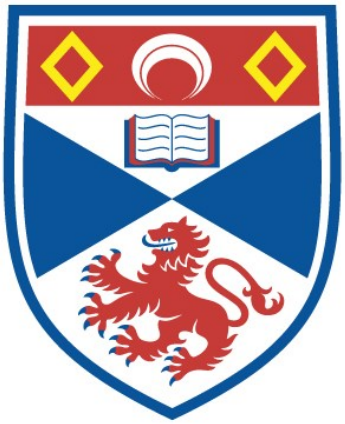
SEARCH FOR THE LOST SON : A STUDY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

Jay Lee Parini

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the following thesis is based on the results of research carried out by me, that the thesis is my own composition, and that it has not previously been presented for a higher degree. The research was carried out in the Department of English in the University of St. Andrews.

Jay Lee Parini

CERTIFICATE

I certify that Jay Lee Parini has spent nine terms of research under my direction and that he has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution of the University Court (1967, No. 1) and that he is qualified to submit the following Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

A.F. Falconer,

Professor of English.

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by

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PREFATORY NOTE

This study is largely based on the unpublished letters, notebooks, draft manuscripts, and teaching notes of Theodore Roethke made available to me through the kind permission of Mrs. Beatrice Roethke Lushington, the poet's widow. Most of this material is contained in the repository of the University of Washington, where I was offered every assistance by the staff of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department. I have also made use of valuable information gathered from letters and drafts of early poems in the possession of the library of the Pennsylvania State University. In State College, Pennsylvania, I also consulted the private collection of letters in the possession of Roethke's old friend, Professor Philip Shelley. Lastly, important, but less easily documented information for this study was acquired in the course of many interviews with friends of the late poet. Conversations with Professor W. Edward Brown of Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, have shed a great deal of light on the poet's early career. Professor Shelley of Penn State has similarly given me a great deal of insight into the crucial decade of Roethke's life (1943-1953). And in Seattle, Washington, where Roethke spent the last fifteen years of his life, I was fortunate to have met a good number of Roethke's former students, friends, and colleagues. But I must especially thank Professor David Wagoner of that university for his kindness to me on my visit to the Pacific Northwest.

I.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Quest for Paradise

> The greatest poverty is not to live
> In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
> Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
> After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
> Itself, non-physical, may, by chance, observe
> The green corn gleaming and experience
> The minor of what we feel.
>
> Wallace Stevens, Esthetique du Mal.

There is, Wallace Stevens suggests in the above epigraph, no greater glory than to live in the physical world. He would have us acknowledge and celebrate the earthly paradise and live wholly in the present. But this, for most of us, seems next to impossible. We long for the past, which is nothing but a series of blurred images; we yearn for the future, which is at best an unknown quantity. But why are we so obstinate?

Perhaps the answer lies with the dualism that keeps us from attaining what Yeats called Unity of Being. We occupy a divided world. There is the subjective reality of the personal consciousness and the objective world of everything outside of the individual mind. A child, however, does not seem to suffer from this sense of a divided world; hence, the Romantic glorification of childhood experience. Wordsworth looked to childhood as a kind of lost kingdom that must somehow be regained. Twentieth century Romantics, such as Wallace Stevens, resort to the language of psychology. The ego is subject, the world is object. And the function of poetry is to unite the inner and outer realms through metaphor, that essential technique for linking together disparate things.

The subject of this study is the American poet Theodore Roethke; the whole of his poetry is examined in the light of much new biographical information, largely derived from the vast collection of letters, notebooks, and teaching notes contained in the repository of the University of Washington. The basic argument of this study is that the central period in Roethke's

career was between 1943 and 1953, what I call the Lost Son period. A collection itself entitled The Lost Son appeared in 1948; it represents Roethke at the height of his powers as an artist and offers a key to the rest of his work. In it, the essential myth of the Greenhouse Eden unfolds. The quest pattern, involving a search for identity, occurs for the first time. And the original voice of the poet emerges in this period, only to reappear on select occasions in the later work. It was during this Lost Son period that Roethke sought nothing less than the earthly paradise of the physical world. His devotion to concrete reality was complete, although it was not without the inevitable "anguish of concreteness" that attends whatever is physical and temporal. Not until the later poetry did the quest for an otherworldly paradise begin, a longing for an eternal condition; but even in this Roethke retained a grasp of the physical world as a system of correspondences; he used the temporal world as a means to the eternal. And in doing so he joins the mainstream of the American Romantic tradition. Hence, this study also attempts to place Roethke firmly within the Romantic tradition, although the influence of the much earlier and wider Metaphysical or Meditative tradition is not neglected.

Theodore Roethke explores the depths of subjective reality in his poetry. His withdrawal into regions of the subjective imagination was nearly complete. The few words he took for his own early in his career remained with him to become symbols. The local territory of his childhood in Saginaw, Michigan, was to remain the dominant landscape in his work, though transformed thoroughly into a landscape of the mind, far removed from the actual physical reality of external nature. His boyhood fascination with miniature creatures, the little "Sleepers, numb nudgers in cold dimensions,/Beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes" would continue.[1] Also, Roethke would never step out from under the shadow of his father, Otto Roethke, a god-like figure to Theodore. He would follow his florist-father about the enormous, twenty-five acre greenhouse that was the family livelihood: the greenhouse that in time would

provide the poet with a constellation of images, a poetic universe. The open field not far from the greenhouse would become Roethke's symbol of redemption - and the primary motif for his last book, The Far Field (1963). Even the love poems of Roethke's later period represent the fulfillment of a need documented in earlier work. For example, in the poem "Pickle Belt" the poet sketches a portrait of the young man working during his summer vacation from school on the assembly line of a pickle factory, with his mind on other things:

> He, in his shrunken britches,
> Eyes rimmed with pickle dust,
> Prickling with all the itches
> Of sixteen-year-old lust.[2]

In a way, it is Roethke's greatest limitation that he did not really go beyond the arena of his childhood and adolescence for poetic material. His poetry displays none of the breadth of Yeats, his model, whose tapestry included both interior and exterior realities. Yeats, like Roethke, was ultimately interested in his own salvation, what he called Unity of Being. Yet his concern for Ireland and the life of its society was deep. He went on to assume national office in the Irish Free State later in his career. Roethke would have had none of this. A solitary man, the great issues of the Depression and the Second World War did not interest him, except in so far as they affected him personally. This is a dreadful limitation for any artist, especially one of Roethke's talent.

Nevertheless, the world that Roethke did create and inhabit was a large one, as large as his imagination. He explored the important questions of self-discovery and redemption with a ferocity that is his own. My contention is that Roethke's poetry represents a most unusual addition to the tradition of quest literature. This quest takes on the mythic dimensions of an heroic journey, a questing for the lost paradise of Roethke's childhood Eden of the greenhouse. In the language of psychology, this quest is the search for identity, the recovery of a lost self, the lost state of blissful

union between internal and external worlds which the child experiences. It is a quest for order: Papa is Ordnung; Mother embodies the consoling feminine principle. The poet's sister, June, provides filial companionship. The greenhouse becomes sacred ground, the symbol of chaos in potentia, but under the strict control of the all-powerful Papa. Reflecting on the greenhouse in his notebooks from the perspective of middle age, the poet asks some questions of himself, and answers them forcefully:

> What was this greenhouse? It was a jungle, and it was paradise; it was order and disorder. Was it an escape? No, for it was a reality harder than the various suspensions of terror.[3]

It is tempting in the case of a poet like Roethke, whose biography plays a central role in the understanding of his poetry, to ignore the important distinctions that exist between life and art. But a poet, like other artists, can draw on anything in his experience and do with it as he pleases. It is no wonder that Plato would ban poets from his Republic because they tell lies! The truth of the imagination, like the truth of theoretical physics, stands apart from the contexts of ordinary reality. As long as internal consistency is maintained, "truth" becomes a relative proposition. Thus, I shall explore Roethke's life for clues that may increase our understanding of his works.

That any work of art should be able to stand on its internal merits is the common assumption inherited from the New Criticism; hence, they eschewed biographical criticism. However, a more balanced point of view should now be possible. Any work of art in some way reflects the mind that generated it. The critic can only benefit from biographical information which relates directly or indirectly to the work under discussion. I shall take my chances, making fullest use of biographical sources when they contribute to the understanding of a passage. But I shall not limit myself to any one strategy of criticism. Where myth and psychological modes of criticism provide useful contexts of examination, I shall make free use of their techniques. Of course, the methods of "close analysis" developed by the New Critics are indispensable

for "explication" and interpretation. However, the bias of this study will be toward biographical criticism, surveying the whole of Rothke's poetry, but concentrating on The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948) because of its central position in the Roethke canon. Although his verse ranges from the early, metaphysical lyrics of the 1930's (some of which were collected in Open House, which appeared in 1941) through the last, free verse meditations of the posthumous volume, The Far Field (1963), the fact is that The Lost Son remains the key volume. It presents Roethke at the height of his power and originality. It is the volume which informs the whole of his work.

It will be useful to formulate my thesis in terms of myth in Northrop Frye's sense of mythos, a structural organizing principle of literary form. Frye has isolated what he believes is "the basic framework of all literature", which is the story concerning the loss and regaining of identity.[4] In literature from antiquity to the Renaissance, this myth usually took the form of a quest for golden cities or lovely gardens. In his study The Earthly Paradise of the Renaissance Epic, A. Bartlett Giamatti traces the progression of this particular motif from the Ancients up to Spenser and Milton.[5] For the modern, however, this metaphor tends to assume less fantastic proportions. The quest for identity plays a major role in the poetry of Wordsworth, for example. The discovery (which he seems to have made at Alfoxden) that the present depends heavily upon recollection of the past informs this quest. Yet the old mythical framework is not completely abandoned. In "The Recluse", for example, there is the following passage:

> Paradise, and groves
> Elysian, Fortunate Fields - like those of old
> Sought in the Atlantic Main - why should they be
> A history only of departed things,
> Or a mere fiction of what never was?
> For the discerning intellect of Man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these
> A simple produce of the common day.[6]

Similarly, Yeats pursued "the holy city of Byzantium" where reconciliation and identification were possible. This was his paradisal vision of a kingdom

wholly imaginative, an artifice of eternity wherein the poet's created self, like a golden bird, rests beyond mutability in a golden cage and singing:

> Once out of Nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come.[7]

Yeats described himself as "one of those men bound to subjectivity who must by their very nature, like the spider, weave their web out of their own bowels."[8] The same could be said for Roethke. In fact, again and again Roethke acknowledged his debt to Yeats, as in the masterly sequence "Four for Sir John Davies" when he admits:

> I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;
> I take it, and I give it back again:
> For other times and other wanton beats
> Have tossed my heart and fiddled through my brain.
> Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how
> That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.[9]

Indeed, Roethke was of that breed of conscious imitators who dares to challenge his master, confidently certain of his own powers to measure up to the model standard. In a late article entitled "How to Write Like Somebody Else", Roethke said:

> In a time when the romantic notion of the inspired poet still has considerable credence, true "imitation" takes a certain courage. One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with papa. In my own case, I should like to think I have over-acknowledged, in one way or another, my debt to Yeats.[10]

There are, of course, large differences of style and content that separate Roethke from Yeats. But there are enough obvious similarities to make this relationship interesting and important to the student of Roethke's poetry. Both poets summoned the high, rhetorical style, although Roethke would experiment outside of this tradition frequently, sometimes dissolving sense into nonsense in an effort to suggest the non-rational experience of the unconscious mind. Both poets developed a pattern of elemental symbolism drawn from nature, but diluted and stylized: a special "Nature" evoked by a

system of words that acted as landmarks for various moods, akin to Emerson's "luminous generalities". Ellman says of Yeats: "Waves, woods, winds, and stars were subject to his special meaning and correspondence."[10] This habit of mind provided Roethke with a context he could progressively enlarge. Beginning with symbols appropriated from his boyhood around the greenhouse, he would widen his circle of reference slowly - but never going very far from home, always on a quest for that idyllic state of Unity of Being that a child assumes naturally. Here, Roethke differs radically from Yeats. He sought no artificial kingdom. Roethke wanted to repossess a concrete state lost in the natural motion of time. To do this, he probed deeper and deeper into the morass of memory. Searching through the notebooks which Roethke kept with diligence from 1930 to his death in 1963, one discovers to what a high degree he was conscious of this quest into the past. He observes: "To write about one's past is not to escape but to understand the present". And again: "I go back because I want to go forward".[11] Then there is the following jotting taken from a notebook dated July, 1945: "All the present has fallen: I am only what I remember".[12]

Roethke understood the near impossibility of recapturing the past, of course; he knew the psychological risks involved in this regressive journey. Comparing his quest with Yeats's - he once scribbled into his notebook: "Yeats had a twilight: I have a jungle".[13] But he also observed that this jungle was a paradise as well. "It was both order and disorder. It was a reality harder than the various suspensions of terror." Perhaps a better comparison could be made with William Blake. Two paradisal enclosures may be discovered in Blake's personal mythology. Eden represents the highest conceivable state which can be attained. But Roethke's "greenhouse Eden" is more like the lower paradise of Blake's Beulah. The strange land of Beulah is that "married land" sung by the prophet Isaiah, a state of glory where "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shall be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married".[14] In the

Pilgrims' Progress, John Bunyan places Beulah between the perilous Enchanted Ground and the glorious Celestial City. Beulah is on the rim of heaven, but not in heaven itself. Translated into the mythology of Blake, Beulah is very like the greenhouse that Roethke portrays in The Lost Son and in his notebooks: a state of perilous suspension where order is always threatened by chaos and light by darkness. Chaos, or the state of excessive self-absorption, is represented by Ulro in Blake's system. Beauty becomes terror and creativity becomes destructiveness in this living Hell. But Eden, the final paradise, can be seen from Beulah as the Promised Land of Canaan could be seen from the top of Mount Nebo by Moses. And so with Roethke, the greenhouse jungle can lead up or down. It is a selva oscura of the mind out of which there is no clear path.[15]

The desire to associate or identify with a lost condition of bliss stems from the natural cleavage between subject and object that has already been discussed. Wallace Stevens suggests that men are driven to analogical thinking in poetry because they are trying to overcome this dissociation.[16] Those rare moments when we feel we are part of what we know represent the ideal state of identification. Metaphor and its exponent, myth, are part of that search for unity. The quest for a lost kingdom, for example, is such a myth. The various phases of separation and identification along this mythical cycle appear in any number of literary modes - from the all-encompassing epic to the slightest lyric. This myth occupies the main stream of romance literature from earliest times through such English authors as Spenser, Milton and the Romantics. And Roethke is, by way of Blake and Yeats, a part of this tradition.[17] This becomes evident in his longer poems, where the quest motif often takes on the central role. However, as a modern, Roethke's quest is not anything like that of Spenser's Red Cross Knight; there is none of the dependence on Christian mythology that supports Milton's Paradise Lost. Instead, Roethke's quest is into the hinterlands of memory, that "pure serene of memory in one man".[18] He makes an effort to transcend in his final period (1953-1963)[19] the alienated state of self-obsession, "the long journey out

of the self". He seeks after what Stevens identified as a primary state, such as childhood, when the gulf between subject and object was not yet apparent, when interior and exterior commingled. Such a state Roethke describes at the excited climax of "A Field of Light":

> I could watch! I could watch!
> I saw the separateness of all things!
> My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
> The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
> There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing
> a windbreak of cedars,
> And a bee shaking drops from a wind-soaked honeysuckle.
> The worms were delighted as worms.
> And I walked, I walked through the light air;
> I moved with morning.[20]

2. Romantic Theory

The poetry of Theodore Roethke reflects the continuing influence of Romanticism in the twentieth century. His poetic credo harks back to German Romantic theory and Coleridge, though Roethke's personal sources for these ideas were not so exotic. In this system the poet is vates or prophet. He is also the hieratic guardian of the inner temple, a priest of the imagination. Roethke believed himself possessed, even mad; and he treasured his madness, declaiming in one well-known poem: "What's madness but nobility of soul/At odds with circumstance?"[1] In other words, the artist only appears mad in the eyes of an unsympathetic society. The poet, in the romantic conception of that role, is an outsider. He is possessed, like Blake, with that essential creative Energy celebrated in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy" and "Energy is Eternal Delight".[2] This Energy may be the source of the poet's gift. In any case, the image of the poet as an inspired madman on the skirts of society is a basic Romantic tenet, although the notion of divine inspiration goes back to ancient Greece. Socrates told Ion that poets "compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed".[3] Shelley echoed this notion, of course, in the "Defense of Poetry" with the assertion that poetry comes not by labour, but

by the compelling afflatus of the genius within, whose visitations are "elevating and delightful beyond all expression".[4] Likewise, in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads of 1800, Wordsworth associates the excitement of composition with that strange, overwhelming joy which is the source of poetry. Although his diction appears less ebullient than Shelley's, the implications are similar. Wordsworth places the poet above other men, calling him one "...endowed with a more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness... pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him..."[25]

Roethke's ideas on the nature of poetry and poetic composition are revealed in the numerous, though unsystematic and often impulsive, statements about the art of poetry in his notebooks. He wrote very little prose criticism. Nevertheless, Roethke's few pieces of interesting prose are collected in a slim volume of Selected Prose.[6] This collection of essays reveals a poet absorbed in the technical aspects of his profession, a dedicated craftsman. Poetry was plain hard work for Roethke. His notebooks are a startling testament to his life-long battle with the language. Dozens of drafts exist for most of his good poems. Hundreds of poems were cast aside for one reason or another. Indeed, Roethke, unlike many great poets, had almost no interests beyond those relating directly or indirectly to verse composition. Naturally, he sometimes faced the bleakness which accompanies having too much of anything. Two markings in his notebooks for July, 1945, reveal something of this:

> Am I saying anything new when I say that poetry
> Is difficult: heart-breakingly so?
>
> A bleakness about poetry-writing: like getting
> to the factory at seven in the morning.[7]

Nevertheless, even the Romantics of the early nineteenth century acknowledged the need for craftsmanship. Coleridge stressed this point over and again. And the mere fact that much of Byron's verse was Augustan with regard to style suggests that perhaps Shelley overstated his case. Inspiration is important,

of course. Yet long hours of meditation have always been a prelude to the sudden clarity of vision which poets call "inspiration". For Roethke, meditation was essential to poetry. He spoke of how "after long meditation, the mind opens up with a sudden burst, and all things appear in a clear light".[8] And he defined poetry as "..the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision".[9] Roethke worked hard to achieve the effect of spontaneous excitement in his verse. He wrote his first drafts spontaneously and, especially later in life, used methods of free association; but his final versions were hammered to perfection. There is no verbiage in any of his work. That Roethke was thoroughly aware of his role as craftsman is obvious in an "Open Letter" to his readers which originally appeared in 1950; he writes that the poet

> in order to be true to what is most universal in himself, should not rely on allusion; should not employ many judgment words; should not meditate (or maunder). He must scorn being "mysterious" or loosely oracular, but be willing to face up to genuine mystery. His language must be compelling and immediate: he must create an actuality. He must be able to telescope image and symbol, if necessary, without relying on the obvious connectives: to speak in a kind of psychic shorthand when his protagonist is under great stress. He must be able to shift his rhythms rapidly, the "tension". He works intuitively, and the final form of his poem must be imaginatively right. If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language; the "meaning" itself should come as a drastic revelation, an excitement. The clues will be scattered richly - as life scatters them, the symbols will mean what they usually mean - and sometimes something more.[10]

To dwell on the many ways in which Roethke was indebted to Romantic theories of poetry would result in tedious elaboration. One can more usefully discuss aspects of Roethke's debt to this tradition as it is seen within the poems themselves. But to clarify what I mean by "Romanticism" I shall outline what I take to be the principle tenets of this persistent movement. My sources are those suggested by M.H. Abrams in his handbook of

Romantic theory: The Mirror and the Lamp. My working assumption is that Romanticism still persists in a form not radically different from its original manifestations in the first decades of the early nineteenth century in England and later in America. Granted, any movement which survives for a long time undergoes changes. But the back-bone is the same, even if the features are drastically altered. Any poet writing in this century, whether consciously allied with the movement, like Yeats or Roethke, or in overt defiance, like Eliot, must inevitably begin from the common ground of first assumptions about the nature of art which are this century's inheritance from the last.

English Romanticism has its roots deep in German philosophy, from Leibnitz through Kant to the Schlegels and Schelling, but no purpose would be served by exploring this connection.[11] Roethke, though a Prussian by blood-line, knew little of the language, and his reading in philosophy was without systematic interest. Wordsworth and Coleridge are the real source for English and American poetics. Although it is doubtful whether Roethke's knowledge of either poet was profound, he certainly appreciated the work of the main Anglo-American Romantic writers.[12] These connections will be explored as they come up in the form of influences on specific poems. But assuming that Wordsworth and Coleridge are indeed the prime sources for this modern Romanticism, the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads of 1800 and the Biographia Literaria can be taken as manifestos. Following Abrams, I intend to base my outline on principles extracted from these texts. There are, then, five rudimentary ideas or notions about the nature of poetry and how it is produced that appear constant:

(1) There is A.W. Schlegel's idea that poetry is expression, not imitation, from ex-pressus and ex-primere (to press out). This poetry is by definition self-centred. The poet writes from his own experiences, "squeezing" something which is deep inside him out into the open. Thus, we find Roethke quoting Yeats's friend, the poet A.E., in his notebooks: "The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep of a life does it spring"(sic).[13]

We discover him admonishing himself in another passage, saying: "Make your poetry the reflection of your life".[14] And we discover the strange belief that "the poet writes the history of his own body" in another note.[15] But the most complete expression of this idea appears in a statement from the July notebook, 1945: "Poetry is still the natural form of self-expression".[16] Because of this notion, so much of Romantic poetry since Wordsworth has been in the lyric mode, and the lyric was the main vehicle of expression for Roethke as well.

(2) There is the notion that poetry represents a form of emotional, rather than intellectual, expression. This was a predominant belief of most nineteenth century critics (who by the beginning of Victoria's reign accepted the basic formulations of the Romantic movement as codified assumptions). John Keble, who occupied that Chair of Poetry at Oxford between 1832 and 1841, summarized this viewpoint in a review of Lockhart's Life of Scott:

> Poetry is the indirect expression in words, most appropriately, in metrical words, of some overpowering emotion, or ruling taste, or feeling, the direct indulgence whereof is somehow repressed.[17]

The twentieth century version of this idea appears in the critical writings of I.A. Richards, Roethke's teacher at Harvard. Richards distinguishes between the "symbolic" or "scientific" use of words and the "emotive" use. The former is descriptive, mainly "for the support, the organization, and the communication of references; the latter is used "to express or excite feelings and attitudes". He calls poetry, "the supreme form of emotive language".[18] Roethke, a life-long admirer of Richards, once wrote in his teaching notes the following proposition: "Poetry -- the emotional equivalent of thought".[19] He liked to think of himself as an intuitive, not an intellectual, poet. In the midst of taking notes in Kierkegaard, Roethke once stopped to ask himself: "Why, damn it, do I insist on being a thinker? Why can't I just be a refiner of the medium, like Herrick, and let it go at that?"[20] And again, he asks himself: "With good intuitive equipment, why think?"[21] He depended rather heavily on the sureness of his emotions as a guide, saying: "I like to think

a thing part way through and feel the rest of the way".[22] The problem of "emotive" versus "scientific" language, as posed by Richards, interested Roethke. In 1947, he copied out the following passage from Samuel Becket:

> Poetry is essentially the antithesis of metaphysics: metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual; Poetry is all passion and feeling and animates the inanimate; Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals. Poets are the sense philosophers, the intelligence of humanity.[23]

In the manner of Romantic poets from Blake to Yeats, Roethke distrusted the faculty of Reason. In one poem he wrote: "Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!"[24] And in the beautiful villanelle "The Waking" he said: "We think by feeling. What is there to know?"[25] There can be no doubt: Roethke believed that poetry was the sensuous and concrete expression of emotion, in some way in contrast to the intellectual, abstract disciplines of metaphysics and science. The notion of "concreteness" plays a central role in Roethke's poetics. It represented the immediate, hard reality that he sought for in his poems, a reality apprehended by the senses and transformed by the imagination. Thus, he declares in his notebooks that "It's the essence of poetic thought to be concrete".[26]

(3) There is the idea that poetry is rhythmical language, depending heavily on concrete imagery (in accordance with what I have said above) and that poetic diction is, as Hopkins once claimed, "the current language heightened". Wordsworth argued, probably for all time in his Preface, against the belief that ornamental figures and meters enhanced the aesthetic pleasures of poetry. There should be no need for the poet to deviate from ordinary language, i.e. the language of speech, for the elevation of style if the poetic subject is properly chosen. The subject itself, then, should naturally lead the poet "to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures".[27] So we discover among Roethke's teaching notes for a class in creative writing the following advice to his would-be poets: "Plain words do

the trick, yet there must be a sufficient heightening, an edge to the common speech, some stepping up of rhythm".[28] And again: "Stick to observation: Look at things. Study what seems to be commonplace and it ceases to be commonplace".[29] As a meditative poet, Roethke's method was that of focusing the attention on the subject wholly, allowing the natural variety of simple language and the rhythms of speech to express or embody the feelings aroused. His poetry testifies to the success of this method. It employs a rich, though simple, diction. In fact, the vocabulary is startlingly limited to the few words taken for his own use and used over and again until they became luminous personal symbols. The rhythms of Roethke's poetry are strong and deliberate, much like those of Donne or Yeats. This is as true for his free verse as for those based on traditional metrical patterns. His poetry displays special dedication to what Frank Kermode has called "the romantic image". Roethke says in the teaching notes: "the Romantic image often attempted to approximate or suggest the quality of the thing itself". But the image is not merely pictorial representation, rather it represents "a unification of disparate ideas and emotions, a complex presented spatially in time".[30] Therefore, we move on to the concept of imaginative unity and the theory of organic form.

