to in notes as Glass House.

³ Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (1975), p. 7.

find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible."⁴ Roethke sought to discover his identity by exploring the memories of his childhood, in his transcendental experiences with Nature, and through his sexual relationships with women. During his lifetime Roethke completed seven volumes of poetry, and he reflected his personal odyssey in search of identity in these volumes.

Acting under the assumption that Roethke's personal development is accurately reflected in the progression of his poetical works, we can divide the growth of the poet's mind into several stages. In his early uncollected poems, and in his first book of verse, Open House, Roethke sought his identity by following his spiritual aspirations. During this phase of his life Roethke felt that he had to suppress his sexual desires because they inhibited his spiritual growth. He believed that he had to keep his spirit "spare," and that by rigidly controlling his spiritual development he would succeed in attaining the levels of transcendental consciousness he aspired to:

I was going through, though I didn't realize it at the time, a stage that all contemplative men must go through. ...The spirit or soul...this I was keeping "spare" in my desire for the essential. But the spirit need not be spare: it can grow gracefully and beautifully like a tendril, like a flower. I did not know this at the time.⁵

Owing to the intensity of both his spiritual aspirations and his sexual desires the split within Roethke's psyche only widened; instead of experiencing higher states of spiritual illumination, he only felt the intense pains of spiritual and physical frustration.

In an attempt to discover the origin of the division between his physical desires and his spiritual aspirations Roethke sought to explore both his personal and ancestral past. His allegorical journey into the self is the theme of his second book of poetry, The Lost Son and Other Poems. In The Lost Son the poet journeys into his past in

⁴ On the Poet and His Craft; Selected Prose, of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (1965), p. 20; hereafter referred to in notes as S.P.

⁵ S.P., p. 21.

an attempt to assuage his internal conflicts. By reflecting on his early childhood and youth Roethke comes to the conclusion that his initial sexual impulses were innocent and in accord with his spiritual self. But as he grew older his "innocent" sexual impulses were corrupted by experience and by a wrong understanding of their true purpose. Instead of delighting in his sexual impulses and using them as a means for exploring new aspects of life, he had sought sexual experiences only for the sake of sensual gratification. This realization provided a sexual liberation for Roethke, and for the first time since his childhood he was able to feel that his participation in sexual activities was not essentially evil.

In his next book, Praise To The End!, Roethke continued his explorations of the nature of sexuality. The poems in Praise To The End! are a celebration of Eros. In Praise To The End! Roethke turns from the tenets of Calvin, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards to his second Puritan heritage, Samuel Morton and the revellers at Merry Mount. The poems in Praise To The End!, while often monotonous in tone and imagery, are important because they reflect the poet's acceptance of his sexual energies. Once Roethke could accept his physical nature as being originally good instead of originally sinful, he was able to use sexual love as a means of finding his identity.

In Roethke's fourth book of poetry, The Waking, the poet left off his explorations of childhood and adolescent sexuality and instead took up the themes that were to dominate his later poetry, the transcendental aspects of Nature, sexual love, and the soul. Following in the footsteps of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, Roethke believed that within all of life there is an animating spiritual force, which is an extension of God. All creatures and things are linked by this spiritual force, and although outwardly they may seem to be separate from each other, inwardly they are one. The poet believed that it was possible to gain a sense of his identity by contemplating the spiritual force that exists within any object or being. He reasoned that since he was inwardly one with all of creation, then his identity was not limited to his own physical self

and individual soul; he was part of everyone and everything, and his true identity was universal.

Roethke sought this vision of the "oneness" of life, which he felt revealed his true identity. He found that the experience of the "oneness" most frequently occurred when he contemplated the spiritual force within his soul, in Nature, and through sexual love:

It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being – and in some instances, even an inanimate thing – brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe... The second part of this feeling, the "oneness," is, of course, the first stage of mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: the sense that all is one and one is all... This experience has come to me so many times, in so many varying circumstances, that I cannot suspect its validity.⁶

In the intensity of sexual union Roethke believed that he was temporarily able to transcend the physical limitations of his own consciousness and perceive that his inner self existed both within his own soul and within the soul of the woman he loved. As long as he could maintain this perspective during the act of sexual love Roethke felt that lovemaking was a vehicle which would increase his own sense of identity. But when his passions eclipsed this perspective he indulged in sexual love not as a means for furthering his search for identity, but only for pleasure's sake. When this happened he became even more grounded in his physical consciousness and in consequence he was drawn further away from the vision of "oneness" that he sought.

In Words For the Wind, Roethke's fifth book of verse, the poet explicates both the illuminations and frustrations that he experienced in using sexual love as a vehicle for finding his identity. Since he was now comfortable in both his creatureliness and transcendentalism the poet was free to explore the several sides of his being. But while his experiences in sexual love did, to an extent, take him one

⁶ S.P., pp. 25, 26.

step further in his quest for identity by giving him brief glimpses of the "oneness," they could not bring him to the heights of mystical awareness that Roethke aspired to reach. Roethke realized that he had to find another means of finding his identity that would provide him with even greater insights into his self, and that would not at times end in spiritual frustration.

The vehicle that Roethke employed to further extend his consciousness was meditation. By meditating on the Self within Nature and within his own being he was able to have progressively deeper experiences with God. He found that unlike sexual experiences which afforded him only a brief glimpse of the "oneness," the revelations that came from meditation endured, and constantly lifted him into higher planes of consciousness.

In the final section of Words For The Wind and in Roethke's final book, The Far Field, Roethke reflects the transcendental realizations that he gained through meditating on his inner self, and on the Self within Nature. Roethke came to believe that his physical body and his soul were one, and that both the impulses of his body and soul were holy. He no longer believed that his physical body was a stumbling block to higher spiritual realizations, and he acknowledged that simply suppressing his physical desires would not lead him to the enlightened states of consciousness that he sought. He had come to realize that instead of suppressing his physical desires, he had to transcend them. He conceived of this transcendence of physical desires as a gradual process in which one must first go "backward" before going "forward" and making "some progress."⁷ By going through this process of psychic evolution Roethke believed that he would eventually transform his physical desires into spiritual aspirations, which in turn would lead him to a state of mystical illumination.

In "The North American Sequence," a sequence of six longish poems in The Far Field, Roethke explores the themes of death and dying, and

⁷ S.P., p. 39.

presents the reader with the final vision of his identity. The poet perceives that his physical self, although transitory, is a reflection of his eternal Self. Since he felt that his deepest Self was spirit, and eternal, he was able to accept that his death was not a final end, out another step in an eternal process of death and rebirth.

In Roethke's final vision of his identity he is able to delight, both in the physical and spiritual parts of his being. He no longer felt that his body and soul were opposites as he had in his early life; he now perceived that his body and soul were complementary, that in their essence they were "one" with each other:

God bless the roots! - Body and soul are one!
The small become the great, the great the small;
The right thing happens to the happy man.⁸

⁸ Theodore Roethke. The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (1968), p. 250; All quotations from Roethke's poems, unless otherwise indicated, are from this volume, hereafter referred to in notes as C.P.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PREMONITION

Walking this field I remember
Days of another summer.
Oh that was long ago!¹

Theodore Roethke's first book of poetry, Open House, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1941. It had taken Roethke ten years to write the poems contained in this one thin volume, many of which had been previously published in a number of poetry magazines. Roethke began to seriously write poetry in 1931 after a year of graduate study at Harvard. His poems began to appear regularly in periodicals from 1931 to 1935. Twenty-three of his poems had been published by 1934.²

During this period of his life Roethke was teaching courses in English at Lafayette College. At Lafayette he performed the triple role of English teacher, Public Relations man for the college, and Tennis coach. Roethke seemed to do well at all three of his occupations, but he excelled at teaching English.³ In 1935 Roethke accepted a teaching position at Michigan State College in Lansing.

At Michigan State Roethke suffered the first of a series of mental breakdowns that were to occur sporadically throughout his lifetime. He was hospitalized from mid-November of 1935 until January of 1936. Roethke's breakdown resulted in the loss of his teaching post at Michigan State, and after his departure from Mercywood Sanatorium, he returned to his family's home in Saginaw, Michigan.

For Roethke, poetry was a means of confessing the terrible guilts and insecurities that plagued his being. In "Silence," one of the poems from the third section of Open House, Roethke confesses his inner turmoils to the reader, something he seemed incapable of doing to those around him:

¹ C.P., p. 6.

² Glass House, p. 85.

³ Glass House, p. 84.

The wheels of circumstance that grind
 So terribly within the mind,
 The spirit crying in a cage...
 The tight nerves leading to the throat
 Would not release one riven note:
 What shakes my skull to disrepair
 Shall never touch another ear.⁴

When the inner turmoils within the poet became unbearable, Roethke could no longer write. At these times he would enter into a manic state which was usually followed by a breakdown.

The signs were obvious. It was as if a change in his metabolism occurred and his whole life moved to a more intense level, physically and psychologically. He became increasingly excited, simultaneously cheerful and alarmed, eager to talk and talking incessantly, and full of extravagant projects. He indulged in eccentricities of dress like wearing three pairs of trousers at once, rubbers when it was not raining...he liked to think himself rich during these times, rich and powerful. He slept little.⁵

One of Roethke's doctors has stated that Roethke's bouts with mental illness were simply the price he paid for his methods of work.⁶ Several critics have also suggested that Roethke's breakdowns were self-induced, and that his breakdowns were the poet's attempts to drive into the interior regions of his own consciousness. It is more likely that Roethke's breakdowns resulted from his inability to reveal his inner turmoil directly to his friends, associates, or even to his wife. Throughout his life the poet was continually playing different roles whenever he was with others, and he only dropped his "masks" and allowed his real self to be displayed in his poems.⁷

Roethke remained with his family in Saginaw until he was hired as an instructor in the English Department at Pennsylvania State University in September of 1936. He stayed on at Pennsylvania State until 1943, two years after the publication of Open House.

⁴ C.P., p. 22.

⁵ Glass House, pp. 105, 106.

⁶ Glass House, p. 109.

⁷ Glass House, p. 109.

The majority of the poems that appear in Open House were written or revised while Roethke was at Pennsylvania State. According to Roethke's girlfriend, Kitty Stokes (with whom he spent more time than anyone else at Pennsylvania State), the poets that Roethke read and reread during the writing of the Open House poems were Blake and Donne.⁸ While these two poets exerted a profound influence on his later poetry, most of the poetic references in Open House are to Emily Dickinson, W.H. Auden, Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, and Stanley Kunitz. Roethke decided that he had enough poems for a book in 1939. Stanley Kunitz suggested the title and put the poems in the order in which they appear in the book. The manuscript was turned down by Henry Holt and Company and by Oxford University Press. It was finally accepted for publication in 1940 by Alfred A. Knopf.⁹

The poetry contained in Open House is a poetry of confession. The poet needs to confess to the reader how it is with him and in particular the intense pain and suffering he feels resulting from the conflict between his spiritual aspiration and his physical desires. He also needs to confess and proclaim his visions of Nature and the metaphysical realizations that were starting to flood his consciousness.

Roethke's poetry of "confession" was given a warm critical reception. W.H. Auden, writing in the Saturday Review of Literature said:

Mr. Roethke is instantly recognizable as a good poet... Many people have the experience of feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life; some quickly put it out of their mind, others gloat narcissistically on its unimportant details; but both to remember and to transform the humiliation into something beautiful, as Mr. Roethke does, is rare. Every one of the lyrics in this book, whether serious or light, shares the same kind of ordered sensibility. Open House is completely successful.¹⁰

⁸ Glass House, p. 124.

⁹ Glass House, pp. 124, 125.

¹⁰ Glass House, pp. 126, 127.

Many other reviewers, including Babette Deutsch of Decision, Louise Bogan of the New Yorker, and Elizabeth Drew of the Atlantic Monthly, were equally favorable in their reviews of Open House. The division of the poems, however, has caused some critics and reviewers difficulty. John Holmes, writing for the Boston Transcript, was typical of this group. He did not realize that the five sections of the book, and the poems placed in those sections, had not been arranged by Roethke but by Stanley Kunitz.¹¹ His review, although based on the incorrect premise that Roethke had determined the order of the poems, was the first attempt to classify the poems in Open House by theme:

The wholeness of Open House demands comment. Mr. Roethke has built it with infinite patience in five sections. The first is personal pronoun; the second, the out-of-doors; the third is premonition of darker things - death among them; the fourth is the purest of metaphysical wit, something very rare in our time; and the fifth contains still another side of this poet's nature, the human awareness of which he has become capable in his recent development.¹²

The first book-length critical study of Roethke's early works to appear was Ralph J. Mills, Jr.'s book, Theodore Roethke. In his book Mr. Mills divides the poems in Open House into two categories:

The two subjects on which Roethke's imagination most often fastened in Open House are the correspondence between the poet's inner life and the life of nature, and the strengths or weaknesses of the individual psyche. Frequently he tries to demonstrate hidden relationships in the process of both.¹³

While Mr. Mills' divisions are to an extent helpful in assessing two of the poet's primary concerns, they do not really categorize the poems accurately. For the purpose of this study I have grouped the poems in Open House not according to the sections into which they

¹¹ Glass House, p. 127.

¹² Glass House, p. 127.

¹³ Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Theodore Roethke (1963), p. 1C.

fall, or by the poet's modes of perception as Mr. Mills does, but by the themes with which the poems are most frequently concerned.¹⁴

There are four principle types of poems contained in Open House: (1) Poems that deal with the struggle between spiritual aspirations and sexual drives, particularly those of the poet; (2) Poems of confession in which the poet is driven to reveal his inner nature; (3) Pantheistic poems in which the poet sees the physical world and Nature as touchstones to a higher spiritual reality; and (4) Poems that deal with the metaphysical and mystical themes. Throughout the entire canon of his poetry Roethke rarely departs from these four types of poems. The only addition would be the love poems in his later books, which rely heavily on the struggle between spirit and flesh, metaphysical, and confessional themes.

It was Roethke's belief at the time of the composition of Open House that the "spirit starves until the dead have been subdued."¹⁵ For Roethke, subduing the dead meant two things: conquering physical and sexual desires, and overcoming the memories of the past. In Roethke's own case this meant reconciling his own uncertain feelings regarding his family and overcoming his strong sexual passions which he believed were innately evil and stemmed from original sin. In "Feud" the poet presents his own view of original sin. Roethke believed that the only cure for this "sin" was to do battle with the "legacy of pain," and in and through this process the physical passions would be subordinated to man's spiritual nature.

There's canker at the root, your seed
Denies the blessing of the sun,
The light essential to your need.
Your hopes are murdered and undone.

¹⁴ There is a certain amount of overlap in these categories, and very often a particular poem will fit into one or more of these divisions. These categories are not intended to be so rigid as to preclude exceptions or occasional overlapping of individual poems. Their aim is to facilitate the exploration of the principle themes in Open House.

¹⁵ C.P., p. 4.

The dead leap at the throat, destroy
 The meaning of the day; dark forms
 Have scaled your walls, and spies betray
 Old secrets to amorphous swarms.

You meditate upon the nerves.
 Inflammé with hate. This ancient feud
 Is seldom won. The spirit starves
 Until the dead have been subdued.¹⁶

Ghosts of the "dead" are also seen in "Prognosis," but in this poem the outcome is more hopeful. "Prognosis" is filled with images of sickness and death. The poem begins with the assertion that existence is only a sham and that if for just one moment we lower our guard then our existence, even though it may be facile, will come to an end. The poem moves through a series of considerations of infections of the body and the spirit, suggesting the mutability of the human condition. In the third stanza the poet rejects the "platitudes" and pride of the human condition, "the mediocre busy at betraying themselves, their parlors musty as a funeral home."¹⁷ But in the final stanza Roethke declares that even though the ghost of the "devouring mother" plagues the son, or the "father's ghost" spoils the honeymoon, these ghosts from the past cannot destroy the human spirit. Roethke's prognosis for the human condition is positive: "the nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost."¹⁸

In "Orders For The Day" Roethke deals with the explosiveness of sexual passions and how these passions can obscure the beauty of the spirit:

The fleshbound sighing lover,
 His clumsy fingers bruise
 The spirit's tender cover.¹⁹

In "Orders For The Day" it is not the spirit which eventually dominates, but the blood, the primal urges for conquest and

¹⁶ C.P., p. 4.

¹⁷ C.P., p. 5.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 5.

¹⁹ C.P., p. 7.

reproduction. In "Epidermal Macabre" the poet makes fun of his physical self-loathing. But below the surface of this strained humor there is an undercurrent of inner torment.

Indelicate is he who loathes
 The aspect of his fleshy clothes...
 Yet such is my unseemliness:
 I hate my epidermal dress,
 The savage blood's obscenity,
 The rags of my anatomy,
 And willingly would I dispense
 With false accouterments of sense,
 To sleep immodestly, a most
 Incarnadine and carnal ghost.²⁰

In "Prayer Before Study," Roethke further displays his distaste for his own physical and intellectual natures:

So caged and cadged, so close within
 A coat of unessential skin,
 I would put off myself and flee
 My inaccessibility.²¹

In "Verse With Allusions" Roethke explores an alternative to his physical self-loathing, which is to allow the physical senses to do as they wish, instead of trying to control them.

Roethke's predicament was that he existed in two worlds, but that he was not comfortable in either of them. He had visions of a higher spiritual order and had come to the conclusion that simply indulging in the passions for the gratification of his senses could not fulfill him any longer. Yet he was not firmly established enough in the transcendental joys of the spirit so that he could totally ignore the pleasures of the body. He was in a kind of spiritual adolescence, knowing that a higher fulfillment lay ahead of him and realizing that he could no longer return to the bliss of ignorance. And yet he could not help envying those individuals who still existed in the bliss of ignorance:

²⁰ C.P., p. 19.

²¹ C.P., p. 24.

Thrice happy they whose world is spanned
By the circumference of Hand.

Who want no more than Fingers seize,
And scorn the Abstract Entities.

The Higher Things in Life do not
Invade their privacy of Thought...

They feed the Sense, deny the Soul,
But view things steadily and whole.

