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Marylou Lewandowski

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THEODORE ROETHKE.

State University of New York at Binghamton,  
Ph.D., 1969  
Language and Literature, modern

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Marylou Lewandowski

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**TRADITION AND THE ORIGINAL TALENT  
OF THEODORE ROETHKE**

**BY  
MARYLOU LEWANDOWSKI**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in State University of New York  
at Binghamton  
1969**

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Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
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**For**  
**FRANK**  
**and for**  
**JOHN V. HAGOPIAN**  
**My Mentors**

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## PREFACE

When I turned to study the modern poets a few years ago, Theodore Roethke's voice rang most clearly and most convincingly. The poet's untimely death in 1963 made his canon complete; by then Roethke had been awarded most of the major poetry prizes offered in this country, and it seemed likely that his status as a "major" poet would demand that close attention be paid to his more difficult poems. Turning to the criticism we find, however, that (with a few significant exceptions) attention to the poems is neglected in favor of arguments about the poet's originality or lack of it.

Shortly after I had "found" Roethke I became involved in some work on Information Theory. This theory seemed to offer insights into the very problem Roethke criticism is caught up in--that of poetic originality. Although literary theorists have long been concerned with the relation between the old and the new in art, Information Theory offered scientific support for those who maintain that both elements are present in a successful artistic product. Combining my two interests, I undertook this study in order to help rid Roethke criticism of its excessive concern with the poet's derivativeness.



If successful, this study may help to clear the critical air so that the job of explicating and evaluating Roethke's work can take a more productive direction.

I owe much to all those who gave me advice, encouragement, and practical assistance during my work. David Wagoner took the time to send me information about his publications of the notebook material. The members of the English Department at the State University of New York at Binghamton provided interest, encouragement, and specific help in the form of calling my attention to new articles on Roethke. My office mates suffered through my groans or exclamations and listened with patience to my arguments.

To some friends I owe special thanks: to Carol Harter, who gave freely of both her time and her critical insights; to John Kellogg, who helped with the typing and some of the impossible rhetoric; and to Peggy Harkness, who spent more hours than I can count in proof-reading, typing, checking quotes, and added just the right touch of humor necessary to pull me out of my own "dark" times.

Special thanks must also be given to certain faculty members. Professor Lawrence R. Gottheim's interest in Roethke matches my own, and he often provided insights and enthusiasm. Professor Milton Kessler advised me repeatedly and offered those creative insights

that only a practicing poet can. My readers, Professors Arthur L. Clements and Robert Kroetsch, also gave their time freely, often under the most busy, trying conditions; they made positive recommendations about both aesthetic and technical matters. Professor Kroetsch first introduced me to Roethke. I owe to Professor Clements what knowledge I have of the Metaphysical poets.

To Professor John V. Hagopian, my teacher and my friend, I can never express my indebtedness or my appreciation; my admiration for his professional and his personal integrity grows constantly, and I am extremely proud to have been his student.

Finally, I must try to express my deepest gratitude to my family. Only my children know what this study has cost them in terms of their own need for attention and encouragement. They seem proud, and I am proud of their understanding and patience. Frank, my husband, gave unbelievable support in both practical and personal ways. To him I can offer only my deepest love in return for his own.

To all these I give thanks for their help and apologies for my shortcomings.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE POETRY AND THE CRITICS: PROBLEMS

James Dickey once said that "Roethke seems to me the finest poet now writing in English"; he elaborated that assertion with an enthusiasm which borders on mystical ecstasy:

. . . I think he is the finest, not so much because of his beautifully personal sense of form (approved even by Yvor Winters, our most insistent watchdog in these matters), but because of the way he sees and feels the aspects of life which are compelling to him. . . . The best of Roethke's poems are very nearly as frightening and necessary as "darkness was upon the face of the deep," and as simple as "let there be light." . . . They are, and will be, permanent parts of our perception of reality, and one feels guilty of an unjust act, of a dislocation of nature, in referring to them as literature at all.

Dickey made this statement in a review of Theodore Roethke's Words for the Wind and was no doubt referring specifically to the "Praise to the End" sequence, poems which dwell on the majestic themes of darkness and light, death and life. Dickey finds them to be both exceedingly complex and strikingly simple, and he praises the technique which can present both extremes of awareness at the same time.

Other critics, especially when they take the poet's entire canon into consideration, have been more reserved. In "The Objective Ego," Stephen Spender attempts to show that, in his best poems, Roethke's speaker is not egoistic: "The 'I' becomes the medium, the conveyer of the not-I." During the course of his argument Spender raises one of the prominent issues in Roethke criticism:

There are influences in Roethke, most evident in the earliest and latest work, less evident in that of the middle period. I write "influences" because that is the appropriate word of the critical vocabulary. But rather I would describe them as props, braces, stays, supports, worn externally and often with a somewhat awkward self-consciousness.

There follows a list of the poets, including himself, whose work is echoed by Roethke; he ends, "Later there is W. B. Yeats, embarrassingly present." The best poems, according to Mr. Spender, the ones "most uniquely Roethke" are the middle ones, those of The Lost Son and Praise to the End!, but "in these the originality is very 'far gone,' so much so that, a little further, and the reader would lose contact with the poet."<sup>2</sup> Thus Roethke is faulted for being both excessively derivative and excessively original.

W. D. Snodgrass finds the swings from imitation to originality and back again to be evidence of Roethke's struggle with form. Beginning with high praise, "The



career of Theodore Roethke is one of the most remarkable achievements of a period whose creative vigor will be a wonder to succeeding ages," Snodgrass attempts to trace that career in terms of Roethke's acceptance or rejection of traditional forms. He says of Praise to the End!, "Even after the wildest surrealists, that voice sounds new and astonishing; it could be no one but Roethke. It is an achieved style, carrying much meaning, and touching only tangentially other voices we have heard in poetry. . . . Even now, more than twelve years since those poems appeared, I do not feel that I really understand them, or feel certain how ultimately successful they are." About Roethke's final collection, The Far Field, however, he says, "Eliot's ideas and Yeats's cadences have rushed in to fill the vacuum of the father-model which could have made this world bearable, yet which Roethke either could not find or could not accept. In one sense, they provide too much form."<sup>3</sup>

A more astute critic, John Wain, feels differently about this last sequence. "These last poems of Roethke's are a summary, refined and strengthened by the power of his long-tried art, of what he had been perceiving and saying for twenty years. . . . And in The Far Field Roethke's meeting with the world is richer and more delicate than anywhere previously except in the best passages of Praise to the End!"<sup>4</sup> Stanley Kunitz seems to concur with Wain's judgment about this last sequence:

"The range and power of this posthumous volume, unquestionably one of the landmarks of the American imagination have yet to be fully grasped and interpreted."<sup>5</sup> But M.L. Rosenthal, in The New Poets, asserts that "The poems of The Far Field have a number of lovely effects and interesting passages, though they are often marred by verbosity, cliché, and derivativeness."<sup>6</sup>

The arguments continue. Louis Martz speaks of the "incoherencies," the "Tom O' Bedlam style" of the poems of Praise to the End,<sup>7</sup> but Hilton Kramer, after an extensive analysis of the poems of this sequence, is led to assert:

I can think of no poet, in fact, who is more literal than Roethke; it is his literality which strikes the reader from the first; and after the symbolic levels rise to the surface, and expand and transform our understanding of the literal, it is still the literal which impresses us above all, and which survives to haunt our minds, in which are now embedded forms of odd living things we hardly expected to contemplate.<sup>8</sup>

A third critic, Peter Viereck, bridges these two points of view in an interesting way. In his 1948 review of The Lost Son, Viereck issued a tirade against obscurity: "It is time for a frontal assault on obscurity as inartistic; if critics still hesitate to take this plunge, it is for the understandable fear of playing into the hands of poetry's Philistine enemies." However he went on to say that "Roethke's original imagery and stark emotion-charged vocabulary outweigh all objections."<sup>9</sup> Four years later he



states that the two "poetic events" of the year are the publication of the posthumous edition of Yeats' Collected Poems and Theodore Roethke's Praise to the End!. In this review his praise of Roethke approaches the metaphysical intensity of James Dickey:

Every sin, probably even obscurity, can be forgiven a poet who exalts and exults. To convey ecstasy, not by explicit denotation but by rhythm and connotation, has a lucidity all its own, a meta-communication, a fourth dimension that transcends -- in a way that 99 percent of obscure poets fail to do--the issue of clarity versus obscurity. Roethke belongs to this obscure but felicitous one percent. He is a poet of "fine phrenzie." Admittedly I am making gradiose claims for him. They can be substantiated not by my prose but by his verse: . . . Any man who can write like this may well become a great poet of that same utter<sup>10</sup> exaltation once sung by Rimbaud and Holderlin.

Viereck's comments, while completely useless to the practical critic, do face the issue at hand: he finds Roethke's middle poems to be obscure and he celebrates that fact with encomium.

Viereck's almost casual comparison of Roethke's work with Rimbaud's is not unusual. Stephen Spender also compares the Roethke of Praise to the End! with Rimbaud, saying that here we find poetry nearer than any other to what Rimbaud calls "objective poetry."<sup>11</sup> That very term calls Eliot to mind and, though Roethke denied any indebtedness to Eliot's method,<sup>12</sup> others have found the influence very strong. Denis Donoghue compares one of Roethke's passages to that of Eliot's "East Coker"<sup>13</sup> and Roy Harvey Pearce notes an echo of "Ash Wednesday" in

"The Lost Son."<sup>14</sup> Babette Deutsch, in Poetry in Our Time, finds in Roethke's long poems examples of what she calls Eliot's "auditory imagination." Yet, she insists, "Roethke's work is his own," and later, in discussing "The Lost Son," she flatly asserts that "Here is no Eliotesque vocabulary."<sup>15</sup>

Yeats, Rimbaud and Eliot are not the only poets with whom Roethke has been compared, favorably or unfavorably. As John Wain says, "He is always reminding us of other poets."<sup>16</sup> Wain adds Blake and Emily Dickinson but others could be added ad infinitum: Homer (in translation), Dante, Donne, Marvell, Vaughan, Traherne, Pope, Swift, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Baudelaire-- and so on, with the list becoming so extensive we would finally be compelled to cite most major poets who ever lived. Such comparisons are made with one of three purposes in mind: to show a strong influence of a poet on Roethke's work; to illuminate a theme by giving us a poetic analogue; to place the poet's work in some particular poetic tradition-- Roethke then becomes a Romantic, an Imagist, a Symbolist, a Visionary, a Meditative and a Confessional poet, depending on the critic's point of view.

Arguments develop even among those who are trying to categorize the tradition to which he belongs. In his book American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present, Hyatt H. Waggoner labels Roethke a Transcendental poet,

associating him most strongly with Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, though insisting that we note his affinities with the metaphysical poets and that we keep in mind the fact that he is a twentieth-century man who works with a consciousness of Freud and those poets who have spoken since the time of his earliest American ancestors.<sup>17</sup>

In a very recent article, "Theodore Roethke and the Landscape of American Poetry," C. W. Truesdale argues quite convincingly that:

But this allegiance--this lifelong allegiance--to form and tradition, to a master's theory of imitation, deep as it was, distracts us, I believe, from what is of major significance in his work. It is part of his charm that he was always a learner, that even in his late years he would still be working through and at his Yeats, striving through imitation and practice to absorb something of the spirit of his masters; but it is his own voice which compels us in the end and his deeper allegiance to the basic cultural traditions of America. Like many a poet before him, like Emerson and Whitman, he would begin by looking at his country through English and European eyes, but in the end he would rediscover his own America and become it.<sup>18</sup>

Compare this with a statement by Denis Donoghue:

When reading Stevens or Robert Frost or William Carlos Williams or Robert Lowell we are constantly reminded that we are reading American poets; but this is not an insistent element in Roethke. Indeed it is quite clear that he bears no special relation to either of the dominant traditions in American poetry--New England or the South.<sup>19</sup>

Here, then, we have three of the major issues in Roethke criticism, each approached from opposing extremes by different critics. Stated as questions, the issues are:



- (1) Was Roethke too derivative in his first and last groups of poems?
- (2) Were the middle poems too original, too obscure?
- (3) To which tradition does Roethke belong?

## II Roethke Answers

Roethke himself was aware of the problems. His comments in both the letters and the essays are often explicit or implicit responses to the charges most often made against him. However, unlike some great poets who were also critics, Roethke never gave us a concentrated, explicit statement of his aesthetics; his comments are always practical answers to practical issues at hand. And these comments differ as the role in which he states them differs. As the teacher, he speaks with authority and assurance, using the arguments of respected critics in support of his position. In his reviews, he judges others according to his own poetic practices and tastes. In his personal correspondence with fellow poets, however, writing as a friend and a competitor, he expresses himself with a less assured tone; we find him reacting subjectively, allowing his doubts about his practices to surface, repeating praise of his work as a defense against the negative judgments of some critics.

In Roethke's mind the charges of derivativeness were the most pressing and the topic is first mentioned in a response to Rolphe Humphries' review of another poet:

Dear Rolphe: That review of F. Frost was certainly a hair-raiser. I always feel hesitant about saying someone's influencing somebody else because sometimes I see a metaphor that I think is mine in someone else's work--in stuff I've never seen before, etc. etc.

But you certainly caught that girl with her pants down. Those were all terrific steals.<sup>20</sup>

Here we have the young poet intent on flattering the older master-poet and critic while suggesting quite timidly that the question of "influence" is not a simple matter to deal with. The tone is half apologetic for "that girl" (Frances Frost, whose book Woman of the Earth was reviewed by Humphries). The sentence "Those were terrific steals" is quite ambiguous, especially in light of his later comments in the prose; for example, he approvingly quotes Eliot's remark that "Bad poets imitate; good poets steal."<sup>21</sup>

Three years later he asked advice from Stanley Kunitz, by then a good friend, about "The Summons," a poem he had sent previously:

I've been making a desperate effort to turn away from negation and "hatred" and this is the result. The shadow of Yeats is on the page, but is it too heavy? In other words, is it my poem or a series of "echoes"? I believe it mine for I had to fight through much to get even this on the page. God knows what I say isn't new, but is it worth saying in this way? I mean with this many abstractions?

Oh, hell, never mind all the questions. What's troubling me is the "influence" business. It's so easy to say: "Yeats: (1) three foot alternate rhymes (2) enumerations."

Please be patient with my frantic questioning. I get in a terrible stew every so often for fear that I'm writing like Lionel Wiggam or Frances Frost. It's theme correcting that addles the brain, perhaps.<sup>22</sup>

Evidently Roethke had accepted Humphries' judgment about "that girl," Frost. And, though the letter expresses his certainty that he has assimilated Yeats in this poem, he was quite conscious of the possibility that the critics might disagree.

The problem nagged at him constantly. In a letter to Katherine Stokes ( a librarian at Penn State) he asks for an exact copy of a sentence in a review. "Reason: I made up an epigram which uses a somewhat similar idea. I've just recalled where I think I got it. Don't work hard at it, because the epigram isn't very good anyway. I'm hoping the reviewer's idea isn't close to mine." So much concern about a piece that "isn't very good anyway" underscores the constant fear of even unconscious "stealing."<sup>23</sup>

When the charge was actually made against him, he reacted with a mixture of hurt pride, defensive rebuttal, and grudging defeat. The letter is interesting enough to quote almost in its entirety:

To Louise Bogan

circa 1939

Dear Louise: Funny thing: I had just popped a letter into the box when I got yours, which was welcome indeed in spite of the P.R. boys' being alienated news.

Well, I hope you told them that I was conscious of what I was doing, at least to the extent of bringing up the matter when I showed you the piece. I may be self-deceived, but I still think that piece is good enough to have an independent existence. And what is an ancestor for anyway? (Ans. To assimilate, not to imitate...Thought I had assimilated, etc.)



Fact is I had sent the piece to Grigson with the title "Hopkinesque" (a Godawful word--should have been Hopkinese, I suppose), and I was intending to write Cowley when the N.R. up and printed it.

From the practical point of view, certainly a blunder, I suppose. But I really did think, and still do, that the piece is something more than imitation. The rhythm seems "righter" for instance. But I won't reprint it.

... You know, I asked two academic guys who were supposed to know Hopkins well whether they thought this was imitation Hopkins. Nothing like him, said they. This probably proves two things: (1) how dumb I am (2) how dumb and/or knavish they were.

When he signs the letter "Theodore Flopkins-Hopkins Roethke," he obviously intends to evoke a smile, but the effect is rather one of poignant defeat.<sup>24</sup>

As his experience increased, so did his confidence and his ability to handle "the enemy." Note the caustic assurance of the following, unbroken until the postscript:

To John Crowe Ransom

Saratoga Springs, New York  
July 28, 1947

Dear Mr. Ransom: Regarding your becoming a convert to my work: I console myself that those slow to faith are, in the end, the firmest.

But I am nobody's Dylan: I never went to school to him. If there's an ancestor, it's Traherne (the prose).

I enclose a new piece, typed by Master Robert Lowell, who says you will recognize what a labor of love his typing is. He thinks you might break down on this one, but I remain cynical and

Yours truly,  
T. Roethke

Pardon the whimsey or cuteness, --the result of a hot afternoon.<sup>25</sup>

The remaining letters reveal the mature poet to be much less susceptible to this kind of criticism. He was

very willing to point out his sources, explaining how he differed from them, even flaunting his confidence in lines of his poetry: "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats/ I take it, and I give it back again."<sup>26</sup> And he always insists that he did give it back: to Peter Viereck,, June 1953, ". . . here's the Sir John Davies sequence, anyway. As you'll see, it goes back to the very plain style of the 16th century--Raleigh and Davies, himself, really not Willie Yeats."<sup>27</sup>

In his reviews of the work of other poets he was quick to point out the "spiritual ancestors" of Louise Bogan, the literary "past" of Ben Belitt, the qualities of early English religious poetry which can be found in the work of Janet Lewis. He is willing, also, to make a judgment about whether or not the influences have been digested: about Willard Maas, "He usually survived his influences"; on Mark Van Doren, "His chief influences, well assimilated for the most part, probably were. . . ." <sup>28</sup> Yet he is also conscious that his judgments are subjective to a large degree. In a letter about the review of Belitt's work, he says, "I am afraid that sometimes in the review there is a tendency to create Belitt in my own image--to insist, in other words, that he do the kind of thing that I do. This is a common failing among reviewers, I believe."<sup>29</sup>

Two distinct sources, however, provide direct and

unequivocal evidence of Roethke's strong conviction that the proper training of a young poet necessarily included an extensive knowledge of the past poets and their modes, and the direct, intentional imitation of them as an exercise in poetic discipline. On accepting a position at Bennington in 1943, he wrote to Leonie Adams, describing which areas of literature he felt competent to teach. Included is a "rough outline of a course in verse writing which was developed to meet the needs of intelligent students who are not particularly well read." The outline is hardly "rough"; the work of each week is detailed and explicit with reference to the poetic topic to be covered and the past poets who will be studied. Take, for example, the third week:

Imagery: Metaphorical thinking as opposed to analytical. Sensuous image: early lyrics, Keats, Yeats, Cummings, Auden. Intuitive image: Blake, Dylan Thomas. Cerebral image: Donne, Crashaw, Marvell, Dickinson. Complex "fused" image: Dante, Milton, Baudelaire, Lorca. Students write poems based on images they associate with a particular mood or subject.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to this reading, there is a list of regular assignments: poem in tetrameter couplets, poem without adjectives, poem based on a single image, etc. Finally there are special assignments in translating poems, rewriting bad poems, notebook or workbook material, and the keeping of an anthology of little-known poems which the student thinks are good. Roethke was a hard taskmaster,



obviously, but his students loved him even if they found his demands in both the course and the exam a back-breaking experience. For our purposes the most important thing about this syllabus is its rationale. In introducing it to Miss Adams, Roethke says, "One cannot teach a young writer to use the past as a tool if he does not know what that past is; consequently, students are expected to read very widely deeply in the whole field of English and American poetry and to get considerable practice in a variety of verse forms."<sup>31</sup>

"How to Write Like Somebody Else" is Roethke's most explicit statement of his attitude toward the question of influence. Perhaps it was written as a defense, as some would claim;<sup>32</sup> certainly it is an intense examination of the problem which confronts the young writer who is troubled about finding his own "style." Two points are critical to the understanding of Roethke's position:

Let us say that some people--often inarticulate simple types--can hear a poem, can recognize the real thing; far fewer know what a line is; and fewer yet, I suspect, are equipped to determine finally whether a writer has achieved his own tone, or whether he has been unduly influenced by another; for such a judgment involves a truly intimate knowledge not only of the particular writers concerned, but also with the whole tradition of the language; a very exact medium sense; and a delicate and perceptive ear. I suggest that the central critical problem remains: whether a real poem has been created. If it has, the matter of influence becomes irrelevant. . . . In other words, take what you will with authority and see that you give it another, or even better life, in the new context.

Roethke then proceeds to give an account of examples from his own work where he doesn't assimilate and where he does. The John Davies poem is cited as successful. In summary, Roethke insists, "Imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps the method of learning to write. . . . The poet's ultimate loyalty--the phrase belongs to Stanley Kunitz--is to the poem. . . . The paradoxical thing, as R. P. Blackmur said of some of the young in the 'thirties, is that the most original poets are the most imitative. The remark is profound: if a writer has something to say, it will come through. The very fact that he has the support of a tradition, or an older writer, will enable him to be more himself--or more than himself."<sup>33</sup>

As for the second of the three major problems raised by Roethke's critics, that of obscurity, Roethke's concern is evident in the letters written during the composition of and after the publication of the poems of The Lost Son and, especially, Praise to the End!. His initial uneasiness is made explicit in a reply to Kenneth Burke, to whom he had sent "The Lost Son": "Your letter meant a great deal to me, . . . I know that poems that run back into the unconscious and depend upon associational rightness have a hard time breaking in on readers who are conditioned by the purely literary kind of thing." Later in the year he sent "The Long Alley" to William Carlos Williams with the comment that "These pieces seem to make

quite a dent, often, in people who usually don't read much poetry. Maybe that's for wrong reasons; but I hope not." Again, to Kenneth Burke, "I guess I'll have to make some sort of rationale or explanation for that second piece 'The Long Alley.' If you ever get brooding on it again, and think of a way of giving some leads to the reader, let me see them. Somehow, I seem psychologically unable to 'explain' something that is so close to me. Hell, these kids sense the unity all right: I don't see why trained readers can't." On sending "A Field of Light" to his editor, Roethke again felt compelled to explain in a postscript, "Maybe a point to make is that the poem is not difficult to anyone who is willing to think in images. Certainly after the deliberate conflicts of the first section, it's all clear enough." Much later, in 1958, Roethke wrote to John Holmes that "Nobody, damn it, has ever worked out those long poems, Praise to the End! But that would take an article, not a review." Finally, when Ralph J. Mills wrote in 1961 that he was working on the Minnesota pamphlet, Roethke replied, "It's the middle poems (Praise to the End!) that need the most explication, I'd say. What the symbols mean are what they usually mean, I always say. . . . Much of the style (in these pieces) and elsewhere is based on shifts in association. Now, either these are imaginatively right or they're not. Plenty of times chances are taken,--but I'd change nothing in that middle



sequence. . . #34

### III The Poetry Answers

Although Roethke became reasonably assured that he was the master of his technique, the poetry must speak for itself. This study will attempt to deal with the first two problems, those of derivativeness and obscurity. The third is easily disposed of: the fact that different critics would place him, with equal assurance, in a variety of poetic traditions suggests that Roethke partook of the entire tradition bequeathed to him, i.e., that he knew and echoed the voices of the great poets of all times. In any particular poem he used those writers who were most pertinent to his immediate poetic purposes. He was, after all, a teacher of English and American literature as well as a creator of it, and his familiarity with his poetic inheritance served him well. Admittedly certain voices echo more loudly than others. If any judgment must be passed in this area, we might most reasonably say that Roethke used the metaphysical style in order to present a vision which has affinities with those of Traherne, Blake, and Yeats--visions of the tension of opposites in man's life and the resolution of these tensions through love.

To answer the first two questions, we shall look at Roethke's first book, Open House, noting what the critics say about it and comparing some of Roethke's poems with

their alleged sources. Proceeding to the "obscure" poems of the middle period, we must try to determine why some critics find them too original and others praise that same originality. Finally, we must look at The Far Field in order to weigh the arguments concerning Roethke's over-reliance on Yeats and Eliot and the opposing view which maintains that the poems are a climax to Roethke's own stylistic accomplishments.

We shall find, this thesis maintains, that the first book serves as a poetic apprenticeship; here the poet develops a number of themes which are unique to his own vision while working within the stylistic traditions of the metaphysicals and the neo-metaphysicals of the earlier part of this century. To discuss the large question of obscurity vs. originality we shall have to consider the position of certain respectable literary theorists who have attempted to deal with the question; the evidence suggests that all poets use elements which are familiar in their poems, but that some seem able to use the familiar in a unique way. Roethke learns to do this by varying his technique in the "greenhouse" poems of The Lost Son, thereby presenting us with experiences which are sharply defined by a new and very unique style.

In the more difficult poems of Praise to the End!, the accomplished poet now uses the past as economically

as possible; he alludes to specific voices and visions but extends the original context of a particular line, for example, to the point where it becomes a new thing in his own poem. Here also he turns to the rhythms of childhood--the nursery rhyme or folk tune--and the rhetoric of the Bible in order to capture, obliquely, the maturing voice of the persona of the sequence. By looking at the source poems from which many of his titles come we can determine how effectively Roethke has managed to assimilate his "influences." A close look at a few poems in this sequence will reveal that the charges of obscurity spring from a misunderstanding of the poet's technique here: the first few poems are presented from the young child's point of view--the perception is primitive, the images are telescoped, and the events are presented completely objectively, completely dramatically, with no narrative commentary.

Turning to The Far Field, we will look at "The North American Sequence." Here Roethke's persona considers and then rejects the visions of Yeats and Eliot. He echoes them only to establish a context within which his speaker can operate, but that context is one of images and symbols which Roethke has previously established as his own. Thus, in this final integrated sequence, the poet becomes his own source, echoing his specific poetic

past and presenting his final vision with a voice which is now completely his own, completely Roethke. Our final argument must be that the charges of "imitation" and "opaqueness" must be dismissed or at least seriously reconsidered. Theodore Roethke is one of the greatest contemporary poets; his work needs practical critical attention, free from the atmosphere of critical controversy over his use of the past. If successful, the argument offered here should provide that liberation.



# NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup>Babel to Byzantium (New York, 1968), pp. 147-48. Dickey's evaluation was reiterated implicitly in the title of a recent article, "The Greatest American Poet," Atlantic, CCXXII (November 1968), 53-58.

<sup>2</sup>In Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1966), pp. 6-11. This collection will hereafter be referred to as Essays.

<sup>3</sup>"That Anguish of Concreteness"--Theodore Roethke's Career," Essays, pp. 81, 91.

<sup>4</sup>"The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," Essays, pp. 74-75.

<sup>5</sup>"Roethke: Poet of Transformations," New Republic, CLII (January 23, 1965), 26.

<sup>6</sup>New York, 1967, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>"A Greenhouse Eden," Essays, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>"The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Western Review, XVIII (Winter 1954), 141.

<sup>9</sup>"Five Good Poets in a Bad Year," Atlantic, CLXXXII (November 1948), 95.

<sup>10</sup>"Technique and Inspiration," Atlantic, CLXXXVI (January 1952), 81.

<sup>11</sup>Spender, Essays, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>See his comments in The Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1968), pp. 122, 142. Hereafter cited as Letters.