(4) It was essentially Coleridge's idea that the imagination serves as the unifying faculty in the creative process. "The poet," he said, "described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power...reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities..."[31] That art involves a "reconciliation of opposites" is central to romantic theory. From the triadic structure of Hegel's dialectics to the material dialectics of Marx, the notion of a dynamic conflict of opposites resolved into a higher third underlies a great portion of nineteenth century thought. This was all part of the withdrawal from earlier mechanistic ideas about the universe and the movement towards a theory of organicism. One of the earliest sources of

this idea was J.G. Herder's essay "On the Knowing and Feeling of the Human Soul" (1778) where the life process of a plant is studied:

> Behold yon plant, that lovely structure of organic fibres! How it turns and rotates its leaves to drink the dew which refreshes it! It sinks and twists its roots until it stands upright; each shrub, each little tree bends itself toward fresh air, so far as it is able; the blossom opens itself for the advent of its bridegroom, the sun... With what marvellous diligence a plant refines alien liquors into parts of its own finer self, grows, loves...then ages, gradually loses its capacity to respond to stimuli and to renew its power, dies...[32]

Translated into the realms of human development, the life cycle of the natural organism becomes an appropriate metaphor of the imagination - in Coleridge's sense of that term, which is also Roethke's. The artist, like the plant, turns all diverse, alien elements into a single, unified whole. This concept was vividly reformulated for this century by T.S. Eliot. Describing the process of imaginative unity, he said:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet, these experiences are always forming new wholes.[33]

The interaction of subjective with objective worlds provides that essential conflict of opposites necessary to art. The motive for art, ultimately, is the desire to reconcile what is inside with what is outside. Thus, we discover in Roethke's notebooks Blake's famous declaration: "Without contraries there is no progression".[34] And again the firm statement that "A great deal of art arises out of opposition".[35] Turning to his former teacher, I.A. Richards, the following appears in Roethke's teaching notes: "Poetry (achieves) an integration of experience - what Richards called 'organization'. A fusion of all the forces of man".[36] In the notebooks, he describes the function of art as "form that culminates in Unity of Being".[37]

And he describes the part played by the eye in Wordsworthian terms: "The eye, of course, is not enough. But the outer eye serves the inner eye, that's the point".[38] The inner eye, where the imagination "sees", is defended; so the imagination itself is defended: "Every attempt to minimize or ridicule the free use of the imagination is a little murder of human life".[39] Roethke's life-long defence of the imaginative realm became something of an heroic struggle against the forces around him which he regarded as invidious or in some way detrimental to his art. He often harangued with great contempt and despair about "the half-men all around us".[40] The terrible chaos of the unimaginative that threatened the orders of his Greenhouse Eden was the basic enemy. The artist, he believed, struggles against this force and those "half-men" who depend too heavily on the literal perceptions of the senses and fear what he called "that progress from the literal to the imaginative".[41] Thus, we are brought to the function or purpose of art.

(5) There is the prominent Romantic notion that poetry has some definite purpose. According to Horace, the aims of poetry were threefold: to teach (*prodesse*), to please (*delectare*) and to move (*movere*). But with the Romantics, the ends of art became more elaborate and pretentious. Wordsworth expressed what was to become a commonplace in the nineteenth century: "The end of Poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure". And its effect is "to rectify one's feelings", to widen their sympathies, and to develop the capacity for "being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants".[42] No doubt, Blake (who stands much closer to Roethke than does Wordsworth) laid even greater stress on the ends of his art. His struggle was nothing less than to free man from the death of literalism and lead him into the life of imaginative, symbolical thinking. Coleridge, whose concepts of the Primary and Secondary Imaginations provide a proto-type for modern psychological theories of art, was an advocate of the healing power of art. For him, art was the great reconciler of opposites. And likewise, for his inheritor, I.A. Richards, art reconciles "diverse impulses" and makes clear vision possible. In the *Principles of Literary*

Criticism he argues:

> In ordinary life a thousand considerations prohibit for most of us any complete working out of our responses; the range and complexities of the impulse-systems involved is less; the need for action, the comparative uncertainty and vagueness of the situation, the intrusion of accidental irrelevancies, inconvenient temporal spacing - the action being too slow or too fast - all these obscure the issue and prevent the full development of experience. We have to jump to some rough and ready solution. But in the "imaginative experience" these obstacles are removed. Thus, what happens here...may modify all the rest of life.[43]

So with Roethke, he believed that poetry brings about "an integration of experience - what Richards called "organization".[44] His poetry is evangelical. The idea of salvation underlies his art. The effects of frenzy and intense passion or rage that nearly always accompany his work are the product of this drive. He believed that his art provided the necessary relief from the chaos of the external world and brought "shape" to his "random joy".[45] One of his recurrent themes was that desire and loneliness - two great contributing factors to man's unhappiness - are relaxed, if not relieved, in sexual love. Roethke suggests a "better way" for his readers at every turn, although the voice of the didactic is rarely obtrusive. The young protagonist of "The Lost Son", for example, plunges into the abyss of subconscious experience and emerges, like the mythical "hero with a thousand faces", with a fierce desire to tell what strange sights he has seen and what knowledge he has gathered. But the lessons offered remain oblique. He is never overtly didactic.

In his notebooks, Roethke often reminded himself of the importance of meditation for making "that progress from the literal to the imaginative", such as "when after long meditation, the mind opens up with a sudden burst, and all things appear in a clear light".[46] Light is always redemptive in Roethke. Like St. Paul, Roethke believed he had "seen the light". But he is not sure exactly what light this is or where it came from. Thus, at the end of "The Lost Son", he asks:

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?

No one, he would suggest, can say for sure. But the final truth of his redemption is embodied in the magnificent last lines of "Four for Sir John Davies":

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

3. The Poetry of Meditation

It is not enough merely to say that Roethke wrote in the tradition of Romanticism. This is probably misleading. For there is first the lamentable truth about the term "Romanticism". Although one may isolate certain characteristics of poetry written in this tradition, such as I have just attempted to do above, there is no certainty that contradictory claims will not be discovered here and there in major Romantic criticism. The great historian of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, has commented that the "categories which it has become customary to use in distinguishing and classifying "movements" in literature or philosophy and in describing the nature of the significant transitions which have taken place in taste and in opinion, are far too rough, crude, undiscriminating - and none of them so hopelessly so as the category "Romantic".[1] The origins of the "movement" remain obscure, although various scholars have tried to isolate the source in such diverse territories as Plato, St. Paul, Bacon and Rousseau.[2] However, my concern is with Romanticism as it has affected poetry in the twentieth century, and I think that some purpose will have been served by my brief outline of characteristics.

Secondly, it should be remembered that Theodore Roethke's poetry is specifically mid-twentieth century American, and I should not bind him to a particular tradition without sufficient cause. However, to study the bright outlines of his poetry against the darker back-drop of Romanticism should serve the end of clarity. For Roethke, like nearly all other poets of this century, digested the basic assumptions of Romantic theory early in his career. His model, the great model for modern poets, was Yeats. And Yeats's

roots go deep into the nineteenth century of those writers whom Graham Hough prematurely called "the last romantics", after Yeats himself had described his own generation as such. Even T.S. Eliot, a self-professed "classicist", depended heavily on Coleridge for his basic aesthetics. Pound began as an "imagist", and was profoundly influenced by the Symbolists, both (according to Frank Kermode) off-shoots of Romanticism, transmitted by Arthur Symons. (The Symbolist Movement in Literature, 1899) and T.E. Hulme (Speculations, 1924). This is, again, in spite of the fact that Hulme was a dedicated anti-Romantic, believing that the Humanism of the Renaissance represented an historical crisis, resulting in the confusion of human and divine realms, ultimately producing the relativism in ethics, religion, and literature that he deplored.[3] Hulme's connection with the mainstream of Romantic thought stems from his theory of the image, a psychological theory later picked up and developed by I.A. Richards. The Image is the means of communication, much as in meditation - where the image is fixed in the mind and examined by metaphor. Poems deal with a kind of truth, Hulme argued, that is not dependent on reason, but on intuition. It is in this sphere that the poet claims special powers, being a "man who is emancipated from the ways of perception engendered by action" or normal perception.[4] One could go on elaborating the connections between Romantic thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but this has been done thoroughly by Kermode and others.[5] The point is that the study of Roethke against the tradition of Romantic poetry should prove illuminating, as long as one remembers the distance of time and culture separating Roethke from the first real "Romantics" of English poetry.

The truth of the matter is that Roethke was learning his craft at a time when Metaphysical, not Romantic, poetry was popular. The revival of interest in the school of Donne was, of course, set off by Professor Grierson's edition of Donne and his popular selection of poems from the "Metaphysical school".[6] Eliot, and later Auden, were among the leading poets to subscribe to this new taste. Professor Grierson, however, set the tone for this period when he described Donne as "a creature of feeling and imagination, seeking

expression in vivid phrase and complex harmonics, whose acute and subtle intellect was the servant, if sometimes the unruly servant, of passion and imagination".[7] And so the stress on the union of thought and feeling, made much of by Eliot and his admirers, entered modern English poetry, accompanied by an affection for intellectual agility and unusual metaphors. The seventeenth century penchant for the "metaphysical conceit" followed naturally from this predilection for witty verse. In America, much the same interests prevailed. The poets of the Thirties looked to the "Old World" for direction, as they always had. Eliot and Pound were in any case Americans by birth and background, undermining the hopes of any scholar who should like to keep the literature of America and Britain distinct, if not mutually exclusive. Clearly, the broad traditions of English literature are as much a part of Roethke's background as are his unique American ties. His interest in writing poetry that might be called "Metaphysical" arose out of the general enthusiasm for such verse that was in the cultural air when he first began writing (about 1928). Quite naturally, he imitated those writers who attracted critical attention in America at that time: Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, Stanley Kunitz and Rolfe Humphries. These poets comprised the bulk of the American revival of Metaphysical verse. And later I shall describe their influence on Roethke in some detail.

However, the <u>direct</u> relationship between the Metaphysical and Romantic traditions in English poetry should be stressed at this point. Louis L. Martz, a scholar of astonishing talent (and a student of Roethke's) has shown that these schools are related by way of meditation and the techniques of meditation popular in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[8] In <u>The Poetry of Meditation</u> he describes the threefold pattern of the <u>Spiritual Exercises</u> of Ignatius Loyola (1535), which provided poets such as Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan and Marvell with a poetic method which has survived into the present. And the essentials of this method are not difficult.

Meditation is a <u>process</u> which was originally developed for religious purposes, although the application of its techniques to secular ends is what

interests the literary scholar. Traditionally, meditation was useful as a prologue to devotion because it called into play the "three powers of the soul" - memory, understanding, and the affective will. The meditator is told by Ignatius to begin with a concrete image, which "will consist of seeing with the mind's eye the physical place where the object that we wish to contemplate is present".[9] This act of concrete imagination is called "composition of place". In order to call up in the mind's eye vivid, physical images such as Ignatius recommends, the faculty of mental vision must operate at a level of intensity uncommon to ordinary experience. The memory has to be searched for the appropriate image. There is no room for idle abstractions. The image must be summoned, then <u>contemplated</u>. Hence, the second faculty comes into play: the understanding. The method of Ignatius demanded rigorous analysis of the subject at hand by way of analogy. Thus, metaphor and the "metaphysical conceit" assume a central role. This was the intellectual side of the process which attracted the Metaphysical poets. And finally, there is the movement outward toward God which Ignatius referred to as the Colloquy. Translated into poetic terms, this comprises the resolution of a poem and is marked by a sudden shifting of tone, a reconciliation, a transformation of image into symbol.

Examples of this type of poem are numerous. Herbert's "Life", for instance, contemplates the evanescence of life in terms of a flower:

> I made a posie, while the day ran by:
> Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
> My life within this band.
> But time did beckon to the flowers, and they
> By noon most cunningly did steal away,
> And withered in my hand.[10]

The poet continues to meditate on the similarities between the poet and the flower. Identification takes place: "My hand was next to them, and then my heart". And finally, the poet takes consolation in the fact that he is so like the flower and muses that if his scent should be as good as that of the posie, it doesn't matter if it be as short. This is what Roethke called, after Blake, that "progression from the literal to the imaginative". The

object, through meditation, becomes a symbol, taking on new dimensions.

The Romantic parallel should be obvious. Coleridge in the Biographia Literaria praises Donne, Herbert, and Sir John Davies (who was a particular favourite of Roethke's). At the end of the fourteenth chapter, he points to a poem by Davies as an example of how the poet "brings the whole soul of man into activity". "He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power exclusively appropriated to the name of imagination." Coleridge explains that the imagination serves to reconcile opposites - the great struggle of the Metaphysicals:

> This power, first put in action by the will and understanding and retained under their irremissive though gentle and unnoticed, controul..., reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative...[11]

Coleridge then quotes Sir John Davies, claiming that what Davies says of the soul could equally be said of the imagination:

> Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
> Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange
> As fire converts to fire the thing it burns,
> As we our food into our nature change.

And so, Metaphysical poetry performs with exactness and in the idiom of its own time the necessary reconciliation of opposites. Also, it makes that progress from literal to symbolic vision. Romantic poetry does much the same in a different idiom. A fine example in the continuing tradition of meditative verse would be Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper". The poet holds the woman firmly in the mind with a vivid image:

> Behold her, single in the field,
> You solitary Highland Lass!
> Reaping and singing by herself.[12]

He compares her voice, in the following stanzas, to the Nightingale of Arabia and the Cuckoo-bird of the farthest Hebrides. Comparison is thus made by the use of metaphor, albeit less extreme metaphors than Donne or Herbert might

have chosen, but the method is similar. After asking whether indeed the melancholy song of the Highland lass is one of ancient sorrows of "old, unhappy, far off things" or if it is a humble description of an immediate, temporal sorrow, the poet elevates the singer and her song to a new, imaginative level. Meditation has kindled the various powers of the soul, and the object is seen afresh, lit with emotion:

> Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
> As if her song could have no ending;
> I saw her singing at her work,
> And o'er the sickle bending; -
> I listened, motionless and still,
> And as I mounted up the hill
> The music in my heart I bore,
> Long after it was heard no more.

Although nothing extraordinary has happened on the literal surface of the poem, a transformation has clearly taken place. The young woman and her singing have released the energies of imagination. She has become the luminous symbol of some lost state of excited feeling. The last few lines of the poem suggest the enduring quality of this image as symbol. The music continues long after it has physically passed as the poet "remembers" or meditates on the image, hence the distinctive quality of this poem as a form of meditation.

The practice of meditation is central to modern poetry. Although the Metaphysicals and such late Romantics as Hopkins or Eliot were consciously imitating formal religious patterns, meditation, as Professor Martz suggests, is not a subject, but a process; therefore, it can be adapted to earthly things: e.g. "The Solitary Reaper". He cites St. Francois de Sales on the distinction between mere thought and meditation:

> Every meditation is a thought, but every thought is not a meditation; for we have thoughts, to which our mind is carried without aim or design at all, by way of a simple musing...And be this kind of thought as simple as it may, it can never bear the name of meditation.

He explains that

> Sometimes we consider a thing attentively to learn its causes, effects, qualities; and this thought is named study. (But) when we think of heavenly things,

> not to learn, but to delight in them, that is called to meditate, and the exercise thereof meditation.

And he concludes that

> meditation is an attentive thought repeated or voluntarily maintained in the mind, to arouse the will to holy and wholesome affections and resolutions.[13]

Meditation then, on the more earthly level of Wordsworth, Wallace Stevens, or Roethke, represents close, sustained contemplation of the concrete image with the hopes of arousing either an affectionate understanding of the object or identification with it. The final effect of such an exercise is by nature calculated to produce a sense of joy or excitement. This will be clear later on when I discuss the long, meditative poems of Roethke's final volume, The Far Field.

Martz emphasizes the vital function of the memory in the process of meditation. In The Paradise Within he argues that such writers as Vaughan and Traherne actively meditated on memories of childhood for inspiration and illumination. He traces the discovery of memory as the most fruitful recourse of the poetic imagination to St. Augustine. A passage from the De Trinitate explains the reasons for this:

> All such knowledge in the mind of man, whether acquired through the mind itself, or through his bodily senses, or by the testimony of others, is provided in the store-chamber of memory; and from it is begotten a true word, when we speak what we know. But this word exists before any sound, before any imagining of a sound. For in that state the word has the closest likeness to the thing known, of which it is offspring and image; from the vision which is knowledge arises the vision which is thought, a word of no language, a true word born of a true thing, having nothing of its own but all from that knowledge of which it is born.[14]

This "word of no language" sounds very like that final "word" in Roethke's "Four For Sir John Davies". ("The word outleaps the world, and light is all.") Roethke's paradise was finally a paradise within, a created kingdom. His quest was a mental one. Following the example of many poets before him, he went back to his beginnings to discover a genuine source of illumination

and to recover what he had lost. ("I quail, lean to beginnings.")[15] The rich images that survived in his memory from the greenhouse and Saginaw, Michigan, provided him with all the material any poet could hope for, giving his quest an authentic and heartening quality enhancing its archetypal patterns. This mode of interior questing links the Romantic and Metaphysical strains with unique resolution. The poetry, like that of both traditions, describes that progress from the literal to the imaginative, from the lost paradise of childhood, through separation, back to a new interior paradise of the illumined or rediscovered self. The final stanzas of "The Renewal" provide one small example of Roethke's typical progression from meditation to celebration:

> Sudden renewal of the self - from where?
> A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine;
> I know I love, yet know not where I am;
> I paw the dark, the shifting midnight air.
> Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?
> I walk the night to keep my five wits warm.
>
> Dry bones! Dry bones! I find my loving heart,
> Illumination brought to such a pitch
> I see the rubblestones begin to stretch
> As if reality has split apart
> And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
> I find that love, and I am everywhere.[16]

II.

THE MAKING OF A POET

1. American Romantic

> The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relationship between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.
>
> Emerson, Nature

> A cloud moved close. The hulk of the wind shifted.
> A tree swayed over the water,
> A voice said:
> Stay. Stay by the slip-ooze. Stay.
>
> Dearest tree, I said, may I rest here?
> A ripple made a soft reply.
> I waited alert as a dog.
> The leech clinging to a stone waited;
> And the crab, the quiet breather.
>
> Roethke, "The Visitant"

The publication of Coleridge's Aids to Reflection in 1829 by James March, President of the University of Vermont, began the transplanting of new ideas from Europe to America that grew (within two decades) into a literature of major proportions. The reasons for this are numerous, but the essential appeal of Romanticism as a stimulus to creativity is bound up with a theme which Emerson took up from Schelling and Coleridge: that each man possessed within himself - through intuition - the whole range of potential experience. For lonely, isolated New England intellectuals, this doctrine of knowledge through reflection provided new possibilities of consciousness. And Coleridge supplied the necessary vocabulary and direction.

The themes of American Romanticism are the same as those generated by the movement elsewhere: nature as a source of divine inspiration, human aspiration and freedom, the reliance upon intuition over reason as a source of knowledge, the need to establish a concept of self, and the redemptive power of the imagination. The ideas of such great European thinkers as Schelling, the Schlegels, Kant, Coleridge and Carlyle found local expression in writers such as Sampson Reed, F.H. Hedge, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson and Emerson. These men looked forward to a new literature in America that

would reflect the immense possibilities so obviously present in a country founded on the ideals of the Enlightenment. Brownson, for instance, cited the special challenge before the American writer:

> What will be the destiny of American literature I know not, and pretend not to foretell. But this much you will permit me to say...that God in his providence has given the American people a great problem to work out. He has given it us in charge to prove what man may be, when and where he has full scope to act out the Almightiness that slumbers within him. Here, for the first time since history began, man has obtained a field and fair play.[1]

This strong sense of mission infected the whole of thinking America in one way or another, and the resulting impact on literature still dazzles the mind with its variety and scope. F.O. Matthiessen, in his classic study of this period, remarked:

> The half-decade of 1850-55 saw the appearance of Representative Men (1850), The Scarlet Letter, (1850), The House of the Seven Gables(1851), Pierre (1852), Walden (1854) and Leaves of Grass. (1855). You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality.[2]

Without doubt, mid-nineteenth century writing in America was proof that the ideas which had been flowing in steadily from the Old World were finding a rich "local habitation and a name" in the New.

The most prominent development of Romanticism in America was the Transcendentalist movement in New England. Although its influence would spread across America, affecting Whitman and others in time, the original Transcendentalists were mostly religious thinkers from New England, such as Brownson, George Ripley and Theodore Parker. These men were distinctly Protestant and the heirs of the original Puritan settlers. They believed that since all knowledge was within the reach of human reflection, no real need for the dogmatic forms of "historical Christianity" existed. Again, they offered a "Paradise within". Christianity was verified, they argued, not by superstitious demonstrations of magical power, but by its correspondence, Ripley said, with the divine spirit already within each man and available

through meditation:

> When we examine the nature which we possess, we perceive at once that it has a power of a remarkable character which seems to bear some resemblance to one of the divine attributes - the power of perceiving truth. Man has a faculty which enables him not merely to count, to weigh, and to measure, to estimate probabilities and to draw inferences from visible facts, but to ascertain and determine certain principles of original truth.

Later, in the same essay, he asserted that

> The purpose of Christianity...is to elevate the human soul to a resemblance of God, to make it a partaker of the divine nature. But this is accomplished, as we have seen, by calling forth the native powers of the soul itself, not by forcing upon it any constraint or violence from without.[3]

From there describes the evolution of a soul into the pure life of the spirit, imitating the German and English Romantics before him. But the point remains the same: everything that is needed for salvation is present within from the beginning. There is no imposition from without.

Transcendentalism expanded rapidly, led by Emerson, to embrace a multitude of philosophical, literary, and social topics. It was based on a version of Platonism harking back to Cudworth's <u>True Intellectual System of the Universe</u> and the writings of Sir Thomas Browne.[4] Anti-materialist in essence, it regarded all physical objects as symbols pointing beyond themselves to a higher realm of spiritual reality. The reality was, of course, constantly available to men who would seek it. Speaking before the Masonic Temple in Boston (January, 1842), Emerson took it upon himself to explain Transcendentalism:

> What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind has ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the sense, the second perceive that the senses are not final, and say, The senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell.