I, starveling yearner, seem to see
Much logic in their Gluttony.²²

In the poem "To My Sister" the poet's intense hate of the physical self is reflected in his advice to his sister. The poem opens as a casual reminiscence of childhood:

O my sister remember the stars the tears the trains
The woods in spring the leaves the scented lanes
Recall the gradual dark the snow's unmeasured fall.²³

But in the second stanza the poet drops the pretense of remembering the pleasant days of childhood. His invocation of the days of youth gives way to an admonition of his sister to: "Defer the vice of flesh the irrevocable choice."²⁴ In the final line of the poem Roethke includes what would pass for a Freudian slip in conversation: "Remain secure from pain preserve thy hate thy heart."²⁵ But in the context of the poem it inverts the poet's advice to his younger sister into a revelation of the poet's intense self-hate, and total rejection of sexuality. A number of years after the composition of Open House Roethke reflected upon his spiritual and mental state at the time he was writing these poems:

But the young often do have an acute sense of defilement, a hatred of the body... Hyperbole, of course, but behind it is still the same desire for a reality of the spirit.

²² C.P., p. 25.

²³ C.P., p. 5.

²⁴ C.P., p. 5.

²⁵ C.P., p. 5.

Again I was wrong. For the body should be cherished: a temple of God, some Christians say.²⁶

The division within Roethke's consciousness caused by the divergent pulls of his spiritual and physical natures caused the poet tremendous suffering. But being first and foremost a poet, Roethke was able to use his own sufferings in his verse. Fortunately for both Roethke and the evolution of his poetry, he was soon able to expand his vision and through a continual exploration of the self he began to at least tolerate, if not accept, his physical nature as being a necessary part of his total being.

Many of the poems in Open House are confessions of Roethke's deepest inner joys, sorrows, and visions. The majority of these poems: "Open House," "Silence," "The Auction," "My Dim-Wit Cousin," and "The Reminder" are confessions of pain. "Long Live The Weeds" and "Might Journey" are respectively a confession of the poet's struggle for identity, and a confession of the poet's delight in the landscape of America, and the pure joy of perception.

In "Open House" Roethke confesses the "nakedness" of his emotions which he proclaims are to be the primary subject matter of his poetry:

My secrets cry aloud.
I have no need for tongue.
My heart keeps open house...
My truths are all foreknown,
This anguish self-revealed.
I'm naked to the bone,
With nakedness my shield.²⁷

In the last stanza of the poem, however, Roethke undercuts his own platitudes with a reflection of his deeper self which rages against both the falsities of existence and his own self-proclaimed truths:

The anger will endure.
The deed will speak the truth
In language strict and pure.
I stop the lying mouth:

²⁶ S.P., p. 22.

²⁷ C.P., p. 3.

Rage warps my clearest cry
To witless agony.²⁸

The "lying mouth" that Roethke alludes to in the fourth line of this stanza is certainly symbolic of those individuals who Roethke referred to in "Prognosis" as:

The mediocre busy at betraying
Themselves, their parlors musty as a funeral home.²⁹

But the "lying mouth" also refers to Roethke. A part of the poet's inner self rages indiscriminately against both his own falsity and his visions of Truth. Roethke's confession in the poem "Open House" is not a confession of his love, or even of his "anguish," but of the rage that he houses within the depths of his own being.

In "Silence" the poet reiterates this rage whose only outlet was in his poetry:

What shakes my skull to disrepair
Shall never touch another ear.³⁰

"The Reminder" describes the poet's condition after a woman he loves has left him. In this poem Roethke confesses his essential loneliness and his need for love. "My Dim-Wit Cousin" depicts the moment of self-realization when Roethke sees that the faults he has branded in others also exist within himself. In "The Auction" Roethke cleverly envisions the sale of the furnishings of his inner "house:"

Once on returning home, purse-proud and hale,
I found my choice possessions on the lawn.
An auctioneer was whipping up a sale.
I did not move to claim what was my own.

One coat of pride, perhaps a bit threadbare;
Illusion's trinkets, splendid for the young;
Some items, miscellaneous, marked 'Fear';
The chair of honor, with a missing rung.³¹

²⁸ C.P., p. 3.

²⁹ C.P., p. 5.

³⁰ C.P., p. 22.

³¹ C.P., p. 21.

After the "auction" was complete Roethke felt a sense of liberation with: "all the rubbish of confusion sold," because for Roethke the act of confession was its own absolution.

In "Long Live The Weeds" Roethke praises not only his imperfections, which he alludes to as "weeds,"³² but he also praises the process of gaining one's identity through fighting these imperfections. Roethke's confession in this poem is that he is actively taking part in the struggle to find his identity, and that he can only gain his identity through these constant internal battles. In "Night Journey" Roethke shares his memories of a train ride through the dark hours of the night. In his poetic journey he confesses the pure joy he experiences in the act of perception. In both of these poems the poet's confession provides an intimate glimpse of the inner self that lay beneath the mask he wore for the world to see. Roethke's essential need was to confess his own humanity, both the agonies and joys that existed beneath his self-created personae.

"The Light Comes Brighter," "Mid-Country Blow," "The Coming Of The Cold," and "The Heron" are all poems in which Roethke depicts Nature as being both a physical and spiritual entity. All four of these poems start with clear descriptions of scenes in the natural world, but either at the end or in the middle of the poems Roethke creates a connection between the scene he has been describing in the poem, and a parallel condition that exists within his own consciousness. In "The Light Comes Brighter," the poet begins by describing the seasonal shift from Winter to Spring:

The light comes brighter from the east; the caw
Of restive crows is sharper on the ear.
A walker at the river's edge may hear
A cannon crack announce an early thaw...

Soon field and wood will wear an April look.
The frost be gone, for green is breaking now;

³² C.P., p. 18.

The ovenbird will match the vocal brook,
The young fruit swell upon the pear-tree bough.³³

In the last stanza of the poem Roethke draws a parallel between the shifting of the outer seasons and an inner renaissance that is taking place within his own consciousness:

And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,
The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled,
Will turn its private substance into green.
And young shoots spread upon our inner world.³⁴

In "The Light Comes Brighter" Roethke equates the organic processes in Nature with the similar process that takes place within himself. By doing so he affirms his identity as part of the natural world.

In "The Coming Of The Cold" Roethke again draws man and Nature together by describing scenes in the natural world in human imagery: "ribs of leaves," "frost is marrow cold," "The small brook dies within its bed," etc.³⁵ "The Coming Of The Cold" depicts Nature as an animate entity with an intelligence and emotions of her own.

Roethke's early concern with metaphysical themes is depicted in "The Signals," "Prayer," "The Unextinguished," and "The Premonition." In "The Signals" Roethke reveals that there is a hidden reality just beyond our physical vision which he has glimpses of from time to time. "The Unextinguished" also depicts this metaphysical reality which he indicates is obscured by man's absorption in physical reality:

Deep-hidden embers, smothered by the screen
Of flesh, burn backward to a blackened heap.³⁶

The poem "Prayer" is a discourse on the nature of the senses, which is portrayed dramatically in the form of a prayer to God. The poet prays that if all of his senses except one must be removed, he would choose to keep his sight. In this poem Roethke uses his

³³ C.P., p. 11.

³⁴ C.P., p. 11.

³⁵ C.P., pp. 14, 15.

³⁶ C.P., p. 17.

physical eyesight as a metaphor for the inner eye of spiritual vision. His final invocation at the end of the poem: "Let Light attend me to the grave!"³⁷ is an affirmation of his belief in the supremacy of the spirit over the physical body.

"The Premonition" relies on the central image of "Hair on a narrow wrist bone," undoubtedly an image borrowed from John Donne's "The Relic." "The Premonition" is a remembrance of the poet's youth, in which he had a glimpse into the unseen reality beyond the physical:

Walking this field I remember
 Days of another summer.
 Oh that was long ago! I kept
 Close to the heels of my father.
 Matching his stride with half-steps
 Until we came to a river.
 He dipped his hand in the shallow:
 Water ran over and under
 Hair on a narrow wrist bone;
 His image kept following after, -
 Flashed with the sun in the ripple.
 But when he stood up, that face
 Was lost in a maze of water.³⁸

The poem begins as a simple childhood remembrance of father and son walking through a field. But when they come to a river, and the father dips his hand into the water, a metamorphosis takes place. The boy perceives the mutability of his father's physical body, which is symbolized by the "Hair on a narrow wrist bone." A moment later his father stands up and a second metamorphosis takes place, his father's face is "lost in a maze of water." While the first metamorphosis reveals to the boy that death eventually would claim the father's body, the second metamorphosis, using water as a symbol of eternal life, reveals that his father's spirit or soul is eternal. This "premonition" gives the boy a brief glimpse of the dual nature of man's existence.

³⁷ C.P., p. 8.

³⁸ C.P., p. 6.

In his later books of poetry Roethke was to further develop the themes and subjects depicted in Open House. The style of the poems in the first book is relatively crude compared to the sophistication of some of Roethke's later poems. But Roethke's use of language did, in some ways, foreshadow the vitality and compressed energies of his later poems. Open House is for the reader a "premonition" of Theodore Roethke's developing vision and poetic abilities. But on the basis of this one small volume no one, including Roethke, was able to gauge that the young Theodore Roethke would one day be one of America's best known poets.

CHAPTER TWO: THE REDEEMER COMES A DARK WAY

The path tells little to the serpent.
 An eye comes out of the wave.
 The journey from flesh is longest.
 A rose sways least.
 The redeemer comes a dark way.¹

In the Spring of 1943 Theodore Roethke took a leave of absence from Pennsylvania State and started teaching at Bennington College. At Bennington Roethke was exposed to a much more sophisticated academic community than he had been at Pennsylvania State. Roethke seemed to welcome the change. He adjusted to his new quarters in Shingle Cottage² and soon struck up friendships with Kenneth Burke, Peter Drucker, Eric Fromm, Karl Knaths and Martha Graham.³

Roethke had started composing the first of his "greenhouse" poems as early as 1942. He came to Bennington with a: "solid reputation as a minor poet, a reputation founded on short lyrics that followed what was then the metaphysical fashion."⁴ But it was at Bennington that Roethke was to drastically change both his style of verse and his methods of composition. It was also at Bennington that Roethke was to have his second breakdown.

In a "Statement of General Nature of Project" Roethke outlined some of his intentions for the poems that were to appear in his second book, The Lost Son And Other Poems:

My whole effort of late has been to write a lively understandable poetry that a good many people can read with enjoyment without having their intelligence or sensibility insulted. My first book was much too wary, much too gingerly in its approach to experience; rather dry in tone and rhythm. I am trying to loosen up, to write poems of greater intensity and symbolical depth."⁵

¹ C.P., p. 66.

² Glass House, p. 135.

³ Glass House, p. 137.

⁴ Glass House, p. 143.

⁵ Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke (1969), ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., p. 113; hereafter referred to in notes as S.L.

This loosening-up process took Roethke three years, during which time he only published two or three poems. But in 1946, he published "Carnations," "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," "A Field of Light," and six other "greenhouse" poems. By the Fall of 1945 Roethke had already written parts of the poem, "The Lost Son." He was in what Allan Seager describes as the "fever of creation,"⁶ when he started to enter into a manic phase. By Christmas recess Roethke had lost touch with reality to such an extent that he had to be hospitalized. He was given shock treatments that "terrified him" at Albany General Hospital, after which he spent several weeks at a nursing home in Albany.⁷

Following his release from the hospital Roethke returned to Saginaw to stay with his relatives, as he had done following his first breakdown ten years earlier. He would pace the floors continually, dictating correspondence and poems to his sister throughout the long winter nights.⁸

It was in this condition of only partial stability that Ted was working on "The Lost Son" and the other long poems of his second book, "A Field Of Light," "The Long Alley," and "The Shape Of The Fire," but he was at home, the fountain of memories, and the greenhouse was there and the field behind it.⁹

Roethke did not return to Bennington and remained in Saginaw where he finished working on the poems for The Lost Son. The poems were completed by February of 1947, and that month he returned to his teaching post at Pennsylvania State.

In The Lost Son And Other Poems Theodore Roethke continues to grapple with the split in his psyche caused by the struggle between his passions and spiritual aspirations. In an attempt to negotiate a peace between these two aspects of his being Roethke returns to the

⁶ Glass House, p. 146.

⁷ Glass House, p. 147.

⁸ Glass House, p. 148.

⁹ Glass House, p. 148.

past hoping to find something there to assuage his internal conflicts. Roethke's search for his "roots" takes place on both a physical and psychic level. On a physical level the poet recalls scenes and incidents from his childhood. On a psychic level he probes the depths of his own consciousness, trying to discover the meaning of existence:

The human problem is to find out what one really is:
whether one exists, whether existence is possible.¹⁰

The poems in The Lost Son are divided into four sections. In the first section the subject matter is restricted to occurrences in Roethke's father's greenhouses. In the second section the poet relates incidents from his youth outside of the greenhouses. The third section of the book contains five metaphysical Nature poems. The final section contains four long poems that are journeys into the poet's psyche in which he explores themes of sterile sexuality and sexual guilt.

The "greenhouse poems" in the first section of The Lost Son are filled with images of primeval sexuality and moral recrimination. The poet depicts the world of his youth as a primitive Eden under glass in which he was free to explore reproduction, growth, decay, and death in a controlled environment which was overseen by his father and his employees:

Maybe a word more about the character of this greenhouse:
While highly scientific in some ways...it was also highly
feudal in character: there were always six or eight people
kept on the payroll for sentimental reasons; tramps were
always fed and lodged in the boiler houses; neighbors took
coal from the coal pile when they were broke. The whole
idea was to be completely self-sufficient in everything.
To this end, they had their own ice house; woods for moss;
a small game preserve...etc.¹¹

In "Cuttings," "Transplanting," and "Cuttings (later)" the poet focuses his attention upon the primeval life force, and on the strength of that life force to survive and multiply:

¹⁰ S.P., p. 20.

¹¹ S.L., p. 162.

Thus urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
 But stems struggling to put down feet,
 What saint strained so much,
 Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?¹²

The sheer power of the generative force as depicted in "Root Cellar," "Forcing House," and "Orchids," in which plants and vines are "Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates" or "Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes,"¹³ makes the reader feel that he is witness to some nameless primitive horror which even a Kurtz wouldn't have been comfortable with. As one critic has remarked:

When he returned to the greenhouses, his attention was riveted on growth, on the willful, tenacious struggle of plants into being in a drive against death. In effect, he went to the vegetal world to penetrate to the root sources of life and in that way to redefine himself. His initial discovery was of a world of multiplicity, terrifying and degrading to human sensibilities.¹⁴

"Moss Gathering" and "Child On Top Of A Greenhouse" are poems of moral recrimination. In "Moss Gathering," Roethke reflects upon the beauty of going to the bogs near his house and gathering the moss that was used in the greenhouses. But his reminiscence of beauty ends abruptly as he recalls the feelings of guilt engendered by his desecration of life and beauty:

But something always went out of me when I dug loose those
 carpets
 Of green, or plunged to my elbows in the spongy yellowish
 moss of the marshes...
 As if I had broken the natural order of things in that
 swampland...
 As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a
 desecration.¹⁵

In "Child On Top Of A Greenhouse" moral recrimination does not come from within the protagonist, instead it is directed towards the

¹² C.P., p. 57.

¹³ C.P., p. 38.

¹⁴ Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (1975), p. 14.

¹⁵ C.P., p. 40.

child from the outside. In a letter to Kenneth Burke dated May 2, 1946, Roethke made the following remarks about the poem:

this act of being up on top of this greenhouse was something that even the most foolhardy older kids condemned because if you dropped you pitched through the glass to if not certain death, a broken back or neck and bad cuts¹⁶

The child is caught by the workers as he carefully walks along the top of one of the greenhouses. The workers "pointing up and shouting,"¹⁷ and the normally neutral chrysanthemums "staring up like accusers,"¹⁸ vividly creates the child's state of consciousness, which is fraught with guilt and verges on the border of paranoia.

The poems in the second section of The Lost Son depict events in Roethke's youth outside of the greenhouses. While "My Papa's Waltz," the first poem in this sequence, is probably Roethke's most anthologized poem, "Double Feature" and "Pickle Belt" depict the poet's deeper concerns. "Pickle Belt" is a reflection from Roethke's adolescent years when he spent a summer working on a production line in a pickle factory. The vitality of the youth in the poem in contrasted to the sterility of the permanent factory workers whose only thought is "about Saturday pay."¹⁹ The youth is experiencing the "Prickling" of "sixteen-year-old lust"²⁰ as he fawns over the girl working next to him. In "Pickle Belt" Roethke does not condemn the youth's sexuality. He posits that the youth's feelings were natural, as opposed to the factory workers, whose passions had grown unnatural in their lust for money:

Whatever he smelled was good:
The fruit and flesh smells mixed.
There beside him she stood,--
And he, perplexed;²¹

¹⁶ S.L., p. 119.

¹⁷ C.P., p. 43.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 43.

¹⁹ C.P., p. 46.

²⁰ C.P., p. 46.

²¹ C.P., p. 46.

"Double Feature" is another reminiscence from youth. In this poem Roethke portrays his growing dissatisfaction, as a youth, with the material world. In the first stanza he describes the motions of human life in a theatre after the evening movie has ended:

Lovers disengage, move sheepishly toward the aisle
 With mothers, sleep-heavy children, stale perfume, past the
 manager's smile²²

In the second stanza the scene shifts to the street outside of the theatre where the protagonist drifts along the sidewalks observing the "shop windows."²³ But in the third stanza the poet shifts from a mundane to a cosmic perspective, using the activity of going to the movies as emblematic of humanity's hopeless attempt to fill its inner emptiness with physical phenomena:

A wave of Time hangs motionless on this particular shore.
 I notice a tree, arsenical grey in the light, or the slow
 Wheel of the stars, the Great Bear glittering colder than
 snow.
 And remember there was something else I was hoping for.²⁴

In the third section of The Lost Son the poet envisions the transcendental aspects of natural phenomena. In "The Waking" Roethke strolls among the fields and meadows and experiences a "oneness" with Nature:

And all the waters
 Of all the streams
 Sang in my veins
 That summer day.²⁵

"The Minimal" and "The Cycle" are affirmations of the constant renewal that the poet sees in Nature. "River Incident" relates a metaphysical experience that Roethke had while standing in a stream. The poem depicts a metamorphosis in which the earth becomes the poet's body,

²² C.P., p. 47.

²³ C.P., p. 47

²⁴ C.P., p. 47.