<sup>13</sup>"Roethke's Broken Music," Essays, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup>"Theodore Roethke: The Power of Sympathy," Essays, p. 184.

<sup>15</sup>New York, 1963, pp. 197-98.

<sup>16</sup>Wain, Essays, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup>Boston, 1968, pp. 563-577.

<sup>18</sup>"Theodore Roethke and the Landscape of American Poetry," Minnesota Review, VIII (Winter 1968), 347.

<sup>19</sup>Donoghue, Essays, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup>Letters, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup>In On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1965), p. 62. (Hereafter referred to as SP.)

<sup>22</sup>Letters, pp. 56-57. Mills notes that "The Summons" was published in Poetry (December 1938); it was never collected.

<sup>23</sup>Letters, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup>Letters, pp. 81-82.

<sup>25</sup>Letters, p. 131.

<sup>26</sup>In "Four for Sir John Davies," The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (Garden City, New York, 1966), p. 105. This text will be considered standard. Any significant deviations from original publication will be noted. All page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>27</sup>Letters, p. 191.

<sup>28</sup>SP, pp. 107, 148.

<sup>29</sup>Letters, p. 88.

<sup>30</sup>Letters, pp. 105-106.

<sup>31</sup>Letters, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup>Note, for example, Rosenthal's argument in The New Poets, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup>SP, pp. 62, 69.

<sup>34</sup>Letters, pp. 116, 124, 127, 129, 217, 251.

## CHAPTER 2

### TRADITION AND THE ORIGINAL TALENT

Roethke's first book, Open House, (1941) was received with the usual qualified praise that attends the debut of great poets. Critics, perhaps more careful of their own reputations than that of the poet, hedged their bets. "Careful, methodical, honest craftsmanship," said Louis Forster, Jr., though at the same time he noted Roethke's lack of technical range, an overuse of the quatrain, the octosyllabic line, and the iambic meter.<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden observed that, with the help of Herrick, Marvell and Blake, Roethke had mastered a kind of "ordered sensibility" in his style; he called Roethke a "good poet" and the book "completely successful."<sup>2</sup> Yvor Winters, after praising "The Adamant" as one of the best poems in the book, proclaimed that

It requires courage to deal with Platonic abstractions in a season of nominalists triumphant and untrammelled--and, were they not so learned, one would add uneducated. Roethke has no desire, it would seem, to write poetry which, in the language of a distinguished contemporary, is sufficiently ambiguous to be self-explanatory. . . .

Roethke is occasionally brilliant in a simpler form of poetry, pure description. . . Roethke is ashamed neither of having subject matter nor of the kind of subject matter he has, and he writes in a style that is good in this period and would be good in any other.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously Winters was reacting against the contemporary

poetic scene and praising Roethke for his "traditional" style. Open House was, in fact, rather an oddity in relation to most other poetry of the thirties; Roethke's work seems especially conservative when we remember that these poems were written during the period when William Carlos Williams was experimenting with the "American Idiom," E. E. Cummings was playing with typography, Robinson Jeffers and Carl Sandburg were extending the line into a literal paragraph, T. S. Eliot was working through his verse plays and towards "Four Quartets."

### I The Rage for Union

In contrast to the free verse used by so many of his contemporaries, and in contrast also to the learned allusiveness and embedded symbolism of Eliot and his followers, Roethke's opening poem seems stark and simplistic:

My secrets cry aloud.  
I have no need for tongue.  
My heart keeps open house,  
My doors are widely swung.  
An epic of the eyes  
My love, with no disguise.

My truths are all foreknown,  
This anguish self-revealed.  
I'm naked to the bone,  
With nakedness my shield.  
Myself is what I wear:  
I keep the spirit spare.

The anger will endure,  
The deed will speak the truth  
In language strict and pure.  
I stop the lying mouth:  
Rage warps my clearest cry  
To witless agony. (p.3)

Although specific lines from this poem have often been quoted,



the poem as a whole has not been closely examined. Yvor Winters asserted that "There is a little of the anatomical imagery which became familiar about fifteen years ago, with the first attempts to emulate the Metaphysical School. 'I'm naked to the bone,' says the author in the first poem, and he repeats the notion and others similar."<sup>4</sup> In his recent study Malkoff looks back at the poem as introductory to the poet's canon and, after mentioning that both the "eye" and the "I" are of great importance throughout the book, states simply, "'Open House' announces that Roethke will explore modes of knowing the self."<sup>5</sup> In effect, the critics have provided only a comment on the source of an image and a prognostication of future themes.

Neither of these tells us much about "Open House," however, and this poem is important because, stylistically, it is representative of the majority of the poems in this first book while it hints slightly at the kind of poetic power of which the poet was to become capable. Thematically, "Open House" ushers in not one, but three motifs which will be picked up throughout this first collection and throughout Roethke's career. Probably the most salient feature is the tightness of the verse form: consistent iambic trimeters (except for the last two lines of the poem which have to be forced slightly to fit the pattern). The noun "Rage," demanding a heavier stress, interrupts the consistent pattern of an introductory pronoun, preposition, or article. The rhyme pattern is also consistent, ababcc, with exact rhymes in the second stanza,

consistent vowel rhymes in the first (the final consonants are different in "aloud" and "house") and, once again, a twist in the last two lines where a switch to slant rhyme occurs. Internal and interlinear alliteration provides reinforcement to the intense compression and tightness of form. The lines are notably end-stopped for the most part (again the second stanza is absolutely consistent); there are only three enjambed lines and only one internal pause.

Consonant with the pared verse form, many images insist on a cutting away of all externals, all ornamentation: "naked to the bone"; "spare" spirit; "language strict and pure." Even the concepts of the heart being "open" and love "with no disguise" support this pattern of stripping away, of driving toward the bare essential. Yet there are contrasting images which seem to produce a tension as the poem progresses. These "secrets" which "cry aloud" become "truths" which are "all foreknown." That very nakedness so desired by the persona is called a "shield." And finally even those "clearest" cries, those secrets and truths are "warped" by rage. There has been a tension building, in fact, in the progression of the emotions listed: from love, to anguish, to anger, to rage, to agony.

The entire poem is framed by paradox, of course. The persona declares immediately that he has "no need for tongue" and explains that his emotions and thoughts and even his spirit are visible to all. Yet he calls his love an undisguised "epic of the eyes" and assures us that his deeds will

speak in "language." Then after having used that tongue he did not need, he asserts, "I stop the lying mouth." The reason? His cries have become "witless."

Why the tension, why the paradox if this poem is, as Malkoff says, announcing that "Roethke will explore the modes of knowing the self?" Because the poem is not an announcement at all; it is an embodiment of the frustration of a poet. The persona here is caught by the dilemma of having to use words, language, "tongue," in order to communicate those things for which there is no language. How does one present the naked essentials of the self? The poem says, metaphorically, by "opening" one's heart, by taking off one's skin to reveal the spirit; by doing deeds. But the frustration of the last two lines expresses the "agony" involved in the attempt to expose one's inner being to another.

Roethke the poet, who created the persona of this poem, takes care to harness the emotional paradox in strict, formal cadences as the speaker presents his charged statements. However, the final rage, turned to agony, has a correlative in the poetic technique; here Roethke creates another tension by destroying established expectations of rhythm and rhyme. After a pattern of regular iambs, we find:

Rage warps my clearest cry  
To witless agony.

That final word is a perfect choice, poetically; one expects a rhyme for "cry"--a strong monosyllable--and finds instead "agony," weak both in terms of its rhythmic function and its rhyme function. The slant rhyme occurs in the final verse after a pattern of exact rhyme in the two previous concluding couplets.

This poem was first published in 1936, under the title "Strange Distortion"; when Stanley Kunitz helped Roethke arrange the poems for this volume, he suggested the title for the book and, evidently, a change in the title of the poem.<sup>6</sup> The placement of "Open House" was especially advantageous for many reasons. First, it is successful, and there are some poems in the volume which are not, or are less so. Second, the compression and economy of presentation is indicative of the style Roethke was to retain, albeit without these formal verse patterns, in his later work. Third, it supplies us with some of the themes Roethke was to pick up and explore again and again.

These themes are caught most explicitly in the middle stanza. "Myself is what I wear," he says and, as so many critics have told us, the central theme in Roethke is the search for identity, the probing of the self, the journey of the psyche. Commenting on this



poem in "On Identity" Roethke himself says

I am not speaking of the empirical self, the fleshbound ego; it's a single word: myself, the aggregate of the several selves, if you will. The spirit or soul--should we say the self, once perceived, becomes the 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 that at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the poetry we find frustration attendant on the sense of the splitting of the persona into many selves. In this first volume, "Against Disaster" is a specific example (p. 19); later, in Words for the Wind, "The Exorcism" reiterates the same theme: "In a dark wood I saw--/ I saw my several selves/ Come running from the leaves" (p. 147).

Keeping the spirit "spare" is a way of saying that the self does not allow itself to partake of all its parts in unity. Roethke's search finally led him to a concept of the self in time, developing out of the past and extending the present into the future. This complete time-oriented self can partake of the spiritual through the physical: "The flesh can make the spirit visible" ("Four for Sir John Davies," p. 106).

The persona learns that he can be One and one with nature and a woman and all existence at the same time. Such a state leads to joy and peace, but in this first poem and in all the others where the self is simply an aggregate, the emotional content is one of anguish or

rage, angry frustration. Such a state leads invariably to "witless agony" or, in the title of another poem on the subject in this first book, "Silence":

The spirit crying in a cage  
To build a complement to rage.  
Confusion's core set deep within  
A furious, dissembling din. (p. 22)

Again, in The Waking, we find "Old Lady's Winter Words," in which the woman longs for the sensual moments of her past. "If I were a young man,/ I could roll in the dust of a fine rage," she says, suggesting the effect of the absence of the sensual. The poem ends with an expression of despair:

It is hard to care about corners,  
And the sound of paper tearing.  
I fall, more and more,  
Into my own silences.  
In the cold air,  
The spirit  
Harden. (p. 104)

In "The Exorcism," the split into several selves is rendered in a manner reminiscent of T. S. Eliot:

I turned upon my spine,  
I turned and turned again,  
A cold God-furious man  
Writhing until the last  
Forms of his secret life  
Lay with the dross of death.

I was myself, alone. (p. 147)

Though Roethke was not a socially-oriented poet, the ominous and disturbing world situation of the late 1930's may have contributed to his sense of Angst. In one of his few "topical" poems, Roethke presents a view of the state of social disunity caused by the anticipation of war:

Lull  
(November, 1939)

The winds of hatred blow  
Cold, cold across the flesh  
And chill the anxious heart;  
Intricate phobias grow  
From each malignant wish  
To spoil collective life.  
Now each man stands apart.

We watch opinion drift,  
Think of our separate skins.

.....

Reason embraces death,  
While out of frightened eyes  
Still stares the wish to love. (p, 31)

Malkoff says that "Lull" is "not sufficiently detached from Auden's 'September 1, 1939' to stand on its own.

Where Auden says that man beleaguered by 'Negation and despair,' craves 'Not universal love/ But to be loved alone,' Roethke echoes [the last three lines above]."<sup>8</sup>

To be sure both poems are in iambic trimeter and both are concerned with isolation and the "collective" life, but Malkoff's point here is not well taken. In

Auden's poem the final lines indicate a selfish desire to

be loved, whereas Roethke's conclusion expresses a desire to shed the selfishness imposed by hatred and anxiousness in order to love. That one line misrepresents the final vision of Auden's poem, however. Auden establishes two polar cravings in mankind--the impulse toward a Utopian collective brotherhood and the opposing need to be "loved alone." The persona sees both drives as misdirected:

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,  
The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky:  
There is no such thing as the state  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.<sup>9</sup>

The poem ends with the persona, "Beleaguered by the same/  
Negation and despair" hoping he can show an "affirming flame."

Auden's poem is certainly more complex and erudite than this early one of Roethke's. Ultimately we see that they are, in fact, two quite different poems. Roethke makes use of the November weather metaphorically in terms of cold "winds of hatred" where, in Auden's poem, the "odour of death/ Offends the September night." Roethke's sense of the "collective life" is in positive opposition to the anxious state in which people think of their "separate skins"; Auden's use of the term "Collective Man" is negative, for he associates it with "blind skyscrapers." In the final lines, Roethke shows us "frightened eyes" which desire to love in opposition to the hatred proclaimed by the opening lines, but that desire seems



to be impotent. Auden's persona declares a similar desire, but the drive is more positive because of his understanding of the extremes of the problem. Finally, Auden's sense of proper love is certainly social in the "objective" sense for the problem of the poem is established in terms of the private man's relation to forms of government, corporations and social ethics. Roethke's poem, while it mentions "generals" and "arbitrators" and "newsmen," concentrates on the effects of social events on the individual; war may be the specific cause of the division of man from his fellow man, but the poet does not range beyond that to broader social implications. This poem presents the theme of the cold, frightening anguish which results from a lack of union, and thus a lack of love, a theme that recurs in many of the poems in which the spirit has been kept "spare" and the self has been divided or isolated.

In his creative urge, the persona of "Open House" is frustrated by his deliberate divorce from his poetic past. "My truths are all foreknown," he says. Of course. The great themes of poetry are those of the great human emotional experiences, and they have been reiterated in our culture from the time of Homer. Against this backlog of past poetry, he tells us, he wears his "nakedness" as a "shield." Presenting his 'essential self' is the persona's key to poetic originality. Indeed, this subject is taken up in "Feud," the poem that follows "Lull." Malkoff, in his desire to maintain a certain kind of unity in Open House,<sup>10</sup> claims that "Feud"

expresses "a pessimistic sense of Origins, which seems to belong as much to the world of myth and superstition as to modern psychology."<sup>11</sup> In his own commentary however, Roethke extends the context:

In any quest for identity today--or any day--we run up inevitably against this problem: What to do with our ancestors? I mean it as an ambiguity: both the literal or blood, and the spiritual ancestors. Both, as we know, can overwhelm us. The devouring mother, the furious papa. And if we're trying to write, the Supreme Masters. In this same harried period, I wrote, in a not very good poem:

Corruption reaps the young. You dread  
The menace of ancestral eyes;  
Recoiling from the serpent head  
Of fate, you blubber in surprise...

And so on...in the last stanza,

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

I remember the late John Peale Bishop, that fine neglected poet, reading this and saying, "You're impassioned, but wrong. The dead can help us." And he was right; but it took me some years to learn that.<sup>12</sup>

In a sense, this entire first book is a struggle with the dead poets; it is, as Frederick Hoffman says, "more formally written and imitative than his other work."<sup>13</sup> Most critics agree and Roethke's own final evaluation is caught in a single sentence: "My first book was much too wary, much too gingerly in its approach to experience; rather dry in tone and constricted in rhythm."<sup>14</sup> The need to use past poets as models and the desire to escape them in order to present his unique perception of the present led to further frustration.

In "Against Disaster" we find the problem localized:

Now I am out of element  
And far from anything my own,  
My sources drained of all content,  
The pieces of my spirit strewn.

.....

This flat land has become a pit  
Wherein I am beset by harm,  
The heart must rally to my wit  
And rout the specter of alarm. (p. 19)

However, "In Praise of Prairie" incorporates imagery from both "Against Disaster" and "Feud," and seems to resolve the tension:

The fields stretch out in long, unbroken rows.  
We walk aware of what is far and close.

Here distance is familiar as a friend.  
The feud we kept with space comes to an end. (p. 13)

Roethke comes close to metaphoric statement in this poem. He has learned that the way to avoid a "gingerly approach to experience" is to capture it sensually, imagistically, metaphorically. His struggle to come to terms with "The anguish of concreteness" is recorded throughout his work. Even in the Far Field he explains, "I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form." That longing is at once creative and mystical; for Roethke the one leads to the other and back again. Aesthetic perception involves a sensuous participation in the perceived; the participation provides a spiritual union which brings joy and peace; that experience is caught imagistically to be recorded poetically. The entire experience is caught, with great energy and humor in "O, Thou Opening, O." An internal dialogue in part 2 provides a dramatic dénouement to all the problems we found in the first poem of the first

book:

And now are we to have that pellucidous Jesus-shimmer over all things, the animal's candid gaze, a shade less than feathers, light's broken speech revived, a ghostly going of tame bears, a bright moon on gleaming skin, a thing you cannot say to whisper and equal a Wound?

I'm tired of all that, Bag-Foot. I can hear small angels anytime. Who cares about the dance of dead underwear, or the sad waltz of paper bags? Who ever said God sang in your fat shape? You're not the only keeper of hay. That a spratling's prattle. And don't be thinking you're simplicity's sweet thing, either. A leaf could drag you.

Where's the great rage of a rocking heart, the high rare true dangerous indignation? Let me persuade 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  
Kissing.  
Yes.

This poem is the only one in which Roethke breaks into the prose rhythm of the W. C. Williams school, and the choice of prose here is appropriate, since the persona is arguing with himself over the validity of his method of writing poetry. The antagonistic voice is correct in saying that the poet has attempted to embody "light's broken speech revived," "a thing you cannot say to whisper and equal a Wound," "a spratling's prattle."<sup>15</sup> In reply to these charges, the poet eschews the old rage we have talked about because he has found his way to perception and metaphor. He answers appropriately, in poetry, saying that he has accepted the past and that poetic vision is sensuous, symbiotic, simple.



## II Tradition

This answer was a long time coming. Open House is an exercise in "subduing" the many fathers of the poet, or, as the critics would have us believe, in imitating. A close comparison of Roethke's poems with the sources will help to determine the extent to which the poems are actually derivative. Among the poetic ancestors mentioned by the critics are Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, Rolphe Humphries, Stanley Kunitz (all of whom Roethke knew in his early years), W. H. Auden, Allen Tate, Richard Wilbur, John Crowe Ransom, and among the older poets, Donne, Marvell, Blake, Herrick, Emily Dickinson and the early Frost. The prevailing spirit is definitely metaphysical or neo-metaphysical.

So many "influences" might be said to constitute a poetic atmosphere, or to shift the metaphor, Roethke may be said to inherit a tradition rather than incur specific indebtedness. Some poems, however, appear to derive from the techniques of particular earlier poets. Three poems on death will help to focus our inquiry. In one letter Roethke mentions that he has been reading Emily Dickinson "considerably"<sup>16</sup> and then includes the poem "No Bird":

Now here is peace for one who knew  
The secret heart of sound.  
The ear so delicate and true  
Is pressed to noiseless ground.

Slow swings the breeze above her head,  
The grasses whitely stir;  
But in this forest of the dead  
No bird awakens her. (p. 17)

The connection is quite obvious: Roethke uses the quatrain,

with alternate, exact rhymes, and the common meter so often employed by Dickinson. Furthermore, his subject is death, the theme that dominates Dickinson's work. The combination of simplistic form with stark subject matter is an identifying stylistic mark of the poetess.

Is this poem derivative? I find no single poem in Dickinson which unites a bird and death in this negative way. Birds there are, but often these creatures exhibit a cautious participation in life and then disappear from the scene, leaving the speaker of the poem with a sense of having caught and lost a moment of beauty (as in "A Bird Came Down the Walk" and "At Half-past Three a Single Bird"). Death, for Emily Dickinson, is always in process; some of her greatest poems are concerned with the experience of dying ("I Heard a Fly Buzz when I Died"), with the direction of death ("Because I Could Not Stop for Death"), or with an activity of communion after death ("I Died for Beauty," and "Renunciation"). One poem, "Ample Make this Bed" dwells upon the grave, but even this grave-bed is merely a resting place. There is a mention of the cutting off of noise here: "Let no sunrise' yellow noise/ Interrupt this ground." Synesthesia makes the image startling, metaphoric.

Roethke's poem, on the other hand, is quite lame when compared to the great ones of Dickinson. There is no participation by the speaker in the emotional quality of death, nor is there any startling juxtaposition of life and death. If any emotion arises, it is the pathetic. The word "peace,"

perhaps because it is too abstract, cannot convey the sense of the tragic loss of sound to the girl who "knew the secret heart of sound." The second stanza begins with two images of motion, incongruous in the present context of sound-no sound, and the "forest" image does not seem adequately prepared for by the preceeding mention of "grasses." Although Roethke included this poem in his later collections, it is barely adequate and gives no hint at all of his future power.

Except for such superficial features as the stanza form and the rhetorical compression, this poem does not have much in common with Dickinson; even the death theme is handled differently in her work. Turning to "Death Piece" (p.4), we find a similar use of the Dickinson form. Instead of an attempt to fuse the sound-no sound tension, however, Roethke describes death by accumulating images of a motionless brain: invention sleeps, the hive is sealed, the thought is moored, and finally, with a slight twist, an external force enters, "And minutes burst upon a brow/ Insentient to shock." Frederick J. Hoffman complains that "Like a hundred others, the poem "Death Piece" states a general condition of insentience, without localizing it or investing it with emotional energy.<sup>17</sup> Hoffman is right. Once again Roethke has described, rather than embodied, and the poem is faulty because of that. It is one step above "No Bird," perhaps, because the images hold the contrast between the vital and the dead -- the final couplet is the best with its sense of temporal energy exploding on an object which has lost the capacity to know either time

or energy.

Malkoff notes that "although Roethke's poem is completely his own, the similarity of theme between Roethke and the neo-metaphysical poets among his contemporaries is often remarkably close.<sup>18</sup> He mentions Leonie Adams' "Nightpiece" among other poems with which we might compare Roethke's poem:

The moon above the milky field  
Gleaning moves her one slant light,  
The wind weeps from the cloud:  
Then, weeping wind, unshroud  
Pale Cassiopeia, blow  
The true-swung pole-lamp bright.  
To this room a midnight's come  
Which speaks but with the beating clock,  
While on glistening paws the mouse  
Creeps night-master of the house.  
Rust shall eat away the lock,  
The door sag from the garner hoard,  
And the sleeper lie unsphered.  
Time's wheel frets on his finger still,  
He bends no more his weight with time's.  
He wept as long as wind,  
And sleeps with an indifferent will.  
Not airs, not climes uncloze, behind  
The lashes' scarcely faltering jet,  
Which star he sees since Hesper set.<sup>19</sup>

The verse form is certainly different; Miss Adams' poem is a one stanza lyric, twenty lines of iambic tetrameter with two lines of iambic trimeter included. There is rhyme but it is irregular and often slanted. A close look at the last few lines reveals some similarity in theme, but the image of "time" gnawing away on the finger is, in reality, quite different from Roethke's "minutes" bursting on an insentient brow. The rest of the imagery in the poem is also quite far from Roethke's. There is a play of moonlight, wind and star in the opening of Adams' poem, mention of a "night-master" mouse, a



sagging door, rust eating at a lock. In fact the mood is Gothic, quite unlike the precise, descriptive attitude Roethke strikes.

More important, these last few lines establish a tension with the overwhelming graveyard imagery of the opening. Note that the dead one somehow gains control over the elements which surround him. The use of the active verbs here--"bends," "sleeps," "sees"--give the sense of an active reaction against death. The tone has changed as well as the vision; the corpse "lives" by his indifference to images of life. To say, then, that the theme of the two poems is the same is to read one of the poems incorrectly. The subject is the same: death. But the theme of Roethke's poem is death conquering, while the theme of Miss Adams' is the dead conquering.

Miss Adam's poem contains the same kind of unexpected reversal Emily Dickinson was so capable of, but which she effected by a sudden off-rhyme or by a final compression of meter and rhetoric. If Roethke learned anything from these two ladies, he learned to ground his emotions in specific images and to capture, finally, that sudden shift in image or tone which strikes to the core of what he is driving after. With "No Bird" and "Death Piece" in mind, consider now "On the Road to Woodlawn":

I miss the polished brass, the powerful black horses,  
The drivers creaking the seats of the baroque hearses,  
The high-piled floral offerings with sentimental  
verses,  
The carriages reeking with varnish and stale perfume.

I miss the pall bearers momentarily taking their  
 places,  
 The undertaker's obsequious grimaces,  
 The craned necks, the mourners' anonymous faces,  
 --And the eyes, still vivid, looking up from  
 a sunken room. (p. 22)

A loose iambic pentameter here, with a number of feminine endings and much more internal pause. The stroke of poetic originality is the introduction of each stanza with the "I miss," followed by the cataloguing of unessentials -- until the last line. Beginning with a sense of stateliness, "the polished brass, the powerful black horses," Roethke introduces the Absurd at the second line with the drivers "creaking the seats." The accumulating store of ritualistic attitudes and actions, combined with the smell of "varnish and stale perfume" builds to a climax of triviality in the face of the shocking final image. No one has suggested a source for this poem, although something of the same emotion is caught by William Carlos Williams in "Tract" and by Dylan Thomas in "After the Funeral." Perhaps, however, the reason no one cares to call this poem derivative is because the "Woodlawn" scene is so intimately Roethke's; it occurs in one of his greatest poems, "The Lost Son."

In one poem in this book Roethke alludes directly to one of his "fathers." "'Long Live the Weeds'" is a line from Hopkins, as Roethke notes. The source poem in "Inversnaid":

This darksome burn, horseback brown,  
 His rollrock highroad roaring down,  
 In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam  
 Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-fróth  
Turns and twindles over the broth  
Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówing,  
It rounds and rounds Despair to drawing.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew  
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads  
through,  
Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,  
And the beadbunny ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

"Inversnaid" is full of Hopkins' alliteration and his original semantic constructions. It contains much of the same kind of auditory gesture Roethke uses in his later work, though there is no specific Roethkean construction here.

In contrast with "Inversnaid," look now at Roethke's poem:

"Long Live the Weeds"  
Hopkins

Long live the weeds that overwhelm  
My narrow vegetable realm!  
The bitter rock, the barren soil  
That force the son of man to toil;  
All things unholy, marred by curse,  
The ugly of the universe.  
The rough, the wicked, and the wild  
That keep the spirit undefiled.  
With these I match my little wit  
And earn the right to stand or sit,  
Hope, love, create, or drink and die:  
These shape the creature that is I. (p. 18)

Instead of his comfortable quatrains, Roethke switches here to a stanza of couplets. Because of the commas in the second to the last line, the iambic tetrameter is strained, but nothing is gained by this maneuver. The poem starts with the Hopkins line, but the allusion functions somewhat ironically

against Hopkins' "romantic" poem. By the second line, Roethke has transformed the river-and-weed, the "wildness and wet" of Hopkins, into a "narrow vegetable realm." After two direct images, "The bitter rock, the barren soil," Roethke turns to pontificating. The mention of "toil" and "curse" add a dimension not found in the Hopkins poem. In fact, the two poets react quite differently to the "weeds"; Hopkins perceives and glories in the wild elements, while Roethke spars with them and, he says, "matches" wits with them in order to "earn" the right to be himself. The poem itself manifests the frustration we are familiar with; the discovery of self cannot come from warring against nature, but rather from a union with it. And poetic communion is not a matter of talking about, but talking through. Hopkins knew this. Roethke was to learn it in the "greenhouse" poems of the next book.

Before turning to that book, however, we should look briefly at some of the remaining poems of Open House. Contrary to the impression we get by looking at the poorer poems, there are some fine pieces in this book, all of which pick up the metaphoric quality Roethke was struggling with. The very next poem, "Genesis," is an example. While there are still some abstractions, much of the imagery is suggestive, connotative. The river, the seed, the pearl all extend themselves into metaphoric meaning by their juxtaposition with the "concept" the poet is posing. From a



small core of insight "new meaning grows immense." "The Heron" (p. 15) is a masterpiece. Far from being simply descriptive, as Yvor Winters would have us believe,<sup>22</sup> it is a beautifully concise metaphoric statement of death's stalking--necessary in the natural course of events, but terrible in the dreadful swiftness with which it swallows up its victims. The extension of the natural scene into the human is effected by the images of the "long eye" which "notes the minnow's hiding place," the beak "quicker than a human hand," and "the bony lip" across which the frog is jerked. Even though the heron itself may not fully suggest human attributes, there is clearly an implied persona observing him and identifying with him, lending him a graceful choreography.