Later, he asserted that "Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors".[5] Thus, consciousness (which is necessarily subjective) becomes the sine qua non of existence. And Nature assumes the role of a system of correspondences. In the important little book Nature (1836), Emerson developed the concept of correspondences. Nature, in the Romantic fashion, is regarded as a source of inspiration and refreshment. "In the presence of nature," Emerson wrote, "a wild delight runs through man, in spite of real sorrows."[6] But nature always adjusts itself to man's deepest needs, he concludes. "Nature always wears the colours of the spirit."[7] Thus, a correspondence is established between the internal emotional state of the perceiver and the natural surroundings. In a real sense, nature becomes a system of keys (symbols) opening the world of consciousness (spirit).[8] The resulting state of ecstasy produced by the experience of nature in this light is recorded in the famous passage which follows:

> Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.[9]

Man goes back to nature to find his bearings. Total identification with the landscape leads man, through nature, back to a deeper sense of the self - the divine substance which constitutes that portion of the spirit (Universal Being) that is in every man's possession, albeit undiscovered. This theme is recurrent throughout Emerson's writings and, as we shall see, is central to the understanding of Roethke - a direct inheritor of Transcendental Idealism.

The attitude of the Transcendentalists toward language and poetry is particularly interesting. In his essay Observations on the Growth of the Mind (1826), Sampson Reed expressed an early version of American Romantic poetics:

> The use of language is the expression of our feelings and desires, the manifestation of the mind.

> But everything which is, whether animal or vegetable, is full of the expression of that use for which it is designed, as of its own existence. If we did but understand its language, what could our words add to its meaning? It is because we are unwilling to hear that we find it necessary to say so much; and we drown the voice of nature with the discordant jargon of a thousand dialects. Let a man's language be confined to the expression of that which actually belongs to his own mind, and let him respect the smallest blade that grows and permit it to speak for itself. Then may there be a poetry which is not written, perhaps, but which may be felt as a part of our own being.[10]

This contains a rudimentary version of the organic theory of creativity which Emerson developed further in his chapter on "Language" in Nature. He began with three primary assertions:

> 1. Words are signs of natural facts.
> 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
> 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.[11]

The first proposition attempts to call words back from abstraction to their origins in physical reality. Emerson elaborates: "Right means straight; wrong means twisted. Spirit primarily means wind; transgression, the crossing of a line; supercilious, the raising of the eyebrow."[12] Thus, physical, concrete reality becomes the source of correspondence or analogy. That such a theory led to an admiration of Metaphysical poetry was inevitable, and Emerson greatly favoured Donne, Herbert, Crashaw and Marvell, saying that this (the seventeenth century) is the era "in which the English language has its teeth and bones and muscles the largest and strongest".[13]

The second and third propositions contain the theory of correspondences. "Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind, and that state of mind can only be described as presenting that natural appearance as its picture."[14] This doctrine, of course, goes back to Swedenbourg. Man is instructed to return to nature in order to transcend it. Language composes and embodies the "pictures" which represent consciousness. And poetry, therefore, is the concrete expression of consciousness.

The weaknesses of this philosophy have been repeated often by Emerson's critics. Joseph Warren Beach, for example, argues that:

> ...it is true that Emerson almost invariably views nature all too blandly through the eyes of the "mind", reading it in the light of "innate ideas" and all the preconceptions of "idealism". Almost never does it occur to him that the mind may have something to learn from nature, from the world which it finds given to it from without.[15]

And without doubt, Emerson rarely found expression for his ideas in the concrete terms he so much admired. He remained a theorist, closer to his philosophical ancestors in Europe than to anything inherently American. It was left to his intimate friend and disciple, Henry David Thoreau, to bring Emerson's ethereal metaphysics back to earth. It would be wrong to say that Thoreau was a materialist, nevertheless. Joseph Wood Krutch informs us that Thoreau was "...enough of a Transcendentalist to believe that there was also some ultimate truth beyond 'phenomena' and 'actuality' which could be caught only, if at all, by grace of a direct, super-rational communication from nature to man".[16] Yet the nature of Walden is the reality of experience, at once physical and sensuous, unlike anything in Emerson. Not denying the Transcendental spirit that underlies and sustains all natural things, Thoreau records and celebrates the very fact of nature itself in his two great books, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849) and Walden (1854). A following passage from the Week illustrates this special view of nature:

> We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery, that its divine vigour has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for grovelling as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. May we not see God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were, with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely? (Italics mine)[17]

Thus, whereas for Emerson nature was a remote system of correspondences, inferior and remote, acting as a metaphor and symbol of the spiritual reality

above and far beyond it, for Thoreau, nature was at once physical and spiritual fact. Transcendence was immanence, with nature representing the full and immediate incarnation of the spirit. Hence, the emphasis in all of Thoreau's writings on close attention to the minute details of the natural world and its processes.

As Roethke was to do a century later, Thoreau kept voluminous accounts of his daily thoughts and experiences. His journal, begun just after his leaving Harvard College in 1837, was continued throughout his life, sometimes running to over three thousand words per day. His major works, such as Walden, were a distillation, selection, and re-arrangement of the spontaneous thoughts, images, and impressions that flowed over and through him in the course of a day. A keen interest in the details of nature established his reputation early as a gifted naturalist. And in fact, the literary aspects of his work were largely neglected during his lifetime, except by the close circle of discerning New England critics, like Emerson, who realized what Thoreau was doing. For Thoreau was a craftsman of the first order. Culled from some twenty-six months of meditation beside a small pond not far from Concord, Massachusetts, Walden describes the natural cycle of one year's seasons, ending appropriately with spring and the suggestion of perpetual rebirth. The philosophy behind the work is intensely personal, yet Romantic in essence. The marrow of the book is present in the following well-known paragraph from the chapter "What I live for":

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swathe and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meaning to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.[18]

His philosophy here is straightforward: confront life on its own terms, deliberately (de-librare: to weigh). Live simply, he says, in order to exploit the fullest range of experience. And reflect carefully on what you are doing and feeling, whether it be "mean" or "sublime". Then express exactly what you discover to the world; be prepared to offer a "true account" of whatever happens. Thus, you will live truly and deeply, avoiding all contemporary modes of life which are false and therefore "not life". As Roethke was ultimately to discover, the most intense forms of creative literature are always autobiographical. Thoreau knew this, and his masterpieces reflect this knowledge.

Turning briefly to the style of Walden, one should notice that the movement (as in the above passage) is slow and meditative: deliberate. The language is muscular and direct, embracing what Emerson called "Saxon precision" with "Oriental soaring".[19] Few of the thoughts offered in Walden are expressed in abstractions. Images that stay in the mind embody abstractions, making the truths they express both sensual and intellectual at the same time, e.g. "I want to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life". Ezra Pound and others have said, the image is the thought. And it should be observed that Thoreau, after Emerson, was devoted to the poets of the Metaphysical school and was fond of Browne. His undergraduate commonplace book teems with quotations from Crashaw, Herrick, Milton and Browne. His journals often begin with mottoes taken from Herbert, Burton, and Marvell. He quoted "The Pretensions of Poverty" by Carew in Walden; and he praised Quarles for bringing "able-bodied and strong-backed words into his service, which have a certain rustic fragrance and force, as if now first devoted to literature after having served sincere and stern uses".[20] This predisposition, in fact, accounts for the strong, simple, and yet wholly original flavour of the prose in Walden, and joins Thoreau firmly to the tradition of meditative writers who, although Romantic in outlook, found the manner of the Metaphysicals convenient for useful imitation. Theodore Roethke would make the same discovery and seek out the "able-bodied and strong-backed" words that made for "Saxon precision".

His strong, end-stopped lines and sharp, Metaphysical imagery were all part of his effort, "however clumsy, to bring the language back to hard, hard, even terrible statement".[21] Later, we shall examine the specific connections between Roethke, Emerson and Thoreau.

The importance of Emerson, then, is that of the theorist. He expressed the idealist point of view in terms that immediately attracted the imagination of his countrymen. Thoreau showed how far these ideas could be realized in practice and emphasized the physical, experiential aspect of the correspondences established by Emerson. But it was left to Walt Whitman, a journalist and carpenter's helper by trade, to supply a poetry which matched the ample resources and vitality of America. His endless catalogue of physical things can be misleading, however. For he is a direct product of the Transcendental movement. The world he names in his poetry is immediate and sensual. But the sense of spiritual immanence is never lost. In "These Carols", Whitman wrote:

> These carols sung to cheer my passage through
> the world I see,
> For completion I dedicate to the Invisible World.[22]

"Yet," as one recent critic has written, "the seen world hardly exists for him, because he spiritualizes everything. He is the ultimate poet of dream. When he sings of himself, he is removed from egotism precisely through inwardness; this self that he observes through imagination has become all selves; he is the multitude he called himself."[23]

Whitman wrote in a manner very close to the free verse styles of this century. His expansive rhythms suggest a kind of raw energy straining to break loose. Images are piled on one another to produce a startling and cumulative effect. Indeed, there is little else like his verse in the nineteenth century, unless one looks to parts of Browning or the Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who said of Whitman:

> ...I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind
> to be more like my own than any other man's living.[24]

And generations of American poets, from Pound to Roethke, have been forced to reckon with Whitman. Pound wrote in Lustra (1916):

> I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman -
> I have detested you long enough.
> I come to you as a grown child
> Who has had a pig-headed father;
> I am old enough now to make friends.
> It was you that broke the new wood,
> Now is a time for carving.
> We have one sap and one root -
> Let there be commerce between us.[25]

But Roethke had no such difficulties in accepting Whitman as a master. Both poets made poems out of deep, personal needs for a spiritual reality grounded in the firm, physical and sensuous multiplicity of concrete objects. Thus, in Roethke's last book, The Far Field, he openly invoked the presence of the master:

> Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues:
> For the world invades me again,
> And once more the tongues begin babbling.
> And the terrible hunger for objects quails me[26]

Physical reality pressed in upon Whitman and Roethke, creating what the latter often referred to as "that anguish of concreteness".[27] Poetry provided a sense of relief from the pressure in the act of celebration. Perhaps the best explanation of this phenomenon was offered by Wallace Stevens, another American poet whose dedication to the physical world was relentless:

> The mind has added nothing to human nature. It
> is a violence from within that protects us from
> a violence without. It is the imagination press-
> ing back against the pressure of reality.
> It seems, in the last analysis, to have some-
> thing to do with our self-preservation; and
> that, no doubt, is why the expression of it,
> the sound of its words, helps us live our lives.[28]

This conviction, that poetry is in some way a necessary activity, essential to man's survival as a fully conscious and passionate being, is deeply Romantic. It was a primary assumption held vigorously by American poets from Emerson and Whitman through Pound, Frost, Stevens and Roethke. Such poets surely represent the mainstream in American verse.

2. Early Influences

> He remembered his youth, his childhood. But most of all, he remembered his childhood. Somehow this stood out more strangely then anything. There was something very fine in the suffering young boy. He had led a hideous life, but everything was natural there. His courage at the time was a fine, moral courage. Physically, he had been afraid of everything: of dogs, of thunder. Now he was afraid of none of these things. But he was afraid of the very idea of life. Sometimes he almost hated to be alive.
>
> Theodore Roethke, Notebooks, November 6, 1930.[1]

The above extract from Roethke's earliest existing notebook reveals the dramatic, perhaps exaggerated, importance of his childhood as it appeared to him when he was a twenty-two year old graduate student. It was characteristic of him at that time to refer to himself in the third person in these notebooks (as in the early poems). This indicates his lack of self-confidence. Probably the word"hideous" is misleading, especially when it was a period of "fine moral courage"as well. As with many young writers, the idea of suffering was pleasant as a boost to his self-image as an artist. One thinks of the young Joyce in Paris who wrote home to his poor, fretful mother:

> Your order for 3s. 6p. of Tuesday last was very welcome as I had been without food for 42 hours (forty - two). Today I am twenty hours without food. But these spells of fasting are common with me now and when I get money I am so damnably hungry that I eat a fortune (1/-) before you could say knife. I hope this system of living won't injure my digestion....[2]

Still, Roethke did suffer a great deal of mental anguish that led to the many breakdowns later in his career. It is curious that such extreme is instability should be the product of a family background which was by all accounts perfectly ordinary. At least Roethke was never subject to the financial want or family warfare that often leads to emotional insecurity.

Born in the heart of the Saginaw Valley in Michigan on May 25, 1908, Roethke witnessed the decline of American wilderness and the growth of a small, vigorous, midwestern town. The lumber boom, which began in the 1840's, had lured immigrants to this remote area of the frontier from all over Europe.

An immense flow of capital from the Eastern seabord had pumped Saginaw into prosperous existence, and even as the forests dwindled, there was enough activity in the town to attract newcomers late into the century. One of these was the poet's grandfather, Wilhelm Roethke, who came to Michigan from East Prussia in 1872 with his three sons, Emil, Charles, and Otto (father to Theodore). In the old country, Wilhelm was the Chief Forester on the estate of Bismark's sister, the Grafin von Arnim. But in the new world, Wilhelm was determined to work for no one but himself. He established a market garden in West Saginaw, which eventually became the greenhouse of Roethke's "greenhouse poems". When the father died, Charles and Otto bought out their eldest brother's share in the business and took over as proprietors. But Otto was the genius behind the works. He ran the greenhouse with Prussian efficiency, and Theodore was able to watch the yearly cycle of planting and picking with a close attention not usually afforded to a child growing up in an essentially urban atmosphere. The exact observation that sets Roethke's poems apart as nature poetry of the first order can be attributed to this early experience about the greenhouse.

Quite naturally then, the young poet came to regard his father in a very special light: he was the man who made things grow. Reflecting on this period in his life, Roethke said that

> It was a wonderful place for a child to grow up in and around. There were not only twenty-five acres in the town, mostly under glass and intensely cultivated, but farther out in the country the last stand of virgin timber in the Saginaw Valley and, elsewhere, a wild area of cut-over second-growth timber, which my father and uncle made into a small game preserve.[3]

This was the enchanted garden of Roethke's childhood. It would provide him with a subject material to sustain a life of poetry and meditation. The relationship between father and son was to haunt him to the end, eventually transforming itself into a struggle between God and the self. But the pattern was the same. There remained a figure of both terror and strength, to be feared and worshipped. The cycle described was one of rebellion, despair, reconciliation and renewal.

And the proportions of the cycle were heroic.

The feminine principle in the poetry was variously to be that of sister (Roethke had one sister, June), mother, or lover. Either of these represented the abstract concept of Woman to him. This concept was often vague, ill-defined, and slightly unreal - and nothing like as important as the father image, which bore the direct stamp of Otto Roethke. The poet, in fact, rarely mentioned his mother, Helen Heubner Roethke, a woman of scant education and relatively little importance as an influence on her son. Roethke later claimed that his fine "Meditations of an Old Woman" was modelled after his mother, "whose favourite reading was the Bible, Jane Austen, and Dostoyevsky".[4] But this is inconsistent with the fact that Helen Roethke was poorly educated and, from all reports, had no interest in literature whatsoever.[5] This misinformation was probably another of Roethke's frequent exaggerations. He was notoriously addicted to spinning such tales as might improve his stature at any given moment, and he often, for example, would lay claim to friendships with Chicago gangsters. Such was his capacity for <u>creating</u> the world he wanted to live in, not the world <u>given</u> to him by chance. It is this same capacity which made the poetic vision come alive for him. But this vision was always more vivid and of greater intensity when fashioned from the raw materials of concrete reality. And thus, the Woman figure in many of Roethke's later poems became something of a composite image of all women, abstracted, dream-like. For this reason, these poems were not so successful as the "greenhouse poems", which drew on the childhood world of Saginaw, Michigan, for substance.

Inevitably, Roethke's intellectual and spiritual roots were deeply American. Recounting his interests and ambitions as an adolescent, he wrote:

> I really wanted, at fifteen and sixteen, to write a 'chiselled' prose as it was called in those days. There were books at home and I went to the local libraries (and very good ones they were for such a small town); read Stevenson, Pater, Newman, Tomlinson, and those maundering English charm boys known as familiar essayists. I bought my own editions of Emerson, Thoreau, and, as God's my witness, subscribed to the <u>Dial</u> when I was in the seventh grade.[6]

Over and again, Roethke would acknowledge the profound influences of Emerson and Thoreau, among many others. His copy of Emerson's Nature is heavily underlined, dog-eared, and annotated. Inside the title page Roethke describes Emerson as one of the "great optimists" who revealed "the possibilities of the human spirit", adding that "One of the potencies of Emerson is that he appeals to your own initiative".[7] This was important to Roethke, who would have to rely on strong initiative to become anything more than an average citizen of the Saginaw Valley. He learned from Emerson that he could discover himself in the woods, among the flowers, in the open field behind the greenhouse. But he also learned that nature should not overwhelm. At the very end of his copy of Nature he wrote: "After all, nature exists only for man, who is to be the master". Like Blake and other Romantics, Roethke would affirm the belief that without man, nature is barren. Instead, nature becomes "a steady stream of correspondences", revealing the world of the spirit to man, with "all shapes blazing unnatural light".[8]

Towards the end of his career, Roethke would look back and discern the large presences of his literary ancestors. He wrote to a friend in 1959: ".... what I want to say is that early, when it really matters, I read, and really read, Emerson (mostly prose), Thoreau, Whitman, Blake and Wordsworth".[9] He names other influences without shame, as usual, but these few, early encounters are what mattered. They are the source of his own Romantic vision and inspiration. The deep shadow of Yeats came much later, and fit easily over the shape which had already taken form.

It is difficult to say when Roethke first thought of himself as a poet. At the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where Roethke studied from 1925 to 1930, his strong literary interests were apparent. He was uncertain whether to attempt a legal or teaching career, and eventually entered the University of Michigan Law School in the autumn semester of 1929. But his lack of enthusiasm for this subject became obvious not long after, and he transferred to the Graduate School in order to continue his studies in

literature the following semester of the same year. Although he claimed no memory of having written any poems as an undergraduate, the essays which survive from his first courses at the university reveal a mature understanding of himself and a sensible, direct approach to the craft of writing:

> I write only about people and things that I know thoroughly. Perhaps I have become a mere reporter, not a writer. Yet I feel that this is all my present abilities permit. I will open my eyes in my youth and store this raw, living material. Age may bring the fire that moulds experience into artistry.

His awareness of nature is obvious as he continues:

> I have a genuine love of nature. It is not the least bit affected, but an integral and powerful part of my life. I know that Cooper is a fraud - that he doesn't give a true sense of the sublimity of American scenery. I know that Muir and Thoreau and Burroughs speak the truth.
>
> I can sense the moods of nature almost instinctively. Ever since I could walk, I have spent as much time as I could in the open. A perception of nature - no matter how delicate, subtle, how evanescent, - remains with me forever.[10]

The movement and tone of these passages are clearly reminiscent of Emerson's Nature. But the sincerity of young Roethke cannot be questioned. He would become one of the exalted celebrators of natural America, and especially of his native Michigan.

The atmosphere at Ann Arbor was, however, distinctly provincial. Most of the students at that time were drawn from local high schools in Michigan. They tried their best to maintain a social surface not unlike that of the Princeton portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel, This Side of Paradise. But the lack of sophistication that marked this small, midwestern university, both socially and intellectually, prompted Roethke to move elsewhere. He decided, in the manner of a Fitzgerald hero, to go East, picking the most prestigious university he could think of: Harvard. The ostensible reason for this, which he would repeat endlessly throughout his life, was "to work with I.A. Richard, the English critic".[11] He entered the Harvard Graduate School in the autumn term of 1931, intending to work for a Ph.D.. And though this

plan was halted by the Depression, forcing Roethke to take a teaching position at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, it was at Harvard that Roethke first received recognition as a poet.

But it cannot be said that Roethke was precocious. From 1930, when he first wrote poems seriously, to the publication of Open House in 1941, Roethke struggled with uncanny energy to find a voice and mode of expression. For the most part, the poems of this decade are inferior lyrics which display a good sense of rhythm and attention to descriptive detail, but little else. It remains, therefore, all the more astounding that the following decade, the 1940's, should discover Roethke at his peak: an original, distinctly major poet. The path of his development can be traced, but it is obscure.

Early in his career it was evident to Roethke that good poetry begins with imitation. A poet usually begins in this way, by imitating the surface features, at least, of the dominant figures of the preceding generation. In an essay written towards the end of his career, entitled "How to Write Like Somebody Else", Roethke explained that the "sensitive young are always acutely conscious of 'fashion', highly aware of the topical, the surfaces of life; there is a peculiar sheen of contemporaneousness - the phrase may be Huxley's - which seems to exist to speak to them alone".[12] And he goes on to show how the conscious act of imitation was essential to his own development. Like Eliot, he could not be bothered with the charge of plagiarism, reaffirming that "Bad poets imitate; good poets steal", by which he means that poets enjoy the freedom to take what they can use, provided they do it with authority and supply a new, vital context to give what is borrowed a life of its own.[13] Roethke then mentioned some specific models which served him at the beginning: Elinor Wylie (whom he claimed was a bad choice since Wylie herself wrote pastiche), Leonie Adams, Sir John Davies, and others, arguing that

> Imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps the method of learning to write. The ancients, the Elizabethans, knew this, profited by it, and were not disturbed. As a Son of Ben, Herrick more than once rewrote Jonson, who, in turn, drew heavily on the classics. And so on.

> The poems are not less good for this: the final triumph is what the language does, not what the poets can do, or display. The poet's ultimate loyalty - the phrase belongs to Stanley Kunitz - is to the poem.[14]

While a young teacher at Lafayette College (from 1931 to 1935), Roethke made the most important literary contacts of his career. There he met three older, established poets who would take him under their separate wings, offering friendship, criticism, and advice throughout his life. Without a doubt, the technical expertise of Roethke's first volume, Open House, can be traced to his association with these writers: Humphries, Kunitz and Bogan. It is likewise true that his own, highly original talent suffered repression in the effort to please his masters. But given Roethke's lack of emotional security, he might never have developed into a poet at all were it not for this encouragement.

Rolphe Humphries, a poet of small talent himself, was a classical scholar and translator of considerable skill. He lived near Easton (where Lafayette is located) during the summers, and Roethke sought him out with a forthright initiative that could easily be offensive. But Humphries responded favourably to the young man with such a positive interest in the craft of verse. Although the two could not have been more different on the surface - Humphries a retiring, patient scholar and Roethke a boisterous, impatient young egotist - they shared a belief in the final importance of poetry and the need for careful craftsmanship and purity of diction. And so, the relationship flourished, lasting until the sudden death of Roethke in 1963.

As usual, Roethke acknowledged any help given to him by a friend. In a remarkably instructive little essay called "Verse in Rehearsal" which appeared in 1939, Roethke showed how constructive criticism can help a developing poet to make better poems. He quotes a rough version of the poem "Genesis" which eventually appeared in Open House.

> This elemental force
> Was wrested from the sun;
> A river's leaping source
> Is locked in narrow bone.

The love is lusty mirth
That shakes eternal sky,
The agony of birth,
The fiercest will to die.

The fever-heat of mind
Within prehensile brute;
A seed that swells the rind
Of strange, impalpable fruit.

This faith surviving shock,
This smouldering desire,
Will split its way through rock
Like subterranean fire.

Humphries's comments are restrained, yet exacting. He forced Roethke to weigh every word carefully and to control his tone and argument with precision. Humphries says of the poem:

> ...It is certainly in the historical and traditional manner but you can make more use of the manner, and exploit it to better advantage than you do here. If the editors have any intelligent reason for rejecting the poem, it may be that they are fighting shy of it on the ground of its conventional rhymes: desire-fire; shock-rock; mirth-birth; sky-die. It just misses breath-death, as it were, and is pretty trite... And personally I am a little bothered by your monogamous adjective-noun combinations: six such combinations in the first eight lines, while each may be used advisedly, is a good deal to ask the reader to endure; or, if he can achieve such endurance, you condition him to a frame of mind which he has to throw off with a most violent wrench when he comes to 'strange, impalpable fruit'.[15]

Humphries, inadvertently, became the first of a long line of substitute fathers, satisfying Roethke's need for a figure of authority to submit to and impress. Kenneth Burke, whom the poet met in 1943 at Bennington College in Vermont, would even be called "Papa" -- ostensibly in jest -- but there is no doubt that Burke became another father-figure to the poet.[16] Roethke, then, constantly sought out new symbols of authority. This adds another dimension of realism to the archetypal pattern which blossoms fully in The Lost Son and become the central myth of his poetry as a whole: the search for a father.