²⁵ C.P., p. 51.

and he becomes aware of the eternality of his own existence by virtue of his "oneness" with Nature:

Sea water stood in my veins.
 The elements I kept warm...
 And I knew I had been there before,
 In that cold, granitic slime.
 In the dark, in the rolling water.²⁶

In a letter to Babette Deutsch dated January 22, 1948, Roethke assessed the principles of spiritual growth and prosody that he adhered to while constructing the poems in the fourth section of The Lost Son:

1. To go forward (as a spiritual man) it is necessary first to go back.
2. In this kind of poem, to be true to himself and to that which is universal in him, the poet should not rely on allusion.
3. In this kind of poem, the poet should not "comment," or use many judgment-words; instead he should render the experience, however condensed or elliptical that experience may be...²⁷

For Roethke the later poems in The Lost Son were a means of going "backward." In and through the composition of the poems the poet had to retrace his steps back to the womb, and even beyond the womb, into what Roethke referred to as a "history of the race."²⁸ Roethke's return to the past was a mythic descent into Hades in which he had to confront all of his ghosts, in order to become whole again.

The poems in the first three sections of The Lost Son are a restrained return to the past in which the poet presents specific visions of his youth to the reader.

Roethke's overall outline of The Lost Son suggested how carefully tailored the sections of the book were to be:²⁹

²⁶ C.P., p. 51.

²⁷ S.L., p. 139.

²⁸ S.L., p. 139.

²⁹ Several features of this outline were modified, but most of Roethke's

1. An uncompleted sequence about my father's greenhouse called News of the Root. In this I am trying to avoid the sentimental and literary diction of the Georgians or the earlier Floral Offerings of the nineteenth century and write a natural sensuous poetry with some symbolical reference in the more complex pieces. The poems done so far are not sufficiently related and do not show the full erotic and even religious significance that I sense in a big greenhouse: a kind of man-made Avalon, Eden or paradise.
2. A sequence of satirical poems, more violent in rhythm, mostly about the suburbs...
3. A series of three longish poems about a mental and spiritual crisis. The first of these, The Lost Son, is included. The central section of this poem will be revised and expanded.
4. A group of pieces about rivers and watery places. In these I try to suggest the relation between the visible and invisible reality by a merging of sound and imagery. ("The Minimal," "River Incident").
5. A series of dramatic lyrics. "My Papa's Waltz" or "Pickle Belt" are examples of this kind of thing.³⁰

What is most interesting about Roethke's projected outline of his second book is the third section in which he refers to "A series of three longish poems about a mental and spiritual crisis." The "mental and spiritual crisis" he was alluding to was probably his second breakdown. If this was the case then we can assume the Roethke not only had the ability to make use of his own mental illness to create new forms of verse, but that he might even have induced his breakdowns precisely for that end.

Most of the final section of The Lost Son was written shortly after Roethke's second breakdown while he was in a condition of only "partial stability." The poems in the final section reflect a

projected poems occur in The Lost Son, with the exception of the "satirical poems" indicated in the second part of his outline. The poems listed as "dramatic lyrics" in the fifth part of his outline became section two of The Lost Son. The poems about rivers, listed as the fourth part of his outline, were placed in the third section, the poems listed as part three of his outline became the final section of his book, and the poems listed under part one of Roethke's outline were placed in the first section of The Lost Son.

constantly shifting sensibility as the poet alternates his subject matter and diction in a series of surrealist flights from reason to irrationality:

At first sight, the poems appear to be surrealist juxtapositions of nursery rhymes, riddles, songs and chants. Viewed more closely it becomes clear that Roethke is imitating an Elizabethan tradition, that of the Bedlam Beggar, the natural man, stripped of all pretenses, who stands on the edge of incoherence, courting madness as a recovery of sense.³¹

In "The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," and "The Shape Of The Fire" Roethke dismisses rational modes of thinking and demands that the reader do the same. Roethke insists that the reader accept his own alternating moments of sense and incoherence, under the premise that by doing so a greater understanding or Truth will be revealed. Viewed in this light these four poems are an experiment in what Rimbaud referred to as a "dereglement de tous les sens."³² The poetry that occurs as a result of this process frequently alternates between being brilliant, boring, and confusing.

The first of these four poems, "The Lost Son," is divided into five sections. The first section, The Flight, is a fearful running away, which is punctuated with hallucinatory periods:

The protagonist so geared up, so over-alive that he is hunting like a primitive, for some animistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the sub-human. These he sees and yet does not see: they are almost tail-flicks, from another world, seen out of the eye. In a sense he goes in and out of rationality; he hangs in the balance between the human and the animal.³³

³⁰ S.L., p. 113.

³¹ Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (1975), p. 41.

³² For Roethke mental breakdowns opened the floodgates of his unconscious mind and allowed their water to flood his being. He would then construct his poems from the debris that washed up from his unconscious mind, without trying to place these elements in an overall logical or even associative pattern.

³³ S.P., p. 139.

But the protagonist's hunt for some "clue to existence" fails. He can only gain small clues to his identity in the world of the "primitive," a rudimentary level of consciousness in the prehuman stage of evolution.

You will find no comfort here,
In the kingdom of bang and blab.³⁴

In the second section, *The Pit*, the poet deals with sexual drives which he feels create both physical and psychic exhaustion.

In the third section of the poem, *The Gibber*, the "lost son" explores the world of generation and reproduction in a surrealist juxtapositioning of images of frustrated sexuality. Biblical quotations relating to the Creation, reflections on his mother and father, and disconnected images from Nature. The result of all this seems to be a general state of confusion both for the "lost son" and for the reader. But this confusion gives way to a temporary clarity in the fourth section, *The Return*.

Section four is a return to a more ordered sequence of childhood memories. The actions depicted take place in a greenhouse which symbolizes a perfect Eden in which Roethke's physical "papa" is associated with God:

With the coming of steam (and "Papa" – the papa on earth and heaven are blended, of course) there is the sense of motion in the greenhouse – my symbol for the whole of life, a heaven-on-earth.³⁵

The poet presents the reader with a vision of a higher unified creation in direct contrast with the disorganized visions of sexual generation that have appeared in the previous sections. In the greenhouse a sense of purity and order prevails, all of which is ruled over by "Papa." In the final section of "The Lost Son" a partial illumination takes place. The poet gives the reader a glimpse of a higher reality, a state of existence that transcends his vision of the

³⁴ C.P., p. 54.

³⁵ S.P., p. 139.

greenhouse eden. But the illumination is not fully accepted; the protagonist questions his experience, not fully understanding what has happened to him. In the final stanza a voice reassures the protagonist that he will have a deeper and higher illumination, but that the time for it to occur has not yet arrived:

A lively understandable spirit
 Once entertained you.
 It will come again.
 Be still.
 Wait.³⁶

From our initial reading of "The Lost Son" it is possible to set up a model for many of Roethke's longer poems. The poet usually begins in the first section by presenting the "problem," which is usually a failing in the human condition, or an inner limitation that he wishes to transcend. In the next two or three sections of the poem (depending on length) he will improvise on the initial theme, examining it from different perspectives, and looking at possible alternatives, none of which are usually desirable. Images of confusion coming from several different levels of consciousness (subliminal, human, mythic, psychic, etc.) will assault the poet's consciousness until a blackout or near blackout occurs. The blackout is followed by a vision of a higher order and often by several subsequent illuminations. At the end of the poem the poet will slip back, to an extent. But he will not return to the level of consciousness he was on when the poem started. He will have made some progress, and he will have reached a higher plateau of awareness.

In "The Lost Son" the initial problem posited in the first stanza is that the protagonist has entered into a state of spiritual emptiness, which is the result of unfulfilled sexuality and feelings of guilt.

All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
 I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
 Saying,

³⁶ C.P., p. 58.

Snail, snail, glister me forward.
 Bird, soft-sigh me home.
 Worm, be with me.
 This is my hard time.³⁷

In the second and third sections the themes of unfulfilled sexuality and guilt are further developed. All of the sexual images suggest an emptiness, the protagonist has been cut off from his spiritual essence and the sexual experiences that he has are, therefore, devoid of any meaning or substance.

Dogs of the groin
 Barked and howled...
 The weeds whined.
 The snakes cried.
 The cows and briars
 Said to me: Die.³⁸

The rate and pace of these disconnected images increase until they reach such a state of intensity that the protagonist loses consciousness in a blackout at the end of the third section:

These sweeps of light undo me.
 Look, look, the ditch is running white!
 I've more veins than a tree!
 Kiss me, ashes, I'm falling through a dark swirl.³⁹

In the fourth section the protagonist awakes in a greenhouse eden. He has a vision of perfect order and of a higher fulfilled sexuality that exists there.

Finally, in the last section of the poem, after the vision of the greenhouse eden has faded, the poet retains the essence of his higher vision and is admonished by a voice to "Wait" and "Be still;"⁴⁰ more will be revealed to him later.

The sequence of physical and spiritual actions in "The Lost Son" and other Roethke poems of this genre is a manifestation of the poet's

³⁷ C.P., p. 53.

³⁸ C.P., p. 55.

³⁹ C.P., p. 57.

⁴⁰ C.P., p. 58.

belief that "the redeemer comes a dark way."⁴¹ Roethke felt that it is necessary for a man to go backward and psychically relive and experience each level of consciousness from the prehuman forward to the human before he could go on to experience higher states of spiritual illumination:

I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward; but there is some "progress."⁴²

The remaining three poems in The Lost Son conform to the basic model we have established from our analysis of "The Lost Son."

All three of these poems are variations on themes already introduced in "The Lost Son" and depict a movement from a condition of spiritual emptiness, sexual frustration and guilt, to a state of spiritual clarity, resulting from a partial reconciliation of the protagonist's sexual and spiritual drives.

In "The Long Alley" the "problem" that the poet introduces in the first section is sexual guilt. In the subsequent sections of the poem the poet explores the origins of sexual guilt, and finally transcends sexual guilt by participating in a wild sexual dance of generation (section four). By participating in a joyful sexual revelry, the poet is able to assuage his feelings of guilt and accepts that the "fire" of his sexuality is an essential part of his own nature (section five).

"A Field Of Light" follows a similar pattern. The poem begins with the protagonist in a state of spiritual stagnation. This stagnation causes the protagonist to go on a quest for the higher self (section one) which eventually leads him to a state of spiritual ecstasy (section two) which is followed by a blackout. In the final

⁴¹ C.P., p. 66.

⁴² S.P., p. 39.

section of the poem the protagonist, having transcended his spiritual emptiness, has a mystical experience of the "oneness" of all creation:

I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things!
My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds...
And I walked, I walked through the light air:
I moved with the morning.⁴³

The final poem in The Lost Son, "The Shape Of The Fire," is a reworking of the same theme. While in the three preceding poems the poet grappled with his sexual guilts and lessened them, he has not completely accepted his own sexuality. This acceptance is manifested in "The Shape Of The Fire," and its result is a movement in the opposite direction, a celebration of sexuality for its own sake, which is the theme of Roethke's third book, Praise, To The End!

⁴³ C.P., p. 53.

CHAPTER THREE; SING, SING, YOU SYMBOLS I

Roethke's third book of poetry, Praise To The End!, is a verse celebration of the generative principle of life, which the poet asserts is his defense against the conditions of sterility and alienation which exist in the modern world. In Praise To The End! Roethke continues to seek his identity by a continuation of the cyclic entrance into the self, emergence, and enlightenment process which he had started in The Lost Son. The poems in Praise To The End! are a mythic, psychic, symbolic, and poetic odyssey in which the protagonist moves through a number of stages of consciousness. The voice that reflects the experiences of the protagonist in each level of consciousness varies from the grotesque mutterings of the prehuman and the sing-song nursery rhyme of the child, to the metaphysical meditations of the seer.

It has already been suggested that these poems carry echoes of archetypal patterns from other modes of experience, particularly mythical and religious. Because the protagonist travels into the regions of memory, the preconscious and the unconscious, he shows distinct similarity to the heroes of myth whom Jung saw as representative of the quest for psychic wholeness. Like those fabulous heroes or the lesser ones of fairy tales Roethke's lone protagonist must endure the trials and dangers of a mission into the darkness of personal history. The prize to be won is rebirth and illumination, what is called in one of the poems, "condition of joy."¹

The title of the book, Praise To The End!, is taken from a passage in Wordsworth's Prelude in which Wordsworth reflects upon the creation of the self through sufferings, vexations, and "other miseries," and rejoices that such a process can produce or result in a deeper degree of self-knowledge:

How strange, that all
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
Within my mind, should e'er have born a part.
And that a needful part, in making up

¹ Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Theodore Roethke (1963), p. 18.

The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!

In the poems in Praise To The End! Roethke's protagonist goes through a similar process which is referred to in Roethke's psychic shorthand as the "struggle out of the slime."²

The period in which the Praise To The End! poems were written was one of the most productive phases, in terms of volume, in Roethke's poetic career. The majority of the poems that appear in Praise To The End! were written in 1948 and 1949. During this period Roethke was writing on an average four or five pages of poetry a day, although he published only three poems in 1948, and one in 1949.³

Roethke had accepted a teaching job at the University of Washington in Seattle in September of 1947. During the next two years he worked concurrently on both Praise To The End! and a volume of children's poetry, I am! Says The Lamb. After two years of teaching and writing Roethke had his third breakdown, and was hospitalized for several months. During his hospitalization, however, he continued to work on the Praise To The End! poems.⁴ Praise To The End! was accepted for publication by Doubleday in the fall of 1951. It was published in November of 1951 and was dedicated to William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke.⁵

Praise To The End! is divided into two sections the first containing a sequence of six poems and the second a sequence of three poems. The first poem in section one of the book is entitled "Where Knock Is Open Wide." In this poem the protagonist is a child who views the world in non-categorical terms, depending on sensory rather than intellectual associations for the formation of his thoughts. The opening stanzas of Praise To The End! are reminiscent of Joyce's Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man.

² S.P., p. 37.

³ Glass House, p. 186.

⁴ Glass House, p. 190.

A kitten can
 Bite with his feet;
 Papa and Mamma
 Have more teeth.

Sit and play
 Under the rocker
 Until the cows
 All have puppies

His ears haven't time.
 Sing me a sleep-song, please.
 A real hurt is soft.⁶

Roethke begins his odyssey with a return to the free flowing dialectic of the child's mind. The child lives in a world of free associative thought in which he is aware of the metamorphoses that are constantly taking place in both his own consciousness and in objective reality. As the child matures, his mind begins to develop, and the rational principle becomes predominant. In this stage of his development the child begins to "think" reality instead of feeling it. The "I" consciousness becomes dominant and the child loses touch with the "numinous ring" that constitutes his own identity. He no longer perceives the constant metamorphosis that takes place within and around himself. Instead he lives in a world of sterile thoughts and intellectual categorizations.

Roethke believed that in the child's consciousness the worlds of fantasy, dream, and objective reality were all unified in a vision of perpetual wonder. The child was able to perceive that physical objects themselves were constantly shifting their identities and going through a progressive evolution of their own. Thus the child could declare, as Roethke's protagonist in "Where Knock Is Open Wide" does: "My father is a fish," and be accurately perceiving the essential unity between two diametrically opposed things.

Roethke felt that the attainment of the higher mystical states of consciousness was symbolically a return to childhood, and he often

⁵ Glass House, p. 197.

⁶ C.P., p. 71.

uses the child in his poetry to suggest that essential property of spiritual perception which he himself was striving to attain:

In writing on the theme of the child, he was aligning himself with a long tradition that includes figures as various as Traherne, Blake, Wordsworth, and Emerson – the tradition that offers the child as a symbol of the visionary imagination. From this viewpoint, the child lives in a world that is inseparable from himself, in a state of vivid and nourishing relationship to Nature. As Emerson put it: "(His) mind being whole, (his) eye is as yet unconquered." Eventually however, consciousness intrudes upon the child's power of direct and immediate apprehension of reality: "Man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness."⁷

In essence then Roethke felt that the child saw life as a whole and not as the sum of its parts. But Roethke's search for the unified consciousness, for which the child was his symbol, was not an overindulgence in a self-styled romanticism in which childhood is seen as an ideal state of being:

Roethke never succumbs to romantic and nostalgic notions of childhood. His child – no pre-lapsarian – is cruel, uncompromising, and often arrogantly unjust. But he does posit at the core of human personality a contrary intuition toward otherness, a hunger for relation, ultimately a metaphysical instinct of human nature to extend beyond the self.⁸

It was not the child's activities that intrigued the poet, it was his ability to perceive what Roethke called the "genuine mystery"⁹ of existence. The poet believed that the visionary states of consciousness attained by the mature mystic far transcended the child's consciousness. But the parallels between the vision of the child and the mystic made it easy to equate both and view the period of the loss of self-awareness in-between these two states, as an uneasy adolescence from which most individuals never emerge.

⁷ Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (1975), p. 58.

⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹ S.P., p. 41.

Both the child and the mystic see life through a non-categorical perspective. The child and the mystic use the faculty of intuition instead of reason. Roethke believed that transcending the fragmented vision that comes from using the rational mind, and instead experiencing the "oneness," the inter-connectedness of all things, was the first step in mystical illumination:

the "oneness," is, of course, the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: the sense that all is one and one is all. This is inevitably accompanied by a loss of the "I," the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence.¹⁰

Roethke believed that thinking had to be replaced by "feeling," that is, by intuitive thinking. As long as an individual looked at life only through his intellectual mind, his perceptions, and their accuracy, was bound to be limited. The reason for this is because the intellectual mind perceives through an analytical reasoning process. This process is dependent upon thoughts. Thoughts are constructs; they are representations of reality. When an individual "thinks" about something he is not directly perceiving that thing, but instead he is perceiving his thought of it. But when an individual uses his intuition he is able to directly perceive the essence of the object he is focussing his attention on.

Roethke believed that metaphysical understanding could either come through the medium of intuition, or as thoughts from the higher imagination. He differentiated between the ordinary thoughts of the mind and the thoughts of the higher imagination:

an idea...can be as real as the smell of a flower or a blow on the head.¹¹

The thoughts from the higher imagination were charged with psychic energy and were visions of a higher reality. Ordinary thoughts were used in the rational process and offered man only limited perceptions.

¹⁰ S.P., p. 26.

¹¹ S.P., p. 27.

In Praise To The End! Roethke breaks through the rational world of ordinary thoughts and categories and returns to an intuitive and imaginative dialectical mode of consciousness. His identification with the child's consciousness is the first step in that process. In "I Need, I Need," the second poem in the sequence, the poet continues to view the world from the child's perspective.