The final image is compelling in both this poem and its use in similar poems which deal with the same subject. Notice how the "ripple" is used in "The Premonition" (p.6). Malkoff ties the "hair on a narrow wrist bone" image to Donne's "The Relique" thereby locating it as a death image.<sup>23</sup> The comparison is stretched; the "bracelet of bright hair" in that poem belongs to a woman, of course, and its location on the wristbone of the speaker connotes union beyond death. The vision of this poem is that of separation, and the hair and the bone belong to the father. Such detective work is not necessary here, in fact, for the speaker tells us that the scene took place "long ago"; we might safely assume that the title of the poem carries its

usual negative connotation. The presentation is completely dramatic after the opening lines. The little boy follows his father, looks on as the man dips his hand into the stream, sees the image caught in the ripple caused by that movement. And then, after a strategic "but," the poet fuses image with feeling; the vision the boy sees when the father stands up, "...that face/ Was lost in a maze of water," connotes the sense of loss which stretches to the present moment for the speaker.

The river and the ripple run throughout Roethke's poetry, but they gain a sense of life as well as death and, finally, the sense of life in death. The climactic poem for this image is "The Far Field." In part 3 the river moves and gathers all into itself by that movement. The persona merges with that movement and finally beyond it, in part 4, to a point where:

All finite things reveal infinitude:  
The mountain with its singular bright shade  
Like the blue shine 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. (p. 201)

### III Poetry in a New Key

To be sure, some of the early poems appear to have elements of form, theme, image and metaphoric quality in common with Emily Dickinson, Leonie Adams, Hopkins, Auden and Donne. However, except for the common meter quatrain of Dickinson, there seems to be little direct imitation of

these earlier poets. Nowhere has Roethke "copied" all four of these poetic elements from a specific poem of one of his masters.

Theoretical questions begin to emerge. How many of these elements need be present before the charge of derivativeness can be made? At what stage does a poem stop being someone else's and become the poet's, uniquely? The question is not irrelevant. Paradoxically, Malcolm Cowley says of the 1960's that "This is an age when almost everyone is trying to write like Ted Roethke."<sup>24</sup> If Roethke is derivative and these poets imitate him, and if one of Roethke's chief sources, Yeats is also charged with derivativeness,<sup>25</sup> where does the chain end?

Or should it? It is impossible to conceive that a poet could write in a complete poetic vacuum. Even the most revolutionary must have some sense of what he's revolting against. Evidently there is some middle road which will allow the poet to walk from the past into a new poetic Eden where all is new and all is his. Henry W. Wells has studied the problem and decides:

When the modern poet faces the world, he generally depends in part on recent achievements and in some degree at least upon a traditional literary past. He consciously discards one or the other at his own risk.

and, by extension,

No poet or poetic movement has sustained an entirely unique poetic quality. The objective evidence that good verse is produced in virtually all periods of English history is seen not only in



the circumstance that some verse from each movement is remembered but the fact that it is repeatedly incorporated as a literary influence into new poetry of the same language or even of foreign tongues. Modern poetry is thus much more catholic and less doctrinaire than a great deal of modern criticism.<sup>20</sup>

In an attempt to explain what is new in modern poetry, Mr. Wells tells us,

When a writer subjugates the expression of his own personality and of the spirit of his times to an attempted reproduction of the expression of another age, he forfeits his claim to be a creative artist, becoming at best a historian, at worst a pedant. In any true poem the present is always more conspicuous than the past, the near than the far. Such a poem may exist without any tangible relations to the past whatsoever, other than the most elementary aspects of language and form. <sup>22</sup>

In similar words, fifty years ago, T. S. Eliot wrote:

. . .and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but also its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless and of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.<sup>28</sup>

Scholars are quite willing to allow such tradition to the older poets. If Homer took from the myths, Vergil took from Homer; Dante used both and Milton reaps from all three. The last three used not only the large epic structure but also the small formulaic details. In fact, these great poets dared to use even specific images and similes, albeit with extensions or additions fitted to a thematic variation.



We do not condemn them for such "stealing"; in fact, we take great scholarly joy in turning up fresh associations between the Masters. Why? Because, quite often, the original context of the allusion illuminates the text we are reading.

Roethke critics, however, are less positively inclined to commend the modern poet for his borrowings. There is a demand for the completely new, the original, as the reputations of Joyce, Eliot and William Carlos Williams signify. Nevertheless, there are some problems involved in this demand; opaqueness (or obscurity) seems to accompany experimentation, and for some of the more radical, experimentation in form seems to lead to complete formlessness. Again the theoretical questions emerge. Where do we draw the line between newness and obscurity, between experimentation and formlessness?

Frank Kermode deals with the issue from a point of view similar to that of Wells and Eliot:

. . .the forms of art--its language--are in their nature a continuous extension or modification of conventions entered into by maker and reader, and this is true of very original artists so long as they communicate at all. Consequently, novelty in the arts is either communication or noise. If it is noise there is no more to say about it. If it is communication it is inescapably related to something older than itself.

. . . . .

Schism is meaningless without reference to some prior condition; the absolutely New is simply unintelligible, even as novelty.

. . . . .

Novelty becomes the inflation of triviality  
. . .there is more noise than information. 29

Kermode's study deals specifically with the novel, but many of his findings are relevant to the study of poetry. His discussion of "conventions entered into by maker and reader" is explained in depth by reference to "fictional patterns or paradigms." Adherence to the pattern effects the "popular" story, he says, but, because life itself is not patterned, "The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naive expectations, is finding something out for us, something real." Since "by definition one seeks the maximum peripeteia," the greatest challenge for the artist is to provide a variation in the interval between the "tick-tock" of artistic time. Joyce does this by giving us a "tock-tick," Kermode says, but no artist could obliterate artistic rhythm totally.<sup>30</sup> We would be left with the chaos we know in life. The tensions and surprises in the good poems of Dickinson and Roethke provide similar "peripeteiae," while restricting themselves to familiar, traditional forms.

In speaking of "information" and "noise," Kermode turns to the terminology of modern Information Theory, a scientific discipline which advances mathematical support for what our literary theorists have maintained. Abraham

Moles, in his Information Theory and Esthetic Perception, tells us that, if communication is to take place, any message must contain elements of the familiar and the new (the "banal" and the "original," in Moles' terms). Moles maintains that for the artist there are a number of "dialectical dipoles in the conceptual network, between which the creative activity of the mind takes its bearing." While the artist leans far to the side of the unpredictable, the novel, the complex, he must always keep in communicative touch with his reader by providing some elements which are familiar. That is, no matter how novel his work may be he must provide some kind of form, some redundancies, some kind of order in his work.<sup>31</sup>

As critics, we try to reduce the information content of a piece of literature: we look for familiar elements; we predict the end of a set of actions on the basis of some corresponding pattern we know; above all, we try to grasp the form of the work. Often, of course, our predictions are thwarted and we lose sight of the form we thought we were perceiving. On rereading we may find that our artist hints at a familiar pattern and deliberately reverses it, or destroys the usual sequential development in order to create new variations within an old framework. We can see now why Wells and Eliot insist on the past as a necessary accompaniment to the present for the artist. When one is experimenting with form and breaking up the time order or fragmenting the perception units, there is always a danger

of pushing the creation too far towards the side of originality. Sometimes an historic pattern or analogue is the only means of providing clues to the implicit order or form of the work. Admittedly the relationship of the past model with the present work may be inverse; as Kermode suggests, Joyce's Ulysses provides us with a "tock-tick," but we couldn't understand or perceive the inversion if we didn't first know the usual order.

In his central chapter, "Semantic Information and Esthetic Information," Moles tells us that the first kind, semantic information, is "structured, articulable, translatable," while esthetic information "cannot be translated into any other 'language' or system of logical symbols because this other language does not exist. While the first kind has the "goal" of preparing actions, i.e., of "communicating," the second kind has "no goal, properly speaking . . . it determines internal states." But the two kinds of information "superposed," Moles says; you cannot destroy the semantic information without destroying the message itself.<sup>32</sup>

The distinction is an important one. Moles is insisting that while literature uses language as its medium, the message contained in that medium is different from the message of a newspaper article or a set of directions in a handbook. The poetic message is not discursive, it does not communicate facts; the esthetic content of a poem deals not with events, but with the feeling-quality of experience.



As Susanne Langer says, "Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling," and in poetry "what is created is a composed and shaped apparition of a new human experience."<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Langer maintains that the poetic function of words is

. . . quite distinct from their usually recognized uses; it may be called the formulative function of language, which has its own primitive and advanced, conscious and unconscious levels. It is normally coincident with the communicative functions, but largely independent of them . . . . Communication is less likely to stimulate it than to set its limits, and hold spontaneous ways of shaping experience to something like a standard pattern. In this way, it is the communicative office of language that makes the actual world's appearance public, and reasonably fixed.<sup>34</sup>

Here Mrs. Langer is attempting to maintain her former arguments concerning the unique function of art. In Philosophy in a New Key she establishes the fact that symbols in art function presentationally rather than discursively. In Feeling and Form she describes the world of art as "virtual" rather than actual. Attempting to maintain the same kind of distinction, in this paragraph she sees language functioning in two different ways: the formulative function is associated with the presentational, the "virtual"; the communicative function is relegated to the discursive, the "actual world." The two functions may coexist, she says, but they are independent. According to information theory, of course, there is a dialectic between the two functions. Although Mrs. Langer sees that the communicative function "sets limits" and holds spontaneity to a "standard pattern," she

seems not to admit that function as a positive one in art. But we cannot perceive the "apparition of a new human experience" unless the artists relies on both the formula-  
tive and the communicative function of language at the same time. Complete spontaneity creates the unperceivable; some pattern is necessary. All of our critics and modern communication theory insist on this tension between the familiar and the new. The artist must provide some way into the new emotional experience he has created, and that way is to express his individual talent in terms of a tradition. In his first book, Roethke was using traditional meters and stanzaic forms for the most part, in his next, "The Lost Son," the poet combines the old and the new in a unique way, providing us with sharp insights into the emotional content of the poems.

#### IV The Original Talent

The way into emotion is metaphor. To "tell anger" is to tell what anger is like; emotion itself is ineffable. The poet bridges the formulative and the communicative function of language by finding a proper analogue or correspondence or correlative, or a proper vehicle for his metaphor. "Proper" means two things for the serious artist: the vehicle must have something familiar about it so we can see the comparison being made; it must also be unusual, or presented in some unusual way, so we can perceive the unique emotional experience the artist is trying to convey. The

metaphysical poets strived for the unusual, providing us with striking or even startling images. Donne's well-known "compass" and Crashaw's "wardrobe" are cases in point. The more conventional approach is to take a familiar metaphor and invert it or expand it. Milton, Pope and Joyce all use epic machinery, but each converts the "battle" scene into something unique and appropriate for the context he is working in.

In the first three sections of The Lost Son Roethke is searching for his appropriate metaphoric method. In fact, he tries many; the work is not totally "greenhouse" oriented, although most critics concentrate on those poems. And Roethke varies his method even in those famous poems. Some of the experiences he is trying to capture are extremely complex or elusive and at times the analogue or vehicle cannot incorporate the emotion. Without attempting anything approaching a total explication of these poems, let us examine Roethke's attempts at developing viable metaphors.

Take, for example, "Double Feature" (p. 47). This poem was first published as "Episode Seven"<sup>35</sup> and that title makes the first line explicit. "With Buck still tied to the log, on come the light." We are in a movie theatre and the end of a serial adventure implies that feeling of "hanging in the air." The scene is familiar to anyone who participated in the Saturday film ritual of the early forties; each weekend we followed our particular hero (Buck Jones, Buck Rogers, e.g.) into some horribly dangerous situation

which the villain had contrived and, just at the moment of extreme danger (at the point of death, usually), the chapter ended and we felt compelled to return the following week to see if and how the hero would be rescued. In the poem, this moment of suspended terror is followed by a description of the slow emptying of the theatre, and the persona's own lethargic reluctance to leave the atmosphere created by the film image of a man on the brink of the plunge into death. The third stanza picks up this motif of the "interim moment" with the line "A wave of Time hangs motionless on this particular shore." When the persona turns to observe the real, nature in the form of an "arsenical grey" tree, or the Wheel of the stars holding the Great Bear "colder than snow" he remarks, apparently illogically, "And [I] remember there was something else I was hoping for."

The tree image and the "cold" stars reinforce the anticipated death in the movie serial. But the mention of the Wheel and the Great Bear push us beyond death, for these symbols have traditionally connotated immortality, eternity, even for those readers who do not know or remember that the Great Bear is composed of seven stars (the earlier title was "Episode Seven"), and that seven is the number of the Supreme Being, the Ultimate or Everlasting.<sup>36</sup> What the person was hoping for, then, was a dramatic glimpse into eternity, a view beyond death.

Roethke's correlative here is the movie ritual, some-



thing that would have been "banal" to his contemporary readers. The poem starts with this reference to a heightened emotional state. But, as we all know, there was never any real question about the hero's survival; even a child realizes that if the hero dies the sequence is over, but in those particular serials the point was to pit "Buck" against as many obstacles as possible so that by pure wit, cunning, and morality he could triumph in the end. Thus the scene is obviously a "fake" confrontation with death, one that lovers can remain indifferent to and one that will not alarm mothers and children. Outside the theatre is dull reality presided over by the timeless stars. The persona is "reluctant" to leave the drama provided by the created confrontation; reality outside consists of "rickety pop-corn stands," "shop windows" and traffic. It is not until he sees the cold objective threat of nature that he realizes he wanted a real confrontation, that he wishes the drama to take place in life and not inside a movie theatre.

Roethke tried to capture the same sense of disappointment with the ultimate dullness of reality in a poem in Open House. "Interlude" (p. 6) builds in drama and intensity as two people watch the growth of a violent storm. "The element of air was out of hand," the poem begins, with a compressed statement suggesting the "chaos" and the "unnatural night" of the second stanza. The wind ripping off "tender leaves" and flinging them "in confusion" presents an image of destruction which seems to be a prelude to the

intensity of the destruction this terrible storm will bring. But the storm does not come. The last stanza reverses the metaphysical implications the storm was building; "full" dark comes, and the wind is motionless in "long grass." The final two lines capture beautifully the ambivalence of the emotional state of a timeless "interlude," that sense of "being on the brink." The fear is caught by the image of the pounding veins and yet, we are told, "What we had hoped for had not come to pass." This line is similar to the last line in "Double Feature" where the hope is also disappointed or misdirected. In this poem, however, there is a dramatization of a natural scene and the intensity with which the characters watch the building storm depends on their perception of it as "unearthly." The death of the storm stops the drama and produces the disappointment in the viewers.

So far we have seen two different types of correlatives--one derived from nature, the other from society. In "Pickle Belt" (p. 46) Roethke combines the two to produce a delightfully witty and whimsical poem. Here the poet presents a very explicit statement of adolescent sex urgings. The monotony of the job to the other workers is caught in the first stanza. The pleasure and confusion of the boy is contrasted to this in the second. And in the third the pickle becomes phallic, as its characteristics--shape and the ability to cause "itching"--are transferred to the boy.

The theme of the poem is a familiar one, but the images and the diction here provide us with a startling, albeit amusing, insight into the "sixteen-year-old lust." The pickle-penis comparison is caught both visually and audibly: the boy's britches are "shrunkn"; he "prickles" with itches. This poem suggests the kind of imagistic and verbal novelty Roethke uses in the highly complex poems of Praise to the End.

In these three poems, the vision has been directed toward the external. In the later poems, however, the persona explores the internal, preconscious, prerational areas of experience. Roethke's movement toward these states is noted explicitly in two poems of part III of The Lost Son, "Night Crow" and "River Incident." In both these poems an element in nature is extended to suggest a complex and elusive emotional state. The correlatives here are somehow more "primitive" than those in the preceding poems we discussed; they seem stark, but they point to the "dark" regions of man's experience and gather imagistic amplification as the poems progress. Kenneth Burke relates "Night Crow" (p. 49) to Baudelaire's sonnet, "Correspondences," saying that Roethke's poem suggests a similar approach to "mankind's passage through nature as through 'forests of symbols,' while scents, sounds and colors 'make mutual rejoinder' like distant echoes that fuse 'in deep and dusky unity'."<sup>37</sup> Malkoff sees the poem as an archetype, an example

of "primordial image" in line with the theories of Jung or Maud Bodkin.<sup>38</sup> Both critiques are accurate, but note that the poem is still discursive to a large degree. The title suggests the perceptual problem involved in probing the unconscious; a "Night Crow" is hardly visible, and the "tremendous bird" invoked by the persona flies even into the "moonless black" where ordinary perception is impossible. The crow image is familiar and ominous, but the method of presentation is intellectual rather than emotional and the correspondence between the crow and the "shape" is made absolutely explicit.

"River Incident" progresses beyond "Night Crow" towards a fusion of nature and the persona. Wading in a river, the speaker is caught by a whirl of silt around his knees and we find him experiencing that "timeless moment" we have met before. Now, however, the speaker turns from his search for the timelessness caught by the Great Bear image of "Double Feature." The river becomes salt water in the persona's veins, elements crumble, and he moves toward the preconscious past of "dark and rolling water," the "granitic slime." The correlative is familiar--water as womb-- but once again the poet presents a correlative and tells us what it means.

Most critics concede, however, that with the appearance of The Lost Son, Roethke's poetic identity was established, for he had attained his "own" style and his work



now bore his unique signature. Most turn to the "greenhouse" poems for examples of what is uniquely Roethkean. While it is true that in these poems his choice of greenhouse imagery was felicitous and that his childhood experience gave him the material which he build on, our interest here is not biographical. Many poets have used plant and flower imagery and perhaps a few even worked within the greenhouse delimitation. We are concerned with the way Roethke uses this imagery; our job is to find why the poems are original and how they communicate their "en-formed" emotion.

What happens in these poems that is different? The best answer I can give is derived, not from Roethke but from Wallace Stevens. In his poetry Stevens celebrates "Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself"; he renders the search for this in "Metaphors of a Magnifico."

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,  
Into twenty villages,  
Or one man  
Crossing a single bridge into a village.

This is old song  
That will not declare itself...

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are  
Twenty men crossing a bridge  
Into a village.

That will not declare itself  
Yet is certain as meaning...

The boots of the men clump  
On the boards of the bridge.  
The first white wall of the village  
Rises through fruit-trees.  
Of what was it I was thinking?  
So the meaning escapes.

The first white wall of the village...  
The fruit-trees...<sup>39</sup>

This poem presents dramatically the process by which one arrives at the "poetic meaning" of any given scene. The persona gives us the factual details at once: twenty men are crossing a bridge into a village. Working in the realm of ideas, he then attempts to capture the essence of this simple scene by philosophical extension and reduction. But this method inhibits poetic perception--the song "will not declare itself." Next comes tautology and the comment that this song is "certain as meaning," i.e., the facts have rational correspondences, we can grasp the idea of the facts. When the persona turns to the sensuous elements of the scene, however, capturing the sound of boots and the sight of the white wall, "meaning escapes." As it should. The persona has stopped thinking about the scene and has immersed himself in the non-rational but essential poetic qualities of the "thing itself." The song (or poem) declares itself, as we see in the final two lines.

When Roethke learns to perceive sensuously, when he stops thinking about the correspondences aloud and presents them poetically, as the persona in Stevens' poem learns to do, the poems declare themselves. This is what happens in

the greenhouse poems. We can see the difference by studying two poems in which an "awakening" in the natural world is associated with an awakening in the human condition. In "The Light Comes Brighter," one of Roethke's early poems, we are given three stanzas describing the breaking of Spring. Then we have the following two stanzas:

Soon field and wood will wear an April look,  
The frost be gone, for green is breaking now;  
The ovenbird will match the vocal brook,  
The young fruit swell upon the pear-tree bough.

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. (p. 11)

Karl Malkoff notes that in this poem Roethke is shifting the ground of his presentation from the "I" to "Eye." But, he insists, the natural landscape becomes an "emblem" of the human mind. "it presupposes a correspondence between inner and outer worlds, and exploits that correspondence not only as a means of representing, but also, in a quasi-mystical sense, as a means of knowing the reality within." He claims that "the final image draws the entire poem into focus. By withholding it until the end, Roethke has avoided the impression of a contrived and artificial metaphor, and allows his reader to share his own sense of sudden insight."<sup>40</sup>

Malkoff argues that the poem functions in the same way as the funereal "On the Road to Woodlawn." But this isn't quite true. That poem was framed by "I miss," and a tension was established by the claim that the speaker could miss

things which he obviously loathed. The final line in that poem does draw the poem into focus because of its startling juxtaposition with the catalogue of ritualistic absurdities; the speaker reveals, suddenly, what he really does miss. In "The Light Comes Brighter," however, there is no integration of the last stanza with the four that come before. To be sure, the poet associates them by mentioning a "leafy mind" and "young shoots" spreading on an inner world, but if this stanza "draws the poem into focus" we should find, upon rereading, that the poet was preparing us for an integrated vision. The clues aren't there; the verbs used never connote that the natural scene is a correlative of a mental process. Malkoff uses the word "emblem" when discussing the function of nature in this poem, and the choice of that word is apt in a way Malkoff doesn't realize. The poet makes the relationship explicit, the ratio is one to one, and there is nothing to indicate the complexity of the mind unfolding, no chance for the nature imagery to become symbolic rather than just emblematic.

In contrast, look now at "Cuttings (later)," a favorite with the critics and one of the best examples of Roethke's ability to fuse the images of his micro-nature with the emotional state of the persona.

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



I can hear, underground, that sucking and  
sobbing,  
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,--  
The small waters seeping upward,  
The tight grains parting at last.  
When sprouts break out,  
Slippery as fish,  
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

Although Malkoff says "There is no essential difference of perspective...between this poem and "The Light Comes Brighter," he does see a development. "First, there is a shift from emphasis upon visual perception to the direct appeal of all the senses, particularly auditory and tactile ...Second, there is in the new poems a more dynamic presentation of the plant world...a poem from The Lost Son contains a sense of growth and struggle within itself."<sup>41</sup> Also Ralph J. Mills, commenting on the greenhouse poems, says "If Roethke's endeavors start with a return to his own past experience, the poems surpass the barriers of privacy to delineate hidden patterns in creation; and they accomplish this with a freshness of language and imaginative energy unmatched by any other poet since Dylan Thomas. A poem like 'Cuttings, (later)' brings poet--and thus the reader--and the newly born plants into a correspondence so delicate and yet profound that there can be only one true conclusion: a kind of psychic rebirth for the poet through his sympathetic contemplation of propagating plants."<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Burke calls this poem the "epitome" of Roethke's "poetic vocation," his "imagistic figuring of a human situation." Burke's critique: "Severedness, dying that is at the same

time a fanatic tenacity; submergence (fish, and the sheer mindless nerves of sensitive plants); envagination as a homecoming."<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps we can pin down the technique a little more specifically. In the "Light" poem Roethke uses active verbs to suggest the vitality of the Spring scene: the sun "cuts" deep, the water "escapes," the cold roots "stir." This kind of "animation" or anthropomorphizing is perfectly traditional, so much so that we hardly notice it. But in the "Cuttings" poem there is a decided originality of diction. Both unusual verbs and emotional verbs are used. The "dry sticks" "wrestle" and "struggle" and "suck," but they also have an "urge" and they "sob." None of these verbs are usually associated with "dry sticks" rooting; they may "extend" or "bulge" or "push out" and the roots may "crawl" or "search," but we are not prepared for the frantic activity and the emotional intensity Roethke endows them with.

The first two lines catch that intensity of the struggle for rebirth. Immediately juxtaposed are two lines calling for a comparison of the efforts of the roots with those of a martyred saint, as the "lopped limbs" suggest. The juxtaposition surprises, but the association is meaningful and is reinforced by the startling emergence of that word "ressurrection" in the first line. It's not that the word is new to us, but rarely, if ever, would we find this particular word used in a context which included "dry

sticks."

In the second stanza the persona perceives empathetically. He "hears" the sound of the beginning of life; he feels in his "veins" and "bones" the seeping waters and the cells multiplying. Suddenly, in fact, the growth activity of the plant is objectified with the second two lines of this stanza, and the empathetic participation progresses to the point where the emotion is located completely in the persona: "When sprouts break out,/ Slippery as fish,/ I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet." Naturally we can transfer the emotion back to the plant if we wish. And that's the point. There has been a constant interpenetration of the process and the emotion as the dynamic drama of rooting occurs; every verb and every image is open-ended, in the sense that it connotes multiple possibilities of insight. This poem is utterly unlike the "Light" poem where the language tended to limit rather than extend the nature-mind correlative.

What does the poem mean? True to the dictum of Wallace Stevens, the meaning escapes in this poem, to the extent that, though there are logical abstract philosophic ideas one can grasp intellectually and state unequivocally, the poetic meaning is not in the idea but in the specific intensity of feelings. The poem is one of process, predominantly, or, as Stanley Kunitz says, of "invincible Becoming."<sup>44</sup> The conceptualization contained here is that

of rebirth, renewal, but even this kind of pinpointing leads to qualification or extension. Malkoff sees this poem, in line with the later ones of Praise to the End, as "concerned with the struggle to be born."<sup>45</sup> We have seen Burke's remarks and Mill's comments about "psychic renewal." The last line leads in many directions, however, and promises both a tendency and a resolution. We can take it as simultaneously empathetic and contemplative. The word "quail" connotes at least two opposing emotional states; does the persona "start up," with a sense of fluttering forth from the nest, as the bird does when happened upon...or should we use the dictionary definition and see him cowering, drawing back in fear, perhaps in awe of the process of rebirth he has just witnessed so intimately? Does he "lean to beginnings" in the sense that he will move forward to something new, (even some new kind of poetry)? Or does he lean backwards, towards his own beginnings, and, by association with the image of the "fish," towards a prenatal state? Probably both. "Sheath-wet" connotes both the budding leaf and the encased foetus. So far, then, we have at least two different but not incongruous interpretations: the persona is moving towards psychological regression (back to the womb) or towards psychic renewal (on to a new life) or both. There is a third possibility. The imagery of the second stanza is sexual and, in line with the later poetry, we could add the idea of adolescent sexual awakening to our list of inter-



pretations. As it happens, all these themes are picked up in the long poems and are expressed in similarly ambiguous terms. For Roethke the three are united in such a way that each one, or all together, suggest potentiality; perhaps that is the final emotional state captured in this poem.

The poetic form here, we should note, is free verse. The piece is held together by redundancy of image, alliteration and assonance. Patterns are established within the poem rather than imposed by the structures of formal rhyme or rhythm. In the first quatrain, for example, we see "urge," "wrestle," "struggling," and "strained" in close proximity. The severedness is caught by "dry sticks," "cut stems," "lopped limbs." The "renewal pattern" echoes through "resurrection," "rose," and "new life." In contrasting tension to the dryness of the sticks of the opening line, we find the second stanza filled with moisture: the suggestive wetness of "sucking and sobbing," the concrete image of "small waters seeping upward," the mention of fish and the final "sheath-wet."