More important to the early poetry, however, were the friendships with Stanley Kunitz and Louise Bogan. Humphries introduced Roethke to Bogan. But Roethke introduced himself, brazenly, to Kunitz -- who lived not far away in

Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The keen metaphysical edge that marked Kunitz's first volume, Intellectual Things (1930), attracted Roethke. His strong disposition toward the Metaphysical lyric was reinforced by Kunitz's successful ventures in this mode. And Kunitz soon became another confidant, assisting Humphries in the constant task of encouraging Roethke and providing sympathetic criticism. Kunitz advised Roethke against an over-dependence on tight, feminine, lyric models as used by the three leading women poets of the day: Wylie, Adams and Bogan. This advice was not taken. But Kunitz became much more of a personal friend than did Humphries, partly a result of the smaller gap in ages (Kunitz was three years older than Roethke). Still, Kunitz did assume a posture of distinct superiority to Roethke in his letters. This attitude never became oppressive, however, because Kunitz was always congenial toward Roethke. His letters read like those of an elder brother to a younger. The "truth" has been discovered and is being passed on. One example, written shortly after one of Roethke's illnesses, follows:

Lugan Green
New Hope, Pa.
Jan 31 1936

Dear Ted:

I'm terribly sorry to learn of your illness. Being flat on one's back, I know, isn't a pleasant experience - how much longer will it be? - but it's a nice opportunity for meditation, dedication, and the gathering of peace to the heart. Your poem has more strength of spirit, more <u>will</u>, than anything of yours I've seen. That consciousness of your own value and direction is something to take with you out of the sickroom.

I think you've let yourself be bothered too much by the venomous little pedants, sneerers, and fops that seem to crawl out of the floorboards and plumbing of the academies. They bite the creative because it is human. Save a drop of pity for them, but no more. The artist needs to respect life.

Really, the world is not a hopeless place, despite all the crimes of power, stupidity, and avarice. The imagination of the race, however starved and terrorized, stubbornly continues to build its commonwealth, where a man can be decent, happy, and useful. That is why we - I mean the poets - are worthy: because we have preserved that possibility, defended the mind from mediocrity and brutalization. And now there are forces in motion that need our tongue and our strength, to help in the organization and inspiration of men of good will. That is why we must go beyond Eliotism and defeatism and the plumb, salt, estranging metaphysical sea, and identify ourselves with the movement of history, the mainstream of energy in our time. I see all kinds of exciting poems,

speculations, and needs ahead.

Let me know what you think and how you feel.

I'm enclosing a poem that Canby's just taken for the Sat. Review.

Stanley[17]

The optimism and encouragement that Kunitz conveys to the ailing Roethke must have been an important factor in his recovery. Kunitz writes with a great sense of occasion, and with hindsight; his premonitions of what history would soon offer up are frightenly accurate. The strong belief in the ultimate value of the creative act as a safeguard against dehumanization reflects the romantic flavour of Kunitz's poetics. And the mere fact that Roethke and Kunitz were actively engaged in mutual criticism of each other's poetry suggests that their relationship was one of helpful interdependence: they helped to sustain one another through a difficult period of personal history for them both.[18]

But Roethke was really making slow progress toward maturity as an artist. He knew this, and on May 25, 1936, he wrote to Louise Bogan:

> ...Just twenty-eight years ago today little Theodore came into the world. Touching, isn't it? I've never thought much about the passage of time over my flesh, but this time it really gets me down. Twenty-eight and what have I done? No volume out and I can't seem to write anything. You can say what you want, but <u>place</u> does have a lot to do with productivity. Hell, I don't care what happens to me, - whether I go nuts or my entrails hang out; but I can't stand being so mindless and barren as I've been.[19]

Bogan, like Humphries and Kunitz, was an established poet and critic. Her work appeared with regularity in <u>The New Yorker</u> and other journals; and she took a special interest in young Roethke, who admired her verse and was so obviously influenced by her poetry. She, too, offered detailed and patient critical comments on his poems. One letter, dated 1935, includes a long list of such comments and a few characteristic passages follow:

"I sought a measure for your subtle being..."

> Good up to the sestet and unimpressive from then on. You can't get tired when you're writing a sonnet.

Epidermal Macabre

In this you show what you really can do in the epithet line. "The cloak of evil and despair." Swell.

"The veil long violated by/ Caresses of the hand and eye." That's you and nobody else.

Final note

I'd work like hell for texture: sets of sounds running throughout an entire poem. For example, if you examine "Italian Morning" you will see that it is built on l sounds, and that circle in the first line is completed by marble in the last. And I'd write some poems on situations in reality, such as the situation of being stung by a bee, or a hornet. (Things can happen to other people, too).[20]

These crisp, informal comments reveal an acutely critical mind at work. A further letter, dated 9 September, 1935, reveals the network of mutual criticism that Roethke enjoyed among Humphries and Bogan. The pains-taking attention to craftsmanship that obsessed Roethke can be seen as well in Bogan's letter. The poem being criticized toward the end of the letter is "Open House", which became the title poem of Roethke's first volume six years later:

Dear Ted:

Well, that's something like it! It's a good a piece as you have done to date, and it sounds like you, and it sounds like a poem, the two ultimate tests. And it sounds felt, not written. Great, lovey. Splendid. Now I'll go for the last few lines, and you must realize that Rolfe and I do this sort of thing all the time with each others works, and mutual criticism often results in mutual improvement, so don't think I'm treating you like a novice, for I'm not. To illustrate R.'s methods with me, I will quote you an eight line and about fourteen syllable lyric, torn off by me last month. In its first form, it had a lamp that had to be lit in it, and the 2nd. line was different, undsw. (sic). Well, Rolfe attacked it, one evening when he was here, and for a week we wrote and re-wrote it, knowing all the time that it was only an eight line, fourteen syllable poem, not much damn good in any case. Variant readings ran through the mail like wild, and after all this fuss, I put it in a drawer and forgot about it. But you see that such things can happen, and not be tampering...

LINES WRITTEN ON COMING TO LATE IN THE AFTERNOON

My God, Louise
Here it is night!
Snap on the light

Snap on the light
And write out plain

Again with labour,
Written as heard,
Set the fit word
To its fit neighbour.

Now to tackle your last lines:

In language fit and pure
I stop the lying mouth

is perfect, really fine. But I don't like lyric cry: it's a cliche as old Malcolm would say. And it seems to me what you need in the last line is a synonym for open or apparent, as opposed to the tongue-less idea. A fine sounding word meaning apparent would, to my mind, bring the intensity of the last stanza to a practically unbearable point of crisis, and that, my dear, is as you know, the great triumph of the short lyric: that it can be brought up, at the end, into a sound that tears the heart in twain. Of course, you could have it, as you suggested: This is my (something) cry, and then, My rage, my agony. That is what you were working toward, I think. Or you could delete the colon after mouth, and say I stop the lying mouth, With something or other, something or other (sic). I like the colon after that swell line, however. I leave the job of writing the penultimate line to you - nice of me, isn't it, - and I go back to a word meaning apparent that could be clapped in front of agony to make the last line. And here are all the words the thesaurus gives: conspicuous, manifest, definite, explicit, apparent, notable, notorious, stark-staring, literal, plain-spoken, producible, and above board. (I don't really think that above board would do, but some of the others might!) Then go ahead, my dove. It's your poem after all.[21]

This extraordinary, informally charming, pains-taking criticism from Louise Bogan must have been of great comfort to the insecure young artist who had yet to publish a volume of his own. Roethke was being included in a circle of highly competent craftsmen who believed firmly in what they did. The references to Rolphe Humphries in the first paragraph of the letter point out the intimacy that these poets shared as artists. The close attention to the smallest points of punctuation in the last part of Bogan's letter suggest that Roethke shared a keen interest in the same detail. And this would never leave him. He was always a conscious craftsman above all else, never the wilful demiurge that he often pretended to be in later years.

These three, then: Humphries, Kunitz, and Bogan, served Roethke through the Thirties as models, friends, and critics. Because of this, perhaps, Roethke continued to write the short, Metaphysical lyric throughout the decade. Most

of these here cryptic, brief titles in the manner of Wylie, Begum and others: e.g. Roethke's "Feud", "Prognosis", or "The Premonition". This period was, nonetheless, fruitful. Roethke managed to write and publish a great many short poems and establish himself as a poet of some promise well before actually having a book of his own in print. But the poems of this period are unremarkable, for the most part. His earliest published effort, "The Conqueror", appeared in Commonweal.[22] It is a typical example of Roethke's early work: pretentious, didactic, hazy. Bit with hindsight granted, one can see a fine sense of rhythm and poetic form, which would not be enough on its own, of course:

> Be Proud to live alone.
>
> Be proud to live alone.
> Be murdered and undone,
>
> But do not seek escape
> In visionary shape,
>
> Now make dissension
> A partner to your own,
>
> Be brave and do not keep
> A guardian for your sleep,
>
> Preserve your promised word
> As bright as any sword,
>
> Your lively mirrors chaste
> Uncheckered to the last.
>
> Erase the shape of doom
> From the walls of your room.
>
> Constrain the willing blood
> To virtuous platitude.
>
> Live valiantly to find
> Felicity in mind,
>
> Perfection in the pain
> That mortifies the brain.[23]

As Roethke developed, he made more and better use of the Metaphysical conceit, retaining the strict forms that allowed for a full display of his technical competence. One such effort, reasonably successful, was "I Sought a Measure", published in the American Poetry Journal (November, 1934). It is

one of the poems referred to in the letter from Louise Bogan (1935) quoted above. The sonnet reminds one instantly of Donne, opening with a sharply drawn conceit:

> I sought a measure for your subtle being,-
> A plumbline that could accurately sound you.
> A figure quite sufficient to propound you.

Roethke then exploits the fullest potential of the metaphor:

> I sought to find the angle of your seeing,
> To learn your reason's reason for agreeing,
> To send a shaft of vision to confound you,
> To aim at you, to pierce, but not to wound you,
> To trap your startled blood, forever fleeing.

As Louise Bogan commented, the sonnet does not retain the same, hard Metaphysical edge. It becomes duller, losing the conceit altogether in the sestet. But there is no lack of interesting lines:

> When I had found the sources of your wrath,
> Appraised the purest substance of your youth,
> And marked the ordered pattern of your path,-
> I still possessed but unessential truth.
> My efforts were ambiguous and dull:
> I could not learn what made you beautiful.[24]

Evidence of Roethke's masterly grasp of the five-stress iambic line exists in the dignity and controlled beauty of the last line above: "I could not learn what made you beautiful". But he was still not a poet in his own right. His mastery of the techniques of poetry had outstripped his imaginative development. And he lacked a genuine subject. It was not enough to echo, however, cannily, the Metaphysical themes of his contemporaries, even though he stood close to this tradition by disposition and would pursue many of these great themes later in his own, fresh way. These themes - the conflict of body and spirit, the need to express spiritual love in physical terms, the difficulty of faith - could not be written about in a meaningful way unless confronted in personal terms. The remoteness of so many of Roethke's more unsuccessful early lyrics derived from an unwillingness to write from experience in a direct fashion. A poem such as "The Cure", for example, never published, consists of well-fashioned, but painfully dull, adolescent platitudes (although

Roethke was approaching thirty when he wrote it):

> The fantasies of sorrow breed
> Acedia in the active brain.
> The hands are useless for the deed;
> You spoil the richness of the vein.
>
> Your flesh is wasting on a frame
> Designed for swift, explicit wrath.
> Denials of the spirit tame
> The conscience into stupid faith.
>
> So bleed yourself of love, the blood
> That melancholy feeds upon,
> And learn the marrow's fortitude,
> The hatred burning in the bone.[25]

Only in a very few early poems did Roethke touch the autobiographical vein that would open out for him in the Forties and Fifties and provide a mode sufficient to his talents. One such poem, included in Open House, is "The Premonition":

> Walking this field I remember
> Days of another summer.
> Oh that was long ago! I kept
> Close to the heels of my father,
> Matching his stride with half-steps
> Until we came to a river.

The poem begins in the memory. A vivid scene from childhood is recollected - in the manner of meditative poets from Donne to Wordsworth. The poet remembers an instance from the past when he followed after his father through a summer field. (The field, of course, would become a dominant symbol in the later poetry.) The writing is direct and without pretension. Then the poet extends the image by recalling that as the father

> ...dipped his hand in the shallow:
> Water ran over and under
> Hair on a narrow wrist bone;
> His image kept following after -
> Flashed with the sun in the ripple.
> But when he stood up, that face
> Was lost in a maze of water.[26]

Suddenly, the image becomes a symbol of mortality. The concrete visual terms of "Water ran over and under/ Hair on a narrow wrist bone" recalls Donne's eery "Bracelet of bright haire about the bone" in "The Relique". Although

the poem retains a level of simple meaning on the surface - as in "The Solitary Reaper" of Wordsworth - the image is highly suggestive and takes the reader into another dimension of understanding. The father has been "lost in a maze of water" in the end, and we are left to consider the implications of this fact.

Roethke would learn to exploit this rich vein in time. But he did not make much of it in the poems leading up to and including Open House (1941). He matured slowly as a poet, incredibly so. And the early notebooks are symptomatic of this condition. Modest and controlled, for the most part, they suggest nothing of the passionate abandon that characterizes the notebooks after 1943. They contain little confessional material, and what there is illustrates an adolescent tendency to exaggerate personal suffering. For example, he wrote in 1933:

> Why this endless self-exhortation, this savage introspection? Am I a Doestoesky? (sic) Must I go through something terrible before I can become articulate?[27]

This fumbling, pathetic self-consciousness and pretence only demonstrate that Roethke was simply unable to deal with his own life in an imaginative, mature way at this point. Like the Browning of Pauline, Roethke was morbidly insecure and embarrassingly naive when speaking personally. But Roethke, unlike Browning, would eventually make his life-crises the sumstance of his art.

One good reason for the retardation in Roethke's development was, of course, his general instability, which only became apparent after he left Lafayette for a job at Michigan State University in 1935. At that time he experienced the first serious breakdown; he was committed to a sanitorium for the first time as well, an experience which he would periodically repeat until his death in 1963. Mental illnesses are, by nature, understood imperfectly. But roughly, the term manic depressive loosely applied to Roethke's case, although he tended to be manic rather than depressive. It has been suggested that many forms of neurosis may well be considered benign.[28] The Polish

psychiatrist, Casimierz Dobrowski, for example, argues that personality evolves to higher levels of integration through a process of disintegration. Development implies dissatisfaction with an already existing state of affairs, thus, in order to go forward, the current state must be loosened or dissolved. The resulting anxiety or neurosis may be merely the outward symptoms of a deeper level of natural development. This is entirely speculative, but it may be useful as a framework for understanding Roethke's unusual case. The work of psychiatrist R.D. Laing may also offer suggestive parallels. Laing's chief interest has been the nature of the schizophrenic experience, and it should be mentioned that Roethke's psychiatrists often diagnosed his condition as that of "paranoid schizophrenia".[29] But the general category of schizophrenia includes a wide range of abnormal behaviour. Laing has said that the schizophrenic is, traditionally, someone who has queer experiences and/or is acting in a queer way, from the point of view usually of his relatives or society.[30] In saying this, Laing points out the essential naivete which pervades the Behaviourist school. He suggests that perhaps the schizophrenic patient should be treated like someone on a journey, a <u>healing</u> journey, an exploration of the inner realm of unconscious experience. He refers to Gregory Bateson, who edited a nineteenth century autobiographical account of the schizophrenic experience. Bateson says in his introduction that

> It would appear that one precipitated into psychosis the patient has a course to run. He is, as it were, embarked upon a voyage of discovery which is only completed by his return to the normal world, to which he comes back with insights different from those of the inhabitants who never embarked on such a voyage. Once begun, a schizophrenic episode would appear to have as definite a course as an initiation ceremony - a death and rebirth - into which the novice may have been precipitated by his family life or by adventitious circumstances, but which in its course is largely steered by endogenous process.[31]

Laing compares the schizophrenic experience to the epic voyages of discovery, the explorations of jungles and space, and other heroic journeys. Some of

Laing's concepts will be useful later in my analysis of The Lost Son, which embodies a similar kind of voyage into the reaches of inner space and time.[32] If one studies the radical changes in style that mark off each of Roethke's volumes, it becomes clear that he followed a tortuous dialectical path. Breakdown led to synthesis in the constant process of self-definition by which he achieved a sense of harmony with the world. Thus, one can only suggest that Roethke's periods of instability were not entirely without benefit to his personal and creative development; in fact, without them he may well have stagnated.

In 1936, Roethke applied for and received a post at the Pennsylvania State College, now Pennsylvania State University. He would be associated with this institution for ten years, except for an interval of three years (1943-46) at the experimental college for women, Bennington, located in Vermont. In both places Roethke enjoyed the natural benefits of location. Penn State was originally an agricultural college, and to this day it overlooks some of Pennsylvania's most beautiful farmlands. Bennington rests to great advantage in the unspoiled pine forests of the Vermont hills. No poet concerned with nature could have had a better luck with jobs!

One close friend at Penn State, Philip Shelley, later a Professor of German and chairman of that department, introduced Roethke to classical music, German literature, and many other refinements.[33] Together, Shelley and Roethke taught a course on modern poetry, Shelley lecturing on Rilke and Roethke on Yeats. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Roethke enjoyed a plethora of cultured friends at Penn State as he later did at Bennington, but there were ample opportunities for him to expand his knowledge and experience into areas where he was deficient, such as music and foreign literatures, and he seems to have tried hard to take advantage of this situation.

Roethke settled into a working pattern as a poet during the years at Penn State, and he altered this only slightly in later life. He would ceaselessly make notes on odd bits of paper, in cheap student notebooks, anywhere he happened to be. Generally, he preferred to work at night in his study, and he

pursued his craft with uncanny dedication. Like Hopkins, Roethke would jot down whatever random images came into his attention. And usually, an associational pattern would emerge in time, and this was the raw material of his poetry. The early notebooks are neater, more reserved and more directly related to specific poems. About 1940, the notebooks take on the appearance of a confessional diary of a madman. He records his obsessions with death ("Why am I afraid of death when so much of me is dead already?...The thought of oblivion reduces all happiness to ashes."), his overwhelming sense of guilt ("I carry the guilt of too many lives."), and that particular anguish of concreteness that was his special burden ("What an irony that we love the concrete so much, yet that is the very thing that must pass away.").[34] He drew heavily upon the ideas and images in these notebooks for poetic material, as I have said, and they are invaluable evidence of his exhausting method of composition. The subjects that became poems can be seen to emerge, slowly, like a photographic print dipped into solution and gradually coming into focus from the blurry negative. It was an adventurous and highly successful technique, and later it will be discussed in greater detail. For the moment, the first fruits of Roethke's long apprenticeship, Open House, must be considered.

3. Open House

> I burned my life, that I might find
> A passion wholly of the mind,
> Thought divorced from mind and bone,
> Ecstasy come to breath alone.
> I broke my life, to seek relief
> From the flawed light of love and grief.
>
> Louise Bogan, "The Alchemist"

The poems of Open House, which operate under the aegus of Bogan, Kunitz, and Auden -- the "neo-Metaphysicals" -- are nonetheless connected intimately with the major stream of American Romanticism. The dominant themes of the book: the need to establish a firm sense of self and the discovery of a correspondence between internal and external reality (self and other) -- are played over and again. The chosen instrument is the Metaphysical lyric.

The volume has all of the usual faults of a first volume of poetry; it is self-consciously clever, derivative, and unevenly textured. This is so despite the decade of sustained labour that went into its making. Roethke had simply gone down the wrong path, relying too heavily on his masters and ignoring the genuine strains that crept into his verses more and more frequently toward the end of the Thirties. Nevertheless, the volume does shove much to commend it. With hindsight, it easy to say that Roethke had not yet discovered an appropriate mode. But Open House must be judged for what it is: an accomplished collection of first poems representing the effort of a young writer in the process of discovering his own voice.

Several of the short, tightly controlled lyrics are among the best in the language. For example, the opening poem, "Open House", (which Kunitz suggested as a title for the entire volume) is a remarkable foretaste of things to come. It is a direct, analytical probing of the sense of selfhood - although the overly assertive accent that marks the first stanza would prove embarrassing in other poems from the volume that are less clearly conceived:

> 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.[1]

The poet lays claim to a greater portion of honesty than one may be willing to believe in the second stanza:

> 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.

But the concluding stanza grasps firmly a theme that Roethke would cultivate later to great advantage - the need for direct experience and the effect of rage on reason:

> 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.

Open House was carefully organized into five, distinct sections. The plan of the sequence is obvious to a careful reader, and John Holmes (among others) detected Roethke's scheme in an early review of Open House which appeared in the Boston Evening Transcript:

> The wholeness of Open House demands comment. Mr. Roethke has built it with infinite patience in five sections. The first is personal pronoun; the second the out-of-doors; the third is premonition of darker things - death among them; the fourth is the purest of metaphysical wit, something very rare in our time; and the fifth contains still another side of the poet's nature, the human awareness of which he has become capable in his recent development.[2]

Such variety would never again occur in any one volume of Roethke's poetry, clearly because he would find a distinct voice and format for each successive volume. The voice would always be recognizably Roethke's own, but always slightly different from anything that had gone before. Still, he would never go far beyond the greenhouse Eden of the second volume, The Lost Son, for material, nor would he really improve upon the rare, personal voice that emerges from those pages. One must, and can, read Open House with an eye to the future and discover the germs that flowered later. But it is difficult to imagine how the first critics of that collection managed without the advantages of having read the later poetry.

Holmes's analysis can be focused more sharply from our present perspective. Roethke begins with an attempt to locate the self in a mist of strong, contradictory feelings. "Feud" begins:

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

Exhausted fathers thinned the blood,
You curse the legacy of pain;
Darling of an infected brood,
You feel disaster climb the vein.

There's a canker at your root, your seed
Denies the blessing of the sun,
The light essential to your need.
Your hopes are murdered and undone.[3]

The poem continues by exploiting the Freudian vein yet further. The method suggests psychoanalysis. The poem is about the separation of the self from the ghosts of family and home which persist in the unconscious mind long after they should have been forgotten. The poet argues that "The spirit starves/ Until the dead have been subdued". But this was precisely the wrong tack Roethke should have taken. He could never seriously hope to extricate himself from the morass of emotional connections with his background. This is impossible for anyone. And Roethke could never hope to isolate his identity until he boldly confronted Papa, the huge Otto who made things grow.

The poem "Prognosis" continues the theme. Parental eyes are always with the speaker, everywhere

Though the devouring mother cry, "Escape me?
Never -"
And the honeymoon be spoiled by a father's ghost,
Chill depths of the spirit are flushed to a fever,
The nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost.[4]

But we <u>are</u> lost. The ending sounds a false note, inconsistent with the tone of the poem as a whole. "To My Sister" is a rather nostalgic poem which follows, enlarging the family circle again. It would be foolish to stress the specific connection between the sister addressed and Roethke's own sister, June. For no hint of the sister's character exists within the poem itself. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that Roethke did have just one sister and that Roethke <u>is</u> writing, however remotely, from his own experience. The poem appears to be lightly sentimental from the outset, and probably too much so:

O my sister remember the stars the tears the trains
The woods in spring the leaves the scented lanes
Recall the gradual dark the snow's unmeasured fall
The naked fields the cloud's immaculate folds
Recount each childhood pleasure...

The second and final stanza changes the tone from one of nostalgia to one of

admonition. The advice given is that which might be offered by any elder brother: keep faith with joy, defer the vices of the flesh, etc.. But the last lines upset the otherwise conventional progression of the poem:

> Walk boldly my sister but do not deign to give
> Remain secure from pain preserve thy hate thy heart.[5]

The well intended interjection of "hate" for "heart" alters the dimensions of the poem considerably. But it remains a dull poem, despite the final, clever twist undermining the overall tone of the piece. And one may well criticize the pretentious omission of punctuation, no doubt intended to evoke a dream-like quality or stream of consciousness. The poem is not sufficiently original to warrant such a technique.