Went down cellar,
Talked to a faucet;
The drippy water
Had nothing to say.

Whisper me over,
Why don't you, begonia,
There's no alas
Where I live¹²

In the last stanza of "I Need, I Need" the poet introduces the theme of sexuality which he will continue to develop throughout the book.

Her feet said yes.
It was all hay.
I said to the gate.
Who else knows
What water does?
Dew ate the fire.

I know another fire.
Has roots.¹³

Roethke's vision of human sexuality as depicted in Praise To The End! is a celebration of the creatureliness of human existence. The evolving awareness of the sexual self as seen through the eyes of the protagonist in "I Need, I Need," and in the next poem in the sequence, "Bring The Day!," is placed in direct correspondence with the world of Nature. Roethke is further developing the theme he introduced in The Lost Son, that the initial sexual impulses are innately good, but that they become corrupted as man's consciousness develops and he loses touch with his intuitive perceptions. In "Bring The Day!" Roethke equates the protagonist's sexual experiences with the "innocent"

¹² C.P., p. 74.

¹³ C.P., p. 76.

experiences of the world of Nature. By having the "far leaves" approve of the protagonist's sexual encounter, Nature is in effect nodding her head in agreement:

The green grasses,—would they?
 The green grasses?—
 She asked her skin
 To let me in:
 The far leaves were for it.¹⁴

The remaining stanzas of "Bring The Day I" are an invocation of Hymen and the rites of Spring. After the initial sexual experience depicted in the second stanza, the protagonist begins a rhapsodic description of the generative forces of life, and seeks other correspondences for his own awakening to the sexual world in Nature:

A swan needs a pond.
 The worm and the rose
 Both love Rain.¹⁵

The "worm" and the "rose" are emblematic of the phallus and the vagina, and their love of "Rain" is, of course, symbolic of coitus.

In the fourth poem in the sequence, "Give Way, Ye Gates," the initial innocent impulses of sexuality begin to change to a painful compulsion. The protagonist is entering into maturity, and as his ego develops, he loses touch with the pure joy of his being and of his innocent sexuality. In terms of psychic development Roethke's protagonist is moving from a prelapsarian to a postlapsarian state. He is leaving his childhood Garden of Eden and entering into the world of experience.

I've played with the fishes
 Among the unwrinkling ferns
 In the wake of a ship of wind;
 But now the instant ages,
 And my thought hunts another body.
 I'm sad with the little owls.¹⁶

¹⁴ C.P., p. 77.

¹⁵ C.P., p. 78.

¹⁶ C.P., p. 80.

In the final stanza of "Give Way Ye Gates," the images of the "fallen" world that the child enters into become more graphic as his sexual desires develop:

Touch and arouse. Suck and sob. Curse and mourn.
 It's a cold scrape in a low place.
 The dead crow dries on a pole...
 The mouth asks. The hand takes.¹⁷

The delights of Nature depicted in the previous stanza have disappeared. Now instead of a world in which Nature (the leaves and flowers) approves the protagonist's actions, the "wind" and the "cold" indicate that the protagonist has fallen from a state of grace with Nature.¹⁸

In the concluding stanza of the poem the protagonist reflects upon his state of consciousness before and after his "fall." But his conclusion is not infused with bitterness for his current state; instead he is able to accept that his "fall" is a necessary step in his movement towards a higher stage of development. His overriding sense of the rightness of his course of actions and development is mirrored in his feeling that he is still being guided and provided for by an unseen hand:

The deep stream remembers:
 Once I was a pond,
 What slides away
 Provides.¹⁹

In the last two poems in this sequence, "Sensibility! O La!," and "O Lull Me, Lull Me," there is a gradual movement towards the acceptance of the fallen nature of the protagonist. In spite of the loss of the child's innocence, the protagonist exhibits an adaptability to, and at times almost a revelry, in his new state of consciousness. In the second stanza of "Sensibility! O La!," the protagonist acknowledges his physicality:

¹⁷ C.P., p. 80.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 80

¹⁹ C.P., p. 80.

A shape comes to stay:
The long flesh.²⁰

In the third stanza he reflects on his loss of innocence and indicates that he feels that he made a wrong choice in leaving his inner garden of Eden:

I've waked the wrong wind:
I'm alone with my ribs;²¹

But part way through this stanza the protagonist changes his sentiments from a puritan lament at the loss of heaven to a celebration of his physical nature:

You've seen me, prince of stinks.
Naked and entire.
Exalted? Yes....²²

In the protagonist's celebration of his physicality he is reminiscent of Whitman and Ginsberg celebrating the "holiness" of physical and sexual existence.

The final poem in the sequence, "O Lull Me, Lull Me," is divided into two sections. The first section begins with an allusion to Blake: "One sigh stretches heaven."²³ It then progresses to a consideration of the protagonist's lover and of the beauty of her animality:

How still she keeps herself.
Blessed be torpor.
Not all animals
Move about...
Oh my love's light as a duck
On a moon-forgotten wave!²⁴

The final section of the poem is a rhapsodic singing and celebration of both the protagonist's existence and of his new state of being. The final lines in the poem act as a summation of the

²⁰ C.P., p. 81.

²¹ C.P., p. 82.

²² C.P., p. 82.

²³ C.P., p. 83.

²⁴ C.P., p. 83.

entire movement of the sequence. The poet celebrates the process of life itself. He feels that his long journey out of the self, even though it may result in a temporary loss of innocence and joy, and the acceptance of the pain and frustration of a "fallen" consciousness is still cause enough for celebration and "singing." The protagonist sings the joys and sorrows of his own conditions, regardless of what they may be. He has come to realize that it is not his condition that matters, but the singing of it. He celebrates himself and sees that all of Nature and the natural world is an extension of his own being:

I'm an otter with only one nose:
 I'm all ready to whistle;
 I'm more than when I was born;
 I could say hello to things;
 I could talk to a snail;
 I see what sings!
 What sings!²⁵

The reviews of Praise To The End! that appeared shortly after the book was published were generally favorable, although not as enthusiastic as they had been for The Lost Son. Writing in the New York Times Richard Eberhart said:

Roethke gives us the new, age-old excitement of a true poet uttering the feelings, the meanings deepest in him, in his own peculiar way, driven by compulsive force. The verse is an incantation, a celebration – and it is often playful.²⁶

Louise Bogan's review, which appeared in the New Yorker, was also favorable:

Roethke has added several long poems to passages from The Lost Son, published a few years ago, and these additions accent his original theme – the journey from the child's primordial subconscious world, through the regions of adult terror, guilt, and despair, toward a final release into the freedom of conscious being. Roethke's description of this process attaches itself to a recognizable myth and legend hardly at all: his renditions of a sub- or pre-conscious world is filled with coiling and uncoiling, nudging and creeping images that often can be expressed only with the

²⁵ C.P., p. 84.

²⁶ Glass House, p. 198.

aid of nonsense and gibberish. But it is witty nonsense and effective gibberish, since the poet's control over his material is always formal; he knows exactly when to increase and when to decrease pressure, and he comes to a stop just before the point of monotony is reached.²⁷

The "several long poems" referred to by Louise Bogan in the previous review were the final three poems in Praise To The End! which comprise the second section. All three of these poems: "Praise To The End!," "Unfold! Unfold!," and "I Cry Love! Love!," were both stylistically and thematically more advanced than any of Roethke's previous poems. They were prefigurations of the type, and to an extent, the style of poetry that Roethke was to write for the rest of his life.

The first poem in the sequence, "Praise To The End!," is, as the title suggests, a song of endless praise and celebration of existence. The poem is divided into four sections: the first section depicts a specific sexual act; the second section is a reflection on childhood; the third section is in the form of a dramatic experience and depicts an experience of the protagonist when he was thirteen; and the fourth section is an illumination.

The first section of "Praise To The End!" opens with the description of an erection, which is accompanied by a vague feeling of sexual guilt:

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.
For whom have I swelled like a seed?
What a bone-ache I have.
Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last.²⁸

The action then moves to a nursery rhyme replete with phallic imagery and, in the third stanza, to an appeal to a physical or spiritual father to exonerate him for his participation in the sexual act: "father, forgive my hands."²⁹ In the final stanza the act of

²⁷ Glass House, p. 198.

²⁸ C.P., p. 85.

²⁹ C.P., p. 85.

intercourse is completed, and the tension of the poem and of the protagonist is eased:

The rings have gone from the pond.
The river's alone with its water.
All risings
Fall.³⁰

The language in the second section shifts from a slow, steady, deliberate and measured rhythm to a rhapsodic adolescent jive:

Where are you now, my bonny beating gristle,
My blue original dandy, numb with sugar?³¹

The protagonist then moves into an interior reflection on his youth when he: "romped lithe as a child, down the summery streets of my veins."³² But the happy conditions of childhood turn into a somber reflection as he considers how happy he was and how now he has lost his innocent happiness. The "weeds" are no longer his friends, but they now symbolize both the psychic and physical obstructions in the protagonist's life which he seeks to overcome:

Now the water's low. The weeds exceed me.
It's necessary, among the flies and bananas, to
keep a constant vigil,
For the attacks of false humility take sudden
turns for the worse.³³

In the remaining stanzas the protagonist reflects on his fallen state and concludes that he must seek to enter into another state of consciousness: "My dearest dust, I can't stay here."³⁴

In section three the protagonist describes an experience he had walking one day in the country. As he walked he entered into a state of rapture communing with the life-force in the natural objects that surrounded him:

³⁰ C.P., p. 85.

³¹ C.P., p. 86.

³² C.P., p. 86.

³³ C.P., p. 86.

³⁴ C.P., p. 86.

The sun came out;
 The lake turned green;
 Romped upon the goldy grass.
 Aged thirteen.

The sky cracked open
 The world I knew:
 Lay like the cats do
 Sniffing the dew.³⁵

In this metaphysical rapture he experienced his spiritual essence, "Skin's the least of me,"³⁶ and transcended the world of physical desire, "Desire was winter-calm."³⁷

In the final stanza the poet's communion with Nature unfolds into a spiritual illumination. His experiences in the world of desire are seen as enabling him to identify with, and gain joy from, the world of generation and death. In effect, Roethke is declaring that he does not seek to achieve a spiritual state beyond the physical world, but that he wants to experience the bliss of spiritual consciousness within the physical world. His experiences in the physical world, even his sufferings, help him towards the achievement of this goal by unfolding another aspect of creation to his eyes. His journey out of the "slime" has released him from the limitations of sensuality, and he can now delight in the order of natural existence:

I'm awake all over:
 I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or
 a dog;
 I know the back-stream's joy, and the stone's
 eternal pulseless longing,
 Felicity I cannot hoard.³⁸

The protagonist's journey into the self has taught him to delight in the process of psychic evolution: "I bask in the bower of change."³⁹

³⁵ C.P., p. 87.

³⁶ C.P., p. 87.

³⁷ C.P., p. 87.

³⁸ C.P., p. 88.

³⁹ C.P., p. 88.

In the final stanza of "Praise To The End!," the protagonist reaffirms that his descent into the "hell" of the self was necessary so that he could emerge with a new knowledge. He has confronted his darker self and in that process has attained a temporary state of illumination:

Wherefore, O birds and small fish, surround me.
Lave me, ultimate waters.
The dark showed me a face.
My ghosts are all gay.
The light becomes me.⁴⁰

The final two poems in Praise To The End! are similar enough in character to the poem "Praise To The End!" that they do not need a careful explication. In the first of these poems, "Unfold! Unfold!," the protagonist experiences another psychic purgation by a descent into the Self, which is followed by an entrance into a state of metaphysical enlightenment. In the first stanza the poet rails at the conditions of "contraries." The field, Roethke's symbol for life and eternity and for the "simple" joys of childhood, has shifted meanings: "The field is no longer simple."⁴¹

In the second stanza the poet questions the nature of reality and in return is given a number of mystic answers. The third stanza depicts a return to childhood similar to that of stanza two in the previous poem. The fourth section reflects on the emptiness of sensual passion, the "easy life of the mouth."⁴² In the fifth and final stanza of the poem the illumination occurs. The poet invokes both the visible and invisible worlds and the spirits and creatures that inhabit them to come to his aid in his quest for identity. The "field" is now no longer an alien form, but "a field for revelation."⁴³

⁴⁰ C.P., p. 88.

⁴¹ C.P., p. 88.

⁴² C.P., p. 88.

⁴³ C.P., p. 90.

The protagonist declares that he will now direct his attention towards discovering his "higher self:" "I'll seek my own meekness."⁴⁴

In the final poem in Praise To The End! Roethke abjures the world of logic and order and instead opts for a combined reality of Nature and Spirit:

Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!
 The hedgewren's song says something else.
 I care for a cat's cry and the hugs, live as water.
 I've traced these words in sand with a vestigial tail...
 Bless me and the maze I'm in!
 Hello, thingy spirit.⁴⁵

For the poet Praise To The End! has been a return to both a childhood and archetypal past. By retracing his roots and investigating the past the poet has determined the problem, an overemphasis on sexuality which results in his bondage to the physical world. His solution is not to totally renounce the physical body and practice austerities, instead it is to accept the limitations of his physical conditions and his experiences in the world of desire as temporary. The poet is, like all of Nature, in a state of constant evolution. By learning to delight in the process of transformation itself, he is able to overcome the temporary limitations of his physical or psychic being. Roethke's goal has not changed - he now longs more than ever before for a mystical illumination. But he has realized that hating his physicality is not the solution and will not bring him any closer to the experience of illumination. Instead by learning to live with his limitations he was preparing himself for the next step in his inner odyssey, to see the finite in the infinite, and the infinite in the finite.

At the end of Praise To The End! after the poet's dark night of the soul, he has attained a new plateau of consciousness. From his new perspective he is able to sing, and he sings of the joy of both physical and spiritual existence. He is the poet of transformation;

⁴⁴ C.P., p. 91.

he delights both in the form and the formless. The only danger he perceives, and which he seeks to avoid, is the trap of empty sensuality, passion devoid of love. With this new understanding gained through the pain of self-examination he is able to sing:

Mouse, mouse, come out of the ferns.
And small mouths, stay your aimless cheeping:
A lapful of apples sleeps in this grass...
I proclaim once more a condition of joy.
Walk into the wind, willie!⁴⁶

⁴⁵ C.P., p. 92.

⁴⁶ C.P., p. 92.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DARK HAS ITS OWN LIGHT

The year 1953 was a year of recognition, travel, and love for Theodore Roethke. In 1953 on a trip to New York to give a poetry reading, Roethke met Beatrice O'Connell, who had been a former student of his at Bennington College. After a whirlwind courtship Theodore Roethke and Beatrice O'Connell were married in New York City on January 3, 1953. The Roethkes spent the months of January and February in New York City while Beatrice Roethke finished teaching her classes in a public school in Harlem. The Roethkes traveled to Europe in March and remained there until August."¹

On September 8, 1953, The Waking, a collection of Roethke's poetry which included many of his previously published poems, and eight new poems, was published. The book was well received, and Roethke was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for The Waking in the early part of 1954. The principle themes of the new poems that appeared in The Waking were extensions of themes that Roethke had explored in his three previous books of verse: The struggle between the spirit and the flesh; The transcendental vision of Nature; and The poet's search for identity. But in The Waking Roethke added a new theme to his verse: The love between man and woman, and how the act of sexual love could be used to find one's identity.

The eight new poems that appeared in The Waking provided a major shift in Roethke's poetic vision. While many critics have explored the peripheral aspects of this shift in focus, few have succeeded in gauging the importance of the new poems in The Waking. Rosemary Sullivan, in her book, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master, is particularly sensitive to Roethke's changing vision:

After the experimentation of Praise To The End! sequence, the almost new-Elizabethan formality of the new love poems seems hardly less than extraordinary. Yet there is a deeper continuity between these two periods of his development than is generally assumed, a continuity at the

¹ Glass House, p. 208.

level of sensibility. Even in this new guise, the poet's voice remains primitive, elemental, defined on the one hand by his unthinking delight in nature confronting him dramatically in the body of the woman, and on the other by his fear that love may entangle him in the defilements of the body: the old guilts, muted it is true, expressing themselves again as an antagonism between spirit and flesh.²

She accurately points out Roethke's preoccupation with the "antagonism between spirit and flesh." But as we have seen in our exploration of the later poems in The Lost Son and Praise To The End! this antagonism has, to an extent, been muted by the poet's realization that his physical and sexual impulses were innately good. The poet now delights in both his physical and sexual natures, and Praise To The End! is a verse celebration of that delight. Roethke's sexual guilts had been modified. He now felt that through the act of physical love-making he was able to achieve a temporary transcendence of the ego and experience his inner self in another human being.

The belief that the Self exists in all beings, and the perception that seeing that Self in others is an essential step in the quest for identity, was not a new notion to the poet. Roethke already believed that this experience could occur with phenomena in the world of Nature, and he was simply transferring his understanding of this process from the world of Nature to the world of love:

If the dead can come to our aid in a quest for identity, so can the living and I mean all living things, including the sub-human. This is not so much a naive as a primitive attitude: animistic, maybe. Why not? Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. One could even put this theologically: St. Thomas says, "God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless. He is in all things as causing the being of all things." Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God:

Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home.

² Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (1975), p. 90.

Worm, be with me.
This is my hard time.³

Countering this movement towards identity through love and physical love-making was the poet's realization that desire and passion could constrict, instead of expand, his consciousness. The eight new poems in The Waking are poetic essays discoursing on the evolution of the poet's being and of his awareness of the change of his identity.

"O, Thou Opening, O" is similar in structure to the poems in part two of Praise To The End! The poem is divided into three sections. The first section is a combination of nonsense verse, oxymoronic statements, and considerations of the nature of good and evil. In the second section the poet seeks to convince the reader to seek the depths of reality and not to be content with leading a superficial existence. The first stanza is addressed to a woman, and in tone it is similar to a Southern Baptist sermon on the nature and dangers of evil:

And now are we to have the pellucidous Jesus-shimmer over
all things, the animal's candid gaze, a shade less than
feathers... I'm tired of all that Bag-Foot... Who ever said
God sang in your fat shape? You're not the only keeper of
hay. That's a spratling's prattle. And don't be thinking
you're simplicity's sweet thing, either. A leaf could drag
you.⁴

In the third stanza the poet drops his accusatory approach and instead seeks to transmit his message of the beauties and complexities of existence by persuading "more slowly:"

The dark has its own light.
A son has many fathers.
Stand by a slow stream:
Hear the sigh of what is.
Be a pleased rock
On a plain day.
Waking's

³ S.P., p. 24.