Is the poem original? Almost every critic would say yes, but few tell us why. To say that the originality lies in the greenhouse imagery is not enough, no matter how closely associated with this kind of plant growth Roethke was in his youth. Nor is it simply the association of human rebirth with rebirth in plants; that image is at least

as old as the Old Testament. Malkoff speaks of a shift from the purely visual to the use of all the senses, and Mills talks of "freshness of language" and "imaginative energy." Burke notes that Roethke goes "as far as is humanly possible in quest of a speech wholly devoid of abstraction." Using Kantian divisions, Burke tells us that Roethke's aesthetic insists on "A minimum of 'ideas,' a maximum of 'intuitions'." Summing up the poet's linguistic heritage, Burke maintains, "All told, then, we can see in Roethke's cult of 'intuitive' language: a more strictly 'infantile' variant of the Dantesque search for a 'noble' vernacular; a somewhat suburban, horticulturist variant of Wordsworth's stress upon the universal nature of rusticity; and a close replica of Lawrence's distinction between the 'physical' and the 'abstract'."<sup>46</sup>

The familiar, the "old" in this poem is the imagistic correlative of the rooting process; anyone who has watched a slip develop roots in water knows of the waiting, the appearance of those first small nubs, and then the bursting forth of the roots (a child, in particular, thrills to the "wonder" of all this). But the unexpected juxtaposition of specific words--"resurrection," "lopped limbs," "fish" "quail,"--all these add novelty, strain foreseeability. Instead of using a familiar form, the poet, as we have seen, constrains his movement towards disorder by providing verbal and imagistic redundancy. We find, then, images

which are "activated" in a very special sense and they provide for the possibility of new insights--a number of them--into the traditional theme of "renewal." However, to dissolve the poem into the abstract category of "renewal," as myth critics tend to do, would be to destroy its communicative originality, to prevent the universal from becoming concrete.

There are a number of greenhouse poems which function similarly. Most have been explicated in a number of ways; all allow similar insights. One of the most interesting is "The Minimal," which is actually one sentence. The persona "studies" the "lives on a leaf"; the term is metaphoric, indicating the size of the world of the micro-creatures. Progressing from the dry to the wet dimension again, the persona comes to "bacterial creepers" whose "wan mouths" kiss, clean and caress wounds and the sutures which hold them. Again we have those startling action words giving us novelty and a new perception of the minimal life and its relation to human life. The healing power of the slime and mire becomes a predominant theme in the longer poems in which Roethke turns back to the primordial world the creatures of "The Minimal" suggest. That world is the source of all life and it provides Roethke with an imagistic correlative for his own pinpointing of his persona's psychic rebirth.

There are also poems about the "Greenhouse Society"

in this book, most of which have been commented upon by other critics. "Big Wind" has been treated masterfully by Kenneth Burke<sup>44</sup>, and it is a prime example of the way a poet can select a traditional metaphor--in this case the ship in a storm--and fit it to his own unique purposes. Literally, the storm threatens the static greenhouse and all the life it holds, but Roethke's use of the ship metaphor allows him to posit the activity in the greenhouse itself. The drama is intensified because we are reminded of the fragility of this "ship"--"so much thin glass." But "she" keeps "plunging" and "bucking" the storm until, finally,

She sailed into the calm morning,  
Carrying her full cargo of roses (p. 41)

Part IV of The Lost Son marks the beginning of Roethke's psychic journey and, since he later put these poems into the Praise to the End sequence, we should study them in the context he chose. In these more difficult poems Roethke leaves the greenhouse far behind, returning to it only to establish a temporal correlative or an emotional tie with the florist as father-figure. In these poems he uses and pushes even further the poetic methods he learned with the plant poems: sensuous perception of all nature, the emotional rather than the intellectual presentation of the persona's experiences with a sense of the dramatic which is akin to Joyce's, and he plays with rhythm and syntax to create powerful new images and tensions. Thus he produces a



sequence of poems which Ralph Mills calls "unique in modern literature."<sup>48</sup>

# NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup>"A Lyric Realist," Poetry, LVII (July, 1941), p. 222.

<sup>2</sup>"verse and the Times," Saturday Review, XXIII (April 5, 1941), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>"The Poems of Theodore Roethke," Kenyon Review (Autumn, 1941). pp. 514-15.

<sup>4</sup>Winters , p. 515.

<sup>5</sup>Malkoff, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>There seems to be some confusion about when the poem was written. In "An Evening with Ted Roethke" (MQR, 6, p. 235), Kunitz says it was written when he suggested "Open House" as a title for the collection. However, Roethke decided on the title in 1938 (Letters, p. 63) and the poem was first published as "Strange Distortion" two years earlier, in Scribner's Magazine, XCIX (May, 1936), p. 311. The "rage" in this poem might have been suggested by Wallace Stevens' "blessed rage for order." Allan Seager notes that, "by March 30" of 1936 (two months before "Strange Distortion" appeared) Roethke had completed a review of Stevens' Ideas of Order. See The Glass House (New York, 1968), p. 111.

<sup>7</sup>SP, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Malkoff, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>See Auden's Another Time (New York, 1940). Unfortunately Auden chose to omit this central stanza in later editions.

<sup>10</sup>John Holmes first discussed the structure of Open House in the Boston Evening Transcript, March 24, 1941, p. 9. Both Holmes and Malkoff assume that Roethke himself arranged the poems; Holmes notes that he built the sequence "with infinite patience." Allan Seager tells us, however, that Stanley Kunitz helped Roethke arrange the poems: "the poems were written first and the order imposed later". See The Glass House, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup>Malkoff, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>SP, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>"Theodore Roethke: The Poetic Shape of Death,"  
Essays, p. 96.

<sup>14</sup>Letters, p. 114.

<sup>15</sup>"spratling": a baby fish, denotatively; con-  
notatively, because of the linguistic origins, a coming  
forth, a sprouting. (Such diction is perfect because of  
the pre-natal, greenhouse-associated imagery of the book  
just previous to this one).

<sup>16</sup>Letters, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup>Hoffman, Essays, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup>Malkoff, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup>Leonie Adams, "Poems: A Selection" (New York,  
1954), p. 18.

<sup>20</sup>Note the difference and the improvement of that  
final version over one of the early versions Roethke sent  
to Louise Bogan (Letters, p. 76):

I miss the polished brass, the powerful  
black horses,  
The drivers creaking the seats of the  
baroque horses,  
The high piled floral offerings with senti-  
mental verses  
--As the carriages passed you smelled sweat  
and the flowers' perfume

Now, as if performing a task that disgraces,  
The black-flagged cars, filled with anonymous  
faces,  
Hurry to where a man's last resting place is.  
--As if in the cemetery there was not suf-  
ficient room.

<sup>21</sup>A Hopkins Reader, ed. John Pick (New York, 1966),  
p. 67.

<sup>22</sup>Winters, p. 515.

<sup>23</sup>Malkoff, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup>See letter to the editor, Atlantic (December, 1968), p. 41.

<sup>25</sup>See Richard Ellmann, "Yeats without Analogue," Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, ed. Norman Hollander (New York, 1968), p. 395.

<sup>26</sup>New Poets from Old: A Study in Literary Genetics (New York, 1964), pp. 6 and 18.

<sup>27</sup>Wells, p. 329.

<sup>28</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays (London, 1951), p. 14.

<sup>29</sup>The Sense of an Ending (New York, 1968), pp. 102, 116, 121.

<sup>30</sup>Kermode, pp. 56, 18, 45.

<sup>31</sup>trans. Joel E. Cohen (Urbana, 1966). See chapters 1 and 2 for definitions and introductory material to this very complex theory. Moles' final chart of "dipoles" can be found on p. 208.

<sup>32</sup>Moles, pp. 129-147.

<sup>33</sup>See Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 40, and Problems of Art (New York, 1957), p. 148.

<sup>34</sup>Problems of Art, p. 149.

<sup>35</sup>Commonweal, XXXVI (June, 1942), p. 179.

<sup>36</sup>See Harold Bayley, The Lost Language of Symbolism (London, 1968), pp. 115-119.

<sup>37</sup>"The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley, 1968), p. 264.

<sup>38</sup>Malkoff, pp. 59-60.

<sup>39</sup>The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1965), p. 19.

<sup>40</sup>Malkoff, p. 26.

<sup>41</sup>Malkoff, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup>Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 14.



<sup>43</sup>Burke, p. 254.

<sup>44</sup>Kunitz, "Theodore Roethke," p. 223.

<sup>45</sup>Malkoff, p. 50.

<sup>46</sup>Burke, pp. 258-263.

<sup>47</sup>Burke, pp. 255-256.

<sup>48</sup>Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 15.

## CHAPTER 3

## THE OBSCURE POEMS OF PRAISE

In his review of Praise to the End, Peter Viereck raises the issue of clarity versus obscurity, and suggests that these poems utilize a "metacommunication, a fourth dimension."<sup>1</sup> Thom Gunn, in another review, disagrees. After quoting a poem from Open House he says: "The next group of poems-- most but not all of those between pages 63 and 138 (in Words for the Wind; these pages include, among others, all of the Praise to the End cycle poems)-- is a surprise after this and I'm not sure why Mr. Roethke prints them here. Some of them are deliberate nonsense poems, but they are not very good nonsense poems...At times these poems recall the pronouncements of the Fool in King Lear, but Shakespeare is only half-concealing his purposes where Roethke is completely concealing his."<sup>2</sup> In terms of the theories we have been using, such a charge means that these poems are too original and contain nothing familiar at all. The opening stanzas of "Where Knock Is Open Wide" seem to bear out Gunn's judgment:

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.

This sounds like nonsense. Even "Cuttings (later)" didn't prepare us for this.

However, Gunn's extreme position is now rendered invalid by the amount of criticism done on these poems and by the number of critics who have found propositional assertions in them. Although, as we saw in the first chapter, charges of over-originality still exist, the explications of this sequence by Hilton Kramer, Ralph J. Mills, Kenneth Burke and Karl Malkoff have been effective in reducing the confusion a first reading often presents. They have helped to reveal just enough of the familiar in these apparently totally original poems to make them effectively communicative. Because of the length of the sequence and because of the richness and complexity of the pieces contained in it, these critics have been able to give us only a very general introduction to the basic themes and directions the poems take. Each offers a slightly different kind of insight, however, and by using them and by turning to Roethke's own sparse comments, we can learn a great deal about what these poems contain. By using our theories we can, perhaps, gain a few additional insights about how Roethke communicates as well as about what he is saying.

Our task is made more difficult by the fact that in

these poems, there is a dialectical tension between the familiar and the original on many different levels, sometimes simultaneously. First there is the area of theme: while we are familiar with Freudian and Jungian case-history explorations of the unconscious, Roethke's dramatic presentations of the preconscious and prenatal states are unique in modern American poetry. Second, although we can see traditional semantic patterns, Roethke experiments with diction in these poems. His vocabulary abounds in infantile idioms, neologisms, puns and ambiguities. Unusual rhetorical devices are used -- the riddles and incantations, as well as the nursery rhymes and folk-jingles. Third, we find that familiar images and symbols are extended to provide "activated" metaphoric constructs. The poems are filled with paradoxes and illogical associations. Turning to the rhythmic techniques, we note that there is often a tension created between the naive meter of the jingles and the complex rhythm which the emotional state of the persona demands. Along with this tension we get startling rhythmic juxtapositions or the sudden breakdown of an established rhythmic pattern.

With so many novelties, where do we turn for the familiar? The most obvious place to start is with the clues already provided by Roethke and his critics. Although Roethke made it clear that he did not "rely on allusion"<sup>3</sup> he himself gives us some of the "ancestors" of the work;



the Bible, Mother Goose, Traherne, the songs and rant of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.<sup>4</sup> The titles of the poems suggest others: Christopher Smart, Wordsworth, Blake and William Strode. The problem of allusion is a complex one here; unlike Eliot, who used whole lines or formulaic, ritualistic phrases, Roethke's use of echo or allusion is usually subtle or implicit. Often the titles establish a tie with an emotional context in the work of another poet but the poem proceeds to inverse or expand that particular context. This happens not only with the titles, but also with words and images and rhythms.

Besides the "ancestors" Roethke mentions directly, critics have suggested other literary associations which seem appropriate: Dylan Thomas, Eliot, Joyce, Dante, Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Outside the strictly creative realm, references to Maud Bodkin, Freud and Jung provide some of our critics with help in understanding the psychological implications caught by the poems, and Malkoff suggests that the psychic or spiritual tendencies are best seen when compared to the experiences recorded by Eckhart and Boehme.<sup>5</sup> While such comparisons do not necessarily indicate "sources" in the strict sense, they sometimes help to illuminate a particularly difficult passage and, as with those influences we saw operating in

Open House, such references (including Roethke's) provide us with a kind of creative atmosphere within which the poet worked.

### I. From "Knock" to "The Opening"

The best way into the poems is to get an overview of the sequence first. It is important to note that, like Dubliners or Go Down, Moses, the apparently disparate elements of what appears to be a mere collection are actually a diaphoric unity, a single structure with an internal progression from one state of being to another. Here Roethke and the critics I have mentioned can supply much help. First, a few comments by the poet on theme and technique:

Each poem . . . is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual process; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more.

Listen to them, for they are written to be heard, with the themes often coming alternately, as in music, and usually a partial resolution at the end.

. . . at least you can see that the method is cyclic. 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."

Much of the action is implied or, particularly in the case of erotic experience, rendered obliquely. The revelation of the identity of the speaker may itself be a part of the drama; or, in some instances, in a dream sequence, his identity may merge with someone else's, or be deliberately blurred . . . Disassociation often precedes a new state of clarity.

and, finally, 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.<sup>6</sup>

Ralph J. Mills also provides some valuable observations which will contribute to rendering these poems as successful communication:

The journey, while it is basically psychic and spiritual, also has similarities with quest myths: the hero's descent into the underworld of self; a series of ordeals he must pass or an enemy to be vanquished; his return to familiar reality, which is now changed by his efforts. This sort of parallel will make it clear at once that while Roethke's primary intention is the "struggle for personal identity" (his phrase) in the individual protagonist, that struggle symbolizes a more general body of human experience. This last dimension is, however, implied rather than heavily outlined through a detailed system of allusion.<sup>7</sup>

The stages of the progression of this journey are marked in individual poems. As Hilton Kramer says of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," "The drama is the death of the father, and the 'events' of the poems are perceptions and memories in which parental love and the security of home are jeopardized or in some moment of crisis."<sup>8</sup>

These memories, however, include a prenatal time and Ralph J. Mills notes that we are given "the protagonist's introduction into time" with hints at the "evolutionary process." Malkoff extends both readings by noting that we get here "the protagonist's vision of his own begetting, associated with a tenderly aggressive form of sexuality." According to Malkoff, the "I fell!" of part 4 connotes a literal birth, and a falling away from oneness with God at the same time -- "in the mode of Vaughn, Traherne, Blake and Wordsworth." This separation makes the child-persona "somebody else," because he is now a "lost son." As Malkoff notes, "the main themes of the entire sequence -- birth, death, sexual guilt and confusion, separation from father and God (the 'lost son' motif) -- are explicitly considered in the first poem."<sup>9</sup>

"I Need, I Need" captures the later loneliness and isolation of the young child after the father's death. Alienation from the mother ("I can't taste my mother"), is followed by an attempt to communicate with water and flowers, symbols of communion with the father. Childhood play is aggressive: "I scratched the wind with a stick," and, in the jump-rope of section 2, "You're not very nice, --/ So touch my toes twice." Such aggression



is made pathetically poignant, however, as the child constantly juxtaposes allusions to the father with verbal or imagistic hostility. As happens so often, this child retaliates for his hurt by aggressions or renunciations:

Today I saw a beard in a cloud.  
The ground cried my name:  
Good-bye for being wrong.

When you plant, spit in the pot.  
A pick likes to hit ice.

The poem ends with the child turning to nature and Mother Earth for comfort. Malkoff sees the fire image at the end of the poem as sexual: "As infantile sexuality seemed to cause the fall from union with the father, or God, the growing sexual urges now threaten to expel the child from an Eden-like state of union with nature."<sup>10</sup> But Ralph Mills sees this fire as a "symbol of the spirit."<sup>11</sup> Whether or not we accept Malkoff's negative reading of the fire symbol, we should note that here Roethke does combine the sexual and the spiritual development as the psyche progresses to individual identity: fire, warmth, the sun, summer all connote the sense of developing potential, both physical and psychic, as the poems progress.

"Bring the Day" makes that developing potential explicit. Far from being "frightening" (as Malkoff suggests), this poem is one of "celebration" (as Mills insists). The frank sexual imagery in the opening lines

is reinforced by the intercourse between the herrings in part 2. And all nature -- the grass and the wind and the "least waves" -- reiterate that a beginning is at hand. "Forever is easy" says the earth, and although the small boy "melts" and "can't marry the dirt" yet, he is aware at the end of the poem of the "small bird awakening." Sexual? Yes, and spiritual also, in the sense that it promises release from the "dust" that "stays."

"Give Way, Ye Gates" connotes, in Kramer's terms " . . . the sexual awakening which marks the passage out of childhood, an awakening intimated or observable everywhere in nature, everywhere celebrated with spontaneity, except in the human animal."<sup>12</sup> Malkoff explains the imagery of the second stanza: "The implications of the child telling his soft bone about dreams of stiff boards are quite clear. The child is no longer a kitten but a 'cat after great milk and vasty fishes.' (The yearning for both mother -- milk -- and father -- fish -- is implicit in the imagery)."<sup>13</sup> But there is no mention of a "soft" bone, and the cat and the moon are not usually masculine in Roethke. The liquid imagery of the first paragraph suggests that the young boy has wet dreams; the second is addressed to the feminine object of one of these dreams. The suggestion is made, then dramatized.

The "cat" who desired "great milk and vasty fishes" -- sperm -- "twiced" him "nicely" in the green world of sleep. In this dream world the images are telescoped, but they are at the same time very explicit: "Tufty, the water's loose."

If the argument needs support, we might look at a section from the notebooks from which some of this passage was taken:

She moved, gentle as a waking bird,  
Deep from her sleep, dropping light crumbs,  
Almost silurian, into the lap of love ...  
She moved, so she moved, gentle as a waking bird,  
The bird in the bush of her bones singing;  
Woke, from a deep sleep, the moon on her toes.<sup>14</sup>

This is Roethke's version of the adolescent girl's awakening, a view which, in the extended section of the notebook, includes as much anguish and confusion as our protagonist has suffered. The dream gives the boy an awareness of his potency that sends him seeking and participating in the potency of all nature:

In the high-noon of thighs,  
In the springtime of stones,  
We'll stretch with the great stems.  
We'll be at the business of what might be  
Looking towards what we are.

Such release of physical anticipation seems to be caught up short in the next stanza and, I suggest, the psyche now answers the body's joy with opposition. "The instant ages" as thoughts turn to the past and death. Stanza

four creates a powerful physical-psychological tension; the boy masturbates as "Shapes in the shade/ Watch." The line "These wings are from the wrong nest" imply that sexual soaring will not overcome the "old wind" and the "cold" of the old memories. The poem ends with the boy in a regressive state, alone.

"Sensibility! O La!" is filled with images of displacement. The dream world controls all. Although absolute sexual maturity is stated in stanza 2, the dream is filled with awakened spirits (the birth of a Venus-wench in the first stanza), ghosts, and witches (part 3). Malkoff tells us that the poem suggests Freud's Oedipal stage and the imagery seems to support this.<sup>15</sup> "I've waked the wrong wind," says the persona, and the ghost here seems to be of the "Mamma" who, apparently, keeps the sweetheart in a cave. "My sleep deceives me," the boy declares and he seeks a door out of "the dark" into the sun.

"O Lull Me, Lull Me" provides an interim, a breathing space away from the intense psycho-physical battles the boy has been enduring. The boy wonders if it's time to think, and seeks a "white way to another grace." "This doxie (creed of onanism?) won't do," he declares, ". . . I can't go leaping alone." The poem ends with a recognition of where solace is to be found:



I could say hello to things;  
I could talk to a snail;  
I see what sings!  
What sings!

Although other critics have not suggested an extension of theme here, we might see the explicit beginning of a kind of poetic awareness dawning at this point. "I'm all ready to whistle," the persona says, and we remember those lines back in "Where Knock Is Open Wide": "A ghost can't whistle." The vision of the dead has created a silent world for the isolated protagonist. He stops the larks and the play-song ("I Need, I Need") and the only real singing he has heard has been that of those herrings ("Bring the Day") and the song of the girl in his dream ("Give Way, Ye Gates"). In the poems after "The Lost Son" noises and songs abound. In the title poem of this series, "Praise to the End!" the protagonist recalls, "Once I fished from the banks, leaf-light and happy:/ On the rocks south of quiet, in the close regions of kissing." Throughout "Praise" there are numerous references to communication with the grave:

Speak to me, frosty beard.  
Sing to me, sweet. (part 2)

Is the eternal near, fondling?  
I hear the sound of hands.

Can the bones breathe? This grave  
has an ear.  
(part 3)

I have been somewhere else; I remember the  
    sea-faced uncles.  
I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing,  
Lighter than bells,  
Softer than water. (Part 4)

The voices continue in "Unfold, Unfold":

The dead speak noise. (Part 1)  
  
A tongue without song  
    -- Can still whistle in a jug. (Part 2)  
  
Sing, sing you symbols! All simple creatures,  
All small shapes, willow-shy,  
In the obscure haze, sing! (Part 5)

This last poem, in particular, is aesthetically oriented. The persona admonishes himself for his rhetoric: "What a whelm of proverbs, Mr. Pinch!" The influence of the dead has now become positive and allows the persona to find himself and his voice, which echoes the voices of leaves and light. It is at this point, it seems, that Roethke heeded the lesson he said he learned (in "On Identity"):

In their harsh thickets  
The dead thrash.  
They help.

"The Lost Son" is the central poem in the sequence we have been following (p. 53). Roethke's rearrangement for Praise to the End! was useful in a developmental way: the first poem gave us the death scene from the point of view of the young child; the persona has struggled with the ghost throughout all of the poems we have glanced at; now we see the persona face the grave, endure his struggle

with all the psychological implications this act has, and finally find release and a sense of hope for the future. In the poem just preceding this we found the young boy at a point of "lull." This poem, which retells the events we have followed from a more mature point of view, is the center of the storm. Burke suggests that the pattern of this poem is reiterated in the three poems that followed it in The Lost Son, "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," and "The Shape of Fire." "The four poems are, in general, an alternating of two motives: regression, and a nearly lost, but never quite relinquished, expectancy that leads to varying degrees of fulfillment."<sup>16</sup> Malkoff's explications are quite specific and add another point: the poems move "from sexuality to the coming of spiritual light."<sup>17</sup>

After these four from The Lost Son, Roethke adds the title poem, "Praise to the End." which begins with masturbation and ends with belief; "Unfold, Unfold," our "aesthetic" poem; and "I Cry, Love! Love!," where union is the key word. The sense of utter joy in this last poem is founded on the persona's realization of his total identity -- biological, psychological, spiritual. This is not to say that all is clearcut and logical in this poem. It exudes the sense of "mystery" as Roethke called it.<sup>18</sup> References to the "white

spirit," and "thingy spirit" are confusing, but, as Malkoff notes, the title suggests Blake; he may well be the spiritual father of this poem and the "willie" whom the persona addresses. The "condition of joy" proclaimed in this poem is based on the speaker's participation in and his love of all things. All the elements and creatures in the poem sing or dance or play; the sense of isolation with which the sequence began is completely gone. The beginning of the possibility for union came in "Praise," when the boy could state, "The dark showed me a face./ My ghosts are all gay." Seeing beyond any specific ghost in "Unfold! Unfold!", he says "What the grave says,/ The nest denies." The meaningful union of the grave and the nest leads him to a profound perception in "I Cry, Love! Love!":

Beginnings start without shade,  
Thinner than minnows.  
The live grass whirls with the sun,  
Feet run over the simple stones,  
There's time enough.  
Behold, in the lout's eye,  
Love.

Union of beginning and end, union of all creatures in love-- the realization produces a new perspective in the regressive scene of part 3; a soft light pervades the scene and the water rocks "gently." The sense of union provokes an awareness that, ultimately,



We met in a nest. Before I lived.  
The dark hair sighed.  
We never enter  
Alone.

Roethke added "O, Thou Opening, O" later, when arranging his work for The Waking. Malkoff notes that it recapitulates much of the previous work, but that the prose additions seem to be a rejection of ascetic mysticism here. We looked at a section of this poem before (Chapter II) and noted that it contains answers to many of the poetic problems suggested by "Open House." The poem completes the search for identity which this sequence has embodied; here Roethke's persona shows that he has found his poetic identity. The poem is about creating poetry, whatever else it contains. Sprinkled all through it are references to rhetoric and language: "Read me the stream," "Dazzle me, dizzy aphorist" (possibly a reference to Blake), "I'll change my image," "a thing you cannot say to whisper and equal a Wound." And more:

You mean?--  
I can leap, true to the field,  
In the lily's sovereign right?  
Be a body lighted with love,  
Sad, in singing-time?  
Or happy, correct as a hat?

.....

I'm wild with news!

.....

See what the sweet harp says.  
Should a song break a sleep?  
The round home of a root, --  
Is that the place to go?  
I'm a tune dying  
On harsh stone.  
An Eye says,  
Come

And we might begin again with the "epic of the eyes" the persona mentioned in the first poem. The speaker tells us, however, that "Going is knowing," and he has taken us with him on his journey. The most significant line, then, for our purposes is almost a direct allusion to the first line of that first poem, "My secrets cry aloud." Here the persona tells us, rather naïvely, "I've crept from a cry."

## II Tradition in the "Praise" Poems

An overview allows us to see a general thematic connection between the poems of this very original sequence. In some of his titles Roethke turns to poetic tradition in order to provide us with some familiar imagistic, rhetorical, or emotional analogue which will aid in our perception of the emotional content of specific poems. A look at some of Roethke's sources will help us reduce a little more of the "obscurity" before we turn to a more specific examination of the poet's own unique poetic practices.

The title Praise to the End comes from Wordsworth's Prelude, Book I, line 350. Hilton Kramer finds two things relevant in this allusion:

It is a passage in which Wordsworth interrupts his account of the education which the spirit receives in the hands of nature to acknowledge the antithesis between harmony (that "dark/ Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles/ Discordant elements") and the will to dissolution ("The terrors, pains and early miseries,/ Regrets, vexations, lassitudes") which characterizes the journey of the psyche in this world . . .

Moreover, we should also recall the essential place which Wordsworth gives the child in his effort to recover a meaningful life of the emotions, and not the child only but childhood itself in all its intimate identification with the life of nature.<sup>19</sup>

In this series of poems, then, Roethke is acknowledging, like Wordsworth, his debt to the education nature has given him and, like Wordsworth (and like Vaughn, Traherne and Blake) he shows us the progression of this education through the perceptions of childhood. But John Wain observes that ". . . Roethke frequently reminds us of Wordsworth, except that he is free of the temptation to systemize his findings in quasi-philosophical language; and that physical passion, which is by no means overlooked in Wordsworth's scheme of things, is nevertheless much more central in Roethke's."<sup>20</sup> Roethke's mode of presentation is far from Wordsworth's, as he was well aware. He

conceived of this sequence as "A kind of tensed-up Prelude, maybe: no comment; everything in the mind of the kid."<sup>21</sup>

The immediate context of the passage is certainly appropriate, but there are other anticipatory lines which may have additional relevance. "The earth is all before me" (l. 14), Wordsworth begins, in a clear echo of Milton's closing words in Paradise Lost. But Wordsworth turns back to re-enter the Eden of his childhood, whereas Roethke's persona, "the lost son" has been expelled from Eden even as a child and must go much farther back into experience for his source of renewal. Recalling a journey to his "hermitage," Wordsworth tells of a particular experience he had: "I spare to tell of what ensued, the life/ In common things -- the endless store of things,/ Rare, or at least so seeming..." (ll. 108-110). If this reminds us of the familiar line "We see into the life of things" (Tintern Abbey), we are on the right track in associating Roethke's perception with the kind Wordsworth talked about; Roethke doesn't talk about it, however -- he captures it in imagery and metaphor. "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up/ Fostered alike by beauty and fear" (ll. 301-302), the older poet says, suggesting metaphorically the



Springtime of his life. Once again Roethke takes the image and extends it to its regressive limits; his child asks "What's the time, papa seed?"