"The Premonition", which follows, has already been discussed. It treats the relationship of son to father that would become Roethke's dominant theme in The Lost Son. The poem is aptly titled, for it suggests the peculiar, powerful vision that would develop as the poet learned to recognize the true fibres of his poetic voice and speak from the centre of his imagination. The poem flashes across the pages of Open House like a gem buried in the dust, making the other poems appear, by contrast, mechanical.

An interesting theme, however, comes to the surface in "Orders for the Day" - the conflict between body and spirit. The poet observes:

> The flesh-bound clumsy lover,
> His clumsy fingers bruise
> The spirit's tender cover.[6]

But the poem goes nowhere in particular. The last three poems of this first self-centred section of Open House are simply competent versions of the Metaphysical lyric. "Prayer" is demonstrably imitative of the seventeenth century mode, beginning:

> 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.

Decrying all other senses but sight, the poet sends by asking:

> Therefore, O Lord, let me preserve
> The Sense that does so fitly serve,
> Take Tongue and Ear - all else I have -
> Let Light attend me to the grave![7]

The emphasis upon sight as the proper instrument of knowledge continues throughout the volume. "The Signals" follows "Prayer" and affirms the importance of vision, although adding that:

> Sometimes the blood is privileged to guess
> The things the eye or hand cannot possess.

Here, the Romantic theme of knowledge gained by intuition (the blood) crops up. Later in the poet's career, it would find direct, original expression in such poems as "The Waking".("We think by feeling. What is there to know?")[8]

"The Adamant" finishes the first section. It is Roethke's most perfect Metaphysical conceit. The self is like adamantine. Nothing can compress or alter it in any way. "Thought" and "truth" are identified with the centre of being:

> Thought does not crush to stone.
> The great sledge drops in vain.
> Truth never is undone;
> Its shafts remain.

Nor can any hammer crack it:

> Compression cannot break
> A center so congealed;
> The tool can chip no flake:
> The core lies sealed.[9]

Part II of Open House shifts the centre of gravity from inside the poet's mind to the out-of-doors. But the switch is deceptive, and close reading reveals the subtle dialectic being established between the inner and outer worlds of self and nature. It is a Romantic dialectic, suggesting the influence of Emerson, and Roethke pays homage to the English Romantics at every turn. "The Light Comes Brighter" opens the section; the season is spring; the thaw may come any day; the first evidence of green begins to show beneath the light frost covering. But the poem doesn't end there. A direct

link between internal and external weather is established. The poet says that

> ...soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,
> The leafy wind, that long was tightly furled,
> Will turn its private substance into green,
> And young shoots spread upon our inner world.[10]

The poems which follow, "Slow Season" and "Mid-Country Blow", adopt an attitude toward nature similar to that of the young Robert Frost. They are full of simple observations:

> Now light is less; noon skies are wide and deep;
> The ravages of wind and rain are healed.
> The haze of harvest drifts along the field
> Until clear eyes put on the look of sleep.[11]
>
> ("Slow Season")

The stately, haunting rhythms of the pentameter embody the very slowness that is the subject of the poem. The poem describes the deadening effect of late autumn on everything in nature, including the poet himself. Again, the correspondence is drawn between the external and internal spheres:

> The shoots of spring have mellowed with the year.
> Buds, long unsealed, obscure the narrow lane.
> The blood slows trance-like in the altered vein;
> Our vernal wisdom moves through ripe to sere.

Such masterly effects were not accidental. Writing did not come easily to Roethke, and the early drafts of poems such as "Slow Season" reveal his unique capacity to work at lines until they meant exactly what he wanted them to mean. An early typescript version of "Slow Season" ends with the following three lines:

> Buds, long unsealed, are litter in the lane.
> The blood moves trancelike through the altered vein;
> Our vernal wisdom has grown ripe and sere.[12]

The facile manner of the phrase "are litter in the lane" has been altered to the more suggestive "obscure the narrow lane". The dull verb "moves" in the next line has been cleverly replaced by the more accurately descriptive

"slows". And the banal and somewhat illogical line: "Our vernal wisdom has grown ripe and sere" is wonderfully transformed in the final version, allowing for the sense of process that is suggested by "moves through ripe to sere". (italics mine)

"Mid-Country Blow" and "In Praise of Prairie" continue in a similar fashion, evoking the Michigan landscape with a subtle talent for fresh observation and appreciation of the intimate relationship between perceiver and perceived (percipere and percipi):

> 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.[13]
>
> ("In Praise of Prairie")

"The Coming of the Cold", which follows, has very little to commend it. It is an obvious exercise piece, a five-finger scales. The poet at practice in this poem cannot be dismissed, but craftsmanship alone does not make for a poem. But "The Heron" is a tiny masterpiece of description. It conjures the image of a bird standing on one leg in a pool deep and black. The heron moves along a sand-ridge on a hunt for food. At last,

> He jerks a frong across his bony lip,
> Then points his heavy bill above the wood.
> The wide wings flap but once to lift him up.
> A single ripple starts from where he stood.[14]

"The Bat" ends the section. Full of premonitions, the poet forces a connection between the bat and the human animal in the last, sharp couplet:

> For something is amiss or out of place
> When mice with wings can wear a human face.[15]

The ominous character of "The Bat" signals a change of mood. One enters the realm of Part III with a considerable sense of disquiet.

Part III regards the self in an altogether different light: a dark one. It traces the path of negation. Death haunts the poet in this section of Open House like a spectre, at once sinister and redemptive. "No Bird" moves

into the shadows quickly. It speaks of some woman, mysteriously nameless, who has been recently buried:

> 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 the forest of the dead
> No bird awakens her.[16]

But the poet doesn't succumb to morbidness. Rather, he celebrates the "narrow vegetable realm" which overwhelms mankind, as in the poem "Long Live the Weeds" which was inspired by Hopkins, whose influence on Roethke was immense and lasting:

> 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.[17]

The poem ends with the self seen in terms of the following unattractive alternatives:

> Hope, love, create, or drink and die:
> These shape the creature that is I.

The naivete and abstractness of such a conclusion, and the embarrassing contortion of normal syntax for the purposes of rhyme in the last line, point out once again Roethke's persistent immaturity as an artist.

"Epidermal Macabre", however, is accomplished and memorable. It explores the relationship between flesh and spirit: a great Metaphysical theme. The attitude toward the body which Roethke adopts in this particular piece is one he would later abandon. The poem serves as an illustration of the self-conscious, unenlightened attitude of anyone who would deny the truth expressed by Blake in the Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

> Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for
> that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned
> by the five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in
> our time.[18]

In "Epidermal Maculae" Roethke boasts of his indelicate attitude toward his body, which alternately disgusted him and gave him intense pleasure throughout his life. But in this poem he yearns, after the fashion of the medieval mystics, for a pure and wholly spiritual state of being:

> I hate my epidermal dress,
> The savage blood's obscenity,
> The rags of my anatomy,
> And willingly would I dispense
> With false accoutrements of sense,
> To sleep immodestly, a most
> Incommodine and carnal ghost.[19]

It becomes clear, in a poem such as "The Auction", that the poet has little respect for himself and is beset with a variety of deeply ingrained fears. The poet imagines, in a manner bordering on the surreal, returning home to discover his choicest possessions on the lawn being auctioned off. But these objects are not ordinary personal artifacts, rather, as the auctioneer shouts:

> "One coat of pride, perhaps a bit threadbare;
> Illusion's trinkets, splendid for the young;
> Some items, miscellaneous, marked "Fear";
> The chair of honor, with a missing rung."[20]

The poet believes that once these things are all sold he will be free, saying:

> I left my home with unencumbered will
> And all the rubbish of confusion sold.

The last poem in Part III strikes a more clearly autobiographical vein. "On the Road to Woodlawn" refers to the graveyard back in Saginaw, Michigan, where Roethke played as a child, a place full of family ghosts and vivid memories. It was also the graveyard where his father was buried, the setting for the long poem "The Lost Son" of the later volume having the same title. The poem "On the Road to Woodlawn" sketches a miniature portrait of a small town funeral, dimly suggesting the kind of poem Roethke would later produce. After a close description of the horse-drawn procession of baroque hearses and carriages smelling of perfume and varnish, the poet confesses:

> I miss the pallbearers momentously 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.[21]

But the poem is without vitality. It contains none of the terrible immediacy of Roethke's later poems about death, specific deaths, such as "Elegy for Jane". The remoteness of so many of the poems from Open House may well refer to the poet's early inability to face those aspects of life most painful to him in a direct fashion. Writing in the early notebooks of his own problems, he would cast all comments of a confessional nature in the third person, even when he could not possibly have been referring to anyone but himself. For example, a notebook entry from July of 1934 contains the following self-assessment:

> His life seemed always subject to a very few major influences. It was a small heaven - with very few stars: mother, and sister, and Stanley Kunitz, and drinking and Conrad Aiken and music. Sometimes mother almost vanished out of sight.[22]

Not until a decade later could Roethke face his problems directly, even in the private world of his notebooks. But when he did face them, it was not without considerable pain. The overwhelming sense of a son's guilt that he suffered is obvious in the few examples that follow:

> I carry the guilt of too many lives.
>
> The devil who has my heart
> Will not let me be.
>
> Afraid? Why hell, I've been afraid all my life - dogs, thunder, my cousin.
>
> Anxiety - "It is when we begin to hurt those that we love that the guilt with which we are born becomes intolerable...we hate ourselves in them.
>
> My private conscience is terrible.
>
> I'm in the pits still; in the mire, spiritually. I can't seem to throw off the sensuality that is a part of me. I don't want to throw it off. I'm not tempted, I'm a temptor. Maybe I'm even one of the party of the Devil. One of his seducing, fat charges.[23]

Such a pervasive sense of guilt must have been with Roethke continually from adolescence, but the above confessions all occur after the publication of Open House. Before then, Roethke did not have a verbal outlet for his anxiety. The tight, Metaphysical lyrics which he cultivated in the Thirties could not contain his rage or expiate his sense of guilt. He needed a more expansive form to cope with such needs. And when he found a suitable form, as in The Lost Son, the creative act became a kind of therapy, an incantation by which the poet sought to liberate himself from "the menace of ancestral eyes".[24]

Part IV of Open House displays a number of lighter verses of little consequence. Roethke would, however, become a master of the comic vein much later. One poem in this section of some biographical significance is "My Dim-Wit Cousin" which shows the poet's resentment of one cousin, Bud Roethke - the only son of Otto's brother, Charles, who shared ownership of the greenhouse in Saginaw. Roethke was deeply scarred by early experiences, and the very fact that so much contempt could be called up after so many years points to a salient aspect of Roethke's character. He was desperately sensitive and did not easily forget grudges.

Part V takes us from the comic perspective of the preceding section into the realm of public verse. The poems in this sequence reflect the direct influence of W.H. Auden and are largely unsuccessful because of this. Auden's capacity to hold abstractions in the mind and manipulate them with dexterity and panache was not something Roethke could ever hope to imitate. Roethke could not think abstractly, and he was later well aware of this, as the following two quotations from his notebooks demonstrate:

> I like to think a thing part way through and
> feel the rest of the way.
>
> Conceptual thinking is like believing in God - one
> wants to put it off as long as possible.[25]

Roethke would come to think of himself as a mystic eventually, partly because of his attraction to the way of knowledge by intuitive perception rather

than abstract inquiry. He would write:

> Mysticism has the desirability of requiring no sustained thinking; instead, a constancy of belief and the capacity for intuitive leaps.[26]

Nevertheless, Roethke admired Auden greatly, and this influence was not altogether negative. He said of Auden in his notebooks:

> Auden, for all his cleverness and posturing and thumb-turning episcopality, is one of the true sources of life.[27]

Like so many other poets of the Thirties, Roethke was infected with Auden's energetic approach to poetry. The sheer technical mastery of Auden's work provided Roethke with a first-rate contemporary model. Kunitz and Hogan were simply not good enough for this. The famous range of Auden's vocabulary, the use of colloquial phrases in formal settings, the creation of an idealized landscape which corresponds to a particular mental state, the dependence on pictorial, almost photographic imagery: these were but a few of the obvious techniques that Roethke would appropriate. But the public settings of the poems in Part V of Open House were later abandoned, and the influence of Auden gradually disappeared, having been thoroughly assimilated.

"Ballad of the Clairvoyant Widow", the first poem in Part V, is trite and witless, an offshoot of Auden's keen interest in the ballad. "The Favorite" is a fantasy about a man who was so successful at everything that he "...longed to feel the impact of defeat" for its own sake, a curious taste by any standard![28] The more successful poem, "The Reminder", follows. It chronicles the loss of love. Roethke's talent for close observation redeems an otherwise conventional poem. It begins:

> I remember the crossing-tender's geranium border
> That blossomed in soot; a black cat licking its paw;
> The bronze wheat arranged in strict and formal order;
> And the precision that for you was ultimate law.[29]

It ends with the speaker sitting alone in a room that is dirty and disorderly, remembering the absent lover and cherishing one last scrap of illusion: "A

cheap clock tick-over in ghostly cicada voice". One other poem of considerable promise is "Lull (November, 1939)" which portrays the nervous beginnings of the "Age of Anxiety":

> 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.

Moving into the public arena, the premonitions of war are clear:

> We watch opinion drift,
> Think of our separate skins.
> On well-upholstered bums
> The generals cough and shift
> Playing with painted pins.
> The arbitrators wait;
> The newsmen suck their thumbs.

Reaching for an appropriate abstraction, Roethke ends the poem with:

> Reason embraces death,
> While out of frightened eyes
> Still stares the wish to love.[30]

The poem succeeds, but remains too closely imitative of Auden's famous poem on exactly the same theme: "September 1, 1939".

Only one other poem in the final section of Open House is of interest. "Night Journey" recreates the experience of travelling by sleeper across America:

> Now as the train bears west
> Its rhythm rocks the earth,
> And from my Pullman berth
> I stare into the night
> While others take their rest.

The clickety-clack trimeter suggests the rhythmical movement of the train. The poet observes

> Bridges of iron lace,
> A suddenness of trees,
> A lop of mountain mist

and many other sights familiar to the American midwest. Here, Roethke is

beginning to fulfil Emerson's prophesy that America would not wait long for a literature to celebrate its riches. Roethke ends the section (and the volume as a whole) with:

> I stay up half the night
> To see the land I love.[31]

To conclude: Roethke wrote from the beginning with a decidedly Romantic bias, but his Romanticism was thoroughly American. His first masters were Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman; however, the circle soon widened to include Blake and Wordsworth, then the Metaphysicals. With such tastes, it was natural for him to come under the influence of Kunitz, Humphries, and Bogan, the "Neo-Metaphysicals", when he left college and began his career as a teacher and writer. But owing to his insecurity, he fell too deeply under the dominance of the fashionable movements of the day. Auden became an obsession that he could not easily assimilate. And his inability to explore his own background candidly to discover his real self and to exploit the rich storehouse of potential symbols awaiting his use was another limiting factor on his development as a poet. Hence, after a very long period of gestation, Open House appeared in 1941. Composed mainly of finely constructed lyrics along traditional lines, it enjoyed the kind of success it deserved. Roethke's contemporaries admired it and looked for more of the same. But in reality, there was no more. Roethke would have to make a radical shift or stop writing poetry. In a brilliant, early review of Open House which appeared in a little magazine published by Penn State's College Bookstore in the spring of 1941, Auden came to the following accurate conclusion about Roethke's first volume:

> The only question which remains, and it concerns the poet rather than the reader, is: "Where is Mr. Roethke to go from here, having mastered with the help of Herrick, Marvell, and Blake, a certain style of expression? How is he to develop it, to escape being confined to short and usually iambic lyrics?
>
> It is possible, I think, that Mr. Roethke is trusting too much to diction, to the poetic instrument itself to create order out of chaos. For poetry is only an instrument. It can be sharpened, but it cannot, by itself, widen the area of experience

> with which it deals. Poe was quite right in saying that an instrument in poetry alone can only produce short lyrics, but wrong, I think, in concluding from this that only short lyrics are poetry. It is possible that Mr. Roethke has read quite enough English poetry for a while, and should now read, not only the poetry of other cultures, but books that are neither poetry nor about poetry, for every artist must be like one of his own characters who
>
> > Cried at enemies undone,
> > And longed to feel the impact of defeat.
>
> Otherwise, he may be in danger of certain experiences becoming compulsive, and either, like Emily Dickinson and A.E. Housman, playing more and more variations on an old theme, or like Rimbaud, of coming to the end of his experiences and ceasing to write.[32]

Fortunately, neither of these useless alternatives were realized. With ferocious energy, Roethke was able to battle his way out of the corner where Open House had led him, moving into the open spaces of The Lost Son, then moving on again and again. For as he once wrote in his notebooks:

> The poem is a kind of death: it is finished, a complete, a comprehensive act. The better the poem, the more final the destruction.[33]

III.

THE RADICAL VISION OF A LOST SON

1. The Broken Mirror of Perseus

> Am I saying anything new when I say that poetry
> is difficult: heart-breakingly so?
>
> Roethke, Notebooks (July, 1945)

Kenneth Burke, whom Roethke befriended at Bennington College in 1943, said in The Philosophy of Literary Form (1941) that the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa can by analogy teach us much about the ways of poetry. He identifies the poet with Perseus, the hero "who could not face the serpent-headed monster without being turned to stone, but was immune to this danger if he observed it by reflection in a mirror, enabling him to confront the risk, but by the protection of an indirect reflection".[1] Burke was writing this at a point in Roethke's career which might well be called a "life-crisis". Open House, his apprentice volume, had been published and well received, establishing him as a competent versifier, a minor off-shoot of the Neo-Metaphysical revival. And Auden, who did not wish to discourage Roethke, had nevertheless been harsh with him, suggesting a change of direction.[2] It seemed that Roethke had taken the short, traditional lyric as far as he could. And such a form by its nature precludes the wider ranges of experience that a poet must explore if he wants to develop his vision. Otherwise, he becomes compulsive and repetitive, or simply ceases to write. Roethke understood this, fortunately, and decided to make a radical change in his approach to poetry. An individual with numerous personal serpents to slay, he might easily have used poetry as a mirror to reflect the beasts within himself, thereby avoiding the harsh glare of immediate reality. Poetry may well be regarded as a medium between reality (nature) and the imagination. Burke's mirror of Perseus, but this analogy would be inappropriate in Roethke's case. For if Roethke is Perseus, the mirror seems to break once the image is caught. Reality is not so much mirrored in his poetry as revealed. This, of course, is the Romantic ideal. Poetry should not so much describe experience as embody it. As Wallace Stevens explained:

> There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is the strange rhetoric of that parallel: a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verbality.[3]

In other words: poetry at its best dissolves the medium by embracing reality and the imagination directly, achieving that "exquisite appositeness" beyond "verbality" or language.

The modern Romantic poet is "the new Perseus" examined by Geoffrey Hartman in The Unmediated Vision(1954):

> It is said that Perseus when he went to slay the Medusa, was given by Athene a resplendent mirror to escape the monster's direct glance, which would have turned him into stone. Perseus, accordingly, cut off the Gorgon's head, and from her blood there sprang the winged horse Pegasus which with one stomp of its foot produced Mount Helicon's sweet fountain, dear to the Muses. But the new Perseus is a different kind of hero. He disdains or has lost Athene's mirror, and goes against the monster with naked eye. Some say that, in consequence, he is petrified; others, that he succeeds but the fountain of Pegasus is a bitter-sweet brew.[4]

The modern Romantic, Hartman argues, seeks to gain "pure representation" of experience by means of a direct, sensuous intuition of reality. "The eye and the senses are made to supply not merely the ornaments but the very plot of truth. Consciousness becomes, in its contact with the physical world, the source and often the end of cognition."[5] Hartman suggests that not only the four poets considered in his study - Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valery - but the majority of poets since the dawn of Romanticism have refused any but human and sensory intermediaries to knowledge. They seek what he calls "The hellenic innocence of the senses," and rely on no arbitrary or traditional text: "Nature, the body, and human consciousness - that is the only text".[6] This fact, however, precipitates a major crisis for modern artists. Having forsaken the spiritual authority of a sacred text, these poets feel "the inadequacy that dogs conventional ways of expression." And what is worse, the world becomes devoid of sacred meaning; everything is

suddenly as profane as it is sacred. "Symbols are only such by pretence, and the entirety of life is caught up in this pretence. Everything is *in potentia* equally sign and symbol."[7] Thus, the poet is driven back upon himself to confront his own experience directly and discover his own meaning. The raw materials of his vision are within him; and though his symbolism may well become esoteric, this is the risk he must take. No other choice exists but silence.

Roethke, irresistably drawn to the creative act, could not bear to endure too much silence. Language was for him a form of consciousness that could not be repressed. "All consciousness is an appeal to more consciousness," he wrote in his notebooks, quoting Hegel.[8] And so he would have to lay aside the formal mannerisms of *Open House* and encounter himself and his past without a protecting mirror. The record of his struggle with this task is contained in the notebooks surviving from his years at Bennington College (1943-1947) and in the poems which came out of it all. Significantly, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) is the key volume in the Roethke canon as a whole and represents the first expression of the poet's own voice. The volumes immediately succeeding this one can be seen as extensions of the discoveries made in *The Lost Son*. Roethke's personal symbolism, revolving around the greenhouse in Saginaw and the image of his father, Otto, emerged at this time and provided the poet with a working mythology that seemed virtually inexhaustible. It may well be that *The Lost Son* contains the very best of Roethke's poetry. He would never excel these poems, although some of the later work reaches the same high level of expression. Thus, I propose to examine the process of radical introversion and regression by which Roethke called the poems of *The Lost Son* (and attendant volumes) into being. Like Hartman's "new Perseus", Roethke decided to face the Medusa directly, calling the mirror of Athene out of his own eyes. His only text was that of sense experience, often filtered through the gauge of memory. He sought immediacy and therefore suffered "that anguish of concreteness". He wrote in his notebooks: "Things, how they involve me!"[9] And recalling a phrase of Whitman's

another time: "The poet writes the history of his own body".[10] In these terms poetry becomes a record of the artist's sense perceptions, concrete and immediate. But more is involved. For a man of Roethke's temperament, writing was an act of expiation, a ritual of purification, a response to his burdens, a movement toward the "hellenic innocence of the senses" described by Hartmen. Roethke had innumerable personal monsters to slay. So each poem became for him by necessity an act of violence.

2. Back to Beginnings: The Lesson of the Plants

> Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the external world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling - a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world.
>
> Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

> A notion of centrality: there is a core to all things that even a child knows, yet it is one of those ancient thoughts that can never become a cliche.
>
> Roethke, Notebooks (July, 1945)

The life-cycle of an organism - birth, growth, maturity, decay and death - is the Romantic paradigm for the life-cycle of a human being as well. And the organic process extends to Romantic theories of artistic invention by way of analogy. In The Mirror and the Lamp M.H. Abrams provides an elaborate discussion of these notions and cites the German sources that underlie English theories of creativity.[1] Kant, Herder, and Schelling (among others) regarded the plant as the most appropriate metaphor to describe the process of literary invention. Coleridge, adapting the concept of dynamic opposition between the subjective artist and the object contemplated from Schelling's System of Transcendental Idealism (1800), explains creative genius in the same biological terms. One may recall his description of the poetic imagination at work:

> The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings

> the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.[2]

The full, biological significance of the word synthetic in this passage must be observed. The metaphor of organic process is implicit. The poet, like the plant, unites the disparate elements of the external world: light, water, minerals, carbon dioxide, etc.. The process is transformational, the end product bearing small relation to the ingredients that went into its making. And so with a poem. All images taken from the objective world must be greatly modified. As Coleridge said:

> ...images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human or intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit...[3]

This understanding of the poet's task is especially helpful with regard to Roethke's Greenhouse Poems. Abandoning the mechanical organization that mars even the best poems of Open House, he began to think more in terms of the organic process, allowing each poem to develop from within, assuming a shape unique to itself. Although the fourteen poems that eventually made up the greenhouse sequence appear at the outset to be merely descriptions of various plants and their caretakers, a great deal more is involved. The symbolical qualities of the greenhouse, per se, will be discussed shortly. But as for the plants themselves: each takes on a mysteriously human aspect. As Coleridge demands in the passage above, the image of each flower is modified by the human life transferred to it from the poet's own spirit. Many of the poems in the greenhouse sequence approximate to a particular psychological state. Roethke probed the memory for images and hunted in the recesses of

the mind for meaningful symbols. In his notebooks from this period (1942) when these poems were just beginning, he wrote wearily of "the long testing of the unconscious before one gets even a few symbols true to himself".[4] But at last, after several years of near silence (1943-1946), the Greenhouse Poems began to emerge in magazines, revealing a new Roethke. By the process of regression into the memory and near withdrawal from the public eye, Roethke managed to discover his roots and develop a style of his own. Exactly how this happened remains to be considered.