⁴ C.P., p. 98.

Kissing.
Yes.⁵

The new direction that Roethke's poetry takes in The Waking is summed up by the preceding nine lines of poetry. All of the other poems in The Waking only serve to further explicate the ideas contained in these lines. There are five interconnected ideas expressed in this stanza. "The dark has its own light" is a reflection of Roethke's belief that the finite exists in the infinite, and the infinite exists in the finite. The "dark" he is alluring to is not so much a physical darkness, but a spiritual darkness. Roethke's perception is that there is no absolute darkness or "evil," that even within so-called darkness there is some "light" or good. If man can perceive that essential divinity within all things, then he will see the "light" that exists within darkness, and be able to perceive the innate goodness within all things.

The idea expressed in the second line, "A son has many fathers," is that a man has "roots" in both the physical and spiritual worlds. A man has both a heavenly father who is God, and at the same time a physical father, and by virtue of the interconnectedness of all beings, all forms of creation can be viewed as an extension of his "father." The third and the fourth line are directions that lead one to the attainment of these realizations:

Stand by a slow stream:
Hear the sigh of what is.

The stream referred to is both a physical and metaphysical stream. By listening to the physical stream man can hear the voice of the natural world, which is usually "drowned out" by the complexities of modern existence. By listening to the metaphysical stream man can gain a more developed vision of his inner self.

The fifth and the sixth lines of this stanza direct the reader to accept all conditions of life with an even frame of mind. Roethke

⁵ C.P., p. 98.

instructs the reader to be happy, regardless of the condition of his life. The seventh and eighth lines reveal that "Waking" (Roethke's term for the process of becoming aware of the several sides of life) occurs through the act of giving love, and participating in physical love. The "Yes" at the end of the stanza affirms the ideas that have been previously stated and suggests the overall positiveness of the poet's new philosophy.

The third and final stanza is a reflection on the ideas presented in the previous stanza. The protagonist in this stanza delights in these revelations and sees that all of existence is now a part of his own being. The journey into and out of the Self is praised. Since "The dark has its own light," all things are innately good, and the voice celebrates the fact that loving and making love have led him to this realization:

The lark's my heart!
 I'm wild with news!
 My fancy's white!
 I am my faces,
 Love.⁶

"A Light Breather" illustrates the change that has occurred in the poet's perspective on spiritual growth and development. He no longer feels the necessity of keeping his spirit "spare," but instead he has entered into a state of spiritual maturity in which he can accept himself and his own constantly evolving consciousness and rejoice in both. Roethke's vision of the innate nature of the "spirit" is that it is not restricted either by the spiritual or the material worlds. Unlike the outer self the spirit never seeks to deny its own inner divinity; it is "Unafraid of what it is,"⁷ and its natural direction is "Still inward,"⁸ ever questing its own unravelment. The entire motion of spiritual development as depicted in this poem is graceful and pure. Roethke's comparison of spiritual

⁶ C.P., p. 99.

⁷ C.P., p. 101.

⁸ C.P., p. 101.

enfoldment with the opening of a blossom, and the playing of a "minnow," reinforces his thesis that the spiritual nature of man is not divorced from the physical world, and that the world of Nature is a concrete manifestation of the divinity that exists in man's soul.

Taking and embracing its surroundings,
 Never wishing itself away,
 Unafraid of what it is,
 A music in a hood,
 A small thing,
 Singing.⁹

"Four For Sir John Davies" traces the movement of the protagonist of the poem from a state of questing for inner knowledge and experience, to a state of mystical awareness which comes to the protagonist through his participation in the physical act of lovemaking. In the first section, "The Dance," the protagonist seeks to experience the whole of truth by conquest. The image of dancing is drawn from Yeats and symbolizes the protagonist's alternations between the spiritual and physical realities. In this first section the protagonist has not yet integrated both realities, and he is "dancing mad:"

I tried to fling my shadow at the moon,
 The while my blood leaped with a wordless song.
 Though dancing needs a master, I had none
 To teach my toes to listen to my tongue.
 But what I learned there, dancing all alone,
 Was not the joyless motion of a stone.¹⁰

The protagonist recalls that his attempts to enter into states of higher awareness were frustrated because his physical desires (blood) and his spiritual aspirations (shadow) conflicted. His attempt to fling his shadow at the "moon" (Truth) failed because of his inability to bring these two parts of his being into harmony. But these early spiritual explorations were not a loss because through them the protagonist gained a greater sense of his identity; he realized that they were a necessary stage in his gradual unfoldment.

⁹ C.P., p. 101.

The second section of the poem, "The Partner," introduces the theme of sexuality. The symbol of "The Dance" shifts in meaning from a spiritual meandering to represent the act of physical love-making.

Between such animal and human heat
 I find myself perplexed. What is desire? —
 The impulse to make someone else complete?
 That woman would set sodden straw on fire.
 Was I the servant of a sovereign wish,
 Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?¹¹

In the first stanza in section two the protagonist tries to determine whether the sexual dance leads him to a state of liberation or bondage. In his meditation on desire he perceives that the act of sexual union is either a completion of his "self" by merging with another or a barren process in which he is alienated from his self by his animal passions.

The protagonist moves from these abstract considerations of sexuality to concrete memories of his sexual experiences. He concludes that the act of physical love-making awakens both his higher and lower natures and is therefore attended both by feelings of joy and sorrow:

Incomprehensible gaiety and dread
 Attended what we did. Behind, before,
 Lay all the lonely pastures of the dead;
 The spirit and the flesh cried out for more.
 We two, together, on a darkening day
 Took arms against our own obscurity.¹²

The third section, "The Wraith" presents the central theme of the poem: "The flesh can make the spirit visible."¹³ The sexual experiences of the protagonist have enabled him to lose his individuality: "Did each become the other in that play?," and

¹⁰ C.P., p. 105.

¹¹ C.P., p. 105.

¹² C.P., p. 106.

¹³ C.P., p. 106.

experience a vision of a higher reality: "Our souls looked forth, and the great day stood still."¹⁴

The final section of the poem, "The Vigil," proceeds through a series of four "meditations" in which the protagonist considers the complexities of sexual union. In the first stanza the poet meditates on the power of love to lift man from a physical to a spiritual consciousness. This was the ideal of courtly love, and Roethke invokes this philosophy with a consideration of Dante's love for Beatrice.

In the second stanza the protagonist reflects on spiritual progress and accepts the fact that total enlightenment does not come all at once, but is the culmination of a series of smaller enlightenments: "Who leaps to heaven at a single bound?"¹⁵ He accepts the experiences of making love as small enlightenments, which gradually help him to transcend the confines of the physical world of time and death: "Her look was morning in the dying light."¹⁶

In the third stanza is a philosophical capitulation to sexuality. The protagonist agrees that the physical reality and sexuality are capable of deluding him into thinking he is entering into a transcendent state of consciousness: "The visible obscures. But who knows when?"¹⁷ His conclusion, however, is that his sexual encounters are not delusions because they are part of the "dance" of the spirit which is evolving in and through the physical form. The dance itself now symbolizes the dance of consciousness which progresses from flesh to spirit. And it is the "dance" itself which the protagonist feels is of the greatest importance; his recognition of the process of spiritual evolution is in itself an inner awakening.

The final stanza paraphrases the thoughts and actions of the preceding sections of the poem, and in a final apocalyptic image the

¹⁴ C.P., p. 106.

¹⁵ C.P., p. 107.

¹⁶ C.P., p. 107.

¹⁷ C.P., p. 107.

poet sees the entire "dance" as a movement towards total self-transcendence.

Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.¹⁸

In the final two lines of the poem the protagonist affirms that the spirit (the word) transcends the material reality. He sees that the end of the "dance" culminates in spiritual illumination and that the very process of life itself will eventually lead him to self-transcendence. Having found his identity through sexual love, he is now capable of "outleaping the world" and attaining illumination. The sexual act has been a vehicle that allowed him to make the mystical "leap," which he was unable to make in the first stanza of the poem.

The title poem of Roethke's fourth book, "The Waking," presents the poet's transcendental philosophy in terms of "waking:"

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.¹⁹

In the first two stanzas of "The Waking" the poet presents the reader with what he feels is the essential paradox of human existence: man becomes fully aware of his identity in life, only to lose his identity in death. On a physical level the idea expressed is of a cyclic movement, waking which is followed by sleep. On a secondary level the poet expresses the idea that "waking" {discovering one's identity} is a process of forward and backward movement that results in "some progress." "Waking" is not accomplished by a conscious direction on the part of the mind, but occurs spontaneously and is directed by life itself:

¹⁸ C.P., p. 107.

¹⁹ C.P., p. 108.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
 God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there.
 And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
 The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.²⁰

The poet affirms the sanctity of the natural world, and in the fourth stanza he presents the idea that the process of physical and spiritual evolution cannot be understood with the mind; it is part of the essential mystery of existence. All he can do is participate in existence, and allow it to guide him, as it does all creatures and things:

Great Nature has another thing to do
 To you and me; so take the lively air.
 And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
 What falls away is always. And is near.
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
 I learn by going where I have to go.²¹

The fifth stanza is an affirmation of the process of life, and the poet hints that although the path that leads to illumination may appear to be circuitous, that life itself is guiding him in exactly the right way. Roethke counsels that one should simply have faith in the process, and enjoy it. In the final stanza he suggests that the transitory is eternal by virtue of the fact that the eternal exists within the transitory. He affirms his belief that nothing can be lost because man is inwardly connected with all of existence. It is only the outer appearance of physical reality that deceives man. When he can see beyond the physical to the eternal then he will realize that: "What falls away is always and is near." Roethke affirms the process of life and suggests that it is a process of eternal discovery, in which man passes from threshold to threshold, growing and discovering new aspects of his infinite Self, throughout eternity.

²⁰ C.P., p. 108.

²¹ C.P., p. 108.

CHAPTER FIVE: ALL THE EARTH, ALL THE AIR

Marriage, prizes and awards, trips to Europe, readings at colleges and universities, teaching, the continual writing of verse, and periodic mental breakdowns, this is the outer biography of Theodore Roethke in the years in which he wrote the poems contained in his fifth book, Words For The Wind. But what of Roethke's inner biography? The evolution of his poetic vision? As we read the poems contained in Words For The Wind, and in Roethke's last book, The Far Field, we become increasingly aware of the disparity between the poet's outer and inner life. While Roethke's marriage hastened the evolution of his love poems, it seems clear that he would have followed a similar path had he not married. The seeds of the evolution of his vision of the interrelationship between matter and spirit, as seen in Praise To The End! and the poems written in The Waking prior to Roethke's marriage, indicate that the poet was moving towards the acceptance of love as a vehicle for self-transcendence. The other elements in his life, travel, teaching, his acceptance as a major American poet replete with prizes and awards, never seemed in any clear-cut way to influence his verse. Even Roethke's breakdowns and the dramatic crises in his personal life that they caused were only tangential to the creation of his poetry. Roethke had grown to accept them as part of his life, and like other elements in his existence, he used what he could from these experiences to further his poetry.

Roethke always seemed able to pull himself together remarkably well after each breakdown. But the emotional cost of these breakdowns can perhaps to some extent be assessed by an incident that immediately preceded his commitment to a Sanitarium shortly before the publication of Words For The Wind. Roethke had been entering into a manic phase, and his friends and his wife recognized the telltale signs that always preceded his breakdowns. On the opening day of the Fall term on October 2, 1957, Roethke, whose reputation as a teacher engendered

admiration on the part of his colleagues and awe in his new students, arrived late for his first class:

Suddenly the door burst open and Ted appeared, panting with exhaustion, his face grey and wet with sweat, his damp trousers clinging to his legs... He flung himself against the blackboard in a kind of crucified pose, muttering incoherently. His students knew that he was subject to such attacks and one of them ran to the English Department office and got the Secretary, Mrs. Dorothy Bowie... Mrs. Bowie knew that something drastic would have to be done. She called the city police and said, "This is a very distinguished man and he is ill. All we want you to do is take him to a sanitarium. No rough stuff."

Ted feared and hated cops. When he saw them, he made one lunge at them but they seized him and smoothly handcuffed his hands behind his back. There wasn't any rough stuff. They were gentle but firm. And they led old Ted, the distinguished man, the poet and friend of poets everywhere through the corridors of Barrington Hall just as classes were changing, with his head bent nearly to his knees and the cops sedately around him.¹

The only real key to the development of the poet's mind can be found in the poems themselves. They are a chronicle of Roethke's journey to the interior, and in both their thematic exposition and explosive intensity they reflect both the terrible pain and indescribable ecstasy of the poet's later years.

The new poems in Words For The Wind were divided into five sections: (1) "Lighter Pieces and Poems for Children;" (2) "Love Poems;" (3) "Voices and Creatures;" (4) "The Dying Man;" and (5) "Meditations of an Old Woman." In all there were forty-three new poems, and a selection of poems that Roethke chose to keep from Open House, The Lost Son, Praise To The End!, and Waking.

It was very widely reviewed as the work of a major poet, in the New York Herald Tribune by Babette Deutsch, among many others, by Richard Eberhart in the New York Times, who said, "The collection of Theodore Roethke's work is a major achievement in the Romantic tradition of American poetry," and by W.D. Snodgrass in Poetry who said, "Roethke seems

¹ Glass House, p. 246.

here to have accomplished (or, at the very worst, to be on the verge of) a language which many of the best poets of his age and younger, among them Lowell and Berryman, have been dreaming about and working toward."²

In recognition of his achievement Roethke was awarded the first of his Boreston Mountain Awards; The Edna St. Vincent Millay Award; The Bollingen Award; The Longview Award; The Pacific Northwest Writers Award; and the National Book Award.³ Roethke used the money from these awards to help pay his sky-rocketing medical bills for his recurrent mental breakdowns.

The "Love Poems" in section two of Words For The Wind express both Roethke's awareness of love as a vehicle for self-transcendence and his personal suffering from the limitations that passion placed upon his spiritual nature. It is in and through his identification with his other "self," the woman depicted alternately as earth goddess, or sexual partner in these poems, that Roethke is able to expand and transcend his understanding of his own identity.

Roethke depicts the women in "The Dream," "Love's Progress," "The Swan," and "Memory" as earth goddesses who are extensions of his inner self. The women in "Words For The Wind," "I Knew A Woman," "The Sententious Man," "The Pure Fury," and "The Sensualists" are depicted as his sexual opposites who, through the act of physical love-making, afford the poet a glimpse of a higher reality, or of sensual emptiness.

In "The Dream" Roethke depicts his love as both a heavenly emanation and as a part of the natural world:

She came toward me in the flowing air,
A shape of change, encircled by its fire.
I watched her there, between me and the moon;
The bushes and the stones danced on and on;
I touched her shadow when the light delayed;
I turned my face away, and yet she stayed.

² Glass House, p. 250.

³ Glass House, p. 250.

A bird sang from the center of a tree;
 She loved the wind because the wind loved me.⁴

In the third stanza a connection is made between the consciousness of both the poet and his love. The image of "A small bird" flying in circles around the poet and his love symbolizes the unity of the man and woman. In the final stanza of the poem the image of the poet and his love merge in a metaphysical "oneness;" the poet emerges from this experience with a sense of completion, he has discovered his other half:

She held her body steady in the wind;
 Our shadows met, and slowly swung around;
 She turned the field into a glittering sea;
 I played in flame and water like a boy
 And I swayed out beyond the white seafoam;
 Like a wet log, I sang within a flame.
 In that last while, eternity's confine,
 I came to love, I came into my own.⁵

In "The Swan" the poet conceives of his love as an earth goddess, but instead of a total entrance into the alternate part of his self, the poet alternates between a longing for her as an extension of his spiritual being and a physical desire for her as a woman. The poem is divided into two sections. In the first section the poet considers his propensity for sensual experience, which he condemns: "A dry soul's wisest. O, I am not dry!"⁶ He then dismisses his self-analysis as the broodings of his mind which he feels only interrupts the natural flow of his being:

We think too long in terms of what to be;
 I live, alive and certain as a bull;
 A casual man, I keep my casual word,
 Yet whistle back at every whistling bird.

A man alive, from all light I must fall.
 I am my father's son, I am John Donne
 Whenever I see her with nothing on.⁷

⁴ C.P., p. 119.

⁵ C.P., p. 120.

⁶ C.P., p. 140.

⁷ C.P., p. 140.

In the preceding stanza the poet dismisses his self-recriminations for his sensual drives. Declaring that he is a "casual man" and comparing himself with the virile image of the bull, he places himself in the world of Nature and, therefore, feels that his sexuality is "natural" and not a "fallen" sexuality that is fraught with self-consciousness. But the poet preserves his spiritual identity and individuality because he is able to: "whistle back at every whistling bird." He feels that although he is a "casual man" in his sensuality (the bull), he is also a sensitive and artistic individual. The poet identifies himself with John Donne, and this identification is an affirmation of his sexuality by placing it in both a Biblical tradition, the inevitability of the fall so that man can be resurrected, and in a poetic tradition. It is as if Roethke, the poet, is saying that it is the nature of the poet to be sensual, John Donne, a great poet was, and I, another great poet, am too.

In the last stanza the poet no longer sees his love in sexual terms. She has gone through a metamorphosis, and he now sees her as a swan, the traditional symbol of the soul. He declares that she is in effect, his "lost opposite;" they are both made of the same spiritual substance (that nothing), and since she is a goddess, and his other half, then he is a god:

The moon draws back its waters from the shore.
 By the lake's edge, I see a silver swan,
 And she is what I would. In this light air.
 Lost opposites bend down—
 Sing of that nothing of which all is made,
 Or listen into silence, like a god.⁸

"Words For The Wind" presents woman as the poet's opposite who, through the act of sexual love, allows him to enter into a transcendent state of consciousness and thereby gain a new sense of his own identity. In the first section of the poem the poet identifies himself with the natural world:

⁸ C.P., p. 140.