Wordsworth's subtitle is "Growth of a Poet's Mind." Certainly Roethke was aware of this and presented his own version of it. We were not wrong in seeing a developing poetic sensibility in the sequence then. As if by way of reinforcement, Roethke mentions a cow and a "mooly man" in the opening verses of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," calling to mind immediately another child whose first memory is that of a moocow and a "baby tuckoo." The allusion, of course, is to Joyce, and the title of the work from which it comes is Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. This kind of allusive redundancy assures us that the journey of Roethke's persona is that of a "singer," an artist. This last allusion adds another dimension, however. Malkoff is right in suggesting that Roethke's method of presentation is very close to Joyce's. Roethke is trying in poetry the stream of consciousness technique Joyce perfected in his novels.<sup>22</sup>

The allusiveness of the titles of the individual poems is open-ended, however. When Roethke sent the title poem, "Praise to the End" to Burke, he commented on the source and said, "Ambiguities, ironic and otherwise, are intended."<sup>23</sup> The poem opens with the persona masturbating;

the pun is obvious. Later, Roethke mentions that Burke calls this book of poetry Prays to the Tail<sup>24</sup>, apparently as amused by such verbal horseplay as he is by a critic's comment that the long poems in The Lost Son are "the most phallic poems in English."<sup>25</sup> They may be, and the sexual puns can extend far towards the direction of the erotic, but the fact remains that this is not all they are. The sequence deals very seriously with the sexual awakening and awareness of the boy as a difficult period but a very necessary stage in his developing awareness of his origins and his identification with the natural cycle of life and death. The sperm-fish association always sets off, by extension, a fish-father-death-womb-water-life sequence; this sequence is presented with many imagistic and rhetorical variations in the different poems and the meaning becomes more explicit as the boy gets older, but his awareness of the cycle brings him finally to a sense of his own identity.

Roethke does not give us specific poetic sources for all the poems in the cycle (perhaps there are none for some of them). He does mention and quote a poem by William Strode:

O lull me, lull me, charming air!  
My senses rock with wonder sweet;  
Like snow on wool thy fallings are;  
Soft like a spirit's are thy feet.  
Grief who needs fear  
That hath an ear?  
Down let him lie  
And slumbering die,  
And change his soul for harmony.<sup>26</sup>

In "O Lull Me, Lull Me" the line "The air, the air provides" gives us a specific textual connection, and Strode's interesting similes, especially "Soft like a spirit's are thy feet" recall many of Roethke's lines where the air, or the wind, in particular, provides a metaphoric vehicle for the expression of all kinds of communicative forces; the wind whispers to the persona and provides the stimulus for his own poetic whispers. As William Meredith has noted, "The most frequently repeated theme is the wind. It is named at least once in every poem. Later the collected poems would be called Words for the Wind, as though that were the chief of the powers he would propitiate. The wind seems to mean to him another self, all the trouble and delight of the world's weather, a witch-like white goddess who is his muse in a wordless existence, man's merciful destiny -- more than one would suppose a word could be charged with."<sup>27</sup> Previous to this "Lull" poem, the wind has always been connected with the ghost of the past: "I hear the clap of an old wind/ The cold knows when to come" ("Give Way, Ye Gates"); "The grass says what the wind says:/ Begin with the rock; End with water" ("Bring the Day"); "Scratched the wind with a stick./ The leaves liked it./ Do the dead bite?" ("I Need, I Need"). In this poem that wind is still, while the air "provides" light -- a "white/ Way to another grace." By the end of the poem we see that

"The poke of the wind's close,/ But I can't go leaping alone"; this light provides the necessary perception of the persona's union with "things" and a "snail", and all the things that "sing." Strophe's poem, which asks "...who needs fear/ That hath an ear?", and which speaks of changing a soul for harmony, finds unique echoes in Roethke's poem, and helps to explain the emotional "wonder" at the end of the poem.

Roethke doesn't mention the source for "Sensibility! O La!" and no critics speak of having found the lines in a past poet, but there is an old nursery rhyme which begins with these words:

Dear Sensibility, O la!  
I heard a little lamb cry, baa!  
Says I, "So you have lost Mamma?"  
"Ah!"

The little lamb, as I said so,  
Fisking about the field did go,  
And, frisking, trod upon my toe.  
"Oh!"<sup>28</sup>

The little lamb in this poem seems to be singularly unworried about having lost his mamma and even retaliates for the speaker's having mentioned her loss. As we noticed, Malkoff sees Roethke's poem as Oedipal with a domination of the mother figure. The speaker fights against such domination, however, crying "Mamma! Put on your dark hood." He wishes, like the little lamb, to lose his mamma so that he may "frisk" in his own fields.



Of the other poets Roethke mentions, three have similar visions of the Innocence of Childhood. Like Wordsworth's child who comes "trailing clouds of glory" into birth, which is a "sleep and a forgetting," Vaughan's child "Shin'd" in "Angell-infancy" and could view in a cloud or a flower "Some shadows of eternity." Traherne, in his "Third Century," asks:

Will you see the Infancy of this sublime and celestial Greatness: Those Pure and Virgin Apprehension I had from the Womb, and that Divine Light wherewith I was born, are the Best unto this Day, wherein I can see the Universe .... Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and Curious Apprehensions of the World, than I when I was a child.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the best summary of Blake's complicated vision is Northrop Frye's, in his introduction to Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake:

The child is born civilized: he assumes that the world he is born into has a human shape and meaning, and was probably made for his own benefit. This is known as the "state of innocence"; only after years of exposure to nature is he resigned to accepting the vast, mysterious, unconscious world of "experience," with all the human cruelties and stupidities that result from the view that man is a helpless captive of nature. The child's innocence, however, is not extinguished: it is only driven underground into his subconscious, where it becomes a world of suppressed and smoldering desire, joined by other outlawed desires of largely sexual origin. Creative artists can release this power, but in most people it remains stifled, emerging spasmodically in wars and revolutions.<sup>30</sup>

Blake's vision impressed itself strongly on Roethke. Much of his work seems an attempt to capture the same kind of vision, although certainly not by using the same poetic

mythology or by using imitative forms. "The Lost Son" and "Where Knock Is Open Wide" both powerfully invoke the perception and even the imagery of Blake's "The Little Boy Lost":

"Father! father! where are you going?  
O do not walk so fast.  
Speak, father, speak to you little boy,  
Or else I shall be lost."

The night was dark, no father was there;  
The child was wet with dew;  
The mire was deep, & the child did weep,  
And away the vapour flew.<sup>31</sup>

Roethke's final compliment to Blake is found in one of his last poems, "Once More the Round": "And I dance with William Blake/ For love, for Love's sake." These lines tell us that Roethke had achieved the vision he was seeking, but even in the present sequence the boy has found what Frye calls the "innocent" and "civilized" view of nature. We know this because Roethke provides us with a startling Blakean correlative in the title of "I Cry, Love! Love!" These words are from Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," and they are spoken by Oothoon, a daughter of Albion, the "redeemed" man. Oothoon tries to awaken Theotormon from his solitude and his dark vision of life:

"Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the  
treasures beneath?  
But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm  
shall tell it thee.  
Does not the worm erect a pillar in the mouldering  
church yard  
And a palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry  
grave?  
Over his porch these words are written: 'Take thy  
bliss, O Man!  
And sweet shall be thy taste, & sweet thy infant  
joys renew!'

"Infancy! fearless, lustful, happy, nestling for  
delight  
In laps of pleasure: Innocence! honest, open,  
seeking  
The vigorous joys of morning light; open to virgin  
bliss.

The poem builds to the intense climax,

"I cry: Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free  
as the mountain wind!

and, after telling Theotormon that love is unselfish and  
unself-seeking, Oothoon finishes:

"The sea fowl takes the wintry blast for a cov'ring  
to her limbs,  
And the wild snake the pestilence to adorn him with  
gems and gold;  
And trees & birds & beasts & men behold their  
eternal joy.  
Arise, you little glancing wings, and sing your  
infant joy!  
Arise, and drink your bliss, for everything that  
lives is holy!"<sup>32</sup>

Theotormon doesn't listen, but "sits/ Upon the margin'd  
ocean conversing with shadows dire." However, Roethke's  
persona has heeded for, as we saw, he says that "Begin-  
nings start without shade" and he knows now what the worm

says. Believing that "everything that lives is holy," as Oothoon says, the boy tells us, "Behold, in the lout's eye,/ Love."

The title of the first poem of the sequence is from Christopher Smart's A Song to David.<sup>33</sup> Smart asserts "Strong is the lion ..." and in verse LXXVII he goes on:

But stronger still, in earth and air,  
And in the sea, the man of pray'r;  
And far beneath the tide;  
And in the seat to faith assign'd,  
Where ask is have, where seek is find,  
Where knock is open wide.<sup>34</sup>

The diction here is unusual, of course; this is Smart's own unique rendering of Matthew 7:7, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Smart has made the verb forms into nouns, but he has left out the "to" of the infinitive form ("Where to ask is to have") thereby violating the usual grammatical rule while giving the verse a new linguistic impact. Smart was fond of playing with verbs this way: in "Of Jeoffrey, His Cat" he lists the daily activities of the cat, using such phrases as "For fiftly [sic] he washes himself./ For sixthly he rolls upon his wash." Since Roethke uses some of Smart's grammatical conversions, especially in the first poems of this sequence, and it is appropriate that he should give recognition to this poet in the opening poem.

Malkoff notes that "In Smart's poem, these lines precede the glorious floods of light of the last stanzas:



the knock, for Roethke, announces a spiritual awakening, an entrance into the kingdom of light. But most of the titles in Praise to the End are puns, and 'Where Knock Is Open Wide' can hardly be limited to Smart's context. It refers to the literal, as well as the psychological or spiritual, birth of the child; and the words of the title have further connotations of conception, and of the sexual act itself, both of which are pertinent to the content of the poem" (p. 70). Picking up Mill's cues, Malkoff refers us to Dylan Thomas' "Before I Knocked," one of the few other successful attempts to deal with prenatal existence. Malkoff is right that the title is extended beyond the context of Smart's poem certainly, but this particular knock does not announce "an entrance into the kingdom of light." The first few poems are full of the dark and of shadows; light is mentioned for the first time in "O Lull Me, Lull Me."

The most important point about this title seems to have been overlooked. It comes in a song to David, the Old Testament harpist, the singer, the poet. Christopher Smart's devotion to David is obvious; his song has 86 verses and he also did poetic "translations" of a number of the psalms, some of which were set to music.<sup>35</sup> Another of the poets Roethke cites was also especially devoted to David. Traherne says, again in "The Third Century":

... but as I read the Bible I was here and there Surprized with such Thoughts and found by Degrees that these Things had been written of before, not only in the Scriptures but in many of the fathers and that this was the Way of Communion with God in all Saints, as I saw Clearly in the Person of David. Me thoughts a New Light Darted in into all his Psalms, and finally spread abroad over the whole Bible.<sup>36</sup>

After speaking of his new vision, Traherne writes his own poem about David and then explicates some of the Psalms, giving contemporary exegetical associations. In the "Thanksgivings," Traherne echoes David strongly, seeing with David's poetic vision.

We should remember that the first time Roethke ever mentions the "ancestors" of the long poems, he includes simply, "the bible, Mother Goose, and Traherne."<sup>37</sup> Though Louis Martz has commented on the similarity and differences between Roethke and Traherne,<sup>38</sup> no one seems to take the Bible clue seriously (except for noting what Roethke says in "Open Letter," that a line from "The Lost Son" -- "Hath the rain a father?" -- is from Job). If we take the clue from Christopher Smart's title, however, and if we note Traherne's debt to David, the Psalms seem to provide the most fruitful Biblical reference for these poems.

Why David? The reason has already been suggested; David was the Biblical singer, the poet who sang in times of pain and sorrow as well as in times of joy. In conjunction with the implications of the Prelude, and Joyce's

Portrait, this Biblical source gives us another familiar "portrait of the artist" analogue. There is no other Biblical model which fits Roethke's purposes as well as the Psalmist does. And the parallels begin to work immediately. The most meaningful allusions can be seen in "Where Knock Is Open Wide" and "The Lost Son," but the Psalms echo throughout.

David says, in Psalm 2, "...the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee," and the "begetting" of the child is seen in the first poem, the one which carries Smart's line as its title. Whereas Malkoff suggestively ties this poem closely with the Edenic expulsion, the emotional context of the Psalms provides a clearer picture of the sense of the boy's anguish at loss and separation. "God, give me a near," he cries; we hear the audible ambiguity -- "God, give me an ear" is the alternate possibility (the line has been misprinted this way a number of times, in fact.)<sup>39</sup> David cries, "Give ear to my words, O Lord..." (5:1), and "Thou art near, O Lord" (119:151). "He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters," the Psalmist says in a prayer of thanksgiving (18:16), while the child asks for deliverance by pleading, "Fish me out./ Please." Psalm 69 is, in fact, a psychological analogue for the entire sequence: "Save me, O God; for the waters are come

in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me" (1 and 2). And immediately after this plea, David comments "I am weary of my crying," which finds its echo in the small boy's "My tears are tired." Most important, the conflation of the father into the Father figure is best seen by reference to the psalms, for David calls his Lord the "helper of the fatherless" (10:14), and a "father of the fatherless" (68:5).

An emotional analogue for "The Lost Son" is thus established. David is truly a "lost son" in many of the songs and he invokes his Father, seeking comfort and using images which Roethke finds especially meaningful within the context of his "journey of the psyche." The first stanza of "The Lost Son" is rich with such images. "Worm, be with me" the boy pleads -- a strange request until we notice that David, in his utter desperation, sobs "But I am a worm, and no man..." (22:6). "Bird, soft-sigh me home" the boy asks. In "Where Knock Is Open Wide" we heard him say "Maybe God has a house./ But not here"; that the boy expects a bird to guide him home is not so amazing when we realize that David constantly beseeches his Father to give him refuge in "the shadow of thy wings" (57:1 and 36:7). "I shook the softening chalk of my bones"



is a perfect image of the fear he feels upon hearing "the dead cry." Roethke mentions "bones" again and again in this sequence, building up and reinforcing his sense of being "naked to the bone." We learn that this kind of nakedness means simply utter and total emotional involvement for the persona. In "Cuttings, (later)" we saw that he could feel in his veins and in his bones the "sucking and sobbing" of the plant; in this sequence all social mannerisms, all intellection is eschewed so that an essential core of emotion can be presented. In the most intimate moments, Roethke reverts to "bone" imagery to express the intensity of the emotion felt by the persona. Later in "The Lost Son" he asks, "Do the bones cast out their fire?" and in the final section, when the physical and psychological frenzy subsides and the persona comes to an anticipation of a new psychic awareness, he mentions that "The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind," and, in the following verse we see "The beautiful surviving bones/ Swinging in the wind." Through the confrontation with the grave of his father the young man has exorcized his fear of the "ghost" which has haunted him from early childhood, but the process has demanded a probing of the interior so thorough that only the skeletal or the "bones" of the exterior self survive.

This denial of the exterior self was also David's way to union with his Father. In one of the most desperate Psalms, 22, he begins "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" Expressing his fear and impotence, the Psalmist tells us, "I am poured out like water, and my bones are out of joint" (14); after describing his enemies in terms of bulls, lions and dogs, David says "I may tell all my bones: they look and stare at me" (17). As in Roethke's sequence, the bone imagery recurs throughout the Psalms: "... my strength faileth because of my iniquities, and my bones are consumed" (31:10); "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long" (32:3); and, in a joyful song, "He [the righteous] keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken" (34:20).

In part 2 of "The Lost Son" the persona regresses into "The Pit." For David, fear of the pit was omnipresent; the wicked are always condemned to it (30:3; 30:9; 28:1; etc.). Roethke's pit is "down under the leave," where the "moss" covers, in the "slime of a wet nest." David sings in thanksgiving for deliverance: "He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock..." (40:2). For David, the pit is dug by the offender, as we see in Psalm 7:15, "He made a

pit, and digged it and is fallen into the ditch which he made." Roethke's persona deliberately seeks his "pit," or his "ditch" (see part 3, "Look, look, the ditch is running white!"), but there he finds the mire healing and the clay a symbol of evolutionary beginnings.

As we noted, one of the lines in "The Lost Son" is from Job rather than David. "Hath the rain a father?" the persona echoes. We remember that Job has declared his innocence (Chapt. 31) and asked the Almighty to answer him (35). After a preparatory speech by Elihu, the Almighty does answer, speaking "out of a whirlwind." He reproaches Job, not for an intentional transgression but for a lack of knowledge about the sources and purposes of life: "Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten the drops of dew? Out of whose womb came the ice? and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?" (28-29). Roethke's allusion, is appropriate, for the young persona is seeking the origins of life, and his quest goes finally beyond his specific father to the Engendering Force in nature.

The Biblical echoes are not only imagistic but also rhetorical. Roethke echoes Job by using the same question, but the Psalms are filled with invocation, supplication, exhortation. When protagonist pleads "Worm, be with me./ This is my hard time," we hear the echo of David's "Be not far from me; for trouble is near" (22:11). When the

boy begs "Voice, come out of the silence./ Say something," we hear the parallel "be not silent to me" (28:1), "have mercy on me, and answer me" (27:7). Compare "Tell me:/ Which is the way I take;/ Out of what door do I go" to David's "Teach me thy way, O Lord, and lead me in a plain path" (27:11).

Reference to the Psalms can also help to clarify the emotional content in other poems in the sequence. In "The Shape of Fire," for example, the persona explains, "The redeemer comes a dark way." The way has indeed been imagistically dark for this boy, and the statement finds a parallel in David's description of the coming of the Lord against his enemies: "And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly; yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies" (18: 10-11). At one point David praises the Lord in terms which might be directly from Roethke: "The pastures are clothed with flocks, the valleys also are covered with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing" (65:13)--after the boy has faced the grave, as we noted, all nature sings for him. Other lines, uniquely Roethkean, partake of the rhetoric of the Psalms without being specifically echoic: from "The Long Alley," "The fiend's far away. Lord, what do you require?"; from "Praise to the End," "Wherefore, O birds and small



fish, surround me./ Lave me, ultimate waters." Finally, we might note that although Roethke's use of the "dance" imagery in his later work is usually considered a borrowing from Yeats, David long ago used the image to connote relief from fear and sorrow: "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness" (30:11).

### III The Proper Use of Analogues

Curiously, critics never make the charge that Roethke is derivative in this section of his poetry. As we have seen, however, Roethke does invoke many ancestors here. If we are certain that he never "surrendered" to them, it is because he pushes past the meaning of the original context of his allusions, allowing them to retain their original "meanings" but giving them "another, or even better life, in the new context."<sup>40</sup> Roethke is removed in time from his ancestors, and his contemporaneity demands that his poetry be cognizant of his age, which means, of course, that he must be aware of the tremendous impact psychology has made on the thinking and the language of modern man. Whether or not Roethke read the works of Freud and Jung, he was part of an age in which the power of dream symbolism had been explored and accepted. Searchings into the subconscious are now a psychological commonplace, as are the notions of "repression" and "regression".

and the "Oedipal" tendencies of the young. We are well aware of the assimilation of these psychological discoveries by modern artists and critics; consider how such images as the "cave" or the "bowl," the "rod" or the "snake" have gathered symbolic charges since the early part of the century. We might note that, because of his own bouts with mental illness and his experience with modern psychotherapy, Roethke had guided encounters with his own subconscious. But the point is that, as an artist, this poet was able to project psychological explorations, to embody the anxiety and fear we have all felt, and to use his symbols functionally and dramatically.

Thus, whatever his "source" for a particular attitude or emotion or image, Roethke used what he did with an eye on its contemporary function. Surely he belongs to the "visionary" company of Wordsworth, Traherne, Vaughan and Blake, but in order to capture of the state of "childhood innocence" he insists that his persona regress to the primordial state. Modern man has been made especially conscious of the role the sensual, the sexual, in his life. When Roethke's young boy thinks of beginnings, then, it is in terms of "fish" or sperm, and the scenes of masturbation in these poems are attempts to discover the self in terms of sexual potentiality; we see that in Roethke the boy's discovery of his own sperm allows him to recognize both his individuality and his union with his father.

Finding the self and its relationship to the past, however, is an agonizing experience for the adolescent. When Roethke echoes the pleading and anguish of David, he invests the original imagery with modern psychological symbolism. The "pit" is not a place where evildoers are punished, as David saw it, but a dark subconscious area in man's experience. To descend into any pit is terrifying for both singers, and Roethke echoes the sense of horror David was able to embody. The longing for comfort and union with a father-figure, caught so well by the Psalmist, provides a perfect emotional correlative for Roethke's presentation of the alienation of his "lost son." Certainly David's songs of thanksgiving and praise suggest the sense of joy and union our poet captures at the end of this sequence. As always, however, Roethke has used the familiar as a means of allowing insight into the new; fields "sing" for the persona because they contain not only corn and sheep but all life, including the worm and the snail, the weeds and the flowers, the light and the shadows.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

<sup>1</sup>"Technique and Inspiration," Atlantic, CLXXXIX (January, 1952), p. 81

<sup>2</sup>"Poets English and American," Yale Review, XLVIII (June, 1959), p. 624.

<sup>3</sup>"Open Letter," SP, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>See "Open Letter," SP, p. 41 and Letters, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup>Malkoff, pp. 94-102.

<sup>6</sup>"Open Letter," SP, pp. 37-41 and Letters, p. 142.

<sup>7</sup>Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Kramer, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup>Malkoff, pp. 76-77.

<sup>10</sup>Malkoff, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup>Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>Kramer, p. 138.

<sup>13</sup>Malkoff, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup>\*In the Bush of Her Bones," arranged from the notebooks by David Wagoner, Southern Review, V (Winter, 1969), p. 1. Many of the notebook selections published by Mr. Wagoner (see bibliography) were written during the time these poems were being composed, and they offer additional insights into Roethke's method of compressing his original stanzas into a series of diaphorically-related lines. Undoubtedly Mr. Wagoner will point out explicit relationships when his work of arranging material from Roethke's many notebooks is finished. He writes me that his volume of selections may appear sometime next year.



<sup>15</sup>Malkoff, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup>Burke, p. 266.

<sup>17</sup>Malkoff, p. 97.

<sup>18</sup>"Theodore Roethke Writes . . .," SP, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup>Kramer, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup>"The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," Essays, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup>Letters, p. 148.

<sup>22</sup>See, however, Malkoff's Qualifications concerning this comparison of Roethke's and Joyce's techniques, pp. 68-69.

<sup>23</sup>Letters, p. 151.

<sup>24</sup>Letters, p. 186.

<sup>25</sup>Letters, p. 145.

<sup>26</sup>Letters, p. 252.

<sup>27</sup>Meredith, Essays, p. 48. In addition to Meredith's many meanings, we should probably include Biblical connotations for the wind as the sequence progresses: the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, pneuma, the second Adam, the word of God, the true self.

<sup>28</sup>See The Annotated Mother Goose, arranged by William S. Baring-Gould and Cecil Baring-Gould (Cleveland, 1967), p. 301.

<sup>29</sup>Traherne: Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings, ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1958), I, p. 110.

<sup>30</sup>New York, 1953, pp. xxv-xxvi.

<sup>31</sup>Blake, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 141-43.

<sup>33</sup>Letters, p. 252.

<sup>34</sup>Poems by Christopher Smart, ed. Robert Brittain (Princeton, 1950), p. 227.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-174.

<sup>36</sup>Traherne, p. 148. Harold Fisch tells us that, with respect to the Thanksgivings and Centuries, "Traherne was perhaps of all religious writers of the seventeenth century the most deeply conscious of the Psalms as a model for writing and as a model for the good life." See Jerusalem and Albion: The Hebraic Factor in Seventeenth-Century Literature (New York, 1964), p. 53.

<sup>37</sup>Letters, p. 142.

<sup>38</sup>Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," Essays, pp. 14-15.

<sup>39</sup>See Richard Gustafson, "In Roethkeland," Midwest Quarterly, VII (1961), p. 169; and Ralph J. Mills, "Theodore Roethke: The Lyric of Self," Poets in Progress, ed. E. B. Hungerford (Evanston, 1962), p. 10.

<sup>40</sup>This is Roethke's completion of Eliot's words, "Bad poets imitate; good poet's steal," in "How to Write Like Somebody Else," SP, p. 62.

## CHAPTER 4

## ORIGINALITY IN THE "PRAISE" POEMS

To attempt to discuss the elements of originality in Praise to the End is to turn from generalities to specifics. As with the greenhouse poems, Roethke's technique in handling his theme in this sequence provides us with the novelty which makes the poems unique. In very general terms, that technique is decidedly modern; like Eliot, Roethke eschews logical connectives or narrative commentary and, like Joyce, he presents the developing events as the child registers them in his consciousness " . . . all in the kid's mind," as he says. The specific means by which Roethke provides new insights is his special use of rhythm and diction. In these two technical areas, in fact, Roethke is constantly straining his vision, pulling away from logical order, building complex sequences of psychological tensions, "activating" the language by twisting semantic placement.

Even a cursory glance at the first two poems of the sequence indicates that the poet often switches suddenly from free verse to units of tightly metered and rhymed quatrains. Although there seems to be a kind of random

flexibility in line length in the free verse sections (which comprise the greater proportion of each poem), we find that Roethke maintains a rhythmic control which produces both order and tension. In a unique study of Roethke's metrical practice, "The Line as a Rhythmic Unit in the Poetry of Roethke," Charlotte I. Lee analyzes the poet's craftsmanship. Working with "The Flight" section of "The Lost Son," Miss Lee points out that half of the sixty-one lines are "impair" lines (lines containing an uneven number of syllables), which, when "played against lines of an even number of syllables . . . are deliberately disturbing, for they withhold rhythmic satisfaction." Working with a small section, four lines which begin "Fished in an old wound," she shows that although the line length varies from five to seven syllables, the stresses remain a constant three; she notes also that "The number of stresses, we see then from this brief passage, helps to steady the variation in line length, whereas their positioning helps to build the tension which results when expectancy is not totally satisfied." Even in the most complex lines--those which are broken into what she calls "speech phrases" ("What a small song. What slow clouds. What dark water.")--the number of stresses within the phrases remains proportionate while the entire line length varies considerably. In the line quoted, for example, there are 11 syllables and 6 stresses, but the speech phrases divide



into a 4-3-4 syllabic count with isochronic stresses in each phrase. The next line has 16 syllables with 9 stresses; the speech phrases break into a 6-5-5 syllabic count, and the stresses are again isochronic.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Lee mentions that in one of his earliest poems, "Sale," Roethke uses a strict quatrain form with eleven- and twelve-syllable lines, but, " . . . a deliberate variation of stresses, both in number and arrangement, adds tension; for example, the last part of one line often is heavily weighted in contrast to adjacent lines which flow more smoothly."<sup>2</sup> Such variation, she maintains, helps to reinforce the meaning of the poem. Miss Lee is thus suggesting two levels of rhythm within any poem; one is measured by the traditional syllable-stress method, while the other is indicated by the logical stress pattern the syntax imposes. Elias Schwartz, however, distinguishes between meter and rhythm and, in the course of discussing "Rhythm and Meaning in English Verse," he uses Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" as an example. He finds the relationship between meter, rhythm and meaning quite complex in this poem:

Here the iambic trimeter quatrain, varied with feminine endings, trochaic and anapest substitutions, is traditional; it is traditionally associated with simple, full-feeling songs. But his is to indicate only the general potentiality of the meter. The rhythm . . . has a similar vigor and athletic gusto. It seems to convey, beside sheer pleasure in physical motion, a kind of pure, uncomplicated delight. It attains its specific nature, however, only through its co-exis-

tence with the meaning and words of the poem, just as the meaning itself is qualified by its co-existence with this rhythm.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Schwartz sees, correctly, that the poem embodies both love and fear, delight and danger. "The rhythm transmutes papa's waltz into a rough and unpremeditated ritual celebrating the child's and the father's mutual love."