The move to Bennington College was crucial. At Penn State Roethke may well have had difficulties in extracting himself from the influence of Kunitz and Humphries. A complete change of environment was necessary if he was seriously to change his poetic frame of mind. He needed a new mentor, and Bennington provided him with a perfect replacement: Kenneth Burke. By this time Burke's reputation as a vastly learned and original critic had grown to enviable proportions. By a fortunate coincidence, Roethke took up lodgings in the same house, Shingle Cottage, where Burke stayed on his weekly visits to Bennington from Andover, New Jersey. Burke lived at Bennington for three days a week (Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays) and occupied the small room upstairs over Roethke's larger flat. This arrangement suited both men, allowing Roethke the solitude he so enjoyed for a good part of the week. Burke applied supplied just the right degree of encouragement and criticism for Roethke. And there can be no doubt that Burke exercised a profound influence over Roethke's direction as a poet during these crucial years. Roethke's ideas about poetry, as illustrated in the notebooks, bear an obvious relationship to Burke's as outlined in his many books up to that period: Counter-Statement (1931), Permanence (1935), Attitudes Toward History (1937) and The Philosophy of Literary Form (1941).[5] Also, the extant letters between Roethke and Burke provide evidence of their intimacy. Burke had early access to the manuscript versions of poems included in The Lost Son and acted as an editor in much the same way as Humphries, Bogan and Kunitz had done earlier in Roethke's career. Burke's natural disposition was, of course, pedagogical; the correspondence

between them shows that he never restrained himself with Roethke, who always distrusted his own abilities and sought reinforcement from an elected father-figure such as Burke. The exact nature of Burke's influence on specific poems in The Lost Son will be discussed in due course. But it will be helpful to review some of Burke's primary notions on the nature of poetry at this point.

In The Philosophy of Literary Form Burke asserts: "Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situations in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are strategic answers, stylized answers",[6] He is obsessed with the idea of a poem as proverbial medicine. A proverb, he says, offers a means of "sizing up" a situation. And he believes that proverbs are ameliorative, extending this meaning of proverb into the realm of poetry, by asking:

> Might we think of poetry as complex variants and recombinations of such materials as we find in proverbs? There are situations typical and recurrent enough for men to feel the need of having a name for them. In sophisticated work, this naming is done with great complexity.... And in all work, as in proverbs, the naming in done "Strategically" or "stylistically", in modes that embody attitudes, of resignation, solace, vengeance, expectancy, etc..[7]

Thus, poetry becomes what Burke calls "symbolic action". He emphasizes the physical nature of speech, referring often to Sir Richard Paget's mimetic theory of "language as gesture". He explains:

> According to Paget's theory, language arose in this wise: If a man is firmly gripping something, the muscles of his tongue and throat adopt a position in conformity with the muscles with which he performs the act of gripping. He does not merely grip with his hands; he "grips all over". Thus, in conformity with the act of gripping, he would simultaneously grip with his mouth, by closing his lips firmly. If now, he uttered a sound with his lips in this position, the only sound he could utter would be m.... Hence, m would be the proper tonality corresponding to the as in contact words like "maul", "mix", and "slam".[8]

The acutely physical quality of Roethke's language in The Lost Son, and especially in the Greenhouse Poems, may well be traced back to Burke's theories.

It is worth recalling that Hopkins - whose verse was consummately physical, seeking out what he called the inscape of language -- should have had a similar interest in the mimetic theory of language origins. It should not surprise anyone familiar with the poems from The Lost Son period that Roethke's notebooks contain many references to Hopkins, whole poems having been copied out by hand and committed to memory. The influence of Hopkins was nevertheless indirect. Burke was actually standing over Roethke at this time, literally and figuratively.

The idea that a poet should write about what most urgently concerns him, that is about his burdens, is directly related to Burke's notion of the poem as strategy. In a sense, he regards the act of literary invention as cathartic. It resolves a problem or at least effects a balance between contending forces. It is only natural, Burke argues, that this should be the case.[9] How this applies to Roethke should be obvious. Poetry was for him a necessary act; otherwise, his obsessive dedication to the craft would be unexplainable. Few poets have put so much seemingly unrewarded effort into their work. But it does follow by necessity from Burke's suggestion that biographical information about an author must be taken into account when considering his work. He defended this position by saying that the "main ideal of criticism ... is to use all that there is to use. And merely because some ancient author has left us scant biographical material, I do not see why we should confine our study of a modern author, who has left us rich biographical material, to the same coordinates as we should apply in studying the work of the ancient author."[10]

One other major tenet of Burke's poetics is the matter of synecdoche, which he believes to be the basic figure of speech. Briefly, synecdoche is the habit of using the part to represent the whole or vice versa: i.e. "twenty beards" for "twenty men". All art is illusion, of course, and there should be nothing deceptive about this; as Burke argues, "A tree, for instance, is an infinity of events - and among these our senses abstract certain recordings

which 'represent' the tree. Nor is there any 'illusion' here. In so far as we see correctly, and do not mistake something else for a tree, our perceptions do really represent the tree."[11] Connecting this with poetic theory, Burke speaks of "associational clusters" or systems of symbols. The poet invokes reality by naming a few parts of reality, by relying upon a few key words as triggers of the unconscious. The importance of this notion for Roethke will be apparent as the poems are considered in detail; for his vocabulary remained drastically restricted throughout his career. Key words like "wind", "stone", and "woman" assume progressively larger significance as his poetic universe becomes fixed. "Associational clusters" play a major role in the works. The concept of "the pit", for example, arises over and again as a symbol area of regression and purification. Words such as "hole", "cave", "boy", "grave", and"slim", recur throughout the longer poems of the "Lost Son" sequence. But this will be discussed in turn.

Burke's system of literary analysis included the useful conception of "levels of symbolic action". He discerns three levels: (1) The bodily or biological level, employing kinaesthetic imagery. Here the artist attempts to represent the rhythms of the life cycle of an organism. He relies on sensory imagery and attempts to "symbolize" the quality of experience "as growth, decay, drought, fixity, ice, desiccation, stability, etc." [12] This is the level at which the Greenhouse Poems operate. (2) The personal, intimate, familiar level which involves personal relationships comes next. At this level Roethke deals with his father and mother or lover. (3) The abstract level. This is the political or social plane of discourse. Roethke would on rare occasions venture into this realm without success. For the most part he was content to remain an introspective voyager, questing after personal salvation.

Certainly, Roethke took many of Burke's notions to heart, but most important he followed the suggestion: write about the past,"begin with personal history". Burke said in Permanence and Change (1935):

Once a set of new meanings is permanently

> established, we can often note in art another kind of regression: the artist is suddenly prompted to review the memories of his youth because they combine at once the qualities of strangeness and intimacy.[13]

This idea, that childhood represents an area of special concern for the artist, was commonly accepted by Wordsworth and the early Romantics. Roethke, in his notebook from April of 1943, quotes Thomas DeQuincey:

> The infant is one with God and one with everything in our immense universe through the medium of love....The adult mind must regain this vision, this secure unity.[14]

This thesis was, of course, refined by Freud, who provided a means of recovering the past through psychoanalysis. It also made available a method whereby some of the great contraries which absorbed the Romantics could be resolved. Professor Norman O. Brown explains how this is so in his study of Freud called Life Against Death:

> If psychoanalysis must say that instincts, which at the level of animality are in a harmonious unity, are separated at the level of humanity and set into conflict with each other, and that mankind will not rest content until it is able to abolish these conflicts and restore harmony, but at the higher level of consciousness, then once again it appears that psychoanalysis completes the romantic movement and is understood only if interpreted in that light. It is one of the great romantic visions.[15]

Brown explains further that this idea was clearly formulated by Schiller and Herder as early as 1793 and remained vital in the philosophies of Hegel and Marx. All believed that man originally experiences a condition of primal unity with nature, but that through the workings of differentiation and alienation (maturation) they are separated, hence perpetually straining to recover a sense of harmony. "But these categories - primal unity, differentiation through antagonism, final harmony - remain in the romantics arbitrary and mystical because they lack a foundation in psychology. The psychoanalytical theory of childhood completes the romantic movement by filling this gap."[16]

Crucial to Freud's thesis and relevant to our understanding of Roethke's poems from this period is the concept of regression. Freud develops this

carefully in his most important work, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900):

> What takes place (he says) in the hallucinatory dream we can describe in no other way than by saying that the excitation follows a retrogressive course. It communicates itself not to the motor end of the apparatus but to the sensory end, and finally reaches the system of perception. If we call the direction which the psychic process follows from the unconscious into the waking state progressive, we may then speak of the dream as having a regressive character.[17]

Later, Freud asserts: "In regression the structure of the dream-thoughts breaks up into its raw materials."[18] Thus, in dreams one goes back to original perceptions. This explains the strange, sensual quality that dreams possess. For as Freud argues, dream-thinking exploits the deepest regions of the memory, reactivating the infantile mind and repossessing the past. He concluded

> that dreaming is on the whole an act of regression to the earliest relationships of the dreamer, a resuscitation of his childhood, of the impulses which were then dominant and the modes of expression which were then available. Behind the childhood of the individual we are then promised an insight into the phylogenetic childhood, into the evolution of the human race, of which the development of the individual is only an abridged repetition influenced by the fortuitous circumstances of life.[19]

Kenneth Burke saw the importance of Freud's theories in the context of literary criticism. In his essay "Freud - and the Analysis of Poetry" he begins with a confession: "The reading of Freud I find suggestive almost to the point of bewilderment."[20] It would be a mistake, Burke continues, to equate psychology and literature, the Freudian perspective having been developed "primarily to chart a psychiatric field rather than an aesthetic one".[21] However, the technique of art is obviously dependent upon the workings of the unconscious as revealed by Freud, and the more a critic can learn about the creative process, the better he should be able to understand the creative product. As Lionel Trilling says in a well-known essay in The Liberal Imagination (1953): "Freud discovered in the very organization of the mind

those mechanisms by which art makes its effects."[22] And Burke attempts to outline the specific mechanisms which relate to poetry directly.

First, Burke turns to Freud's speculations on sexual puns and double-entendres, suggesting that analysis of artistic imagery will corroborate these. Much of the ostensibly incomprehensible gibberish of Roethke's "Lost Son" sequence is explainable in terms of what Burke, after Freud, would call "dream-language", a mode of expression which reaches into the unconscious and uses the inherent ambiguity of language to its fullest purposes. As Freud suggested, art is a means of making the unconscious conscious. When hailed as "discoverer of the unconscious" one time late in his life, Freud responded by saying that "the poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method whereby the unconscious can be studied."[23] Thus, art becomes a function of the unconscious in Freudian terms and is closely associated with the concept of wit that governs the element of play and forms the basis of all language. A poet is first of all someone who likes to "play with words" as a child does. The great enemy of the unconscious, according to Freud, is reason (the reality-principle) which restricts the free associational process so crucial to artistic invention of any kind. Freud explained that

> Wit carries out its purpose in advancing the thought by magnifying it and by guarding it against reason. Here again it reveals its original nature in that it sets itself up against an inhibiting and restrictive power, or against the critical judgement.[24]

Burke saw the importance of puns and double-entendres in poetry and would often focus his critical examinations of a text on specific patterns of word play. In this practice he anticipates many of the New Critics who emphasized the primary importance of wit and ambiguity in literature. The idea of a poem as a conscious reproduction of a dream-state provides a key into Roethke's most difficult sequences in The Lost Son and subsequent volumes. The crucial difference between the poetic process and dreaming remains, of

course, the element of conscious control. As Charles Lamb put it: "The poet dreams being awake. He is not possessed by his subject but has dominion over it."[25] And Burke would go so far as to extend the free-associational method of psychoanalysis over into criticism, assuming that fresh insights into a poem may be gained in so doing.

Secondly, Burke considers the concept of regression, saying that "Regression...is a function of progression."[26] This certainly recalls Roethke's notation of January, 1944: "I go back because I want to go forward."[27] Significantly a year later Roethke quoted Kierkegaard in his notes:"Life can only be understood backwards; but it can only be lived forwards."[28] Clearly, Roethke had a deep and personal understanding of the mechanics of regression, and he probably got this directly from Kenneth Burke, the spiritual father of The Lost Son, which charts the uneasy regression of a protagonist into the hinterlands of memory and back again. The regression takes the central character back to the womb and beyond (especially in the later poems of the sequence, most of them from Praise to the End!). This process is inevitably harrowing. For according to Freud and Burke, birth provides the first severe jolt to the individual. And Burke laments that "the change at birth when the foetus, heretofore enjoying a larval existence in the womb, being fed on manna from the placenta, so outgrows this circle of protection that the benign protection becomes a malign circle of confinement, wherent it must burst forth into a different kind of world - a world of locomotion, aggression, competition, hunt."[29] Nevertheless, Burke continues:

> In the private life of the individual there may be many subsequent jolts of a less purely biological nature, as with the death of some one person who had become pivotal to this individual's mental economy.[30]

For Roethke, adolescence and the death of his father provided pivotal jolts from which he would never fully recover.

Regression, then, must be considered just a part of the search for a new identity which is what The Lost Son and subsequent volumes are about.

The protagonist, seeking a fresh sense of self, must dive into the past in order to cleanse himself of it. The motif is baptismal, suggesting spiritual rebirth. Burke has commented on this:

> In the literature of transitional eras, for instance, we find an especial profusion of rebirth rituals, where the poet is making the symbolic passes that will endow him with a new identity. Now, imagine him trying to do a very thorough job of this reidentification. To be completely reborn he would have to change his very lineage itself. He would have to revise not only his present but his past.[31]

This, of course, would seem to reduce art to a firmly psychological (and therefore biographical) base. And Burke does come rather near to this when he concludes that "In so far as art contains a surrealist ingredient (and all art contains some of this ingredient), psychoanalytic coordinates are required to explain the logic of its structure."[32] Thus, he demands the fullest biographical information that can be acquired about the artist whose work is under consideration, saying that "we can eliminate biography as a relevant fact about poetic organization only if we consider the work of art as if it were written neither by people nor for people."[33]

One could go on at much greater length about the influence of Kenneth Burke on Roethke during this period (1943-1948). But it will be more useful to defer this until later when the dream-sequences of The Lost Son and Praise to the End! (which continued the sequence of "Lost Son" poems) come under discussion. For the moment let me simply maintain that the poems of the "Lost Son" sequence describe a young man's regression into his own murky past, a rediscovery of earlier states of being which allows him to understand and to slough off the old selves and find a new sense of identity. Certainly Burke regarded the poem as "a symbolic proclaiming and formation of identity" and associates this act with the Romantic movement, adding that "the romantic movement tended greatly to conceive of man's identity in non-social, purely naturalistic terms, specializing in such objective imagery as would most directly correspond in quality with subjective states". The poem, he continues, represents a symbolic "slaying of the old self" which is "complemented by

the emergence of a new self".[34] Roethke must have taken these words to heart shortly after his arrival at Bennington, for the period from 1943 to 1948 was one of the systematic introspection and self-discovery. The expression of this process was highly stylized, to use Burke's term, but the style was Roethke's own. He stepped out into the open from behind the earlier Metaphysical mask for the moment. Later he would step behind Yeats and Whitman, among others. But by that time he had learned who he was.

Roethke wanted to "transfer his burden" of guilt from himself to his father (the original source of guilt). This is not so unusual, as Burke explains:

> the delegation of one's burden to the sacrificial vessel of the scapegoat is a giving, a socialization, albeit the socialization of a loss, a transference of something, deeply within, devoutly a part of one's own self - and perhaps in relation to consubstantiality it draws more from the attitude of child to parent than from the attitude of parent to child. It delegates the personal burden to an external barrier.[35]

Roethke's particular burden - an overwhelming sense of guilt - was mysteriously connected to his relationship with his father, Otto. He may have believed himself a failure in his father's eye long after his father had died by taking up a career in teaching and writing poetry. Surely his father would not have understood such a thing. The law would have been a more appropriate occupation from his father's point of view, and indeed Roethke tried law school for a term (hating every minute of it). The element of unconscious guilt over his father's death was also present in the poet's troubled psyche. The notebooks from the years of near poetic silence (1943-1945) provide a telling account of Roethke's burdens at this time - his anxieties, his guilt, his abiding fear of death, the struggles with his art and his concept of God. A highly selective anthology of his entries on these subjects follows:

Notebooks, 1943

> Our concern with death puts an edge upon life. It gives us dignity and purpose. It resolves us to condense more (into) our few hours.[36]

At 34, at last I find out what loneliness means.

Hunted the final night, dug in my own rich dark.

Innocence is the natural state from which man has separated to find corruption.[37]

I carry the curse of too many lives.

I have a great horror of thrusting myself on people or bothering them in any way.

Not all the dead are used: we must take what we can from them.

The devil who has my heart/ Will not let me be.

Charlie and Otto Roethke
labored for sixty years
trying to make a greenhouse
that was truly theirs.[38]

Notebooks, 1944

Thanatos: Death defines love.

When a man comes to realize that something he has done is evil, then he has suffered a growth of the soul.

An almost insane terror of death.

The tough who crave but do not whimper for love.

Papa is holy.

What an irony that we love the concrete so much, yet that is the very thing that must pass away.[39]

The bones of my human guilt.

To write about one's past is not to escape but to understand the present.

"Without contraries there is no progression"
(Blake)

I go back because I want to go forward.[40]

What a miserable little talent I have! after all the ten years of effort.

Style is the ultimate morality of the mind.[41]

I learned the struggle in the stem.

Whose guilt I carry?

Make your poetry the reflection of your life.[42]

Notebooks, 1945

Times when every simple act of life is a burden: times of NO THOUGHT.

"For it is the nature of man to deteriorate unless he recognizes the tendency and the source of his deterioration and expends actual effort to reduce them."

Winters.

Ah papa! It was seven long months before your guts leaked away.

Visit me: wrath and fury.
Blow out my veins.[43]

I don't believe there is a God, but to try to believe in one is one of the noblest human efforts.

Lawrence had the fierce sense of life - but notice this - a place became exhausted for him. He could not pull it out of himself.

I suppose it is a dangerous feeling of power you get from a successful duel with death. But God you have a pride in yourself when you know your fever has been 103.5 - 104 for five days and you can still bark orders and sit up and not lie down limp as a rag.

Afraid? Why hell, I've been afraid all my life - dogs, thunder, my cousin.

Ah papa! He could snot his nose like an archbishop.

Something from this illness seems to have shaken loose powers; I am alive with ideas, some bad, no doubt, but there is more vehemence, more energy, more contempt, more love.

The will, that treacherous guide, often betrays our deepest self.[44]

I became to myself a barren land.

Psalms 19:12

Lawrence...his particular psychological situation always linked to the life around him.

"One of the perils of the soul is the loss of the soul."

Jung.

The poem is a kind of death: it is finished, a complete, a comprehensive act. The better the poem, the more final the destruction.

Anxiety - It is only when we begin to hurt those that we love that the guilt with which we are born becomes intolerable...we hate ourselves in them.

A poem that is the shape of the psyche itself...in times of great stress, that's what I tried to write.[45]

Things, how they involve me!

The soul cannot be defiled.[46]

A constant attempt to see things in human form which are not human at all.

My private conscience is terrible.

An anguish of concreteness.

We must seek to go beyond the pleasure principle to come through to social and philosophical reality, yet preserving the freshness and naivete.

The dream has its own internal laws.[47]

Why am I afraid of death when so much of me is dead already?

The thought of oblivion reduces all happiness to ashes.[48]

Am I saying anything new when I say that poetry is difficult: heart-breakingly so?

A teacher: a wonderful capacity for being enthusiastic about the obvious.

A bleakness about poetry-writing: like getting to the factory at seven in the morning.

The poet: perceives the thing in physical terms.

All the present has fallen: I am only what I remember.[49]

"Actually, our human passions are always connected with antagonistic passions, our love with hate, and our pleasure with our pains. Between joy and the external cause there is invariably some gap and some obstruction - society, sin, virtue, the body, the separate self. Hence arises the ardour of passion. And hence it is that the ardour for complete union is indissolubly linked with a wish for death that brings release."

We live by fictions and myths. They seem as necessary as food.

In many things I was the son of my father.

I feel beneath me the whole vast motion of the world.

To all men, at some times, comes the conviction that he is the center of the world.[50]

Happiness and gaiety are incidental, the inseparable counterparts of a capacity for grief and pity.[51]

...A haunting sense that I was an herbaceous plant, as large as a large tree, with a trunk of the same pith, and branched as large and shadowing...

Poetry is still the natural form of self-expression.

For ten years I played the roaring boy when really I was the frightened boy.

A notion of centrality: there is a core to all things that even a child knows, yet it is one of those ancient thoughts that can never become a cliche.[52]

A man must resist some of the elements of his own age.

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it can only be lived forwards."

Kierkegaard.

The visible obscures delight.

I'm in the pits still; in the mires, spiritually. I can't seem to throw off the sensuality that is part of me. I don't want to throw it off. I'm not tempted: I'm a tempter. Maybe I'm even one of that party of the Devil. One of his seducing fat charges.[53]

Lost in a dismal place
I had suffered a soul's growth;
Shrunken, loose in my skin,
Out of myself I rose,
Hungry and haunted.

What was this greenhouse? It was a jungle, and it was paradise, it was order and disorder; Was it an escape? No for it was a reality harder than the various suspensions of terror.

Snow: symbol of death, symbol of purity.

What is sown comes to life when it dies.

He'll come when. No, I know he won't come. He doesn't care about me anymore. No, I mean Him, the big He, that Great big three-cornered Papa.[54]

I became learned in the rhetoric of desperation.

Something within wants to get out.

When you're alone you either get something done or you fall apart.

The visible exhausts me. I am dissolved in shadow.

I felt myself falling into a dark swirl.[55]

How terrible the need for God.

A great deal of art arises out of opposition.[56]

Lawrence: analogies in the natural world.

I can no longer reject God because the metaphors are bad.[57]

Who killed Papa?

Conceptual thinking is like believing in God; one wants to put it off as long as possible.[58]

These striking excerpts from the Roethke notebooks are invaluable evidence of his passionate, restless intelligence. They point to this burdens, which were obsessive. It may well be impossible to understand the nature of his guilt complex exactly, but the connection with his father's death would seem obvious. It relates to his deeper, ontological anxiety over his own death and the need to be reconciled with it. There was some consolation in what I call "the lesson of the plants": that is, "What is sown comes to life when it dies". But the old anxiety was never eliminated. In the later poems (from The Far Field) it became a central theme. Of course, the idea that "death puts an edge to life" is a basic Romantic notion. The English Romantics, for example, seemed to court the emotions surrounding death. One thinks of Keats's "Ode to Melancholy" where he says of his mistress (Melancholy personified):

> She dwells with Beauty - Beauty that must die;
> And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
> Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure night
> Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:
> Ay, in the very temple of delight
> Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine.[59]

Beauty could not exist without death; for it is the fragile nature of the beautiful which excites our sympathies. And Roethke did not wish to escape this anxiety by leap-frogging the material world in favour of the immutable abstraction. He preferred to stay within the physical scheme and suffer what he called "an anguish of concreteness". Thus did he cry out: "Things, how they involve me!" Having grown up around a greenhouse, he understood the organic life-cycle better than most modern men who live in near total isolation from the natural process. Roethke, like many of the early Romantics, grasped the importance of death-acceptance for those who confront life on realistic terms. Freud put this fundamental insight of Romanticism on a psychological basis, arguing that death is no accident, no external event. Rather, "The goal of all life is death."[60] Like everything which participates in the organic cycle, men are born to die. In Shakespeare's great phrase, "Ripeness is all." Death-acceptance implies life-acceptance. Such knowledge is what Roethke was working toward, haltingly, in this crucial period of his life. And it embodies the fundamental insight discovered by The Lost Son.