All's even with the odd,
My brother the vine is glad.⁹

Then through a complex of visual and metaphysical images he tells the reader that his experiences with the woman he loves have given him a temporary vision of a higher order:

I stayed, and light fell
Across her pulsing throat;
I stared, and a garden stone
Slowly became the moon.¹⁰

This vision fades as the poet then returns to the natural world:

A shape from deep in the eye—
That woman I saw in a stone—
Keeps pace when I walk alone.¹¹

In the second section of the poem Roethke continues to extend both his physical and metaphysical connections with his love.

The wind's white with her name,
And I walk with the wind...
She moves when time is shy:
Love has a thing to do.¹²

At the end of this section he indicates that just as his love has both body and spirit, so he too is not bound by his physical nature ("I smile, no mineral man")¹³ and is capable of the full range of emotions that his opposite self is capable of.

The third section of the poem presents Roethke's philosophy of love. The section is divided into three stanzas each of which offer a different perspective on both the poet and his metaphysical understanding of love.

In the first stanza the poet goes beyond the physical world of generation and sees that his spiritual essence is love:

⁹ C.P., p. 123.

¹⁰ C.P., p. 123.

¹¹ C.P., p. 123.

¹² C.P., p. 124.

¹³ C.P., p. 124.

I get a step beyond
 The wind, and there I am,
 I'm odd and full of love.¹⁴

The second stanza returns him to the physical world where he and his love walk "on ferny ground"¹⁵ and become part of the world of Nature. In this stanza he affirms that the knowledge that comes from love, and in particular love that is grounded in both the body and spirit, provides the lovers with a deeper knowledge than can be discovered through the intellect:

Wisdom, where is it found?—
 Those who embrace, believe.¹⁶

In the final stanza of this section the poet affirms the idea that the eternal exists in the temporal and that all temporal things eventually lead one to the eternal. Thus Roethke is saying that there are two paths to inner knowledge. One path is the approach of pure spirit in which all earthly things must be denied so that an individual can eventually become pure spirit. The second path, which Roethke roots for in this poem, is a metaphysical path in which one sees the eternal in the temporal, the infinite in the finite, and follows the spirit within the substance to transcendental illumination (love).

What falls away will fall;
 All things bring me to love.¹⁷

In the fourth section of the poem the poet identifies his love with all of the natural world. In loving this woman Roethke is also loving the feminine aspect of the universe, Nature. By loving his female opposite he "wakes" to life:

The breath of a long root,
 The shy perimeter
 Of the unfolding rose,
 The green, the altered leaf,

¹⁴ C.P., p. 125.

¹⁵ C.P., p. 125.

¹⁶ C.P., p. 125.

¹⁷ C.P., p. 125.

The oyster's weeping foot,
 And the incipient star –
 Are part of what she is.
 She wakes the ends of life.¹⁸

In the final stanzas of the poem Roethke presents the idea that through sexual intercourse he is able to experience the unity between himself and his love. He affirms again that, at this time, the path of inner knowledge through physical love is the path that he has chosen. Through making love he is able to momentarily glimpse the Self in his love, and he sees that she and he are inwardly one:

I kiss her moving mouth,
 Her swart hilarious skin;
 She breaks my breath in half;
 She frolicks like a beast;
 And I dance round and round,
 A fond and foolish man,
 And see and suffer myself
 In another being, at last.¹⁹

In the poem, "The Sententious Man," Roethke reflects on the movement from desire to spiritual aspiration, and affirms the idea that it is first necessary to go through desire before desire can be transcended and replaced with transcendental illumination. In the first section of the poem he presents his thesis of the dual nature of man:

Spirit and nature beat in one breast-bone –
 I saw a virgin writhing in the dirt –²⁰

Roethke believes that to deny the flesh, at least in youth, is impossible: "We did not fly the flesh. Who does, when young?"²¹ In this poem he presents the idea that the physical nature is necessary, but that eventually one must go beyond the physical to the spiritual self and that this process should not be forced.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 125.

¹⁹ C.P., p. 126.

²⁰ C.P., p. 131.

²¹ C.P., p. 131.

Is pain a promise? I was schooled in pain.
And found out all I could of all desire;
I weep for what I'm like when I'm alone
In the deep center of the voice and fire.²²

In the last stanza of the poem the poet again rejects the false piety of individuals who condemn their own physical nature. In his final image of water gaining purity through movement he indicates his belief that man can only attain spiritual purification and the transcendence of his physical and sexual nature through a process of experience, and gradual illumination:

For water moves until it's purified,
And the weak bridegroom strengthens in his bride.²³

²² C.P., p. 132.

²³ C.P., p. 132.

CHAPTER SIX: THE SUN! THE SUN! AND ALL WE CAN BECOME!

Roethke started writing the "Meditations Of An Old Woman" in 1955 shortly after his mother's death. Words For The Wind concludes with this sequence of five poems. The poems are organized as a series of progressive "meditations" in which the protagonist, an old woman, is confronting her spiritual emptiness and oncoming physical death. In an attempt to discover at what point in her life she became dissociated from her spiritual identity she reflects back upon her past. Her reflections, the five "meditations," enable the old woman to psychically relive a number of mystical experiences that she had when she was younger. By "meditating" on these experiences she is able to re-enter the consciousness that she was in during her youth, and she experiences a psychic rebirth.

Karl Malkoff, in his pioneering study of Theodore Roethke, suggested that: "The Meditations are the search for the self with new implications, the search for an identity that transcends the temporal limits of the material world."¹ While this is certainly true, the "meditations" are much more complex than Mr. Malkoff suggests. Their subject matter is as much a study in the means of attaining self-realization as it is a reflection of that state. The poems also concern themselves with the poet's views on: what it is like to be a woman; sexuality; spiritual evolution; the subconscious drives; and the need to achieve a mystical union with God. The poems are structured like music, with the themes coming alternately and being drawn together in a minor crescendo at the end of each poem, and a major crescendo at the end of the sequence.

The first of the five poems in the sequence, "First Meditation," presents the old woman at odds with her inner state of spiritual stagnation, which Roethke mirrors in terms of cold and harsh natural imagery. She first meditates upon her current state of consciousness

¹ Glass House, p. 13.

and then comes to the conclusion that she is dissatisfied with it, and must begin a quest for meaning, and spiritual fulfillment:

On love's worst ugly day,
 The weeds hiss at the edge of the field.
 The small winds make their chilly indictments.
 Elsewhere, in houses, even pails can be sad;
 While stones loosen on the obscure hillside.
 And a tree tilts from its roots,
 Toppling down an embankment.
 The spirit moves, but not always upward...
 And the sun brings joy to some.
 But the rind, often, hates the life within...
 I need an old crone's knowing.²

The first poem in the sequence is divided into four sections. After becoming dissatisfied with her present condition in the first section, the old woman moves through a consideration of the nature of spiritual journeys into the self and then has a brief remembrance of her childhood, of two sparrows singing back and forth: "one within a greenhouse... And another, outside, in the bright day."³ These two sparrows suggest the harmony with which her spiritual self (symbolized by the bird inside the greenhouse) and her physical self (the bird in the open air) had in her youth. But her remembrance is lost as she considers the sheer impossibility of returning to the state of psychic wholeness of her youth. The last stanza presents images of upset and turmoil suggesting the self at odds with its own being, and finally ends in a blackout:

Journey within a journey:
 The ticket mislaid or lost, the gate
 Inaccessible, the boat always pulling out
 From the rickety wooden dock,
 The children waving;
 Or two horses plunging in snow, their lines tangled,
 A great wooden sleigh careening behind them,
 Swerving up a steep embankment.
 For a moment they stand above me,
 Their black skins shuddering:

² C.P., p. 157.

³ C.P., p. 158.

Then they lurch forward,
Lunging down a hillside.⁴

In her return to the present, the image of the two birds singing harmoniously back and forth has been replaced by the apocalyptic image of two black horses tangled in their own lines, suggesting her present state of spiritual dissociation and her oncoming death.

In the third stanza Roethke, via the personae of the old woman, extends his theory of spiritual growth, the theory from which he created the structure of "The Meditations" themselves. The movement is first backward, as suggested by the crab who is "sliding slowly backward,"⁵ and the salmon which slowly but steadily moves its way forward against the current, making slow but steady progress:

Still swimming forward—
So, I suppose, the spirit journeys.⁶

In the final stanza the Old Woman achieves a state of tranquility. Her meditation on the past and the nature of spiritual discovery has not given her illumination ("There is no riven tree, or lamb dropped by an eagle"),⁷ but it has allowed her to find a limited amount of satisfaction with the world of "things" that surrounds her. Although she has not reached into the depths of her spiritual essence, she has at least achieved a small reconciliation with the world and is happier than at the beginning of the sequence. Just as her psychic state of disunity was suggested at the beginning of the poem by negative natural imagery, now the positive natural imagery suggests a movement towards psychic wholeness:

There are still times, morning and evening:
The cerulean, high in the elm,
Thin and insistent as a cicada.
And the far phoebe, singing.
The long plaintive notes floating down,
Drifting through leaves, oak and maple...

⁴ C.P., pp. 158, 159.

⁵ C.P., p. 159.

⁶ C.P., p. 159.

⁷ C.P., p. 159.

In such times, lacking a god.
I am still happy.⁸

The second poem in "The Meditations," "I'm Here," and all of the succeeding poems in the sequence, will follow this pattern of psychic dissatisfaction, followed by a return to the past in which the protagonist experiences a forgotten part of her being, and at the end of the poem a renewal, as the protagonist integrates the essence of her reflection into her present situation. "I'm Here" is divided into five sections. In the first section the Old Woman is at odds with circumstances and her physical surroundings:

Outside, the same sparrows bicker in the eaves.
I'm tired of tiny noises:
The April cheeping, the vireo's insistence,
The prattle of the young no longer pleases.⁹

The second stanza is a return to her adolescence. She remembers herself as being a happy part of the natural order:

Running through high grasses.
My thighs brushing against flower-crowns...
Flesh-awkward, half-alive...
Bemused; pleased to be;¹⁰

But her joyous reflection is interrupted by the voice of her adult sensibility. This voice of rationality will often interrupt her reflections as it attempts to place limits upon her revelry:

So much of adolescence is an ill-defined dying,
An intolerable waiting,
A longing for another place and time,
Another condition.¹¹

The third section of the poem continues with further reflections of the Old Woman's past. But in the fourth section she returns to the present and is confronted with the images of two flowers which

⁸ C.P., p. 160.

⁹ C.P., p. 161.

¹⁰ C.P., pp. 161, 162.

¹¹ C.P., p. 162.

respectively suggest her own imminent physical death and her soul's immortality.

My geranium is dying, for all I can do,
 Still leaning toward the last place the sun was.
 I've tried I don't know how many times to replant it.
 But these roses: I can wear them by looking away.
 The eyes rejoice in the act of seeing and the fresh after-
 image;¹²

In the final section of the poem the Old Woman reaches a metaphysical understanding of death, feeling that death is not a final state but only another step in a progression of the soul's development: "It's not my first dying."¹³ She has found a peace within herself by seeing her inner "oneness" with all of Nature, and she rejoices in her own mortality:

I can hold this valley.
 Loose in my lap,
 In my arms.
 If the wind means me,
 I'm here:
 Here.¹⁴

The third poem, "Her Becoming," begins with reflections on mutability. The Old Woman sees herself as existing in a world of duality which is bounded on one side by pleasure and on the other side by pain. She seeks to go beyond this condition to experience a deeper metaphysical joy that far transcends the limited amount of satisfaction that she can gain from physical pleasure. She has come to realize that pleasure is always followed by pain and that as long as she has her attention atuned primarily to the physical level, she will not escape the "cold fleshless kiss of contraries."¹⁵

This meditation on the transitory nature of the physical world is followed by a regression to the past and to a metaphysical experience that the Old Woman had when she was a young girl, when she transcended

¹² C.P., p. 163.

¹³ C.P., p. 164.

¹⁴ C.P., p. 164.

the duality of the physical world and experienced a "jauntier principle of order:"

There are times when reality comes closer:
In a field, in the actual air...

My breath grew less. I listened like a beast.
Was it the stones I heard? I stared at the fixed stars.

The moon, a pure Islamic shape, looked down.
The light air slowed: It was not night or day.
All natural shapes became symbolical.¹⁶

The "Fourth Meditation" is a consideration of the battle between the spiritual aspirations and physical and sexual drives, and an overall reflection on what it is to be a woman, and the state of women in the modern age. The Old Woman reflects on the days of her youthful innocence when she could "stretch out the thin bones of my innocence."¹⁷ But as she grew older that innocence was replaced by an empty sensual longing which could never be quenched. She envisions the plight of the soul, which is the observer within the self, who watches the transmutation of the body and tries to choose a higher spiritual destiny for the Old Woman in spite of the body's insistent demands for purely physical fulfillment:

The soul stands, lonely in its choice,
Waiting, itself a slow thing,
In the changing body.¹⁸

The second stanza is a reflection on the nature of women and what it is to be a woman. Her reflection on the limited awareness of her sisters causes the Old Woman to wish that they might awaken: "May they flame into being!"¹⁹

Her meditation then turns into a consideration of racial evolution in which she sees herself as part of the human family that

¹⁵ C.P., p. 166.

¹⁶ C.P., p. 166.

¹⁷ C.P., p. 168.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 168.

¹⁹ C.P., p. 169.

are: "descendants of the playful tree-shrew that survived the archaic killers."²⁰ In the last section of the poem she comes to the realization that her lost self can be reclaimed, and she feels that regardless of her age she will endure: "The husk lives on, ardent as a seed."²¹

The final poem in "The Meditation of an Old Woman" retraces the movement of all of the preceding poems in the sequence, drawing all of their themes together in a final acceptance and transcendence of the self. The first stanza is filled with images of death and stagnation. The Old Woman meditates on the fear of her approaching death which shrouds her awareness and on the limited nature of physical existence which distracts her from her own true identity as an immortal being:

O my bones.
Beware those perpetual beginnings,
Thinning the soul's substance;
The swan's dread of the darkening shore,
Or these insects pulsing near my skin,
The songs from a spiral tree.²²

The second section of the poem is a metaphysical consideration of the Old Woman's relationship with God and with her soul. She sees her soul as being totally different from her physical and emotional self. It is withdrawn and unattached:

The self says, I am;
The heart says, I am less;
The spirit says, you are nothing.²³

She finally concludes that although she has forgotten about God, God still exists within her, and that God actually has a purpose for her existence:

I rock in my own dark.
Thinking, God has need of me.
The dead love the unborn.²⁴

²⁰ C.P., p. 170.

²¹ C.P., p. 170.

²² C.P., p. 171.

²³ C.P., p. 172.

In the final section of the poem the Old Woman thinks of herself and envisions her soul as a bird that disappears "into a waning moon."²⁵ She then enters into a state of self-revelry and rapture in which she proclaims a condition of joy for both her transitory physical self and her immortal soul. Her final realization is that she is both soul and substance, and as such she exists as both a limited finite individual and as a part of the infinite Self:

I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;
Sometimes I think I'm several.²⁶

She is thus able to welcome death as a metamorphosis and see herself as a player in a cosmic drama that has no ending and no death for her:

That came to me vaguely is now clear,
As if released by a spirit,
Or agency outside me.
Unprayed-for,
And final.²⁷

²⁴ C.P., p. 172.

²⁵ C.P., p. 173.

²⁶ C.P., p. 173.

²⁷ C.P., p. 173.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE WINDY CLIFFS OF FOREVER

Theodore Roethke's The Far Field is the culmination of a lifetime of poetic creation. In The Far Field Roethke achieves a reconciliation between his spiritual aspirations and his physical desires and comes to the realization that matter and spirit are two complementary aspects of one seamless reality. In The Far Field Roethke reflects the final stages of his search for his identity, and the metaphysical realizations that he came to shortly before his death.

In Roethke's search for his identity he passed from the rejection of the physical self to a gradual acceptance of it, and then to a revelry and delight in it. He used the act of physical love as a means of transcending his ego and gaining a deeper awareness of the nature of his inner self, by experiencing that same self in the woman he loved. But as he matured the limitations of this form of self-realization became evident to the poet, and in the final years of his life he came to realize that it was in and through meditation and mystical experience that he would finally achieve the union with his inner self that he had been seeking all of his life.

Ultimately, Roethke seems to have come back to a peculiarly American "stance," the Emersonian confidence in seeing the spirit in matter, also, in a sense, in creating matter (or forming it) through the power of the transcending will. Much more than Emerson's, Roethke's mind was drenched in particulars. He had at the beginning to move away from them, in order to notice his own identity, to "be himself." The "papa" principle had eventually to yield to the search for adequate limits of self, simply because "papa" had died. Momentarily, he found a surrogate definition in the physical nature of love; when his confidence in this ceased, he was forced alternately to meditate upon the end of a temporal process and to will transcendence of it.¹

The Far Field was published posthumously one year after the poet's death. Roethke had completed the poems to be included in the

¹ Theodore Roethke; Essays on the Poetry, ed. by Arnold Stein (1965), p. 111.

volume shortly before his death and had placed many of them in the order in which they appear in The Far Field. Both the "North American Sequence" and the "Sequence Sometimes Metaphysical" are, in content and order, as arranged by Theodore Roethke in the original manuscript.² It is my intention in this chapter to focus primarily upon the "North American Sequence." I believe that these six poems were among the best that Roethke ever wrote and that they fully represent the poet's final vision of himself, and the land that he loved.

In "Night Journey," the final poem in Roethke's first book, Open House. Roethke describes his experiences journeying through the night on a train moving across North America. In "Night Journey" Roethke describes the land as it passes rapidly before his eyes, and his own personal reactions to what he sees:

Now as the train bears west,
 Its rhythm rocks the earth,
 And from my Pullman berth
 I stare into the night
 While others take their rest...
 Full on my neck I feel
 The straining at a curve;
 My muscles move with steel,
 I wake in every nerve.
 I watch a beacon swing
 From dark to blazing bright;
 We thunder through ravines
 And gullies washed with light.
 Beyond the mountain pass
 Mist deepens on the pane;
 We rush into a rain
 That rattles double glass...
 I stay up half the night
 To see the land I love.³

Roethke's love of "the land" increased throughout his life, and it becomes more manifest in his succeeding books of poetry. In spite of the poet's inner turmoils and psychological difficulties this love gave him the joy he needed to declare: "I count myself among the happy

² C.P., p. 1 (note).