" . . . the precise nature of this rhythm and its specific effect are not determined merely by its triple timing, but by its co-existence with the particular words and meanings of the poem."<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, Mr. Schwartz's distinction between rhythm and meter is quite helpful, as is his observation that the iambic trimeter quatrain is "traditionally associated with simple, full-feeling songs." Thus, Roethke's meter has the same kind of novelty-familiarity character that we have noted in his imagistic correlatives and allusions.

The point needs emphasis because in Praise to the End! Roethke plays with what we might call "culturally established" meters. Mother Goose is put to good use here--the nursery rhyme, the riddle and the counting jingles. Traditional fairytale magic is provided through the rhythm of incantation. The use of these meters provides "rhythmic analogues" which give us clues to the age of the persona. As the boy matures, these analogues become progressively more sophisticated: folk songs, prayers, formal invocations and beautitudes erupt. And the use of these meters is never purely ornamental. We find, in fact, that there is always

a tension in those verses where Roethke uses the tradition meters. If the free verse sections create tension because of the disappointment of rhythmic expectations, these particular passages set up traditional meters with which we associate certain feelings or attitudes in the child or adolescent and then "disappoint" our emotional expectations by using words and images which are not at all familiar within the metrical context. There is, in Mr. Schwartz's terms, a new "rhythm" thus established which functions as an added indication of the emotional state of the persona. One might argue that any parody does the same thing, but there is no satire or comedy implicit in Roethke's presentation. In fact, we never find an entire nursery rhyme with only the words changed--as we might in a parody; most often Roethke establishes the familiar analogue within a few lines and then destroys it, either abruptly or gradually.

We might add one qualification to Mr. Schwartz's point about the traditional meters. The most familiar pattern is one which combines a specific meter with certain rhetorical characteristics. Consider, for example, the patterns "of the people, by the people, for the people," or "And God said, 'Let there be light'," or "But there is no joy in Mudville--mighty Casey has struck out." By substituting a few different words into these patterns we can produce lines that will retain the same tone or others which will be in ironic contrast to the original tone, depending on the context. For example, consider the effect of a re-

port of a movie "of the Beatles, by the Beatles, for the Beatles," or the plea of a little-league losing pitcher, "And Joe prayed, 'Let there be rain'." (For the best example of this twist in modern poetry see E. E. Cummings' use of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in his "Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal.")

Early in his career Roethke was aware of the poetic possibility of playing against such a familiar pattern.

In Open House we find "Prayer" (p. 8):

If I must of my Senses lose,  
I pray Thee, Lord, that I may choose  
Which of the Five I shall retain  
Before oblivion clouds the brain.

This meter and this rhetoric invoke the childhood prayer, "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," especially the last two lines of that prayer, "If I should die before I wake/I pray thee Lord my soul to take."

My tongue is generations dead,  
My nose defiles a comely head;  
For hearkening to carnal evils  
My Ears have been the very devil's.

While the meter remains essentially the same, the rhetoric has changed here, losing some of its original formality. In fact, the last line is informal enough to hint at levity. When we read the next few lines our suspicions are reinforced:

And some have held the Eye to be  
The instrument of lechery,  
More furtive than the Hand in low  
And vicious venery--Not so!  
Its rape is gentle, never more  
Violent than a metaphor.  
In truth, the Eye's the abettor of  
The holiest platonic love:



Lip, Breast and Thigh cannot possess  
So singular a blessedness.

Surely Roethke is playing here. The mention of "venery," "rape," and the eye as an "abettor," along with the glance at "Lip, Breast and Thigh" provoke a distinct impression that the persona intends to make lecherous use of his eyes and that, in fact, he "protests too much" here. When the persona goes on to ask that he be allowed to preserve "The Sense that does so fitly serve" we have a return to the more formal rhetoric, but, upon consideration, we understand that this sense serves most fitly to "rape" gently. While he has sensuous motives for asking that he keep this one sense above all the others he mentions, he can always argue that his lecherous glances are really expressions of platonic love. The comic effect here is gained by the use of a formal, serious meter which is undercut eventually by the rhetorical playfulness of the persona. This is clear in the poem, but, if we need additional support for such a reading, we should note that Roethke himself calls this a "blasphemous little piece about the eye."<sup>5</sup>

In the Praise to the End! sequence the effect is often just the opposite; the familiar meters are usually associated with pleasant things for a child, but the overlaying diction and rhythm capture a sense of loneliness or despair. As Mr. Schwartz says, the rhythm cannot be divorced from the words and meaning of the poem and, to show examples, we must work through some of the longer poems to show how the poet builds up to and into these passages. But turning to the

poems involves us in an additional difficulty--that of coming to terms with Roethke's unique diction which is at the same time strikingly simple and extremely complex. Perhaps a statement by Harry R. Warfel, a specialist in this area of language patterns, will help clarify some points about Roethke's technique:

Roethke grasped the fact that poetry requires pictures rather than abstraction, that poetry dramatizes abstract ideas in images. He knew, too, that free verse can be distinct from chopped-up or rhythmical prose only by the resolute elimination of non-essentials from every line. He reduced structure words and abstract words to the minimum. He did so through his skill as a mechanic in fabricating sentences. To miss his syntax is as inadmissible as to overlook the leitmotifs of Wagner's music or the pastel shades of a Monet painting. Roethke is in the great tradition of artists who mastered the tools of their craft. In this respect he had few equals in his generation.<sup>6</sup>

Roethke once said that these poems were not difficult "to anyone who is willing to think in images."<sup>7</sup> That is the best clue to the proper way to read them and Warfel is right in saying that Roethke presents pictures, dramatizations rather than abstractions. If we can remember that this bombardment of imagery indicates what the world "feels like" to the persona, we will catch the "meaning" that declares itself.

### I The Feeling of Death

We have already established that "Where Knock Is Open Wide" is a drama about the child's experience of the death of his father. We know this only when we reach the end of the poem, however, when we see the poem as a whole with all

the parts leading to dramatic presentation of the boy's visual perception of the dead father, "He was all whitey bones/ And skin like paper." This one direct, concise image pinpoints for us the event which is most central in this poem and the others which lead to "The Lost Son." The boy's instinctive emotional response to this event, "Kisses come back,/I said to Papa," establishes the intense feelings of loss, separation, lack of love and communion which determine the child's reaction to all external sights and sounds. His rational response to the event, "God's somewhere else," and "Maybe God has a house./ But not here," explains his sense of utter isolation and his quest for a place or a time in which he was "enclosed" by warmth and love.

Part of the difficulty in understanding the logical sequence of events or the relationship between the images springs from the fact that in this first poem we are thrust into the consciousness of a very young child whose sense of objective continuity or proportional relationships is not yet developed. Add to this the fact that the child has experienced that one traumatic event which colors all his perceptions; space and time, life and death, union and isolation all merge in the boy's consciousness. As we all know, a young child is completely ego-centered. He perceives everything in terms of its relationship to him, and he "thinks by feeling."<sup>8</sup> But this boy's feelings are complex at this time; he wishes, at the same time, to



be united with his father again and to escape the implications of such a union--for the father is now dead.

This attempt to suggest the confusion of the boy's logic or his emotional state does not imply that Roethke committed any "imitative fallacy" in the structuring of this poem; embedded in the imagery are complex symbolic relationships which echo throughout the sequence, providing us with the artistic logic which controls the emotional content. Perhaps Roethke's supreme accomplishment in this sequence, and in the first few poems in particular, was his ability to present sophisticated psychological events from the point of view of the primitive consciousness. Wayne Shumaker, in his Literature and the Irrational<sup>9</sup> argues that all literature uses elements of the primitive or the childlike; animism or synecdoche have long provided metaphoric insights into emotional experiences. As we've seen in the "Cuttings, later" poem, Roethke can intensify the usual poetic animism by using unexpected verbs or creating unforeseen correspondences. Here the point of view allows logically for the full play of the poet's "primitive" vision: the child uses metaphoric language instinctively; he endows one physical feature with an emotional quality which reflects, to him, the attitude of the person he is watching ("His ears haven't time," "Her eyes went kissing away"); and he sees simultaneous occurrences as related in



terms of cause and effect ("I know it's an owl. He's making it darker").

"A kitten can/Bite with his feet"--a startling introduction to a poem about death, certainly, but an impressively suggestive image of a kind of pain which is both soft and sharp. Then, in immediate juxtaposition, "Papa and Mamma/ Have more teeth." To ask for a logical connection between the two statements is to miss the point. The boy is saying that parents have more power to hurt in this soft-sharp sense than a kitten does. Notice, however, that the child associates this kind of pain with the mouth; the kitten "bites" instead of "scratches" with his feet and, according to the boy's logic, Mamma and Papa "bite" harder. We might note that the boy has an "oral fixation" at this stage but such a psychological fact is subservient to a poetic function. This first stanza establishes the first of a number of controlled imagistic references to the power of the mouth to cause either comfort or pain: the mouth can sing or bite, devour or kiss. The child's own mouth provides him with sensual contact with his parents, first by nursing, then by kissing. Later the contact is retained verbally, with words having the same power to sooth or sting.

Stanza two suggests the boy's isolation and his separation from the adult world. "Sit and play/ Under the rocker" he tells himself; the rocker was obviously a place

of communion and comfort in earlier days and his choice of a place to play indicated his longing to be associated with the warmth he once found there. The next two lines, "Until the cows/All have puppies," give us the child's confused sense of reproduction, with the species mixed but the correct proportion between the large and the small retained. These lines imply a waiting for some important event in the adult world, perhaps, or something that will happen to him when he's ready to stop "playing." A confused anticipation of birth, then, combines with a feeling of loneliness in this stanza.

The rhythm of these first two stanzas is quire regular and simple; the two-stress lines are reminiscent of childhood songs like "Lady-bug, Lady-bug" or "Ding-Dong Dell." Tension is created through the images which strain against the soothing meter. The lines lengthen in the next stanza as the feeling becomes more intense. "His ears haven't time," the boy observes. Of course, the primary meaning is "he won't listen to me"--another indication of the boy's sense of alienation, but the line gains amplification by association with the final section of the poem: the father is dead and his ears, quite literally, "haven't time"--are deaf to time. The next line echoes similarly. "Sing me a sleep-song, please"; a request for comfort and attention, and probably an indication of the literal time of day, but also a request for an explantion of the "sleep" of his father. The final line, "A real hurt is soft," suggests

that the deprivation of a loved one creates more anguish than a physical assault and sums up the entire opening sequence with efficient rhetorical clarity.

The "sleep song" is done in the iambic trimeter of so many nursery rhymes, used here to embody the first of a series of regressive movements. In "Once upon a tree/ I came across a time" the meter suggests the opening of a fairy-tale, but the reversed image pattern creates an abrupt disorientation from the normal time-space continuum. We might be reminded here of Dylan Thomas's line in "Fern Hill," "And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves," but the effect of Thomas's line is quite different. The persona of that poem is an adult who remembers the Edenic "green and golden" time of childhood, "the lamb-white days" of innocence. The child-persona of this poem has lost his sense of the green and golden, and seeks a time of union with the father. The sexual connotations of the next stanza remind us of the Joycean analogue in Portrait, and give us the child's subliminal impression of intercourse. By relating this stanza with the previous one we can see the "tree" as phallus, or a source of life, and we understand why the time the persona comes "across" is disassociated from any "ghoulie-dream" or imaginative time: the time he has found in his prenatal time. The boy has come to this time through dream symbolism and is aware that he now exists in two different temporal dimensions: "What's the time, papa-seed?/ Everything has been twice." The reali-

zation that his father is a "fish"--sperm--provides the persona with an imagistic reference to a time when he was a past of his father; the fish-sperm-union association will be repeated many times before the boy can finally come to terms with it.

The contrast between the completely regular iambic song of the first part of section 2 (usually associated with light-hearted moments in childhood) and the utter seriousness of this child's quest of communion (caught so well by the images) creates a tension which is maintained in the next section. Perhaps the mention that "Everything has been twice" ticks off a plunge into a memory-time which holds the death of an uncle, the first of two masculine deaths for the boy. "I sing a small sing," he says (a sleep-death song, perhaps?), and proceeds to tell us that his uncle's "away" for "always." In the child's mind the uncle has been sentenced to hell, and he adds his pathetic vindictive taunt, "I don't care either." Those familiar with children are aware that a child uses this response only when he does care very much and finds himself frustrated and unable to perform any meaningful action. The two deaths are tied too closely in the child's consciousness for him to be sincerely passive about the uncle's being gone "for always."

A sudden shift of focus to the mother follows. The child's perception is completely primitive and completely sensual: recognition ("I know her noise"), and the furry softness we saw before ("Her neck has kittens"), then the



eruption of warmth which seems to be associated with love (I'll make a hole for her./In the fire). In the next stanza, however, we find the beginning of a sense of loss of contact with the mother also. "Her eyes went kissing away"--notice the terms of the visual caress, the kiss which is usually associated with the mouth, of course--and "It was and it wasn't her there"; both lines connote a movement away from warmth.

The child has been "singing" all day, he tells us, and we have heard his nursery-rhyme meter. The "Winkie will yellow" then suggest some connection with the rhyme "Wee Willie Winkie":

Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town  
Upstairs and downstairs in his night-gown,  
Rapping at the window, crying through the lock,  
Are the children all in bed, for now it's eight o'clock?

The lines indicate a kind of frantic activity which is connected with bedtime, and since Winkie is "Wee" we can suppose that the boy identifies with him in some way. But why would Winkie "yellow"? This is one of those places where Roethke makes use of a child's compression of language to produce an audible ambiguity. To "yellow" is to age, certainly, and the boy is maturing some in this poem. On the other hand, we might hear "Winkie will yell oh" or "Winkie will yell low" in this line. Both readings suggest a time of hurt or mourning, perhaps, or an inability to yell loudly, to communicate his feeling of anguish. The boy's singing seems to have little effect on the mother in this stanza, for she moves away from him.

Except for the "noise" of the mother, the implied "hoo" of the owl in the first stanza of section 3 is the first real external sound in the poem. The sound is mournful and frightening to the boy; it is associated with loss of warmth and loss of light. As has happened with other emotions, the boy's fear is expressed by association with the bird's mouth: "Eat where you're at. I'm not a mouse." The bird's song is dreadful enough, but the boy also fears that mouth which can devour a small creature. He tries to focus on images of light and warmth again: "Some stones are still warm" (because they retain the warmth of the sun, of course) and "I like soft paws" (like those of the kitten-mother association). The sense of darkness and isolation is too strong, however, and the child seems trapped by the subconscious. "Maybe I'm lost, / Or asleep," he thinks, combining the introduction of the "lost son" motif with a direct link to sleep, and by extension, death.

The next stanza dramatizes the horror of being "lost" in this preconscious state. Again we have an emphasis on the mouth, this time a worm's. The question which follows immediately, "Who keeps me last," suggests that the boy does not have a mouth. This can mean two things--either that the boy cannot communicate or that he has lost the sensual contact he desires, or both. The worm image allows

further conjecture, however. The worm devours the dead, literally, but as phallus it defeats death. This worm is subliminally phallic to the boy, for he places it in close association with "fish" and, as we see in section 4, he uses the image to connote the death of his father: "The worm has moved away./ My tears are tired." In this stanza, then, the boy is asking to overcome death while caught in the waters of the womb-time. The boy's plea is caught in startling, dramatic terms which ring of his anguish: "Fish me out./ Please."

When the child cries "God, give me a near" we find one of those Roethkian lines which is "activated" in the poet's unique way. We have already cited the audible ambiguity; pronounced aloud, the line forces the reading "God, give me an ear." Both readings are apt, for the child is seeking both "hearness" and a substitute for the ear which didn't have "time". The cry seems to bring partial comfort, a movement away from the dark, for the boy "hears" flowers--symbols of life and light--and he notes that "A ghost can't whistle." This is the first time the child betrays his fear of what his father has become, and the line seems to explain his fear of the owl. The only way he could have known that an owl was near was by the sound, the "hoo"; apparently he wasn't quite positive when he said "I know it's an owl," but now he seems assured that it was not a

ghost and he repeats "I know! I know!" The last line in this stanza, "Hello happy hands," suggests the child's awareness of himself as a separate physical entity for the first time. Malkoff argues convincingly that this line, seen in the light of a line in the last section, "Don't tell my hands," suggests the first of a number of masturbatory scenes; by the end of the poem the boy is aware of a new spiritual identity, this critic argues, and he wishes to deny the sexual guilt connected with his sinful hands.<sup>10</sup> It is true that in many of the poems that follow the boy masturbates and, whether or not he expresses a feeling of guilt, he does so as an expression of life, in opposition to the overwhelming power of death in his experience. In this stanza, then, the pattern would be consistent.

Section 4 recalls a scene of communion with the father, and in the process of relating the events of this happy time the boy gives us his subliminal awareness of the father's power as life-giver. The first stanza sets the scene and conveys the boy's sensuous awareness of life. Notice that all is wet; the scene is set "by the river" and the two "stepped in wet." One "water bird" snatches a frog, but the slippery creature slips out of the bird's "nose," or beak. Contrast the "ching" of the bird in this scene with the implied "hoo" of the owl. When a fish is caught the boy pleads for its life because "He's trying to talk"; Papa, the life-giver, throws the fish back into the life-



giving waters. This scene contrasts with the previous section, where the fish-child wished to be "caught." And perhaps we have here an added explanation for the child's movement into regression: the fish can't "talk" out of water, just as the young boy can't express his sense of union with the father except in images of sperm and the wet womb.

The next two lines seem to be an illogical aside at first, but two connections occur immediately. The fish is a "bull-head"--father as life-giver first appeared as a "mooly man"-- and like the kitten, bullheads "have whiskers" and "bite." Even in the middle of this communion scene, then, we have a sharp reminder of the hurt the boy experiences. The next stanza takes us back to "greenhouse" time, in which we see the father giving liquid life to the roses. Again we get the Roethkian primitive vision, in the line "His thumb had a rainbow"; literally, the father put his thumb over the nozzle of the hose, diffusing the stream of water into a fine spray which catches the spectrum (we've all seen this phenomenon) but, from the boy's point of view, the powerful father "had a rainbow" springing forth from his thumb.

The last line of this stanza prepares us for the overwhelming feeling of separation which follows. "Dark came early," the boy tells us, suggesting the unexpectedness of the father's death and the early age of the child when

it occurred. Moving into the next stanza we find the boy pulling himself out of the memory-time with a sharp cry, "I fell! I fell!" We can associate this with the usual sexual connotations of a dream sequence, or consider it a fall away from the Edenic time with his father he remembers, but the most important thing is the emotional content; even a tiny baby screams instinctively when it falls. The next line indicates that the "worm," the father-phallus has "moved away," just as the uncle went away and the mother's eyes went "kissing away. The exhausted child sighs that his "tears are tired," echoing the weariness of David, as we saw, but catching again that naive animism of the part for the whole. In the last stanza of this section we see the "little boy lost" telling of his journey away from warmth, his perilous quest for union: "Nowhere is out" (there's no escape from the hurt of death); "...I saw the cold" (of the grave and the sunless time). Trying to capture the end of the journey imagistically, the boy tells us he "Went to visit the wind. Where the birds die." The description is chilling, fairy-tale inspired perhaps (think of "The Snow Queen" or "In the Land of the North Wind" or even the terror which the whistle of cold wind inspires in Gothic tales). This is the first time the persona mentions the wind in this sequence and, because of its connection with the cold and the death of birds, we

must see the force as ominous; if we extend the meaning to include any religious implications--the wind as spirit--we must remember that, at present, the "spirit" is a frightening ghost for this child.

The poignant "How high is have?" is an example of Roethke's skill as rhetorician. The grammatical displacement, "have" used as a noun without the use of the infinitive (as "Knock" in the title), reminds us of Christopher Smart's linguistic innovations. Emotionally, the question embodies the child's plea for guidance to a state of "having" or union. Imagistically, we might see the movement away from the depths of the womb-pit to some "high" place where the child can come "out" of his sorrow and loneliness. Immediately after asking "How high is have?" the boy decides that he will be a "bite"; he wishes to hurt as his parents do, or he wishes his own psyche, to be a "wink" (or Winkie--a low crier?) and to "Sing the snake to sleep." If the worm was phallic, the snake is ominously so and the boy wishes the evil force to be lulled by a sleep-death song.

The closure is extremely important. As noted earlier, we find the child here in his most bitter, lonely state. "One father is enough," he says, and then in the final statement of utter isolation, "Maybe God has a house./

But not here," which has been foreshadowed in "God's somewhere else" in the third verse, where the child expresses his sense of a newly-found separate identity: "I'm somebody else now." A kind of birth has occurred in the poem. The child has been into and has come back from the womb, but he has emerged with a sense of himself as two different entities, one physical and one psychic. He tells himself that he has "not yet" come to "always." This final section tells us that the first attempt to regress to meaning has not been completely successful. God has not given him the "near" he pleaded for and his quest ended in a cold place where all is dead.

The formal rhythms and the ritualized meters of nursery songs communicate all this in terms of the boy's consciousness. His attempts to sing produce the startling primitive perceptions we have noted, captured by the poet in unique diction and syntax. "Where Knock Is Open Wide" is a powerfully dramatic piece in which Roethke embodies the torn emotional existence of the small child who senses death and tries to deal with it. But all is done sensuously, imagistically: the abstraction "death" is not used once-- though the idea of death is embodied in the concrete image of the "dead birds." Each section and each stanza is linked to the next by some imagistic echo which carries the emotional weight of the poem and gives us, in dramatic terms, the progression of the boy's reactions to loss of union with his parents. The quest is just beginning, however,



and the boy will travel far before he comes to "always," but the images established here will provide an emotional framework which will guide us to his confrontation with the ghost and the grave.

## II From "Hoo" to "Hooray"

In "Where Knock Is Open Wide" we saw the collision of images of live and death. In "I Need, I Need" we find the tension between passivity and activity, retreat and aggression. The boy quickly passes through a number of stages of childhood, attempting to communicate with someone or something else at every stage. The over-all movement is backward in the first section, outward in the second, static in the short third, and definitely onward in the last.

The poem begins with the persona at a very young age, and focuses on the oral infantile state: "A deep dish. Lumps in it./ I can't taste my mother." On the literal level, we can assume that the child has just been weaned (hence the loss of the "taste" of mother). On the emotional level, the images imply a loss of sensuous contact with the mother, a traumatic experience which is intensified because of the father's death. The child connects food with love, and registers his response to his present situation in terms of "a deep dish" and lumpy food. The "Hoo" which begins the third line echoes the sound an owl makes; the audible connection seems possible in light of the fact that the child's mouth is now devouring. But, and more

important, the sound also suggests "who" and is followed immediately by "I know the spoon" (like "I know her noise" in the last poem). The child seeks some kind of oral satisfaction; he finds a surrogate mother in the familiar but lifeless spoon and commands "Sit in my mouth."

"A sneeze can't sleep" is a startling development after that first stanza. Imagistically it connotes moisture, activity, life; but, considering Roethke's penchant for Freudian symbols, also suggest ejaculation, the symbol of the conquering of death as the poems progress. At any rate, the line contrasts directly with the passivity of the opening stanza. The "Diddle we care/ Couldly" seems to be the child's babble, a playing with words.<sup>11</sup> But "Diddle" in such close conjunction with the "dish" and the "spoon" calls to mind the nursery rhyme "Hey Diddle Diddle" in which, we remember, the "dish ran away with the spoon." In that rhyme "The cow jumped over the moon," an interesting explanation of what happened to the "mooly man" of the preceeding poem. The child's response, "Diddle we care," is appropriate in the context of the rhyme, for "The little dog laughed to see such sport." However, when we remember the "I don't care either" of the first poem we sense the child's frustration, which is emphasized by the verb-turned-adverb "Couldly"; the word suggests "Diddle is how we could care" or simply "if I could." The response

is complex because it suggests both a belligerent desire not to care about the father's death and the subliminal awareness of caring very much.

The fact that the boy is concerned is shown in the next two tightly-metered stanzas. He goes to the cellar to talk to "drippy water," and then seeks a "whisper" from a begonia. Both verses carry over imagistically from the preceding poem where water and flowers are united as symbols of communion with the father. In the third section of that poem, in fact, the boy "heard" flowers, but now all is silent; this new suggestive descent into wetness brings about only the sensation that there's no way to express the "alas" the boy feels.

The child acts belligerently now: "Scratched the wind with a stick." The child imagines that the leaves, which the wind rips off, "liked it." As we noted, however, the wind now suggests "ghost" to the child and he wonders if his aggressiveness will bring retaliation: "Do the dead bite?" Thoughts of the dead father turn to a reflection on the emotional state of Mamma, who is now a "sad fat." The sadness and monotony of the dove's "dove" sound reinforce the melancholy this first section has created, and the child retreats to "hide" in his father's hat which is now the only paternal house the boy knows, since God doesn't have a house "here." The act of "hiding" in a hat is similar to a earlier retreat "under the rocker";

the act suggests the desire for union. But the mention of "hat" invites comparison of these two lines with the "mooly man-rubber hat" scene of the last poem and it would seem that this boy is now recapturing the security of his existence before he was conceived when, as a sperm cell, he was hidden in his father's "rubber hat."

In the next section, the more sophisticated rhetoric and the boy's ability to participate in the play-dance of jumping rope suggest a sudden leap in time. In section II of "I Need, I Need," it is necessary to imagine two children reciting at each other in alternate stanzas. The protagonist has turned from the search for a lost union with his parents and now seeks some kind of communication with a peer. The familiar jump-rope ritual usually involves both language and gesture, and the reader might recall the motions that accompany the chant "Teddy Bear" in which the jumper imitates the actions cited by the words: "Touch your toes...Blow your nose...Go upstairs...Say your prayers... Turn out the light...Say good night." A study of "Jumping-Rope Rhymes and the Social Psychology of Play" points out that "The language behavior observed in jumping rope is a forceful medium of communication..." "Language helps the child to understand his surroundings, reflects his social environment, permits recall of past experience..." The authors point out that "For very young children, play is highly individualistic, small groups of two or three



individuals beginning to form ordinarily only when children are about four years old," and they maintain that play, for the child, is "serious and all absorbing."<sup>12</sup>

Clearly of the protagonist is involved in precisely such behavior. The other child begins with an obviously ritualized verse, one which had been handed down through generations "in the folkways of children." That the child should make up his own rhymes is not unusual: "We have heard children insert phrases of their own composition when the correct ones were forgotten or when they realized that the jingle was not directly applicable to their situation."<sup>13</sup> We can imagine the gesture that accompanies the last two lines of the first verse: "Put your finger in your face,/ And there will be a booger." Ordinarily, such a verse would be greeted with peals of laughter by other children involved in the game, but our young boy finds it distasteful. When he begins, then, he recites the usual counting-out line and ends with the familiar "touch my toes" gesture, but in the middle of the verse we find the two aggressive lines "I know what you is:/ You're not very nice."