The recurrent nightmare of his father's death by cancer suggests that Roethke did not easily rid himself of his burdens (if he ever did). His reference to God as "that Great big three-cornered Papa" illustrates the ambiguous nature of his authority symbol. He distrusted his father yet demanded his attention and approval. And so with his God. Like a child raging against a parent, he alternately rejected and accepted Him. Certainty was not to be gained, however, so long as the metaphors remained inadequate.

Like all Romantics, Roethke believed that art could be therapeutic. His notebooks from this period contain many references to Freud, Jung and Lawrence: all explorers of the unconscious. The long journey into the twilight of memory that The Lost Son recounts was not haphazardly undertaken. Roethke understood the theoretical basis for the mental retracing of steps which regression involves. Like the meditative poets of the seventeenth century, like many of the Romantics (including Hopkins), Roethke consciously

drew concrete images in the mind from memory for regular contemplation. His notebooks testify to this fact. The same phrases recur over and again. Roethke was attempting to remember his past. As he said,"I go back because I want to go forward." By filling in the memory gaps, thereby making the unconscious conscious, Freud argued that anxiety could be relieved: one comes to terms with the past in order to live wholly in the present. Whether or not this is true, Roethke took the responsability for this introspective voyage upon himself. But one cannot help a certain pathos at his confession: "At 34, at last I find out what loneliness means."

Still, there is a great deal of humour in the notebooks. Roethke's observations on teaching are almost always amusing, as when he wrote, "I'm a wonderful teacher: I can even get those Californians to work."[61] He can even be whimsical about his father, who "could snot his nose like an archbishop". And for all his serious efforts at self-analysis, Roethke still can laugh at himself. "Psychoanalysis," he says, "is a method whereby the mediocre treat themselves as artists."[62] Like most great artists, Roethke combined a profound seriousness with a warm sense of humour. He could see himself in caricature both as teacher and writer, a fact which gives his best work a valuable dimension. The pity is that he died before giving his comic side the full expression that it deserved.

In summary, the notebooks from these years of virtual poetic silence reveal a man in the process of self-discovery, making a voyage back to his beginnings. There the poet was forced to confront his past directly, to meet with the long-dead Papa and the ghosts of his old selves. He had to come to grips with mortality and learn the lesson of the plants, i.e. that life includes death and is magnified by it. Being a highly conscious artist, Roethke knew what he was doing. But in the quest for a Greenhouse Eden he may well have found more than he had ever guessed was there!

3. Images of Paradise : the Greenhouse Poems

> We are always demanding a framework, a metaphor, a legend.
>
> Roethke, Notebooks (20 November, 1943)

> In particular, what is a greenhouse?
>
> Kenneth Burke.

In his seminal essay "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke", Kenneth Burke asks himself the leading question, "What is a greenhouse?" and offered some possibilities -

> It is not sheer nature, like a jungle; nor even regulated nature, like a formal garden. It is not the starkly unnatural, like a factory. Nor is it in those intermediate realms of institutional lore, systematic thanatopses, or convenient views of death, we find among the reliques of a natural history museum. Nor would it be like a metropolitan art gallery. It is like all of these only in the sense that it is a museum experience, and so an aspect of our late civilization. But there is a peculiar balance of the natural and unnatural in a greenhouse. All about one, the lovely, straining beings, visibly drawing sustenance from ultimate, invisible powers - in a silent blare of vitality - yet as morbid as the caged animals of a zoo.[1]

In many ways the greenhouse is the ideal symbol, embracing the central paradox of art: that art is <u>not</u> life, but must <u>suggest</u> life. The earthly paradise of an artist has to be ordered to a certain extent, but it must somehow contain its opposite - chaos. Creative tension always emerges from the drama of contending forces. The greenhouse provides exactly the right balance of contraries: light against dark, order against chaos, life against death. Roethke could hardly have been luckier to have such a symbol or wiser in choosing it.

The first section of <u>The Lost Son</u> contains thirteen flower poems, plus the autobiographical vignette "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze" in later collections of the Greenhouse Poems. "This sequence," says Professor Martz, is "one of the permanent achievements of modern poetry", and must be considered in detail.[2] They prepare the way for the "Lost Son" sequence by establishing the primary symbol of a greenhouse in the reader's mind and

introducing the protagonist: a boy.

Stylistically, these poems represent a dramatic shift away from the formal lyrics of Open House and reveal the highly distinctive voice of the poet. Roethke imposed no outward structure on these small poems, allowing them to develop from within and seek out their most appropriate shape. This is how all "free verse" should be written, of course. But it remains the most difficult of forms to succeed in, for without formal restraints the poet must have a near perfect ear and never for an instant lose sight of his object. And Roethke does succeed brilliantly. Each poem unfolds like a flower petal, as if it could not possibly have been otherwise. The words used are concrete to excess and show how Roethke was able to marry his theory ("The poet: perceives the thing in physical terms") with his practice.[3] Like Hopkins, one of Roethke's masters, he makes fullest use of the physical aspects of language. Alliteration on vowels and consonants provides the momentum which, as it were, pulls the reader forward through these poems with astonishing suction. As Burke says, "No matter how brief the poems are, they progress from stage to stage. Reading them, you have strongly the sense of entering at one place, winding through a series of internal developments, and coming out somewhere else."[4]

The Greenhouse Poems which eventually made up the sequence in The Lost Son were selected from many poems written along the same lines. In the notebooks and drafts of discarded greenhouse poems we can see the poet forcing himself to be concrete and allow the poems to seek out their own best shape. One early, uncollected poem is "Growth" (1943):

> Around us abundant examples flourish
> In the patience of sigh, the response of seasons,
> Swelling of seed, algae persisting in snow,
> Soft snail-marrow jogging its acorn of shell;
> For growth is a tadpole kicking, a wave-like
> Weed-like motion of small beginning,
> No dolphin-change or leaping.
> Perhaps, further in time than solar calculation,
> Some sport of the spirit, a psychic mutation,
> Will unite pursuer with pursued, fish with otter,
> And instinct enter the lost realm of understanding.[5]

The poem is sloppy and dissolves into abstraction in the last four lines. But promise of new life exists in lines such as "Soft snail-marrow jogging its acorn of shell", which combines concrete description with a peculiar dynamism of language that gives it a primitive sense of unrestrainable life.

"The Snail" is an early unpublished version of a much later poem (considerably revised), "A Light Breather" (1953). It was written about 1944, and anticipates the best poems of The Lost Son. Roethke avoids nearly all abstractions (the word 'spirit' may be allowed for the sake of the conceit) and generates a uniquely appropriate rhythm:

> As a seed sings and beats like a fish
> In soil moist and soft,
> So moves the spirit
> Still and inward,-
> A snail:
> Taking and embracing its surroundings,
> Its house on its arched back,
> Its horn touching a stone,-
> A music in a hood,
> A small thing,
> Singing.[6]

The rigorously concrete form that Roethke finally achieved can be seen in "Propagation", another unpublished poem, which is an early version of "Cuttings", the first poem in The Lost Son:

> Slivers of stem, minutely furred,
> Tucked into sand still marked with thumb prints,
> Cuttings of coleas, geranium, blood-red fuchsia,
> Stand stiff in their beds.
> Topsoil crusts over like bakery sugar.
>
> But three inches beneath, in the damp sandy cradles,
> Where the stem-end is cut diagonally like a string-bean,
> The thin, flexible cells keep coaxing up water.
> Even before fuzzy root-hairs reach for gritty sustenance,
> One pale horn of growth, a nubly root-cap,
> Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
> Humps like a sprout,
> Then stretches out straight.[7]

This eventually matured into "Cuttings" and "Cuttings, later" - the two poems which open the Greenhouse sequence. The first begins on a note of hushed anticipation as at the end of a long sleep. A plant is in the process of waking into life:

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
Nudges a crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.[8]

The curious noun combination "Sticks-in-a-drowse" shows the strong influence of Hopkins as does the sensuous and highly physical imagery. Monosyllables dominate the poem and internal alliteration forces the reader onward just as the delicate shoot of the plant breaks upward through the topsoil. The poet communicates the experience directly. Like the ideal artist described by James Joyce in The Portrait of an Artist, Roethke stays invisible "like the God of creation", remaining "within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, paring his fingernails".[9] But the quickly steps into the picture with "Cuttings, later":

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.[10]

Roethke has personified the plants, given them a human perspective by comparing them to saints. The Romantic conflict of opposites is present: life against death. We are asked to witness all forces in contention; the life urge wrestles against its contrary. One recent critic has called attention to the "sliding of the metaphorical images by which the plants are rendered backward along the phylogenetic scale".[11] The poem's metaphors descend the Great Chain of Being systematically: saint becomes sucking and sobbing infant which in turn becomes fish. One senses at this very early stage in the sequence that these poems are intended to be more than straightforward

descriptions of the natural process.

"Root Cellar", one of the very earliest of Greenhouse Poems (1943) follows. It takes us back yet further into the dank, dark, steamy pitch of a greenhouse cellar where the life-force is as death-resistant as a germ. The soil is almost malignant:

> Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
> Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
> Shoots dangled and drooped,
> Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
> Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.[12]

The root cellar may not be a direct metaphorical equivalent of the unconscious, yet the explicitly sexual nature of the imagery ("Shoots dangled and drooped,/ Lolling obscenely") cannot but suggest Freudian parallels. Here life can be seen to persist at its most primitive level, a jungle of roots and stems gasping for breath in the slime that nearly overwhelms. "Nothing would give up life:/ Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath." Life arises out of opposition and continues, thriving on the contest with death.

"Forcing House" describes the artificial environment of the greenhouse, how it acts <u>against</u> the natural seasons of the planet to make things grow. Here one can find "Fifty summers in motion at once,/ As the live heat billows from the pipes and pots".[13] But the next poem is more important to the greenhouse sequence as a whole, for the boy is introduced:

> Under the concrete benches,
> Hacking at black hairy roots,-
> These lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes,-
> Digging into the soft rubble underneath.[14]

The boy ferrets among a variety of loathesome weeds, grubs, snails, sticks, and fern-shapes, "Tugging all day at perverse life". In a way this resembles what Roethke called in the notebooks "The long testing of the unconscious before one gets even a few symbols true to himself".[15] "Weed Puller" resembles a descent into the underworld of the dead throughout, but the connection becomes explicit only in the final lines:

Me down in that fetor of weeds,
Crawling on all fours,
Alive, in a slippery grave.

The boy disappears in the next poem, "Orchids", one of the most accomplished poems in the sequence. It divides into two stanzas. I quote them in full:

They lean over the path,
Adder-mouthed,
Swaying close to the face,
Coming out, soft and deceptive,
Limp and damp, delicate as a young bird's tongue,
Their fluttery fledgling lips
Move slowly,
Drawing in the warm air.

And at night,
The faint moon falling through whitewashed glass,
The heat going down
So their mushy smell comes even stronger,
Drifting down from their mossy cradles:
So many devouring infants!
Soft luminescent fingers,
Lips neither dead nor alive,
Loose ghostly mouths
Breathing.[16]

Here the contention of opposites occurs more subtly. Daylight governs the first stanza, while evening presides over the second. Similarly, the air is alternately warm and cold as the plants, like strange reptiles in a zoo, are awake, then asleep. Mysteriously, the adder-mouthed creatures sway upward (under the influence of the sun) then recede back to their mossy cradles (when the moon falls through the glass). The gradual transformation of metaphor in the poem should also be observed. The snake imagery (signifying a very low point on the phylogenetic scale) gives way to bird imagery ("delicate as a young bird's tongue") all within the first stanza. By the second, the orchids are now called "So many devouring infants!" Thus, we climb to a level of humanity, albeit infancy. But a much stranger transformation takes place in the last lines as the "Loose ghostly mouths" hover in suspended animation, "neither dead nor alive", waiting and breathing. The orchids achieve a kind of spirituality in the end, having become breathing ghosts. (One should recall

the original meaning of spiritus : breath.) By reversing the direction along the scale of being, "Orchids" stands in opposition to the second of the Greenhouse Poems, "Cuttings, later" and suggests that a dialectical progression exists between the individual poems in the sequence as a whole as well as internally.

"Moss Gathering" opens up new dimensions for the boy. It contains the narrative of an experience common to Roethke in his youth, that of going out into the countryside to gather patches of moss for lining cemetary baskets. It was all part of the florist's job, of course, but the poet could not help but regard his every action as symbolic. After cutting up squares from the earth's surface, the sensitive young man claims a certain feeling of remorse:

> As if I had broken the natural order of things in that swampland,
> Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,
> By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
> As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration.[17]

Only a poet with an overwhelming sense of guilt could have reacted so strongly to an apparently innocent task. The poem presents the boy (probably an adolescent) for the second time in a condition of isolation, reacting against his surroundings in a highly individual fashion. In both poems nature is animate, ready to accuse or simply devour the protagonist. Nature is never simply acted upon. It reacts, participating in the interplay of subject and object so crucial to Romantic poetry.

Burke uses the next poem ("Big Wind") to illustrate his thesis that reading the greenhouse poems "you have strongly the sense of entering at one place, winding through a series of internal developments, and coming out somewhere else". In this essentially narrative poem the poet begins by defining the situation with a rhetorical question:

> Where were the greenhouses going,
> Lunging into the lashing
> Wind driving water
> So far down the river
> All the faucets stopped?[18]

There follows an account of the efforts to keep the greenhouse together in the storms and functioning. The florists drain the manure machine and pump the steaming mixture all over the plants to protect them from the cold. The greenhouse appears to be collapsing in the high wind, requiring great efforts to save it. The narrator explains:

> Where the worst wind was,
> Creaking the cypress window-frames,
> Cracking so much thin glass
> We stayed up all night,
> Stuffing the holes with burlap.

This exact description of the physical work involved during the storm dominates the second section. Careful manipulation of line-length and accent forces the reader through the poem as if he were caught on a screwthread. But his effect ends suddenly with the majestic image of the greenhouse-as-ship in the final movement of the poem. The speaker declares:

> But she rode it out,
> That old rose-house,
> She hove into the teeth of it,
> The core and pith of that ugly storm,
> Ploughing with her stiff prow,
> Bucking into the wind-waves
> That broke over the whole of her,
> Flailing her sides with spray,
> Flinging long strings of wet across the rooftop,
> Finally worrying, wearing themselves out, merely
> Whistling thinly under the wind-vents;
> She sailed until the calm morning,
> Carrying her full cargo of roses.

The wonderful clarity of the last image resolves all the tensions established in the poem at the outset. The poem proceeds from instability to immense stability in the final image. To explain the peculiar effect of balance contained in this image one might invoke Acquinus (as does Stephen Dedalus in the Portrait of the Artist) : Ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur integritas, consonantia, claritas. This translates: Three things are needed for beauty - wholeness, harmony and clarity (radiance).[19] Dedalus explains these qualities with remarkable ease. Wholeness, he suggests, requires that the image be "luminously apprehended as selfbound and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space and time which is not it. You apprehend it as one thing".

The greenhouse-as-ship image certainly fulfills this admirably. Harmony demands that one should "feel the rhythm of its structure". Roethke's complete mastery of the rhythms in "Big Wind" gives the poem as a whole what is called in fiction "narrative compulsion". The reader is impelled through the poem as if caught in some great torrent of water; but the third section resembles the effect of when a river pours into the sea. This is partly due to the power of the final image which manages to absorb the compulsive rhythms previously employed and bring the poem to a resolution. Finally, radiance is seen to be "the instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is luminously apprehended by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony". The resulting condition, according to Dedalus, is one of stasis. Or the mind is arrested, lifted above both fear and desire. It would not be unreasonable to judge "Big Wind" favourably by any of these criteria.

The last poems of the sequence continue themes already established but widen the perspective of the reader. "Old Florist" offers a portrait of someone working away at his job with skill and loving patience. Likewise, "Transplanting" describes the routine that one could observe in the normal course of events around the greenhouse. The poem returns to the concept of a young plant's struggle to be born, although the conflict appears less intense, aided by human attendants and the artificial atmosphere of the greenhouse. Hothouse plants resemble, of course, human offspring in the sense that they are protected in the same way as humans protect their young and provide a suitable (artificial) atmosphere for maturation to continue unhampered. As a result, adolescence may well come as a shock to the child who encounters the world on its own terms for the first time. The protagonist of The Lost Son is in some ways a product of his unnatural environment, a hothouse plant tossed out in the cold of nature which may easily be indifferent or hostile.

"Child on Top of a Greenhouse" follows directly upon "Transplanting", making the connection obvious by association. The poem contains one central image: the daring boy balancing precariously disdain for his life on one of

the slender ribs of the glass cage of a greenhouse:

> The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
> My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,
> The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,
> Up through the streaked glass, flushing with sunlight,
> A few white clouds all rushing eastward,
> A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,
> And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting![21]

This portrait of the boy as dare-devil expands our knowledge of his character considerably. It was dangerous in the extreme for anyone to climb on top of a greenhouse, and the children who ventured to walk the narrow seams risked losing their balance and falling through the glass. But our protagonist resists the inherent dangers of this act and ignores the surrealistic accusations of the half-grown chrysanthemums. His final glory is the admiration of his peers, "And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!". The poem arrests our minds with the single, breathless image of the child leaning into the wind, momentarily on top of the world, ignoring the threats of disaster which challenge from every angle.

"Flower Dump" provides a contrast to the aerial setting of "Child on Top of a Greenhouse", conjuring up for the reader "Whole beds of bloom pitched on a pile".[21] The triumph of the boy leads into the comic defeat of flowers in a heap of compost:

> Everything limp
> But one tulip on top,
> One swaggering head
> Over the dying, the newly dead.[22]

Which gives way to the last flower poem in the sequence, "Carnations", the most delicate organism encountered so far: "Pale blossoms, each balanced on a single jointed stem,/The leaves curled back in elaborate Corinthian scrolls". This minute poem completes the cycle, offering resolution of contraries for the moment in the stasis of art:

> A crisp hyacinthine coolness,
> Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,
> The windless perpetual morning above a September cloud.

****

A later poem, "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze", enlarges the greenhouse sequence by adding to the company of characters. It was written several years after the Greenhouse Poems of 1948 (The Lost Son) and shows a drifting away from the concrete intensity of the other poems in the sequence. It should have been included in the miscellaneous sections Two and Three which precede the "Lost Son" sequence of section Four. The poems of these two brief sections hark back to Roethke's earlier style and are therefore less interesting. One endearing piece, however, is "My Papa's Waltz" which presents an image of the huge, slightly drunken father, Otto, whisking his terrified son about the kitchen. The boy's reaction, significantly, combines fear and affection, suggesting the traditional emotional response of the Jew to Jehovah. The boy speaks out:

> The whiskey on your breath
> Could make a small boy dizzy;
> But I hung on like death:
> Such waltzing was not easy.
>
> We romped until the pans
> Slid from the kitchen shelf;
> My mother's countenance
> Could not unfrown itself.
>
> The hand that held my wrist
> Was battered on one knuckle;
> At every step you missed
> My right ear scraped a buckle.
>
> You beat time on my head,
> With a palm caked hard by dirt,
> Then waltzed me off to bed
> Still clinging to your shirt.[23]

The father does what he does out of affection and playfulness, not realizing the pain and fear aroused in the son by his actions. This picture of Otto, a tough Prussian with simple, strong emotions (not the least of which is love) is far from being unpleasant. Obviously, that Roethke should spend a life-time seeking atonement with Otto is a testimony to his father's amazing influence over the son.

Two other poems in section Two concern us: "Pickle Belt" and "Double Feature". Here we encounter the adolescent for the first time in specific terms.

The former poem shows us a young man working at a summer job in a pickle factory:

> He, in his shrunken britches,
> Eyes rimmed with pickle dust,
> Prickling with all the itches
> Of sixteen-year-old lust.[24]

Likewise, the latter offers an image of a cinema house crowded with lovers, mothers, and sleep-heavy children. The speaker in the poem finds no escape from his problems, however, and is left dawdling on the kerb outside afterwards, remembering that "there was something else I was hoping for".[25] The sense of expectation (which is the mode of adolescence) remains unfulfilled.

Section Three contains only a few poems, most of them in some way interesting. "River Incident" begins with the speaker knee deep in water, a shell arching under his toes. A gradual process of identification occurs as the poet <u>remembers</u> that his original substance was the same inanimate but vital matter which surrounds him. This is the undifferentiated <u>ego</u> of Freud, the condition of primitive wholeness existing before the separation into consciousness. The poet says of being in the water:

> ...I knew I had been there before,
> In that cold, granitic slime,
> In the dark, in the rolling water.[26]

The last poem before the "Lost Son" sequence begins is "The Waking", a brilliant lyric celebrating the peculiar sense of joy felt by the poet while crossing an open field in mid-summer (recalling the redemptive symbolism of the field). The sun pours down, the wren's throat shimmers, the stones sing and the flowers jump. This is the child's view of nature, a sympathetic and responsive world. The child imagines himself to be the centre of this world and all objects are seen as extensions of himself. In a sense, the Romantic dichotomy of subject and object collapses with this perspective. The poet affirms his feeling of complete identification with the earthly paradise in this lyric and says that

...all the waters
Of all the streams
Sang in my veins
That summer day.[27]

In short, the way has been prepared for the major sequence that follows. Roethke has established the greenhouse world as a symbolic realm and given us glimpses of the boy at various stages of development. The dominant yet loving father and the ineffectual mother have already been encountered ("My Papa's Waltz"), as has the redemptive symbol of the field. Nevertheless, the great achievement of the Greenhouse Poems remains a prelude to the "Lost Son" sequence.

4. The Lost Son : Journey of a Hero

All the present has fallen: I am only what I remember.
Roethke, Notebooks (July, 1945)

For behold, the kingdom of God is within you.
Luke 17:21

The "Lost Son" sequence includes the four long poems which make up section Four of The Lost Son (1948), all of the poems from Praise to the End! (1951), and the first poem of The Waking (1953).[1] These poems, often experimental to the point of being unintelligible, are nevertheless Roethke's most original contribution to modern poetry. Their method, which might be called "associationa presses language into the service of the unconscious, thereby extending the conscious: the goal of all art. One should recall Hegel's aphorism, copied out by Roethke into his notebooks in 1947: "All consciousness is an appeal to more consciousness."[2]

In essence, this sequence describes the journey of our protagonist (the boy) into the hinterlands of the unconscious mind, retracing the steps that have led him to his present state in an effort to uncover the past and thereby "burn it up". This process is essentially Freudian, a filling in of the memory gaps by recollection or anamnesis. As Professor Mircea Eliade, a contemporary student of religion and anthropology, explains, "The individual's

return to the origin is conceived as an opportunity for renewing and regenerating the existence of him who undertakes it".[3] To advance, Roethke would have to go backwards first, but he may well have demanded too much of his medium (poetry). A final judgement on this sequence must be reserved, however, until the poems it contains are properly understood. And this, I believe, can only be accomplished by an explication which maintains two points of reference: (1) the poet's 'subjective frame of reference', that is to say the biographical element in the work, and (2) the larger, illusive area of shared experience represented by archetype or myth.