³ C.P., p. 34.

poets."⁴ In "The North American Sequence" Roethke blends his love of "the land" with his search for identity and uses both to create an allegorical journey into the Self which moves from a state of self-alienation and desolation to a state of mystical union and self-rapture. The poet felt that his own personal quest for identity was representative of the quest for self-discovery that all men undertake, and in "The North American Sequence" he beckons the reader forward, to undertake a poetic journey with him in search of identity.

The "North American Sequence" is composed of six longish poems. The first poem in the sequence, "The Longing," opens with images of physical stagnation which suggest the poet's inner state of spiritual and psychological alienation:

On things asleep, no balm:
 A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
 Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
 Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
 Saliva dripping from warm microphones.
 Agony of crucifixion on barstools.⁵

This state of alienation has come about because of the dissociation of the poet's body and spirit. The spirit, which Roethke calls an "eyeless starter,"⁶ has withdrawn into the self because of the poet's sensual overindulgences. It was Roethke's apprehension that the spirit or soul does not force someone to act in any specific way but simply prompts a man to pursue his higher aspirations instead of his sensual drives. When a man listens to the promptings of the soul he enters into a metaphysical quest for his identity that eventually culminates in a joyous and fulfilled state of consciousness. But when he ignores the inner wishes of the spirit:

The soul stands lonely in its choice.
 Waiting, itself a slow thing.
 In the changing body.⁷

⁴ S.P., p. 40.

⁵ C.P., p. 18.

⁶ C.P., p. 187.

⁷ C.P., p. 187.

Roethke believed that if a man does not follow the promptings of his soul, then the soul withdraws and watches from a distance, completely unattached and unaffected by either the pleasures or sufferings of the body that houses it.

In the first section of "The Longing" Roethke does not revert to his earlier contention that the body must be ignored and frustrated in order to cultivate and receive benefit from the soul. He has acknowledged the value of the body and has learned to see that the spirit exists both in the body and the soul. But he has also learned through experience that: "Lust fatigues the soul." Sensual, and particularly sexual overindulgence, causes the soul to withdraw and wait until an individual is ready to raise himself to a more illumined level of consciousness:

And the spirit fails to move forward,
But shrinks into a half-life, less than itself.
Falls back, a slug, a loose worm
Ready for any crevice,
An eyeless starter.⁸

In the first section of "The Longing," Roethke asks the question: "How to transcend this sensual emptiness?"⁹ As the title of the poem suggests, this "longing" for a transcendence of the sensual level of existence, and the resulting quest for a higher transcendental state of consciousness, is the theme of the poem. Roethke starts his sequence with "The Longing" to suggest that the first feeling or realization that an individual must come to in his search for his identity is a rejection of or a dissatisfaction with his current state of consciousness, and a "longing" for something higher. Roethke believed that as long as an individual was content with the limitations of the sensual world, then his quest for identity would remain unfulfilled. To simply "dream" about self-realization was not

⁸ C.P., p. 187.

⁹ C.P., p. 187.

enough; he felt that an individual must actively pursue it: "Dreams drain the spirit if we dream too long."¹⁰

In the second section of the poem Roethke had a vision of the rose, his symbol for spiritual perfection. This vision is only a glimpse of "perfection," but it inspires the poet to continue his quest, which ultimately culminates in a full vision of the Rose in the last poem in the sequence, "The Rose."

How comprehensive that felicity!...
 A body with the motion of a soul.
 What dream's enough to breathe in? A dark dream.
 The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all.
 Who'd think the moon could pare itself so thin?
 A great flame rises from the sunless sea;
 The light cries out, and I am there to hear¹¹

The brief glimpse of the rose brings about an alteration in the poet's state of consciousness. He enters into a temporary illumination. This illumination is not a fully developed state of total illumination but one of a sequence of minor illuminations that the poet has throughout the "North American Sequence." Each succeeding illumination within the sequence raises the poet to a higher plateau of consciousness from which he can gain a fuller vision of his identity. The illumination will eventually pass and the poet's consciousness will descend to a lower level, but this "lower level" will be well above the previous level of the poet's consciousness before the illumination took place. Through this oscillating process of dissatisfaction, quest, illumination, partial descent, and dissatisfaction the poet is able to make "some progress."

At the end of the second section of "The Longing" the illumination resulting from the poet's glimpse of the "rose" fades. But the state of consciousness that he descends to is higher than his consciousness was before the illumination:

¹⁰ C.P., p. 187.

¹¹ C.P., p. 188.

To this extent I'm a stalk.
 -How free; how all alone.
 Out of these nothings
 -All beginnings come.¹²

The final section of "The Longing" is a Whitmanesque catalogue of the shapes and sounds of North America. The poet identifies himself with the land and the animals of North America, suggesting the freedom and individuality he would like to attain:

I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the mad lemmings.
 The children dancing, the flowers widening...
 I would unlearn the lingo of exasperation, all the distortions of malice and hatred;
 I would believe my pain: and the eye quiet on the growing rose;
 I would delight in my hands, the branch singing, altering the excessive bird;
 I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form;¹³

But Roethke's revelry and delight in the "redolent disorder of this mortal life"¹⁴ is shortlived. At the end of the poem he returns to a state of inner stagnation symbolized by the images of the dead buffalo, "The stench of their damp fur drying in the sun."¹⁵ In the very last lines of the poem Roethke echoes a line from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, another poetic quest for the Self. But he turns Eliot's declarative statement into an interrogative sentence: "Old men should be explorers?"¹⁶

In a refutation of what he considered to be Eliot's armchair mysticism, Roethke identifies himself with the American Indian, the rugged individual in touch with the land and his own spiritual identity. He felt that Eliot's mysticism was self-deception. In a letter to Ralph Mills he made the following remarks:

¹² C.P., p. 188.

¹³ C.P., p. 188.

¹⁴ C.P., p. 188.

¹⁵ C.P., p. 189.

¹⁶ C.P., p. 189.

Christ, Eliot in the Quartets is tired, spiritually tired, old-man. Rhythm, Tiresome Tom. ...Not only is Eliot tired, he's a (...) fraud as a mystic – all his moments in the rose-garden and the wind up his ass in the draughty-smoke-fall-church yard.
Ach, how vulgar I become – perhaps.¹⁷

At the end of "The Longing" Roethke identifies himself with the Indian. He has gone "backward" from a state of modern technological complexity and alienation, as depicted in the first stanza in the poem, to a primitive simplicity. He has completed the first step in his six poem odyssey in search of identity:

Old men should be explorers?
I'll be an Indian.
Ogalala?
Iroquois.¹⁸

"Meditation At Oyster River," the second poem in Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence," is a poem centered in stillness. The overall movement of the poem is within as the poet probes the inner recesses of his consciousness and tries to come to an understanding of his soul and its many motions. The recurring symbol in the poem is water, its varying forms, as presented in the poems, suggest the poet's alternating states of consciousness.

The poem is divided into four sections. In the first section the poet is at the mouth of a river near the ocean. The time is near sunset, and the tide is at the turning point between low and high water, when the river is filled with many small forms of life, the overall imagery that surrounds the river indicate a state of decay and death. The stillness of the water between the tides suggests that the poet has reached a turning point in his own life. The final images of the raven with "Its wings catching a last glint of the reflected sun light"¹⁹ set the scene for the poet's meditation on death that follows in the next section:

¹⁷ S.P., p. 229.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 189.

¹⁹ C.P., p. 190.

The self persists like a dying star.
 In sleep, afraid. Death's face rises afresh.
 Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick.
 The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across the
 highway.
 The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting
 for its fly.
 The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to morning
 glory—
 With these would I be.²⁰

The second section of the poem is a meditation on mutability. Roethke's voice extends beyond his own self and becomes a chorus for all of life. He identifies himself with the transitory creatures of the earth and with the eternal consciousness from which all things come and into which all things return. Through his dual identification with both the transitory creatures of the earth and with the eternal consciousness, the poet affirms that he is both within and beyond the cyclic process of existence. The poet's meditation on the nature of the transitory and the eternal shifts to a final vision of the inevitability of death at the end of the stanza:

Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous
 undercurrents
 The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of stone,
 The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.²¹

Just as life is followed by death, so death is again followed by life. Roethke suggests the constant shifting of the life cycle by turning his attention to the Spring, and meditating on birth.

In this hour,
 In this first heaven of knowing,
 The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit²²

The poet thinks of rivers in the Spring and of the ice cracking and shifting until the waters flow with an explosive force downstream. Identifying with this process of renewal the poet has a spiritual

²⁰ C.P., p. 190.

²¹ C.P., p. 191.

²² C.P., p. 191.

vision that renews him and brings him to a new plateau of consciousness:

And I long for the blast of dynamite.
The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its debris
of branches and sticks,
And the whole river begins to move forward²³

Through his meditation on death, and the renewal of life, Roethke has entered into a state of spiritual rebirth. In the last section of "Meditation At Oyster River" he reflects on his "newness." The poem has moved from a still river {section one), to the ceaseless movement of the waves (section two), to the rush of water in the Spring (section three), and finally to the shore of the ocean (section four). This movement has characterized the shifting meditations of the poet as he moved from a meditation on old age, to considerations of death, to thoughts of rebirth, and, in the final section of the poem, to youth. In the last section of the poem Roethke identifies himself with all parts of the cycle of existence when he declares: "Water's my will, and my way."²⁴

The final images at the end of the poem suggest an entrance into a new state of awareness. The poet has been renewed and psychically reborn by his meditations:

In the first of the moon.
All's a scattering,
A shining.²⁵

In "Journey To The Interior" Theodore Roethke continues his journey into the self in the guise of an automobile drive into the past. Roethke adopts a new personae in this poem, the hard rugged individualist who enjoys pitting his strength and cunning against the elements. Throughout the poem Roethke "drives" through catalogues of the North American landscape which in part symbolize the different parts of his own being. Towards the end of the poem the poet has a

²³ C.P., p. 191.

²⁴ C.P., p. 191.

²⁵ C.P., p. 192.

metaphysical vision which transforms his fear of death into an affirmation of life, and he is able to transcend what he calls "the spirit of wrath"²⁶ and instead becomes "the spirit of blessing."²⁷

The fourth poem, "The Long Waters," is the weakest poem in the sequence. It seems to be neither a step forward nor backward in the poet's search for identity. It is a resting place, a pause in the journey in which the poet assesses his progress and prepares for the final drive into the self depicted in "The Far Field." In "The Long Waters" the poet again considers his attraction to desire. But the aging Roethke is no longer battling against desire. With age has come self-knowledge and self-acceptance. He now acknowledges that the outcome of his long battle with desire was inevitable, and he enjoys his parting with desire as he goes beyond it:

How slowly pleasure dies!-
The dry bloom splitting in the wrinkled vale,
The first snow of the year in the dark fir.
Feeling, I still delight in my last fall.²⁸

In the last section of the poem the poet has a metaphysical vision which is followed by an experience of "oneness" with all of existence:

I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,
Become another thing;
My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;
I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world.²⁹

But unlike the earlier poems in the "North American Sequence" in which Roethke emotionally prepared the reader for his final vision, in "The Long Waters" the reader is caught off guard by his vision. While the vision itself has force, it seems to be out of place, and is not suited to the overall structure of the poem. But if a lull in the

²⁶ C.P., p. 195.

²⁷ C.P., p. 195.

²⁸ C.P., p. 197.

²⁹ C.P., p. 198.

sequence had to occur in any section, Roethke picked the most appropriate part of the sequence for it to occur. "The Far Field," the next poem in the sequence, is the poetic and visionary high point of the entire "North American Sequence." And this "calm before the storm" allows the reader a few moments to collect himself before Roethke's final drive into the Self.

In "The Far Field" Theodore Roethke reflects his ultimate vision of reality. While the next and final poem in the "North American Sequence," "The Rose," provides the reader with the poet's transcendent vision of the "rose," the vision at that point in the sequence is anticlimactic and serves as a denouement. In "The Far Field" Roethke explicates his reconciliation between the forces of matter and spirit, and his understanding and acceptance of death as another step in an endless progression of existences. "The Far Field" is a tour de force for Roethke, and he weaves together all of the major themes that he has dealt with throughout his poetry into a final unifying vision of the eternality of man's spirit, the essential joyousness of existence.

"The Far Field" is divided into four sections. In the first section Roethke returns to the image of the car that he used as an emblem for his drive into the self in "Journey To The Interior."

I dream of journeys repeatedly:
 Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel.
 Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
 The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
 A fine dry snow ticking the windshield.
 Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic.
 And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror.
 The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone.
 Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut,
 Where the car stalls.
 Churning in a snowdrift
 Until the headlights darken.³⁰

Roethke begins "The Far Field" with a drive into the self that ends in a blackout. The rhythmic motion of the images that meet his

eyes and the cinemagraphic vision of the protagonist on a lone mission, combined with the image of death (deep narrowing tunnel) , suggest the finality of his "drive" into the Self (the driving force behind it suggests a controlled frenzy, as if Roethke was announcing to the reader that this time he would either succeed at having a culminating vision of himself, or die in the process). The blackout at the end of the stanza is a mythic descent of the Odyssean hero, who must now journey into Hades and meet with the spirits of the dead, before he can return home. In Roethke's case the descent into Hades is a return to youth, and in the second section of the poem he returns to his childhood considerations of death, and then moves forward to a meditation on life after death:

At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,
Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,
Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,
Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,
Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,—
One learned of the eternal;
And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and
ground-beetles
(I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)³¹

Roethke reenters the consciousness of his childhood to discover his first feelings about death.³² He reflects that he "suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in the mower" but that his grief was not "excessive," because he was surrounded by life:

For to come upon warblers in early May
Was to forget time and death³³

His second reflection which comes from a later period of his life is a mere mature consideration of death and an affirmation of Roethke's belief in reincarnation:

³⁰ C.P., p. 199.

³¹ C.P., p. 199.

³² This reflection is similar to the process of a reentrance into childhood in "The Lost Son" in which Roethke discovers his first impressions of sexuality.

³³ C.P., p. 199.

-Or to lie naked in sand,
 In the silted shallows of a slow river,
 Fingering a shell,
 Thinking:
 Once I was something like this, mindless...
 Believing:
 I'll return again,
 As a snake or a raucous bird,
 Or, with luck, as a lion.³⁴

In the final stanza of this section of the poem Roethke returns to the present. His journey into the past has enabled him to overcome his fear of death and what lies beyond death:

I learned not to fear infinity,
 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
 The wheel turning away from itself,
 The sprawl of the wave,
 The on-coming water.³⁵

The third section of "The Far Field" is a withdrawal into the Self. This withdrawal is mirrored in the movement of water, as Roethke again uses water as a symbol for his shifting states of consciousness:

The river turns on itself,
 The tree retreats into its own shadow,
 I feel a weightless change, a moving forward
 As of water quickening before a narrowing channel
 When banks converge, and the wide river whitens;³⁶

The poet reaches into the depths of his subconscious and then surveys his being. Returning again to the "surface" he evaluates the progress he has made. His conclusion is that he has come to a "still, but not a deep center."³⁷ He then considers his death, and instead of being dismayed by it, he is renewed by his thought of it, seeing death as another step in his quest for identity:

³⁴ C.P., p. 200.

³⁵ C.P., p. 200.

³⁶ C.P., p. 200.

³⁷ C.P., p. 201.

I am renewed by death, thought of my death.
 The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
 The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
 What I love is near at hand,
 Always, in earth and air.³⁸

In the final section of the poem Roethke is catapulted into mystical unity with his inner Self. He sees that he is both soul and substance and that his body and the soul are manifestations of one unified reality of spirit: "All finite things reveal infinitude."³⁹ Having transcended death and other physical limitations by entering into a realm of pure mysticism where subject and object are "one," he perceives that he is not simply a finite individual. He (his spirit) exists within all of reality. Thus he can see himself as "the final man."⁴⁰ His quest for identity is now complete. He has found that he is God: he is "one" with the Universal Self, that pervades all of existence. Having made this realization he feels that he can never be limited by his body or its desires again:

His spirit moves like monumental wind
 That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
 He is the end of things, the final man.⁴¹

The final poem in "The North American Sequence," "The Rose," provides the poet with a transcendent vision of the unity of matter and spirit. Like "The Far Field," "The Rose," is divided into four sections. The first section is a reflection on the creation of the world. Section two begins with an allegorical journey on a ship which brings Roethke within himself to a vision of his soul (the rose) and then back to the greenhouses of his childhood. Here he sees his father as an archetypal God who tended the roses in the greenhouse eden of his youth:

What need for heaven, then,
 With that man, and those roses?⁴²

³⁸ C.P., p. 201.

³⁹ C.P., p. 201.

⁴⁰ C.P., p. 201.

⁴¹ C.P., p. 201.

The third section begins with reflection on physical reality: "What do they tell us, sound and silence?" Roethke then provides a catalogue of the sounds and sights of the North American landscape. All of the sounds he reflects on ("The bulldozer backing away, the hiss of the sandblaster," etc.) bring him to the source of all sounds, the soul:

And that sound, that single sound,
When the mind remembers all,
And gently the light enters the sleeping soul⁴³

The poet considers his physical desires. He has come to accept them as part of his being: "Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire."⁴⁴ His final reflections in this stanza are on his love of the North American landscape.

In the final section of "The Rose." Roethke rejoices in both his spiritual being and in his creaturely self. He no longer sees these two selves as opposed, but as working together in harmony:

Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of
myself,
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,
And I stood outside myself,
Beyond becoming and perishing...
And I rejoiced in being what I was:
In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm⁴⁵

In the poet's final vision he sees himself as the "rose;" he is "Rooted in stone" (indicating that he is part of the physical reality), and at the same time he is "keeping the whole of light" (indicating that he is spirit and part of a higher reality). He has come to the realization that he is "one" with all reality:

And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
Gathering to itself sound and silence—
Mine and the sea wind's⁴⁶

⁴² C.P., p. 203.

⁴³ C.P., p. 204.

⁴⁴ C.P., p. 204.

⁴⁵ C.P., p. 204.

⁴⁶ C.P., p. 205.