The other child reacts with what seems to be pure nonsense rhymes, similar to the "Ibbity, bibbity, sibbity, sab" rhyme noted by our Britt and Balcom. Yet it is significant that he calls the protagonist a "nemesiss," a rather unusual word in the vocabulary of a young child, and then

provides us with that intriguing line "The Trouble is with No and Yes." We cannot assume that this child knows the philosophic content of the line. Roethke later noted explicitly, in "The Pure Fury," that the great mystic Jacob Boehme "rooted all in Yes and No."<sup>14</sup> The tension of opposites registers in the boy's consciousness as a relationship between life and death. Without responding directly to the other child, he wishes to be without care: "I wish I was a pifflebob/ I wish I was a funny." But the last two lines express his wish to be very powerful, both sexually and financially, and to have "ten thousand hats" (rubber, of course), and to make "a lot of money."

The meter in these first four stanza has been entirely regular, as it must be for a jump-rope song. It has not been perfectly consistent, however; the first stanza is the sing-song common meter (4-3-4-3), while the second, in which the protagonist asserts his criticism, is in a tighter iambic dimeter. The "philosophic" stanza is iambic tetrameter, while the boy's response reverts to common meter. As we noted before, jump-rope games are usually lighthearted although the skill involved is taken very seriously, as are the rules which the children establish. Yet when the protagonist sings in his regular meter we sense a seriousness which goes beyond any simple aggression reaction toward another child. The boy is intensely conscious of the distance between "one" and "two," "No and



in Christian terms, love-death day. The emotional tautness the protagonist feels bursts now in reaction to these images, although we can probably assume that the antagonist was ignorant of the associations the child would make. "Not you I need," the boy decides, for communication with a peer has failed to bring comfort. "Go play with your nose," he tells the boy and closes the scene with a reference to the gesture with which it opened. "Stay in the sun,/ Snake-eyes": a bitter, lonely recognition that the other boy is cold and evil but can stay in the sun without need for an exploration of the dark.

The brief Section 3 opens with a typical ambiguity. "Stop the larks" can mean "stop the games," or "stop the sound of happy singing." The next request "Can I have my heart back" seems directed, in anguish, to the dead father, for the boy has seen "a beard in a cloud" (the father-Father image), and has heard the "ground"--grave--cry his name. Instead of retreating, however, the boy reacts positively. "Good-bye for being wrong," he tells the "beard," and then explains the "wrong" by saying that "Love helps the sun [son] ./ But not enough." Love can bring light, he seems to feel, but in the face of death love cannot overcome pain.

Part 4 embodies, as Roethke said, "a vaguely felt, but



definite, feeling of love..."<sup>16</sup> That feeling is captured by images which are all positive and active, and at the same time implicitly sexual. On the literal level, the boy seems to be engaged in gardening--planting and hoeing. It seems that part of the clue to union with the dead is to participate in the same activities, but with an open awareness of life in all nature. On the emotional level, the motions suggested by the images are symbols of virility, potentiality: spitting "in the pot," the pick hitting "ice," the hoe eating "like a goat" all have sexual connotations. At the same time there is a new awareness of sensuous communion: "Hear me, soft ears and roundy stones!/  
It's a dear life I can touch." The "Who's ready for pink and frisk?" implies an act of pricking and then frolicking, a kind of sensual game which is in direct opposition to the somber jump-rope section.

The third stanza introduces a female and might suggest that this is the boy's first sexual encounter. Yet the communion has been with nature up to this point and the "she" in the next poem is certainly Nature. There is no reason for not reading the stanza as an ambiguity asserting both experiences. The images captured a sense of assent ("Her feet said yes") from something external. When the boy asks "Who else knows/ What water does," we might answer for him "the duck," but he provides his own answer, again in suggestively sexual terms: "Dew ate the fire." The

ending is certainly positive for the liquid has consumed the destructive force. The other creative fire that he knows "Has roots" an explanation which echoes and reinforces all the garden imagery, but the fire here is different from the sexual one just referred to; it is more permanent, certainly, and by opposition to a physical fire seems to suggest a spiritual one. The poem ends, therefore, with the intimations of the warmth and the light of Love. One line in this last section captures the sense of relief and joy this awakening bring. In the preceding poem the "hoo" of the owl was joined with death and the boy was ware of the devouring mouth. Though the sound is echoed in the beginning of this poem, the boy knows at last that he and the mice are safe from that ominous threat. He shouts, in utter joy, "Hooray for me and the mice!"

### III The Road to Woodlawn

The next four poems in this sequence mark stages of progress towards the light which the boy finally sees in "The Lost Son." They are as implicational as "Where Knock Is Open Wide" and "I Need, I Need." Beginning with the rhythm of a folk-ballad "Bring the Day" opens with the sexual connotations of "Bees and lilies there were." For the first time there is no tension between the lilt of the familiar meter and the joyful imagery the meter contains.

Although the boy is not able to consummate his desired union with "the green grasses" ("I'm a biscuit. I'm melted already") in the first section, he is sensuously aware of the communion of all creatures in nature: "Everything closer."

The first stanza of section two affirms that we "Begin with the rock;/ End with water," and that there is "singing between." In the second stanza the persona describes his growing physical potential: "When I stand, I'm almost a tree." In a specific Blakean image, he captures the union of death and life, and of the physical and the spiritual; both extremes are joined by their common origins and source of nourishment:

The worm and the rose  
Both love  
Rain.

The third section captures the simultaneous "wakening" of the sexual organs and of the psyche in the image of the "small bird." Released from the "long dust" of the grave, the boy shouts his awareness of potential: "It's time to begin!/ To begin!"

However, the childish joy cannot endure through the metamorphosis of adolescence. As Roethke says in a later poem, "I'm Here":

So much of adolescence is an ill-defined dying,  
An intolerable waiting,  
A longing for another place and time,  
Another condition. (p. 162)

The 4th poem of Praise to The End, "Give Way, Ye Gates," embodies that emotional state exactly. The wet dream occurs in a "green" sleep and the poem is filled with images of vitality, energy, expectation. But, as we noted before, the 3rd section suggests the boy's psychological distress at his growing awareness of physical potential. In contrast to "Bring the Day," this poem ends negatively: "I'm sad with the little owls." Section four contains the torturous masturbation scene. "Touch and arouse. Suck and Sob. Curse and mourn," it begins. The association of this act with the death of the father is caught by the last speech phrase, "Curse and mourn." Knowing what physical act accompanies these words, we expect "curse and moan"; the "mourn" startles us into awareness of the tension between life and death revealed in the act itself. The "spirit," the "old...cold wind" settles upon the boy, and the poem ends with his recognition that the past is still a part of him. The last stanza is one of the most unique of Roethke's correspondences. We know that the boy has just ejaculated ("What beats in me/ I still bear"-- there is more sperm, and my father's ghost is still "beating" at me); now the sight of his own sperm ("What slides away,") provides an imagistic and meta-physical link with the primordial past: "The deep stream remembers:/ Once I was a pond."

Concerning the next two poems, we have already noted



the dream displacement and the Oedipal tendencies in "Sensibility! O La!" and the combination of sexual lull and psychic and aesthetic renewal in "O Lull Me, Lull Me." There are also two significant modulations in rhetoric. In the "Lull" poem we find caught in the one beatitude, "Blessed be torpor," the first of the mature prayer meters. The familiar rhythm is used quite seriously, yet with a touch of tortured irony in the unexpected use of the word "torpor." In "Sensibility" the second stanza announces the birth of a consciousness of Venus in the boy: "In the fair night of some dim brain,/ Thou wert marmorean-born." The persona adds his own personal touch with the lines "I name thee: wench of things,/ A true zephyr-haunted woodie"--a "tree" haunted by the "wind" of his father; but even here, the epic flavor of the rhetoric is maintained. The shift from "you" to "thou" suggests that the boy is now a young man, and he speaks with an appropriately mature poetic "sensibility." As the speech pattern tells us, the boy has come a long way from his linguistic past, where his most poignant utterances were caught by such phrases as "Winkie will yellow, I sang," and "Diddle we care/ Couldly."

Roethke's central poem, "The Lost Son," has been anticipated imagistically and rhetorically. It embodies

all the stylistic and metaphoric techniques Roethke has used in the poems preceeding it. Although it was actually written before the others we have just looked at, its central placement is functional, both from the emotional and the technical point of view. The piece provides an overwhelming bombardment of sensual images, all compressed, all resounding with lines we have heard before and feeling qualities we have come to recognize. Although Roethke considered "The Lost Son" the "easiest" of the longer poems because "it follows a narrative line indicated by the titles...",<sup>17</sup> the simultaneous concentration and extension of the images makes it difficult to translate the emotional content in discursive terms.

Just as the dramatic image of the dead father gave us the imagistic center of the first poem, the mention of "Woodlawn" in the opening section, "The Flight," tells us that the boy is now facing, literally, the grave of his father. Images immediately create a correspondence with the preconscious, primordial state: "A slow drip over stones,/ Toads brooding in wells." The boy feels, however, that nature is against him, "All the leaves stuck out their tongues." He is frightened and invokes the animal symbols of the subconscious (the snail), the spirit (the bird), and the earth (worm), asking all three to

unite and lead him through his "hard time" to some final "home." He tries physical arousal in the second stanza but "nothing nibbled." The plain lucid rhetoric of third stanza captures the utter desolation which leads to his plea for a "voice" or a physical sign of comfort. He asks for direction away from the "silence":

Tell me:  
Which is the way I take;  
Out of which door do I go,  
Where and to whom?

We have already noted at some length how this section echoes the imagery and the rhetoric of David. Obviously there is no tension, no playing with the familiar agonized emotional analogue. The two poets sing with one metaphoric voice here.

But the next stanza invokes the rhythm of a fairy-tale magic formula. The images are again united by the psyche-spirit-phallus references, this time caught by the "sea," the "wind" and the "eel." The magic voices do not give very explicit directions; they say simply to seek each of these "places" for the mere facing of the grave is not enough. "The Flight" then begins in earnest, with frantic movements which lead finally to the slime of the regressive state: "among the rubbish," "By the muddy pond edge, by the bog holes." Phallic imagery follows immediately, presented in the meter of childhood riddle and defined by negative reference:

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.

After the attempt to define the "object" by circular questions, the persona describes the sexual act in the meter of magical rite:

Take the skin of a cat  
And the back of an eel,  
Then roll them in grease,--  
That's the way it would feel.

In "The Pit" the boy regresses to the depths of the primordial womb. The psychological location is caught imagistically in catechismal question and answer rhythm. Kenneth Burke has made clear how the rhetoric captures the emotional quality contained: "This mood is like roots, like under the leaves," Burke reads, noting the ingenuity of Roethke's language and the dramatic effect it produces.<sup>18</sup> "The Bit" is a place that the "mole" knows, a "wet nest," the kingdom of "Mother Mildew," and finally the place where "fish nerves" nibble.

And, again in the "Gibber" section, we get the familiar eruption of the sexual urgings of the boy in combination with the regressive imagery: "Dogs of the groin/ Barked and howled." Again all nature turns against the boy and the short clipped lines reinforce the starkly primitive perception of the boy who is caught by the most intense psychological-physical tensions. The long lyric lines which follow mark a momentary lull, but the imagery



produces the sense of frozen, cataleptic immobility brought on by the intense fear the boy knows, a fear that has power to "drain the stones."

The invocation of "Father Fear" summons up a Gothic dream vision, captured by the familiar childhood dimeter meter, but filled with images of elusive shapes and movements (as in Browning's "Childe Harold To The Dark Tower Came"). The vision is, in fact, a "slow motion" rendition of veiled memories of death in the greenhouse. The boy's tears wet, "Like a slither of eels/ That watery cheek," and effect an emotional release from the paralysis brought on by the fear.

No longer afraid the boy dares to explore and masturbates:

Is this the storm's heart? The ground is  
unstillng itself.  
My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones  
cast out their fire?  
Is the seed leaving the old bed? These  
buds are live as birds.

During his frenzied searching for meaning, the boy's thoughts encompass the primordial, the moral, the metaphysical. A sense of guilt seems to erupt with the lines:

I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,  
I run, I run to the whistle of money.

Then, through magical incantation, the "money" and the "water" are united in a frenzied climax. The sexual act is completed at this point, and the next stanza brings relief in the "cool" grass, while "the stalk still sways." The

next question is a profound one: "Has the worm a shadow?" This marks a new direction in the persona's questioning, with far ranging implications. Does the worm, which devours the dead, also submit to devouring, thus becoming a ghost or a shadow? Does the father's life-giving phallus remain via its shadow, i.e., through the son? And in spiritual terms if the worm does have a shadow, there must be light somewhere. The implications of this question produce a blinding and transforming illumination for the persona, a psychological state so intense that he suffers what Roethke elsewhere describes as a "near blackout."<sup>19</sup>

"The Return," via the greenhouse memories of the child, is a movement from darkness to artificial light to "The light in the morning." Sensations of life--roses "breathing," "little winds," "steam"--combine with sharp impressions of color--the red of the fire and the roses, the white snow. When Papa comes he brings order and a "Scurry of warm over small plants." And, contrary to the final image of the greenhouse section of "Where Knock Is Open Wide" ("Dark came early") we find now upward movement of all the life of the greenhouse towards the light.

The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.  
Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds  
Moved in a slow up-sway.

The final untitled section has moved toward an "in-between time" reveals the boy's feeling that he has endured

his past. He has accomplished this only by the most intense exploration of his own psyche, and he has come to understand that the past and the present are united through their common source in the slime, through their common participation in the breath of life which is passed on spiritually throughout all nature. In the most amazing of perceptions, perhaps, the boy has come to understand that his father and he are united through the phallus; finding his own sperm allows the boy to understand the continuity of physical existence via "little fishes," which spring, ultimately from the deep pond of the primordial past, but exist always in the phallus of every male.

Has the boy come to "always"? Not yet. The past may be accounted for, but the boy must now find himself in relationship to the present and the future. He is aware of this, but he is also aware that all the voices of the past are now there to help him: "The mind moved, not alone." The images of the last section embody the sensation of having been picked clean; all is white and skeletal and silent. However, there is a sense of new beginnings: the "surviving bones" of weeds still "swing in the wind," and we know they will turn green again; "seed-crowns" catch the light. The boy is overwhelmed by a sense of light, a vision which is captured by the imagery of Dante and the rhetoric of Eliot. The final verse embodies the boy's newfound sense of calm

anticipation:

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

We have traced the progression of the protagonist's advance to total identity in the last chapter. The boy comes to place where he can find love in a lout's eye, and to the sound of his own song blending the past with the present. Though he has done this all along, by means of his use of the rhythms of the past, he was not aware of the union. The poet was, however; Roethke has given us a series of poems which are strikingly original in the perceptions they permit, but he has communicated these perceptions by using the meters of the dead, the songs of the past. He, too, has come to terms with the past of poetry, especially its infantile past.

Roethke has also maintained masterful control of his form in this sequence, a fact which becomes apparent only when we notice the internal redundancy; images gain symbolic quality as the poet uses them again and again at climatic points in the poems. For example, we concentrated on the "mouth" and "owl" imagery in the first two poems, where both carried negative emotional charges. In "Unfold! Unfold!" the persona, having resolved his tensions, declares, "Easy the life of the mouth. What a lust for ripeness!" In "I Cry, Love! Love!" the final,



meaningful regressive scene begins, "I hear the owls, the soft callers, coming down from their hemlocks"; the "hoo" no longer frightens him and this regression concentrates on life, not death. Finally, the boy has traveled from the feeling of utter frustration contained in his sigh "Maybe God has a house./ But not here," to a state of illumination in which he can look at the natural scene in "Unfold! Unfold!" and declare that it is "A house for wisdom; a field for revelation."

The one consistent theme embedded in this sequence is the resolution of the tension of opposites in all categories--of time, of life on all levels, of emotions. The final vision must be that all extremes are necessary and all are meaningful. The sequence becomes a song of praise and a song of union. Despite the tortured moments of the protagonist, the potential for union always existed; the key was love, the realization that the "fire" did indeed "have roots," that he was never alone. In the words of the last poem of the sequence, Roethke gives a way to union and love:

The dark has its own light  
A son has many fathers.  
Stand by a slow stream:  
Here the sigh of what is.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

<sup>1</sup>Speech Monographs, XXX (March, 1963), pp. 15-22.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Criticism, VI (Summer, 1964), p. 254. Mr. Schwartz's definitions of meter and rhythm are stated most succinctly in his exchange with Messrs. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Rhythm and 'Exercises in Abstraction'", PMLA, LXXVII (December, 1962), pp. 668-674.

<sup>4</sup>Schwartz, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup>Letters, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>"Language Patterns and Literature: A Note on Roethke's Poetry," Topics: 12 (Fall, 1966), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Letters, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup>Roethke was to say later, in "The Waking" (p. 108), that this kind of "thinking" was the only meaningful one, the only possible mode of perception which could give logic to life.

<sup>9</sup>New York, 1966. Chapters 3 and 4, on "The Language of Literature," offer many insights into primitive perception, and suggest how effectively Roethke captures the vision linguistically.

<sup>10</sup>Malkoff, pp. 75-78.

<sup>11</sup>See George A. Miller, Language and Communication (New York, 1951), p. 146. The entire seventh chapter, "The Verbal Behavior of Children" is helpful for our purposes.

<sup>12</sup>Steuart Henderson Britt and Margaret M. Balcom, in Journal of Genetic Psychology, LVIII (1941), pp. 289-290.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 291.

<sup>14</sup>Malkoff, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup>According to legend, the duck, like the dove mentioned a few stanzas above, represents a "Primal Spirit floating on a primeval Ocean." See Lost Language of Symbolism, I, pp. 207-08 and II, p. 21. Thus, the duck knows all about the origins of life and the creation of light from darkness, things the protagonist wishes to know.

<sup>16</sup>"An American Poet Introduces Himself," Prose, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup>"Open Letter," Prose, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup>Burke, pp. 267-68.

<sup>19</sup>"Open Letter," SP, p. 38.

## CHAPTER 5

### ROETHKE WITHOUT ANALOGUE

Roethke criticism erupts with charges of imitation and derivativeness as soon as scholars leave the "Praise" poems and turn to the later work. W. D. Snodgrass' comment is quite typical:

In Words for the Wind, Roethke's collected poems, the new direction appeared. It was a shock. There had been hints that Roethke was interested in Yeats's voice, hints that he might follow the general shift in twentieth-century verse by following wild experimentation with a new formalism. No one could have expected that Words for the Wind would contain a series of sixteen "Love Poems" and a sequence, "The Dying Man," all in a voice almost indistinguishable from Yeats's. Roethke, who had invented the most raw and original voice of all our period, was now writing in the voice of another man, and that, perhaps, the most formal and elegant voice of the period.

Yet, also in that book appeared "Meditations of an Old Woman" which suggested still another new direction, and promised, I felt, astonishing new achievements. This poem shows a different influence, but one which seemed much less confining--the Eliot of Four Quartets. Perhaps there was also some influence of Richard Lattimore's translation of The Iliad . . . " 1

Other critics play variations on this theme by inviting comparison of Roethke's later work with that of Blake (of course), Whitman and Stevens, but the charges have been answered by a few scholars who examined closely the kinds of comparison being made.<sup>2</sup> Louis Martz insists that what Roethke imitated "so successfully" was



"the metaphysical mode of 'wit,' the 'strong lines,' the firm intellectual control," i.e., the metaphysical style which Yeats "recreated in his later poetry."<sup>3</sup> Considering Roethke's early schooling in the metaphysicals, it is not surprising that he should have control of that style in his later work. Roy Harvey Pearce compares a section of "The Lost Son" to The Waste Land and "Gerontion," and "Meditations of an Old Woman" with Four Quartets; he suggests that Roethke's poems are replies or alternates to Eliot's.<sup>4</sup> C. W. Truesdale notes a considerable difference between Yeats' and Roethke's "Romanticism."<sup>5</sup> Concerning "The Dying Man," Karl Malkoff argues most convincingly that:

. . . The five poems are lyrics in the manner of middle and late Yeats, in tribute to the great Irish poet; but Roethke unmistakably retains his own identity throughout, which is not the least remarkable achievement of these poems. For if the mode of expression is Yeats's, the universe being expressed is Roethke's, related to that of the "spiritual father" to be sure, but firmly rooted in the "son's" imagery, diction, and metaphorical peculiarities. A careful reading shows that there is almost no image or symbol that has not been specifically anticipated in Roethke's earlier work; it is almost as if all of the poet's energies had been drawn together and focused on this one concentrated vision of reality.<sup>6</sup>

The subtitle of "The Dying Man" is "In Memoriam: W. B. Yeats"; what better elegy than a poem written deliberately in that man's style. Any stylistic submission in this work, coming as it does after the great original stylistic feats of the "Praise" section, must be considered an act of tribute rather than a loss of creative power.

Roethke's voice rings through the poem, in the diction we have heard before as in section 5, "They Sing, They Sing": "I've the lark's word for it, who sings alone;/ What's seen recedes; Forever's what we know!--" or:

In the worst night of my will,  
I dared to question all,  
And would the same again.  
What's beating at the gate?  
Who's come can wait. ("What Now?")

Meditation on the death of the Irish poet brings the persona of this poem to a memory of another ghost, "I found my father when I did my work" ("The Wall"), and ultimately to a faint and only partially consoling vision of a "field" of eternity ahead: "O sweet field far ahead, I hear your birds,/ They sing, they sing, but still in minor thirds ("They Sing, They Sing"). Although Roethke subjects himself to the Yeatsian style, he will not submit to the Yeatsian conviction that "Sailing to Byzantium" is the answer to the tension between life and death. When the persona sees the poet's ghost in "The Exulting," he finds the man "Walking the edge, loquacious, unafraid./ He quivered like a bird in birdless air." The image recalls Yeats' persona who desired to be a golden, singing form, an eternal bird fixed in metal by the imagination. Roethke, on the contrary, finds the eternal in "The fury of the slug beneath the stone"; and he answers the vision of his "spiritual father" by asserting strongly that:

The edges of the summit still appall  
When we brood on the dead or the beloved;  
Nor can imagination do it all

In this last place of light: he dares  
to live  
Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings  
Against the immense immeasurable emptiness  
of things.

(To become pure bird then, either of fire or gold, is to divorce oneself from the physical, sensuous life of all creation. This Roethke will not do (and never does), even in tribute to the poet he is honoring.)

Similarly, in his earlier poem "Four for Sir John Davies" (pp. 105-107), Roethke shouts his indebtedness to and his defiance of his "master": "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats; I take it, and I give it back again." Using the cadence of Yeats, but the theme of Sir John Davies, Roethke denies that any mental "dance" is slowing. His persona promises to sing and dance with eternity, "with the bears," and, finding himself a partner, engages in an utterly physical dance of the sensual; such a dance provides a sense of complete union with the woman ("Did each become the other in that play?") and then a sense of unity with all ("Rapt, we leaned forth with what we could not see."). The fusion of life and death in the sexual act ("Alive at noon, I perished in her form") effects a leap from meaninglessness to meaning: "We undid chaos to a curious sound." Thus, "The flesh can make the spirit visible," and, we might add, for Roethke (the spiritual is never separated from the physical; he finds his way to light through participation in the sensuous, whether that means union with a woman or union with a "roundy stone.") Yet, the persona

in this poem maintains, "the visible obscures" at some point--if objects are seen as only physical. When the persona "perishes" in the form of the woman, he "falls" from "flesh to spirit" and then, "The word"--made flesh--"outleaps the world, and light is all." Although Yeats's Crazy Jane realizes that love must "take the whole body and soul," she never celebrates the exalted 'union' of lovers and universe which Roethke's persona envisions; in many of his love poems, in fact, Yeats presents a conflict between the physical and the spiritual, between love in time and timeless love.<sup>7</sup>

"Meditations of an Old Woman" begins with the woman in a state of loneliness and longing "On love's worst ugly day." The restlessness of the woman's spirit certainly recalls the frustration of the persona in Eliot's Four Quartets, but the Old Woman turns to specific memories of the past and sensuous enjoyment of the present and comes, even in the first Meditation, to the point where she can declare, "In such times, lacking a god, I am still happy." There are, to be sure, many echoes of the Quartets in the sequence (the still waiting, the journey theme, the movement toward humility), but for Eliot, as for Yeats, the tension of opposites is never really resolved--we find that, although the Incarnation becomes the "still point of the turning world," man can simply go on "trying" to come to terms with that fact, never really comprehending the relationship between water and fire or love beyond desire. In



answer to such a vision, Roethke's Old Woman moves in "The Wall" to where she is "released from the dance of opposites." The release has been effected in a way familiar to us by now; images of the rock, the worm, the wind and the bird recur prominently through this sequence. In opposition to Eliot's path to light, which is paved with "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action," Roethke's Woman does not renounce earthly nature so much as move through it:

I'm thick with leaves and tender as a dove,  
I take the liberties a short life permits--  
I seek my own meekness;  
I recover my tenderness by long looking.  
By midnight I love everything alive  
Who took the darkness from the air?  
I'm wet with another life.  
Yea, I have gone and stayed.

What came to me vaguely is now clear,  
As if released by a spirit,  
Or agency outside me.  
Unprayed-for,  
Final.

(p. 173)

By this point in Roethke's poetic career any contest between the masters and the student has ended. He knows how to use another's style or imagery and "give it back" with force and "a new life." This is not to say that he rejects allusion as a method of communication; the poems still find emotional correlatives in lines from other poets. But, as he works his way through the love poems and the lighter pieces, Roethke comes more and more to rely on his own past poetry for the images and the rhetoric which give us, at the same time, something familiar and, because of the context, something new.

The voices from the grave still "help" but the poet's own work in Praise to the End has given him the words and music for his final "singing" while the themes provide the pattern for his ultimate "dance."

### I The Final Journey

"All journeys, I think, are the same," says the Old Woman of "Meditations," and then talks of a "journey within a journey." When we come to The Far Field, we find the aging persona contemplating the journey to "always," attempting to find some meaning in his own death as he did earlier with his father's. Roethke called the first section "North American Sequence," projecting, perhaps, his desire to explore the continent as did Crane and Whitman. Actually, very little of the landscape is seen here; the movement is via water from Oyster River in the East to the Tittabawassee river which flows near Roethke's home in Saginaw.<sup>8</sup> All journeys lead to the interior for Roethke and, significantly, his poem in this sequence which is titled "Journey to the Interior" takes him to the mid-Western scene of his past.

The emotional progression in these poems is from the feeling of bleak emptiness to a sense of union caught by one of Roethke's resounding images, the one we may come to identify as his ultimate and most comprehensive symbol:

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's. (p. 205)

The persona has gone through this same progression before in the "Praise" sequence, but in this group of poems, like "Meditations of an Old Woman," he explores the self with an awareness that life-time is slipping away; memory-time becomes the temporal center of the journey and leads to an understanding of the "other" time, out of time. In this sequence Roethke invokes images from his earlier poetry which, because of their repeated use in different contexts, have become uniquely symbolic. These symbols are now the "familiar" elements of communication through which we keep in touch with the emotional shifts in the poems.