"The Right Thing," one of Roethke's last poems, summarizes the metaphysical themes that he depicted in near epic proportions in his "North American Sequence." In "The Right Thing" Roethke suggests that the struggle to understand the Truth from the point of view of the physical mind is a waste of time, because the intellectual mind does not have the capacity to understand Truth. Instead he posits that the best approach is to be happy, to sing the praises of the world and to surrender the will to the higher self in a mystical union with God:

And, praising change as the slow night comes on,
 Wills what he would, surrendering his will
 Till mystery is no more: No more he can.
 The right thing happens to the happy man.⁴⁷

It was Roethke's belief in the later years of his life that it was necessary to accept both the body and the soul and to "praise" both, in order to enter into higher spiritual states of consciousness. He felt that man had both a body and soul, and one could not be ignored or denied in the hope of fulfilling the other. In "The Right Thing" Roethke declares that his identity is both soul and substance:

God bless the roots! – body and soul are one!
 The small become the great, the great the small;
 The right thing happens to the happy man.⁴⁸

His final realization of the "oneness" of soul and body, spirit and matter, and even of his physical desires and spiritual aspirations, marked the close of his search for identity. While it is only speculation, I believe if Roethke had lived for a longer period of time his quest for identity would have continued, for although he had experienced the "oneness," he had not yet come to a full reconciliation with God:

I can't claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God.
 No, God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to
 be duelled with: that is perhaps my error, my sin of pride.
 But the oneness. Yes!⁴⁹

⁴⁷ C.P., p. 250.

⁴⁸ C.P., p. 250.

⁴⁹ S.P., p. 26.

In a panel discussion on "Identity" at Northwestern University shortly before his death, Roethke made the following remarks. They reflect some of his final feelings of "identity," and serve as a proper epitaph for endless quest in search of the Self:

For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time He is farther away — that in the Middle Ages, for instance, He was closer. He is equally accessible now, not only in works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service, or in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul, but in the lower forms of life. He moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails. Is this a new thought? Hardly, but it needs some practicing in Western society. Could Reinhold Niebuhr love a worm? I doubt it. But I-we-can.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ S.P., p. 27.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE POET AND HIS CRAFT

Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, I ask what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, imbued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present, an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by the real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.¹

A careful evaluation of the evolution of Theodore Roethke's stylistic development is a subject that deserves a separate book-length study of its own. It has not been my purpose to undertake such a study in the writing of this dissertation. But in the remaining pages I would like to briefly touch on those aspects of his stylistic development that appear to have been influenced by his changing attitudes regarding the interrelationship between matter and spirit.

Roethke felt (along with several classical schools of painting) that before an artist evolved his own style he should learn the techniques of his craft by copying the works of the "masters." He constantly read and reread the works of other poets and whenever he

¹ William Wordsworth, The Selected Poetry and Prose of Wordsworth, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (1970), pp. 418, 419.

came across a phrase, image, or poem that he liked he copied it in his notebooks. He believed that the best way to learn from other poets was by writing out their poems in longhand. He continued this practice throughout his life even after he had successfully developed his own style.

It is relatively easy to perceive the influences of Blake, Donne, Yeats, Eliot, Christopher Smart, Traherne and Rilke in Roethke's early poems. But as his style evolved these influences paled and his own "voice" became more dominant. The evolution of Roethke's verse, however, was not always smooth and even. He constantly experimented with new verse forms in an attempt to extend the forefronts of his poetry. One of his goals was to create a different style of poetry in each of his books. Unlike some of his contemporaries (who brought out new books of verse each year by transposing the styles and attitudes they had used in their previous poems into their current poetry) Roethke often spent five or six years writing one thin book of poems. During these years the poet himself was rapidly growing; each one of his six major books reflects an important shift in his attitudes and in the poetic structures through which he reflected those attitudes.

Roethke worked diligently on the technical aspects of his verse often writing and rewriting a poem many times before he was satisfied with its rhythms and arrangement. He also worked equally hard at creating a style of poetry that would enable the reader to share his metaphysical quest into the unknown. In order to do this he evolved a style of poetry that acted as a "psychic shorthand" which bridged the gap between the reader's consciousness and the mood or passion that Roethke was reflecting upon at the time of composition. Since so much of Roethke's life was concerned with ineffable metaphysical experiences the poet had to use rhythms, symbols, stanza forms and images that would telescope his perceptions into the reader's awareness.

The constant tension resulting from the battle between Roethke's spiritual aspirations and physical desires is manifested in the verse

forms that he chose to use in his first book, Open House. His belief that he had to "keep the spirit spare" resulted in a tight, repressive style which served to accentuate the personal anguish he experienced in the early years of his life. In "Feud" the regular rhyme scheme and the rapid movement of the tetrameter coupled with short four-line stanzas produces a poetry which reinforces the explosiveness of the poet's emotional state.

The dead leap at the threat, destroy
 The meaning of the day; dark forms
 Have scaled your walls, and spies betray
 Old secrets to amorphous swarms.²

The placement of the terminal caesura in the first and second lines of this stanza and the enjambment of these two lines increase the intensity of the self-hate and revulsion that accompany the "feud" between spirit and flesh that is depicted within this stanza.

Roethke's use of closed couplets in "Prayer Before Study" accentuates his perception that his spirit was being held down by his physical body and its desires.

Constricted by my tortured thought,
 I am too centered on this spot.
 So caged and caged, so close within
 A coat of unessential skin,
 I would put off myself and flee
 My inaccessibility...³

The even progression of the octosyllabic couplets creates a feeling that the poet is pacing back and forth in a confined area longing to break out of his confinement.

In "Highway: Michigan" Roethke personifies this repressed destructiveness in the battle between man and machine. The setting of the poem is an automobile factory at closing time when all of the

² C.P., p. 4.

³ C.P., p. 8.

workers rush for their cars and attempt to take out their frustrations by driving their "creations" wildly down the highway.

They jockey for position on
The strip reserved for passing only.
The drivers from production lines
Hold to advantage dearly won.
They toy with death and traffic fines.

Acceleration is their need:
A mania keeps them on the move
Until the toughest nerves are frayed.
They are the prisoners of speed
Who flee in what their hands have made.

The pavement smokes when two cars meet
And steel rips through conflicting steel.
We shiver at the siren's blast.
One driver, pinned beneath the seat,
Escapes from the machine at last.⁴

The five-line stanza that Roethke uses in this poem is a variant of the conventional "mad-song" stanza of the Renaissance.⁵ The continued use of the tetrameter and the regular rhymes of the first, fourth, third and fifth lines helps to convey the tension of the drivers and the momentum of their cars. The unrhymed second line in each stanza creates an overall feeling of unbalance mirroring the alienation and repression of the workers and preparing the reader for the inevitable destruction depicted in the closing lines of the poem.

The poems contained in Roethke's second book, The Lost Son, are a poetic explication of his journey into the past in which he discovers the causes of the division between his physical and spiritual self. Roethke's journey into the subconscious and preconscious states of human existence helped him to begin to accept his physical self and not "loath" his body and its sexual desires as he had during the early years of his life. At this stage of his development a parallel

⁴ C.P., p. 33.

⁵ Roethke was to continue to rely heavily upon the rants of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama along with many of the rhyme schemes found in childrens' poems in his next book. Praise To The End!.

"loosening up" also began to occur in his poetry. He temporarily abandoned the tightly metered and rhymed verse he was employing in Open House in favor of freer verse forms that more accurately conveyed the inner experiences he had during his journey into the regions of his subconscious.

The poems contained in the first three sections of The Lost Son are sketches of the poet's childhood. In these poems Roethke experimented with a longer line and more organic rhythms to try and capture the feelings of the greenhouse eden that he grew up in. In the longer poems in the fourth section of The Lost Son Roethke introduced even more radical verse forms to try and convey the rapid changes of consciousness that occurred to him during his drives into the self.

In the book's title poem, "The Lost Son," Roethke depicts these rapid alterations of consciousness by alternating the stanza forms used in the poem. By following an unrhymed stanza with a rhyming stanza, or by using a stanza form from a nursery rhyme after a free verse stanza, he is able to rhythmically reinforce the different sensibilities he was seeking to express.

Hunting along the river,
Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,
By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of the
summer.

The shape of a rat?
It's bigger than that.
It's less than a leg
And more than a nose.
Just under the water
It usually goes.⁶

In The Lost Son Roethke started to introduce metaphysical themes into his verse. In order to effectively convey his metaphysical experiences he often used techniques of repetition and a stanza form in which the lines would become progressively shorter. The purpose of

⁶ C.P., p. 54.

both of these devices is to try and bring the reader into a state of consciousness that is similar to that state which the poet was trying to depict. By repeating certain words or phrases over and over a rhythmic pattern is built up, which. Like a chant or incantation, has a mesmerizing effect upon the reader. (The repetition of words and phrases to invoke states of metaphysical meditation is quite common in the Far East.) By using a gradually shortening stanza Roethke is able to crystallize the reader's attention on one specific idea or image. This is similar to some of the meditation techniques used by the Zen Buddhists in which a person gradually eliminates thoughts from his mind and focuses all of his awareness upon one particular point, idea, image, or thing. By doing this Roethke believed that it was possible to perceive the essence of an object and break away from the limitations of the standard modes of perception which are normally dominated by abstractions:

To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you – Rilke gazing at his tiger for eight hours, for instance. If you can effect this, then you are by the way of getting somewhere: Knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee.⁷

In the following stanzas Roethke employs both the repetition of words and phrases and the decreasing stanza to convey a mystical experience that the protagonist of "The Lost Son" had.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.⁸

⁷ P.C., p. 25.

⁸ C.P., p. 58.

In "The Lost Son" Roethke also started to use cinemagraphic "black cuts" when he wanted to rapidly shift scenes or when, as in the following example, the protagonist of a poem had reached the heights of mystical experience that he was capable of sustaining.

Light airs! Light airs! A pierce of angels!
 The leaves, the leaves become me!
 The tendrils have me!⁹

The final technique that the poet introduced into his verse in The Lost Son was the catalogue of images. Roethke used this technique, which he adopted from Whitman's poetry, to convey emotional states or metaphysical realizations. Instead of having the protagonist say that he is happy or euphoric the poet lists a "catalogue" of images that suggest this state. He gradually builds up a complex of images that the reader can identify with and which will transmit the feeling or realization much more concretely than a single abstract idea would.

To have the whole air!
 The light, the full sun
 Coming down on the flowerheads,
 The tendrils turning slowly,
 A slow snail-lifting, liquescent;
 To be by the rose
 Rising slowly out of its bed,
 Still as a child in its first loneliness;
 To see cyclamen veins become clearer in early sunlight,
 And mist lifting out of the brown cat-tails;
 To stare into the after-light, the glitter left on the
 lake's surface,
 When the sun has fallen behind a wooded island;
 To follow the drops sliding from a lifted oar,
 Held up, while the rower breathes, and the small boat
 drifts quietly shoreward;¹⁰

Theodore Roethke's new-found acceptance of his sexual energies resulted in a temporary overemphasis on sexual themes in the poems in Praise To The End!. The often rhapsodic verse forms that Roethke used in these poems were both innovative and excessive. In the Praise To

⁹ C.P., p. 61.

The End! poems he experimented with conscious and subliminal free association. The resulting poems are a mixture of exciting moments of self-revelation, boring childhood mutterings and a rhythmic celebration of the generative force.

Roethke continued to use the new verse forms he had introduced in The Lost Son in Praise To The End!, but the incessant sing-song quality of the child's dialect that dominates these poems detracts from their overall effectiveness. The decreasing line stanza does not act to help the reader perceive the essence of an object or idea in these poems. Instead it is used to simply focus the attention of the reader on an idea or image that the poet wishes to emphasize.

Later, I did and I danced in the simple wood.
 A mouse taught me how, I was a happy asker.
 Quite-by-chance brought me many cookies.
 I jumped in butter.
 Hair had kisses.¹¹

Roethke introduced a new stanza form in Praise To The End! in which the succeeding lines of a stanza would lengthen until the middle line was reached, after which each succeeding line became shorter. But because of his imagistic over-indulgences the effectiveness of this verse form is lessened.

I conclude! I conclude!
 My dearest dust, I can't stay here.
 I'm undone by the flip-flap of odious pillows.
 An exact fall of waters has rendered me impotent.
 I've been asleep in a bower of dead skin.
 It's a piece of a prince I ate.
 This salt can't warm a stone.
 These lazy ashes.¹²

With the exception of "O, Thou Opening, O," in The Waking Roethke was to abandon this type of rhapsodic poetry after the creation of the Praise To The End! poems. But the poems in this collection should not be considered as a poetic dead end. The poet's experimentation with

¹⁰ C.P., p. 67.

¹¹ C.P., p. 61.

¹² C.P., p. 90.

"overindulgence" was necessary to balance out the awesome feelings of repression, self-hate and sexual guilt which had dominated him for so many years. Roethke started to write his best poems after the completion of Praise To The End!. In this sense, then, the poems in this volume were a purgation of Roethke's repressed feelings and emotions. His experimentation with free association and more uninhibited styles of verse cleared the way for his more mature poems that were to follow.

In the poems from The Waking Theodore Roethke was able to channel the energy and intensity of the Praise To The End! poems into more comprehensible forms. In The Waking he left off his explorations of adolescent sexuality and turned his attention to the themes that were to dominate his later poetry, the transcendental aspects of Nature, love and the soul. The Waking poems reflected a new maturity both in Roethke's themes and in the style of his verse. He was able to use a number of more traditional verse forms including the elegy and the French villanelle with an ease and grace that was absent from the poems in his three previous books.

The poem, "A Light Breather," is representative of the new style of poetry that Roethke adopted in his fourth book. In "A Light Breather" the poet continued to make use of the decreasing line stanza. The use of the internal "s" rhymes and the extended pauses in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh lines, coupled with the alternation of the masculine and feminine line endings, rhythmically mirror the movement of the "spirit."

The spirit moves,
 Yet stays:
 Stirs as a blossom stirs.
 Still wet from its bud-sheath.
 Slowly unfolding,
 Turning in the light with its tendrils;
 Plays as a minnow plays.
 Tethered to a limp weed, swinging,
 Tail around, nosing in and out of the current.
 Its shadows loose, a watery finger;
 Moves, like the snail.
 Still inward.

Taking and embracing its surroundings,
 Never wishing itself away,
 Unafraid of what it is,
 A music in a hood,
 A small thing,
 Singing.¹³

Roethke became increasingly conservative in his verse forms in the love poems in Words For The Wind. In these poems he explored the use of sexual experience to achieve a temporary transcendence of self which he felt would provide him with a more complete vision of his identity. By using a fixed stanza form and a more regular meter he was able to set up a poetic framework that would accentuate the "tensions" that his love poems required. He did not, however, need to return to the methodical tetrameter and closed couplets of his earlier poems. The freer-flowing trimeter and the eight-line stanza provided the quick and even movements he sought to depict the "dance" of love.

Love, love, a lily's my care.
 She's sweeter than a tree.
 Loving, I use the air
 Most lovingly: I breathe;
 Mad in the wind I wear
 Myself as I should be,
 All's even with the odd.
 My brother the vine is glad.

Are flower and seed the same?
 What do the great dead say?
 Sweet Phoebe, she's my theme:
 She sways whenever I sway.
 "O love me while I am,
 You green thing in my way!"
 I cried, and the birds came down
 And made my song their own.¹⁴

The poet's use of a fixed meter in the previous stanzas allows him to set up a rhythmic patten which, when broken, dramatically accentuates the "broken" line in a way which would not occur if the poem were written in free verse. In these stanzas taken from the collection's title poem, "Words For The Wind," Roethke breaks the

¹³ C.P., p. 86.

¹⁴ C.P., p. 100.

trimeter to emphasize the first and the eighth line in the first stanza and the first and the seventh line in the second stanza. The enjambment of the fifth line in the first stanza also serves to accentuate the succeeding line. The overall rhythmic effect of these changes provides the poem with a rhythmic "swaying" which the poet occasionally breaks to avoid monotony or to heighten a particular image or idea. The rapid movement of the trimeter also emphasizes the physical motions that the poet is describing.

I kiss her moving mouth,
 Her swart hilarious skin;
 She breaks my breath in half;
 She frolicks like a beast;
 And I dance round and round,
 A fond and foolish man,
 And see and suffer myself
 In another being, at last!¹⁵

In "The Meditations of an Old Woman" and the poems in "The North American Sequence" Roethke was able to rhythmically depict the motions of his protagonist's mind in states of meditation and reflection. In order to do this he employed a predominantly longer poetic line that had a much slower rhythm. This longer line creates a feeling of tranquility as the protagonist "meditates" upon his past, present, and future conditions.

I have gone into the waste lonely places
 Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky cities.
 What's beyond never crumbles like an embankment,
 Explodes like a rose, or thrusts wings over the Caribbean.
 There are no pursuing forms, faces on walls:
 Only the motes of dust in the immaculate hallways.
 The darkness of falling hair, the warnings from lint and
 spiders.
 The vines graying to a fine powder.
 There is no riven tree, or lamb dropped by an eagle.¹⁶

Roethke depicted his final vision of the unity of matter and spirit in these later poems through long catalogues of images. Often he would present an abstract premise in one of his poems and then

¹⁵ C.P., p. 126.

"define" that premise with concrete images that either symbolically or actually suggest that state:

All finite things reveal infinitude:
 The mountain with its singular bright shade
 Like the blue on freshly frozen snow,
 The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
 Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
 A scent beloved of bees;
 Silence of water above a sunken tree:
 The pure serene of memory in one man,
 A ripple widening from a single stone
 Winding around the waters of the world.¹⁷

Roethke also used the catalogue of images to depict his final vision of his identity. In "The Rose" he uses objects from the natural world that have varying symbolic meanings to imaginatively connect himself with both the transitory world of the "lilac change" and with the eternality of the soul which he symbolized as "The dolphin rising from the darkening waves."

And I stood outside myself
 Beyond becoming and perishing,
 A something wholly other,
 As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
 And yet was still.
 And I rejoiced in being what I was:
 In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm.
 In the bird on the bough, the single one
 With all the air to greet him as he flies,
 The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;¹⁸

In his final poems Roethke entered into a phase of pure symbolism. His metaphysical realizations became increasingly difficult for him to express. These poems, most of which are contained in "Sequence Sometimes Metaphysical," have been criticized by some scholars for their vagueness. But since Roethke's poetry has always been very concrete I would suppose that it was not Roethke's fault that these final poems could not fully convey his inner

¹⁶ C.P., p. 159.

¹⁷ C.P., p. 201.

¹⁸ C.P., p. 205.

experiences. Instead I would attribute this fault to the inability of our language to translate the feelings and intuitions that occurred to the poet towards the end of his life.

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