"The Longing" begins the North American Sequence with an assertion that the persona can find no solace from the grave, "On things asleep, no balm." Instead, the first stanza is heavy with images of death, waste, and the paradox of falling waters that forebode no fruition ("Saliva dripping from warm microphones," and ". . . when a week of rain is a year"). In this atmosphere of "stinks and sighs," and "Agony of crucifixion on barstools," the persona despairs. He considers, momentarily, images of love: "illuminated lips," "Hands active, eyes cherished," but realizing that he knows "less and less" of these things, he leaves

happiness to "dogs and children," creatures who can love without questions. Such images, he notes, are those which "only a saint mentions." The protagonist has come a long way from the joy he once found in the love poems, where such images filled the stanzas; and he notes now that "Lust fatigues the soul." However, the suggestion that he wishes a life of pure spirit or imagination is dispelled immediately when he asks, "How to transcend this sensual emptiness?/ (Dreams drain the spirit if we dream too long)."

Notice that this time is "bleak" for the persona-- not dark. He knows very well that "the dark has its own light" and that, as he says in the final sequence, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see" (p. 239). Everything danced at the end of the "Praise" sequence and "I Cry Love! Love!" finished with a shimmer of light, but at the end of this stanza he inverts the positive charge of those familiar images: "The great trees no longer shimmer;/ Not even the soot dances." "The Longing" ends with a brooding awareness that "the spirit fails to move forward." The images of the subconscious, the worm and the slug, now suggest the "shrinking back" of the soul which in the final line becomes "An eyeless starrer." This oxymoron displays the paralyzed condition of the persona who is "Ready for any crevice," which reminds us of the pit which is always yawning.



The final stanza of "The Longing" embodies the state of mature stasis in a straightforward free verse which is clearly Roethke's own style. As in the earlier sequence "Praise to the End," Roethke maintains his penchant for the end-stopped, self-contained lines, and remains master of his own free verse technique, thus he feels free to indulge in the more classic, formal "Yeatsian" mode.

After two lines of self-denigration, the second section continues with a shift in mood to a state of longing for a "comprehensive felicity"--"A body with the motion of a soul." Recalling that "dreams drain the spirit," the persona wonders what kind of a dream the spirit can "breathe in," and answers "A dark dream," reminding us of all the dream visions of the young boy. The statement "The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all" prepares us for that final image of nunc dimittis in the sequence and is as elusive here as it is concrete there. Coming in such abrupt conjunction with "dark dream," the line may suggest the ultimate redeeming vision of Dante, whom the persona has invoked throughout the love poetry. The Dantean rose then signifies ultimate love and beauty; but Yeats's use of the rose invites us to add connotations of suffering and passionate life. The final implication of the entire line is that the rose contains all forms of life and symbolizes "A body with the motion of a soul."

The next line--"Who'd think the moon could pare itself so thin?"--may be an allusion to Yeats's "Phases of the Moon" scheme.<sup>9</sup> The moon "pared" so thin would be close to the Yeatsean dark cycle where complete objectivity and purity mark a superhuman state. On the other hand, moonlight guided our persona through his "dark" times, and the line may indicate a waning, or aging of the man. Perhaps both meanings are involved, for a "great flame" rises out of the "sunless sea." This fire, which certainly "has roots" must be associated with the Rose of Love, and it brings with it a light which cries to the man who is imagistically surrounded by darkness. His desire to be "beyond the moon" indicates a wish to be beyond time, in a condition of spiritual and physical nakedness, "Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm." The next quatrain invites comparison with the "Cuttings, (later)" poem; the man sees himself as a "stalk" and notes that "Out of these nothings/-- All beginnings come," just as life sprung from the "dried sticks" of that earlier greenhouse piece.

The final section of "The Longing" with its unusually long lines capturing a desire to be united with nature, and its turn to the American landscape, is suggestively Whitmanesque. But Roethke's imagery retains its poetic integrity; the man is pleading for release from the sins of pride while asking, at the same time, for a balance of the physical and the spiritual which will give him some concrete being:

I would believe my pain: and the eye quiet  
on the growing rose;  
I would delight in my hands, the branch sing-  
ing, altering the excessive bird;  
I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart  
of form.

Form, we remember, is composed of both substance and essence; to come to the "heart" of form is to find the "quiet" of perfect union of the sensual and the spiritual. The poetic technique itself, of time and space, possibly extends the meaning to the creative realm for Roethke has never before used such long lines as vehicle for the expression of quiet longing. The persona wishes to unite with the "form" of all things in nature, no matter how disorderly they seem in "this mortal life," which has now become an "ambush," a "silence" for the aging man. He recognizes that such immersion in life has previously brought him to the point "Where shadow can change into flame,/ And the dark be forgotten"; as occurred in Praise to the End!. Now, like Jonah, the poet has "left the body of the whale," i.e., he has journeyed through the deep waters, and been reborn from the womb of a sea-creature.<sup>10</sup> Another devouring "mouth of night" awaits him now, however, and he projects his intimations of the landscape of his new journey in images of dryness ("few lakes") and steep hills (buttes), vastness and heat; and over all hangs the stench of death.

Eliot's "East Coker" ends with a section which declares, "Home is where we start from," but the persona declares that age brings a complicated pattern of life

and death. The last part of the stanza seems directly related, emotionally, to the situation of Roethke's old man:

Love is most nearly itself  
When here and now cease to matter.  
Old men ought to be explorers  
Here and there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and the empty  
desolation,  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast  
waters  
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my  
end is my beginning.<sup>10</sup>

The persona of "The Longing" has just glimpsed a desolate scene of death. With his spirit now in stasis, he must find a way to confront that scene and come to terms with it; being a "stalk" he must begin a new lonely journey. Eliot's persona suggests that to be "still and still moving" is to return to the cosmic beginning, to "home" where we "start from." Roethke will take his persona, imagistically, to his own home and his past. Echoing Eliot directly, the man asks, "Old men should be explorers?" Realizing that "here and now cease to matter," (as Eliot's speaker insists), the persona decides to travel--but he does so into the historic past of the country:

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

There is a special significance to the tribes named here. The first tribe is named in a question, which suggests



that the poet is considering it as a model to emulate. That the question is answered with an assured and flat declaration of the other tribe, suggests clearly that the Ogalala are rejected in favor of the Iroquois. Why? The Ogalalas were a member of the Sioux nation, a plains people who lived in the landscape invoked by Roethke. The Iroquois were natives of a land filled with lakes and waters. Further, the Sioux were wanderers who lived by hunting, while the Iroquois were an agricultural people. Thus the persona is rejecting both the dry country and any notion of a real wandering; he decides to return to the water and to the life of growing plants as his way out of this new darkness. The choice of tribes is consistent with the choice he has always made.

As we see, this short, dramatic last stanza is presented in the terse, compressed form we saw in the earlier poems, and, like so many of those tight stanzas, this one is filled with connotative complexity. On the most basic level, we are made aware of a movement toward the past and an opposition between the two tribes of Indians. Roethke is relying on our awareness of the actual difference between these Indians as an indication of the meaning of the man's choice. He hopes, also, that we will catch the Eliot allusion and understand the necessity for making such a choice. Thus, even in such a compact passage, the poet provides us with familiar analogues in order to communicate the emotional meaning of the poem.

"Meditation at Oyster River" finds the man back with the water, during the twilight hours: "A twilight wind" is breathing. The journey begins, then, with the persona alone, contemplating the quiet scene inspired by encroaching age (which is paralleled by the encroaching tide). The twilight imagery captures the movement of the persona's mood and his awareness of the beginning of a resolution to his conflict: from "deepening light" to "twilight" to the "waning of light" to the "first of the moon." The first of these meditations opens with the coming of the "first tide ripples," an imagistic indication that the spirit is beginning to move. The first ripple moves toward "dead" clam shells, but the next, which fills a runnel behind the man, brings a wave of life with it as it comes ". . . creeping closer,/ Alive with tiny striped fish, and young crabs climbing in and out of the water."

In the next stanza the silence of the bay is associated with "no violence," while the quiet gulls have finished their "cat-mewing," their "child-wimpering." The images here take us back to the cat and the child of "Where Knock Is Open Wide." That time is over, the images tell us. The encroaching water brings with it a "brackish foam," reminiscent of the mud-swamp-bog imagery of the regression section of "The Lost Son," but now the persona simply dabbles his toes in it and retires to "a rock higher up on the cliff side." The wind "slackens" and

all movement ceases. The next two lines, invoking images of "dew" and "fire," suggest the beginning of sensuous arousal, but ominously a raven, "turns on its perch"-- moves in a "dead" tree, and, perhaps, turns to devour a fish. We sense a connection with "Night Crow" here, as the raven catches the last glint of sunlight while perched on a "wasted tree" as was that other bird who traveled "deep in the brain, far back."

In the second meditation we find the poet wishing to lose the self, which "persists like a dying star." He would be united with the "shy beasts," all of which are presented in the act of devouring, seeking nourishment, but among which "Death's face rises afresh." He wishes also to be "with water," with the waves which alter their shape to conform with whatever obstacle they meet. And in the third meditation, the persona's wish is felt, "In this hour,/ In this first hour of knowing." At this time the "flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit," and acquires indifference, surety, cunning.

The physical movements of the persona are important in this poem. At first we see him at the edge of the shore; when the water threatens to surround him he leaves it (reluctantly, perhaps, as the toe-dabbling might indicate), and moves to a higher spot, away from the danger of the immersion in regressive waters. Then, with his body indifferent and "sure," he "shifts" on the rock and loses himself to memory-time, travels back to mid-continent

and a river in Michigan. The water imagery gains strength and vitality as the man's thoughts move from an April scene and a tiny rivulet to an "in between time" when the melting ice breaks up on a river, collects at the "spikes" of a bridge, and "creaks" at midnight. And the aging man longs "for the blast of dynamite"--the explosive, dynamic crack of the ice jam breaking and loosening all the human and natural debris which has been caught in the ice, and which includes "nests" and "a child's shoe," symbols of "beginnings." The imagery here recalls that of "The Light Comes Brighter," that early poem in which the thaw and budding of Spring effected a recognition of the budding of the mind.

"Water's my will, and my way," says the persona in the last section, and the water images have embodied the movement toward a wakening for him: from ripple to wave to rivulet to crashing, roaring river. The movement has been towards life and towards the past at the same time, and the persona finds himself now a child in spirit, rocking in the "cradle of all that is" and lulled by water and bird. Once again the poet catches the state by presenting the tension of opposing images: the man sits, literally, in "the waning light," and the image indicates his physical state also; he feels, however, the "motion of morning," and state of spiritual renewal, awakening. If the "half-sleep" seems to indicate the opposite tendency, we should remember that in "The



Waking" (p. 108), Roethke tells us, "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow." Elsewhere, Roethke explicates the first half of the line, "To wake here means to be awakened into full awareness: a paradox that this waking does partake of the nature of an eternal wakening."<sup>11</sup> To be lulled into half-sleep, then, is to be partially awakened into full awareness, including awareness of the eternal regression in the service of the ego. This partial "sleep" is caught by the image of the spirit running "in and out of the small waves" with the shore-birds. Full awakening is fearful to the persona at this stage, as we see by his cry, "How graceful the small before danger!"

The last stanza, while grounded in a concrete sensuous image, suggests the shimmering light which now fills the man's being:

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

We've met this kind of awakening before, at the end of "I Cry, Love! Love!". Compare this stanza with the imagery of the earlier poem:

A fish jumps, shaking out flakes of moonlight.  
.....  
The shine on the face of the lake  
Tilts, backward and forward.  
The water recedes slowly,  
Gently rocking. (p. 93)

"Journey to the Interior" uses imagery we have not met before. Roethke uses the metaphor of the motion of a car on the road to suggest both the literal landscape and,

of course, the psychic one. "In the long journey out of self,/ There are many detours," he tells us. As the landscape passes by in the first stanza, we find images of imminent danger: "And the back wheels hang almost over the edge," "And the sudden veering." The road is filled with "rubble and falling stones," and the buttes and creeks show the effect of the forces of nature--the wind and the rain--turned wild and destructive. As the path narrows, the persona moves closer and closer to danger and death, as the images hold "sharp stones," "quicksand," a "fallen fir-tree," and finally darkening "thickets."

The poet recalls another scene of driving through the countryside, this time one filled with dryness and sand dunes, pitted roads and aging weather-beaten buildings. The trip is a wild one, as the car is forced to plunge and swerve in response to the emotional movements of the young man. One senses the speed increasing steadily until the driver feels that he is motionless ("And all flows past" and "I am not moving but they are"). What "flows past" are images of the past, "the cemetery" and a "grassy plain." As motion ceases in the persona, so does time: "I rise and fall, and time folds/ Into a long moment," during which the moss-like lichen speaks. We understand that the detour along this "shimmering road" is similar to other regressive movements but is here caught in a different metaphor.

The third section of "Journey to the Interior" invokes a vision of "the flower of all water," another elusive image related to the rose of the last poem in the sequence. The scene is luminous and reflective, and captures the state where the persona feels "The soul at a still-stand,/ At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep."<sup>12</sup> In that "long moment" when "the small drop forms, but does not fall"--the moment between life and death--the persona is aware of the fusion of opposites ("the dark and the light of a dry place," and "the drip of leaves") as well as a plunge to "the heart of the sun." Having once known it, he tells us "I rehearse myself for this:/ The stand at the stretch in the face of death." He delights now in mutability, in the sensation of displacement, "toward the other side of light," "beyond my own echo." In this stanza and in the last one Roethke captures Eliot's notions of being "still and still moving" and his conviction that "In my end is my beginning," but with his own images of the timeless moment:

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows  
it is morning,  
I know this change:  
On one side of silence there is no smile;  
But when I breathe with the birds,  
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of  
blessing,  
And the dead begin from their dark to sing  
in my sleep.

Since the persona has come here through silence and by lulling the body to sleep, we might assume that he has crossed over to the side of silence where there is a

"smile." We know, however, that in the "Praise" poems the dead began to sing when the boy realized that a union of the physical and spiritual made him a complete man, a receptacle of past and future time. "But when I breathe with birds" marks a crucial moment in the experience, and we must turn to the following poems to understand whether the birds here are spiritual or what the boy called the "small bird awakening"--both the physical and the spiritual --in "Bring the Day."

In the opening stanza's of "The Long Waters," the persona rejects a world of "higher than C," and admits what he calls his "foolishness with God." In the middle of part 2, however, he asks, suddenly, "But what of her?--" the one who embodies all life, all sound, all light. "How slowly pleasure dies!--" he sighs, and admits that "Feeling, I still delight in my last fall." Section 3 of this poem finds him "in a time" of "young salmon" and pine and flowers, a time filled with utter life, birth and a touch of "muck." The poet notes that he has come here without "courting silence," to a place where "salt water" (asceticism?) is "freshened" by small streams. In the short fourth section he recalls his recent experience as from a distance, and in the final section, "the sea wakens desire" and at last his body shimmers with light.

The final lines of the poem suggest the process which has taken place so far in the "North American Sequence":



I, who came back from the depths laughing  
too loudly,  
Became 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.

As the "lost son" the persona did come back from the depths, but when this sequence opens he has become "another thing." Now, as he faces death, he realizes that he has lost the sense of union with all life he once felt. In "The Longing" the old man seeks a path away from both spiritual and sensual emptiness. By evoking Eliot's persona, Roethke gives us an emotional and spiritual correlative which clarifies the intensity the old man feels and explains his need for some new way to union. The persona tries the contemplative path in "Meditations at Oyster River." He turns away from the water, rejecting the "pit," the suicidal regressive tendencies he once embraced, and rejecting also the sensuous contact with life he knew in former days. As he "shifts" his position, however, his "meditations" lead him back to the water he has just rejected physically; he is finally led to acknowledge, "Water's my will, my way."

"Journey to the Interior" actually captures the landscape and pervading sense of sterility we find in an Eliotic Wasteland and, once again, as memory takes him to "an old bridge" and "sluggish water," the past is revived. On this "dusty detour," however, the man is caught

in a motionless moment with his soul at a "still-stand." He admits that he has delighted in "surface change" and that his body has turned to "the other side of light." The split of the body and the spirit produces stasis, a condition which leads nowhere. "The Long Waters" marks a movement away from the silent "meditative" path Eliot's persona encouraged. The memory of the beloved stirs physical desire and initiates a return to the waters of life. Thus the speaker can proclaim that he is "gathered together once more"; in the last two poems he learns again to "embrace the world."

"The Far Field" begins with an admission that the man dreams of "journeys" repeatedly, and the journeys are always towards death now, toward the place where

The car stalls,  
Churning in a snowdrift  
Until the headlights darken.

Section 2 contains a concrete return to childhood greenhouse days, not to the greenhouse proper but to a field behind it in which the child faced the "eternal" in the form of dead mice and rabbits and the tom-cat "Blasted to death by the night watchman." He mourned for the death of these creatures but, as we see in the second stanza, Spring brought the sound of new singing--"What the grave says,/ The nest denies," he learned as a young boy in "Praise to the End!" This passage contains the perception which finally dissolves the terror of the old man as he faces the final journey; the return to the

greenhouse has once again provided a partial resolution to his problem. As the images shift to a scene of nakedness and sand and shells, "mossy quagmire" and a "wet log," the persona once again enjoys a renewed sensuous union with nature and he tells us:

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 sprawl of the wave,  
The oncoming water.

For the first time in this sequence, in section 3, we see all nature combining, converging, turning in on itself, and the old man feels a "moving forward." At the end of this section he notes that his "mind moves in more than one place,/ In a country half land, half-water," a perfect image for the fusion which has occurred in the previous sections. He finds himself "renewed by death, thought of my death," realizing that what he loves is "near at hand,/ Always in earth and water. The poem ends with the lines we noted in an earlier chapter; the fusion of body and soul is complete and the self finds all time caught in a single image:

A ripple widening from a single stone  
Winding around the waters of the world.

"Water is my way," the man said earlier, and now, in "The Rose" he returns to the sea for his final communion with the memories of the past and his confession of the truth he has found. In direct answer to Eliot, the old man says, "There are those to whom place is

unimportant,/ But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,/ Is important--." Now the man no longer retreats as the waves approach, but admits, "I sway outside myself/ Into the darkening currents." Attempting to capture the psychological and emotional movements of man, he compares them, in Section 2, with the motions of a large ship at sea and a child's toy boat in a pond.

As he searches for some expression of the timeless, the infinite he has come to know, he focuses on an object before him: "But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,/ Stays." His vision of struggle of the rose for some existence which is both separate and joined to others ("A single wild rose, struggling out of the white embrace of the morning-glory") is a metaphoric reflection of his own struggle, of course, as we see when the rose travels into the sea and into the life of some "scuttling" crabs. The view of the wild rose brings him to a memory of the greenhouse roses, those beautiful, cultivated and specially bred flowers his father tended and taught the boy to love. The old man sighs, "What need for heaven, then/ With that man, and those roses?" Section 3 takes us to the sounds of America, presented in Whitmanesque catalogue, but at the end the persona returns to the scene of water and, again rebelling against the code of Eliot's speaker, he declares in Psalm-rhetoric, "Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire."



The poet's final home is with the rocks and weeds, by the rose which brings him "true ease" because the "place of his desire" is a place where land and sea, dryness and moisture, life and death are forever merged.

Here he can go beyond "becoming and perishing," he moves and is still, and "rejoices" in both the past and the future. This sequence parallels the "Praise" sequence so closely we might find them answering one another in terms of motivation, movement, and final goal. Both start with fear of death; the first with the fear aroused by the father's death, this one with the aging man's fear of his own death. The movement in both is from darkness to light, from isolation to union. The goal for both is an understanding of opposing forces which tear men's lives --light and dark, sensual desire and spiritual love, life and death. Both sequences end with light, joy, and calm understanding.

The final symbol contains rose, wind, water, stone, and light. All have public traditional symbolic associations, yet each has accumulated private, unique meanings because of Roethke's use of them in the "Praise" section and in "North American Sequence." In metaphysical terms, the rose connotes Beauty and Divine Love; repeated poetic use has added the connotations of the fragility of human love, passions and suffering. For Roethke's persona the rose is an imagistic link with the greenhouse and the warmth and love of childhood, while the process of its

growth--of the plant itself-- budding, blooming, turning to the light, and dying to be renewed in the spring-- becomes a metaphor for the old man's ultimate perception of the life process. This rose is washed by the wind, which usually holds all the meaning mentioned before (see footnote 27, Chapter III), but now it has come to signify the voice of the poet's personal past, the whisper of communion with the dead poets (a source of aesthetic inspiration), and thus the medium through which the "small bird" can transcend time.

The sea is all things, of course--the source of life and death, the symbol of mutability and changelessness; for this persona it is a medium of rebirth, an imagistic vehicle by which he travels to his personal beginnings and the primordial past. The stone is a literal symbol of the permanent solid substance which endures the ravages of the elements and of time. Roethke's persona sees it embedded in "granitic slime" and ties it to the distant past, the place of beginnings. The light traditionally connotes purity, wisdom, life, and truth; while the persona senses all these meanings, he associates the light emotionally with a movement away from despair and pain.

In this final passage the images are tied together to form a symbol of "forever" to which the persona has finally come. The symbol unifies all time, all things, all emotions. The persona perceives an aesthetic meaning

in this symbol also; it gathers to itself the "sound and silence" of the man, speaking with "quiet" form. Thus the stanza merges man with symbol in a state of utter symbiosis:

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's.

The symbol is completely Roethke's and it is perfect.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

<sup>1</sup>"That Anguish of Concreteness," Essays, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>See articles by Wain, Donoghue and Pearce in Essays. But see also Warfel, pp. 25-29, which contains an excellent, concrete refutation of some remarks made by Donoghue.

<sup>3</sup>Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," Essays, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>See footnote in "The Power of Sympathy," Essays, pp. 183-184.

<sup>5</sup>Theodore Roethke and the Landscape of American Poetry," Minnesota Review, VIII (Winter 1968), p. 347.

<sup>6</sup>Malkoff, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup>As in, for example, "The Two Kings," "The Three Bushes," and "A Woman Young and Old."

<sup>8</sup>Hugh B. Staples notes this is his excellent article on this sequence, "The Rose in the Sea Wind: A Reading of Theodore Roethke's 'North American Sequence,'" American Literature, VI (May 1964), pp. 196-198.

<sup>9</sup>See Cleanth Brooks' "Yeats: The Poet as Myth-Maker," Modern Poetry and the Tradition (New York, 1965), pp. 173-202.

<sup>10</sup>See Jung's Symbols of Transformation (New York, 1956), I, pp. 209-210 for examples of the symbolic journey of the sun, or "son" in our poetry. The process of being reborn in this fashion also suggests a purification of the soul, a journey from ignorance to light; see Lost Language of Symbolism, II, p. 299.

<sup>11</sup>Letters, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup>Note the inversion of "Standstill." See Staples' footnote suggesting that perhaps Roethke wishes to signify "stagnation," as the German word Stillstand means. Staples, p. 199.



## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to clarify and resolve certain fundamental critical problems raised by the poetry of Theodore Roethke. When Roethke succeeded in communicating clearly, did he rely too heavily on the poetic techniques of his predecessors? When he wrote too exclusively in his own idiom, was he simply too original to be communicative? The line of argument in this study has been that successful communication, even in poetry, is a culturally conditioned activity; the poetic message requires a crucial minimum of form-content devices that are familiar. But, since value in communication is always tied to the new, a poem also requires a crucial minimum of something novel. All successful poetry contains the old and the new, but in Roethke criticism the terms "derivative" and "obscure" are clearly relative terms.

Roethke's first book, Open House, was a cautious venture into the world of poetry; the forms in which the experiences were embodied were quite traditional and there was little experimentation with language. It wasn't at all a bold book and it did not bring a new vitality to modern American poetry. As Roethke matured, however, his use of the established poetic techniques gradually gave way to his unique personal style. To be sure, the

Praise to the End! poems do employ stylistic analogues with other poetry, but few critics have seen how they serve merely as carriers for what is brilliantly original.

The "North American Sequence" of his last volume, The Far Field, contains deliberate echoes of T. S. Eliot, which function primarily to establish a tension between the rejected vision which they invoke and the joyous affirmation which the persona finally embraces, even if the images and symbols manifest an awareness of impending death. In this last stage of Roethke's career, his own past work serves to provide a good deal of the "familiar" necessary to successful communication. If he uses Eliot's contemplative mode, it is to affirm his own "forward motion" of the spirit; and when he finally immerses himself in a sensuous union with life, it is because he has discovered that his irresistible urge toward earthly vitality in the earlier poems was the only meaningful one for him.

Roethke's last published poem, "Once More the Round," serves as a perfect closure to his work. "I dance with William Blake," he says, indicating that he has come to accept the older poet's vision of life as a "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," and he rejoices in that fact. He tells us also that the way to the unknown will be found with the "Eye altering all," a brilliant ambiguity with profound aesthetic and metaphysical implication--for the

"Eye" may be heard as "I" or as "Aye," signifying a personal affirmation of the visible world. In his very first poem, Roethke promised us an "epic of the eyes," and throughout his poetry discovered again and again ways in which the "eye-I" can say "aye"--to perceive sensuously, altering familiar images and attitudes.

The tone of the last poem is one of spontaneous joy and echoes that of his earlier shout: "I proclaim once again a condition of joy." Roethke's admirers have already noted that, despite all the brooding anguish expressed in his poetry, he is most notably a poet of thanksgiving, praise, and joy--he will be numbered, as he wished to be, "among the happy poets"--an unusual thing in our time, perhaps, but consonant with Roethke's conviction about the ultimate function of poetry. As he once said (in "On Identity"), "And it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine--in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem."

Not all of Roethke's great poems have been examined in this study, and the decision to omit from consideration his love poems was made with special reluctance. While most of the love poems manifest multiple levels of meaning, they are beautiful celebrations of sensual union, imaginatively explicit and yet amazingly delicate in technique and wonderfully tender and joyous in tone. They rank among the finest love songs ever written and certainly

stand above the achievements of those contemporaries who have learned to present the sexual with frankness and precision, but without the awareness of the ultimate psychological and metaphysical implications Roethke saw. It is no surprise that the poet who wrote "I Cry, Love! Love!" would lose himself in another to find joy, as he does in "Words for the Wind," and then extend the metaphor to embody his ultimate understanding of eternity. That vision is ecstatically expressed in one of his last poems, "The Motion":

1

The soul has many motions, body one.  
An old wind-tattered butterfly flew down  
And pulsed its wings upon the dusty ground--  
Such stretchings of the spirit make no sound.  
By lust alone we keep the mind alive,  
And grieve into the certainty of love.

2

Love begets love. This torment is my joy.  
I watch a river wind itself away;  
To meet the world, I rise up in my mind;  
I hear a cry and lose it on the wind.  
What we put down, must we take up again?  
I dare embrace. By striding, I remain.

3

Who but the loved know love's a faring-forth?  
Who's old enough to live?--a thing of earth  
Knowing how all things alter in the seed  
Until they reach this final certitude,  
This reach beyond this death, this act of love  
In which all creatures share, and thereby live,



4

Wings without feathers creaking in the sun,  
The close dirt dancing on a sunless stone  
God's night and day: down this space He has

smiled,

Hope has its hush: we move through its  
broad day,--

O who would take the vision from the child?--

O, motion O, our chance is still to be!

It would be an unnecessary torture of poetic magnificence  
to force this poem to yield up indebtedness to the meta-  
physicals, Blake, Yeats and others. The poem needs no  
commentary. Roethke has earned the right to let his  
poetry speak for itself.

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