Dr. C.G. Jung separated the unconscious into these two areas, calling them the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. Of the former, he said, "The materials contained in this layer are of a personal nature in so far as they have the character partly of acquisitions derived from the individual's life and partly of psychological factors which could just as well be conscious."[4] These factors are, therefore, biographical and subjective. They employ a personal symbolism and may well be inaccessible to the outsider without considerable knowledge of the individual's life, his family, friends, early environment, personal idiosyncrasies, and so on. However, in addition to these personal elements of the unconscious mind there is the larger, shared contents of the collective unconscious: "These are the mythological associations - those motives and images which can spring anew in every age and clime without historical tradition or migration".[5] This is the world of dreams. It includes the deepest layers of the human mind and provides a common point of reference for all men in all times. Jung explained this concept further in Archetypes of the Unconscious (earliest version, 1934): "I have chosen the term 'collective' because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere all in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate (sic) of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every

one of us".[6]

The Lost Son illustrates the use of mythology for modern man whose old myths have been rendered obsolete by science and the general disintegration of culture that has marked off the twentieth century as a wasteland where

> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water.[7]

The modern artist no longer enjoys the supporting myths that past epochs offer to the creative individual. Instead, myths now have to be fashioned from the materials at hand, and these are necessarily subjective. James Joyce is probably the most obvious example of a modern writer who forged new myths out of the substance of his life. Thomas Mann is another. Both writers foraged in the personal unconscious for symbols that could, by the alchemy of artistic genius, be made public and permanent in the work itself. And so did Roethke, albeit on a less grand scale. By going directly back to his primary life-crisis (birth, puberty, separation from the father) he fashioned a self-contained universe of essentially private symbols: the greenhouse, the father-florist, the open field. Nevertheless, these personal metaphors become intelligible through the larger framework of myth which gives the sequence its rudimentary structure. Whether or not this mythical framework was a conscious effort cannot be exactly determined. But Roethke did write in his notebooks in 1943: "We are always demanding a framework, a metaphor, a legend".[8] And his interest in mythology was always extensive. He made elaborate notes on Yeats's and Blake's respective mythologies, and one discovers numerous paraphrases of important Greek myths scattered throughout the notebooks. He was also a life-long student of Oriental religions, and these had a strong influence on much of his later work. These facts notwithstanding, it remains true of him in the end that "myth", as Thomas Mann said, "is the foundation of life, the timeless schema, the pious formula into which life flows when it reproduces its traits out of the unconscious."[9]

Professor Joseph Campbell, perhaps the greatest systematic student of mythology in our time, identifies the myth (or 'monomyth' as he calls it) of the heroic journey as the archetypal literary plot. In the Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) he describes the myth itself in outline, then discusses some of the infinite variations on this theme which occur in world literature (including religion and mythology). The basic myth of the heroic journey, then, runs as follows:

> The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again - if the powers have remained unfriendly to him - his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).[10]

This sounds rather specific as a general myth, but as Campbell emphasizes, the changes wrought on this simple scale defy description. Any given tale may isolate one aspect of the cycle, such as the flight motif or the atonement with the father. Or a number of independent cycles may be strung together (as in the Odyssey). Characters or separate episodes may be fused, and so on. But the basic monomyth remains submerged in the background offering itself as a framework.

The most commonplace version of the monomyth is the journey of initiation, a rite of passage. This latter term refers to the ceremonies of birth, puberty, marriage or burial which arise in some form or another in all societies, past and present. They are designed to assist the individual in his passage from one station in life to another (or from mortality to immortality in the funeral rite). In primitive societies these rites are especially central. Where survival itself is constantly being challenged, it becomes necessary to maintain intense social cohesion (uniformity) and these initiatory rites contribute greatly to this end. They translate the life-crises of the individual into more generalized, impersonal terms. They reveal to each member of a given community his or her role as warrior, bride, priest or chieftain. As Campbell explains, "The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. Generations and individuals pass, like anonymous cells from a living body; but the sustaining, timeless form remains."[12]

In Rites and Symbols of Initiation, his instructive guide to this cultural phenomenon, Professor Eliade discusses at length the most fundamental initiatory rite of passage: the puberty rite as practised by primitive or archaic societies. Eliade tells us, "the puberty initiation represents above all the revelation of the sacred -- and, for the primitive world, the sacred means not only everything that we now understand by religion, but also the whole body of the tribe's mythological and cultural traditions."[13] "The Lost Son" itself is essentially a puberty rite, albeit a modern variation on this ancient theme. The boy is separated from his father and his home (the womb of the greenhouse) and descends into the dream-world of the unconscious (symbolically represented by the jungle-like forests surrounding the greenhouse). Here the adolescent faces a series of obstacles to overcome (tests) and experiences the nadir of his journey. In this dark, mythical zone he becomes aware of the vital forces within him (sexuality, manhood) and returns to be reconciled with the father. But things will never be the same again. Eliade's

comments on the meaning of archaic puberty rites are relevant to what Roethke has attempted in his long poem:

> In a great many cases puberty rites, in one way or another, imply the revelation of sexuality - but for the entire premodern world, sexuality too participates in the sacred. In short, through initiation, the candidate passes beyond the natural mode - the mode of the child - and gains access to the cultural mode; that is, he is introduced to spiritual values.[14]

Through initiation, then, the child becomes a man, he gains full access to the pleasures and responsibilities of adulthood. The ritual is instructive and symbolic, admitting the individual to a new role in his society. But this can be no easy task.

Eliade explains that the puberty rite involves (1) separation from the family (usually the mother); (2) ordeals or trials which may involve symbolic death: all of which is meant to be instructive; (3) resurrection of the initiate and return to the tribe (transformed, possessed of 'secret knowledge' - the knowledge of sex and the history of the tribe. In terms of "The Lost Son" we can see this pattern unfold directly. Separation, ordeals, symbolic death and rebirth (return) are all present. Many aspects of primitive rites as related by Eliade can be observed. For example, Eliade recounts the puberty ordeals of one Australian tribe. The adolescents are captured by their elders, often masked, and taken into the wilderness. There they are buried beneath branches in the darkness and told that they are about to die; that they will be killed by a divine being. "The very act of separation from their mother fills them with forebodings of death."[15] The terrifying darkness that surrounds them is unrelieved all night by stars, moon or fire. Then comes the hideous whirring sound of the bull-roarers (the elders) in the distance, symbolizing the approaching divinity who will murder the boys. "This experience of darkness, of death, and of the nearness of Divine Beings," says Eliade, "will be continually repeated and deepened throughout the initiation."[16] The novices die to childhood. And when they are uncovered, they believe themselves to be 'new men'. They are told the legends of the tribe, the secrets of sex

and other sacred mysteries, then allowed to return to the village. And 'when the lads finally come back to the camp, the mothers touch them to be sure they are really their sons. Among some Australian tribes - mothers mourn over the initiands as the dead are mourned'.[17] But let us examine the four poems included in the "Lost Son" sequence (up to 1943) in the light of this discussion of myth and the rites of initiation.

"The Lost Son" itself (the central poem in the sequence) opens with a section entitled "The Flight". This signals the reader to the escape motif which dominates the first part of this poem. It begins quickly and in the first person; the hero has been lured by the otherworldly cries of the dead:

> At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry;
> I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
> A slow drip over stones,
> Toads brooding in wells.
> All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
> I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
> Saying,
> Snail, snail, glister me forward,
> Bird, soft-sigh me home,
> Worm, be with me.
> This is my hard time.[18]

The poem begins, as it were, in medias res. As Roethke wrote in his notes in 1944((not long before beginning this sequence), "The motion of a poem: it must get underway quickly."[19] He manages this admirably, as well as the difficult task of establishing this new, associational (dream-like) style. Without any biographical glosses one feels the anxiety of the protagonist who has heard voices from the dead, who imagines leaves come to life, who asks the snail, the bird, and the worm to be his guides through this 'hard time' that is anticipated. 'The softening chalk of my bones'suggests mortality - the fear of death. The imagery throughout is hallucinatory, nightmarish. Nevertheless, a further dimension comes into play if one knows that Woodlawn refers to the graveyard where Otto Roethke was buried. Recalling the death of Roethke's father while he was still an adolescent, it becomes obvious that the initial impetus of the poem was the sense of separation from Otto which plagued the poet throughout his life. The opening recaptures

the boy's sense of loss tinged with panic. The poem then continues with the hero waiting for what Professor Campbell names 'the call to adventure', the beginning of the initiatory journey.[20] There is a moment of hesitation before entering the dark wood:

> Fished in an old wound,
> The soft pond of repose;
> Nothing nibbled my line,
> Not even the minnows came.
>
> Sat in an empty house
> Watching shadows crawl,
> Scratching.
> There was one fly.

The protagonist-hero fishes for a direction. He dips into the pond (symbol of memory or the unconscious), brooding over an 'old wound'. Because the father has died, the house is empty. Like Dante before him, the hero needs a Vergil-figure to show him the way down into the abyss and out again - or else he may perish. He cries out for supernatural aid:

> Voice, come out of the silence.
> Say something.
> Appear in the form of a spider
> Or a moth beating the curtain.
>
> Tell me:
> Which is the way I take;
> Out of what door do I go,
> Where and to whom?

In the manner of an oracle, the answers he receives are cryptic:

> Dark hollows said, lee to the wind,
> The moon said, back of an eel,
> The salt said, look by the sea,
> Your bows are not enough praise,
> You will find no comfort here,
> In the kingdom of bang and blab.

One can only guess at the meaning of such lines. Perhaps 'lee to the wind' means 'shelter from the strongest currents, protect yourself'. Roethke always associates the wind with the spirit (spiritus), but this advice is unspecific. Likewise, the moon's response cannot be pinned down with any ease. Traditionally, the moon is a feminine principle, whereas the eel is

likely to be male. It makes sense that one should recommend the other. The salt, as one might expect, offers the sea as a possibility. One associates the sea with the womb, the source of all being, and the void as well. The symbolic potential of the sea is so vast that one cannot properly gauge its effect. In the context of "The Lost Son" it may be identified with that immense and timeless state-of-being which precedes birth and follows death. In any case these suggestions are of small use to the boy-hero who must enter the dream-zones of the unconscious ('the kingdom of bang and blab')in order to re-encounter the personal dragons of his past and slay them once and for all time. The rhythm of the poem picks up sharply as the hunt begins:

> Running lightly over spongy ground,
> Past the pasture of flat stones,
> The three elms,
> The sheep strewn on a field,
> Over a rickety bridge
> Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.
>
> Hunting along the river,
> Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
> By the muddy pond-edge, by the hog-holes,
> By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.

Suddenly, out of the unconscious springs a nursery rhyme, both portentious and comic, thus ambiguous and unsettling. It describes a gnomic figure that is bigger than a rat, 'less than a leg' and feels like an eel in catskin rolled in grease!

> It's sleek as an otter
> With wide webby toes
> Just under the water
> It usually goes.

The protagonist has already ventured beyond the world of normal waking experience. The journey is well under way. This represents the stage of Campbell's heroic journey where 'unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces' exist ambiguously as threats (tests) and magical aids (helpers). The use of kindergarten rhymes and diction suggest that psychological regression has

begun. The hero hunts in the jungle of his unconscious, excited and terrified. But he may not turn back having come this far.

The second section is called "The Pit". It corresponds to what Campbell marks off as 'the nadir of the mythological round'. Again, the title of the section suggests what comes after. Abandoning the language of the nursery, the poet slows down the pace considerably. He achieves an antiphonal effect by using a dialectic of questions and answers. One might think of the Australian adolescents here, covered with branches, calling out for help. The medicine man replies:

> Where do these roots go?
> Look down under the leaves.
> Who put the moss there?
> These stones have been here too long.
> Who stunned the dirt into noise?
> Ask the mole, he knows.
> I feel the slime of a wet nest.
> Beware Mother Mildew.
> Nibble again, fish nerves.

The three questions all relate to the identity of the hero. Where are his roots? Who put flesh on his bones? Who made the inanimate clay (dirt) animate? The answers are never direct, but always highly suggestive. They point once again to organic cycle, the lesson of the plants, the knowledge of birth and rebirth. Death remains a necessary and acceptable part of the cycle and must not be denied. The hero rests in 'the slime of a wet nest', where Mildew is Mother, reinforcing the intimate connection between birth and decay. If any answers are to be found, they will be here. He (the hero) has much more to endure, however, before the journey is over. This section, the shortest in the poem, ends with a note of expectancy: "'Nibble again, fish nerves'.

The trials of the pit which must be endured are numerous, and these occur in "The Gibber". The title of this third section foretells of Chaos ('gibberish'). As in traditional initiation ceremonies, the goal of these trials is the dissolution of the old identity, fracturing the original ties

with the father and mother which inhibit an individual's progress into full adulthood. One primary way of achieving this break-down was the symbolic regressus ad uterum, a return to the foetal stage in order to effect a spiritual rebirth. Eliade has examined the various manifestations of this motif (gestation and rebirth) in Myth and Reality. He explains, "The regressus ad uterum is accomplished in order that the beneficiary shall be born into a new mode of being or be regenerated. From the structuralist point of view, the return to the womb corresponds to the reversion of the Universe to the 'chaotic' or embryonic state. The prenatal darkness corresponds to the Night before Creation and to the darkness of the initiation hut."[21] And so regression inevitably involves disintegration of the established order and an attempt to regain the limbo-state of the womb, the Chaos which precedes Creation. Relating this to myth, Eliade says that the regressus ad uterum usually features 'a hero being swallowed by a sea monster and emerging victorious after breaking through the monster's belly' or 'initiatory passage through vagina dentata, or the dangerous descent into a cave or crevice assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth'.[22] Roethke employs the latter at the outset of "The Gibber" where the hero is seen overlooking the vagina dentata:

> At the wood's mouth,
> By the cave's door,
> I listened to something
> I had heard before.
>
> Dogs of the groin
> Barked and howled,
> The sun was against me,
> The moon would not have me.
>
> The weeds whined,
> The snakes cried,
> The cows and briars
> Said to me: Die.

These stanzas portray the hero's anxiety, which is partly sexual ('Dogs of the groin') and partly filial (sun as father, moon as mother). Roethke's overwhelming sense of guilt dominates the passage. The unsympathetic side of

nature (weeds, snakes, briars) calls out to the hero: Die. The wages of sin is death.

The regressus ad uterum occurs in the next passage from "The Gibber":

> What a small song. What slow clouds. What dark water.
> Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice.
> Only the snow's here.
> I'm cold. I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and mother.
> Fear was my father, Father Fear.
> His look drained the stones.

The pace of the poem radically alters with this change in line length. Roethke begins the kind of 'dream-language' which typifies the later poems in the "Lost Son" sequence. This limbo-world of semi-coherence represents the cold before the storm, the premonition stage. The central reference in the passage is to the Book of Job. The great question which Job asks himself reveals a sense of isolation from God: "Hath the rain a father?".(Job:38:28). The answer, of course, is yes. The Father must not be denied. Nor can the lost son deny his father, Otto. The equation of Otto Roethke with Job's God must not be passed over too quickly. Significantly, Roethke chose the more human (and therefore more frightening) God of Israel: Jehovah (YAWEH). The softer, more ethereal Godhead of the first chapter of Genesis was called Elohim. In theory these were the same Godhead revealed through different masks. Like Otto, Jehovah demanded more than seems necessary. Jehovah had to be placated. And Jehovah, like Otto, would not easily suffer a disobedient son. He is to be feared. ('Fear was my father, Father Fear') One look from such a God drains all natural impulses from the powerless son. Even nature is emptied. ('His look drained the stones') The hero seeks to complete the regressus ad uterum in this section. ('Rub me in father and mother') And the language employed becomes less and less rational as the poet drops farther back into his past.

The ultimate goal of regression, Eliade concludes, is 'to cure oneself of time'.[23] If one can slip back far enough in time, one arrives eventually ad originem, that point where existence first came into being. By retracing

steps, one encounters the source and comes out into the timeless eternity which precedes conception. The hero of "The Lost Son" attains to this end in this section of the poem. The passage which links the father to Jehovah gives way to a gentler one concerning the mother. It seems that regression has ended with the babe sucking at the mother's breast:

> What gliding shape
> Beckoning through the halls,
> Stood poised on the stair,
> Fell dreamily down?
>
> From the mouths of jugs
> Perched on many shelves,
> I saw substance flowing
> That cold morning.
>
> Like a slither of eels
> That watery cheek
> As my own tongue kissed
> My lips awake.

Again, the language makes no literal sense. Words like 'gliding', 'beckoning', 'poised', and 'dreamily' suggest a feminine principle which softens the harsher male principle of Father Fear. Like all of Roethke's women figures, this one is vague. She may be mother or lover. This matters very little. For the feminine principle grants balance and strength to the hero. She represents the triumph of the quester, as Campbell says, his sacred marriage to the goddess-mother of the world.

A brilliant passage reminiscent of an Elizabethan rant follows immediately. Imagery of disintegration signals the final break-up of the old self:

> Is this the storm's heart? The ground is unstilling 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.
> Where, where are the tears of the world?
> Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher's palm;
> Let the gestures freeze; our doom is already decided.
> All the windows are burning! What's left of my life?
> I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!
> Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going,
> I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,
> I run, I run to the whistle of money.
>
> Money money money
> Water water water

Clearly, the hero regards his old self as in tatters. The leading images are those of destruction. The ground 'unstills' itself, collapsing under the hero, whose veins empty themselves. His body is consumed in flames: "All the windows are burning!'. But in the midst of this crumbling away of the old order ('Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going'), a glimpse of the new one can be discerned. The hero asks, "Do the bones cast out their fire?" "Is the seed leaving the old bed?" The response is positive, "These buds are live as birds." The imagery is sexual, of course; one may recall that what the initiate of the puberty rite learns is the knowledge of sex. Nevertheless, the hero still seeks infantile gratification, 'the lash of the primordial milk'. He is still slipping backwards ad originem ('the time-order is going'). This process involves a conflict of obscure forces: death against life, rational against non-rational, artificial against natural, and so on. The poet attempts to dramatize this conflict of opposites by contrasting 'money' and 'water' as he does at the end of the rant. This succeeds only partially.

This section ends with the natural order prevailing. Again, the question-answer motif occurs, effecting a synthesis of opposites by this technique of internal dialectic which often reappears at crucial points in the "Lost Son" sequence. The final stanza of this third section, however, points toward the resolution. The hero begins to feel a new sense of identity:

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

The colour of white always anticipates a redemption scene in Roethke's work. White is associated with sexual regeneration. (One thinks of Blake's Generation, a zone of experience where mere physical reproduction guarantees a kind of eternity, but hardly redemption.) The 'dark swirl' which the hero drops through in the last line above is the abyss of timelessness. Having descended the memory scale and re-encountered many primal experiences, the hero effectively 'burns up' the past that led to the unwanted self, the

memories which persist and inhibit free access to the present. Hence, the old self has at last become ashes. The new self must now be brought before the Father for reconciliation (atonement).

"The Return" brings the hero back from his dangerous foray into the unconscious, the enchanted forest of memory, and approaches the point on Campbell's mythological round where atonement (recognition by the father-creator). The protagonist struggles back from his adventures in the dark wood to the greenhouse:

> The way to the boiler was dark,
> Dark all the way.
> Over slippery cinders
> Through the long greenhouse.

He encounters first of all the roses, personified as usual, 'breathing in the dark'. The boiler fireman works by a single light. The weeds are sleeping undisturbed. Then suddenly the hero remembers an encounter with his father. Past and present rush together in a flashback:

> Once I stayed all night.
> The light in the morning came slowly over the white
> Snow.
> There were many kinds of cool
> Air.
> Then came steam.
>
> Pipe-knock.

Roethke described this section as 'a return to a memory of childhood that comes back almost as in a dream, after the agitation and exhaustion of the earlier actions'.[24] The 'Pipe-knock' refers to the violent knocking of the pipes which accompanied the infusion of fresh steam. It also calls up an image of the pipe-smoking Otto, banging his pipe against a bench or a pipe. It does not really matter for the signal is clear. The next three lines explain:

> Scurry of warm over small plants.
> Ordnung! ordnung!
> Papa is coming!

Indeed, Papa embodies the many aspects of the German word: ordnung (order, power, etc.). The section ends with the night dissolving, the flowers and weeds coming back to life under the renewing light of morning:

> A fine haze moved off the leaves;
> Frost melted on far panes;
> The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.
> Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds
> Moved in a slow up-sway.

The final section of the poem, untitled, opens with recollections

> It was beginning winter,
> An in-between time,
> The landscape still partly brown:
> The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind
> Above the blue snow.

This is the hero's stage of 'illumination'. The landscape widens for the first time, symbolically, and the full light of day floods the area. Nonetheless, winter represents a time of frozen possibilities. The fulfilment of spring and summer remains at one remove from the present. The hero meditates on a winter field which he remembers, a place where

> The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
> Over the dry seed-crowns,
> The beautiful surviving bones
> Swinging in the wind.

Toward the end of the section the hero questions the experience in a manner reminiscent of Eliot, asking himself:

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

The answer cannot be obtained at this point. For the entire "Lost Son" sequence must be considered as a whole if we are to understand the movement backward and forward which eventually leads to a firm sense of progress, the establishment of a new self. Roethke explained this process very well himself:

> I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man
> it is necessary first to go back. Any history
> of the psyche (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".
> Are not some experiences so powerful and so profound
> ..that they repeat themselves, thrust themselves
> upon us, again and again, with variation and change,
> each time bringing us closer to our own most
> particular (and thus most universal) reality?[25]

Still, "The Lost Son" poem is self-contained. It fulfills the mythological round, although it leaves the hero unresolved in the end, reassuring himself:

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

The other poems in the sequence repeat, less grandly, the same heroic journey or elaborate a particular phase of it. But this poem remains the central poem in the Roethke canon. All the other poems must be interpreted with attention to the key symbols in Roethke's personal mythology as they appear in "The Lost Son". Papa, the greenhouse, the open field, woman and the wind-as-spirit are all present as active forces here; and the later poems merely focus on one or another of these symbols in turn.

Stylistically, "The Lost Son" remains an apex. Having removed all conscious masks, the poet speaks directly and forcefully to his audience. He would attempt further innovations in other poems in the sequence, but not always with the same success. This central poem strains at the borders of intelligibility itself, nearly spilling over into Chaos at several points. But the poet's vision is strong enough to rescue the poem from this fate. Roethke perceived a higher order of reality then that which is normally available to us. By shaping his own version of the heroic journey, he has rescued one of the great myths of all time. And by linking his myth-cycle to the traditional puberty rites of primitive societies he was able to write about his own burdens (to use Burke's phrase) and thereby give the work an authenticity which gives life to the abstract mythological framework of the whole. It stands as Roethke's finest achievement.

One should not forget that Kenneth Burke was acting as mentor to Roethke during the period of composition. "The Lost Son" would probably have been less successful were it not for Burke's influence. For Roethke did not know enough about psychology or mythology at this point in his career to use them as deftly as he did. Burke provided the necessary advice and encouragement. And when a poem was completed, he offered the fatherly approbation which Roethke craved. Upon completion of "The Lost Son", for example, Roethke sent it to Burke for final comments. The reply, which I quote in part, reveals the exact nature of the Burke-Roethke friendship and testifies to Burke's skill and patience as a critic of Roethke's verse:

Andover,
New Jersey,
October 3, 1945.

Dear Ted,

I agree with you that your poem is something to be emphatic about. Surely it is your farthest step in the direction of the eschatological. It gives well indeed the sense of turmoils and trammels, and vaguely balked expectation. And there are many lines that open up possibilities as one reads.

I hope that you won't mind my hanging on to this copy, for a while at least. I think I can use it in the stuff I still want to write on the search for essence. (In the next Kenyon, I think, will appear some observations from the Grammar I did of this nature on Peer Gynt and Proust; but in the Symbolic I'd like to go into the matter further, and your present poem seems to me one hundred per cent the exemplar of one of the ways.)

It is interesting that you selected Eliot in particular to be furious about, in your letter. And I think the choice is quite significant. For do you not see that, for all the vast differences, you end on the vigil, the watching and waiting in silence? Eliot gives this much the traditional Christian interpretation. He could rub himself in father and mother by adding the intellectual matrix of the Church. This call beyond imagery to reason you are feeling, yet battling to resist. You would glumly resist incorporation in some cause or movement or institution as the new parent. Hence your search for essential motives drives you back into the quandries of adolescence (the age par excellence of waiting). The battle is a

fundamental one; which is probably why one gets the feeling that this poem marks the end of one phase and the beginning of another, being thus a kind of "last poem" (hence my feeling that I can use it when on the Symbolism of the ultimate, the essential - which for reasons I explain in the Kenyon excerpt, leads to imagery of temporal return).

You are confronting the need of a new dimension. You fear the loss of your identity whenever you attempt to incorporate it. You particularly resist Eliot because he did incorporate it (though unquestionably at great cost, as judged by the criteria of the aesthetic prevailing prior to this incorporation). So you sullenly arrest yourself, and hold yourself to the continued contemplation of that one station. Knowing the dangers of an ideational framework, you would maintain a kind of Chronic Throw-back - which, however uncomfortable it may be for you, is of great interest to me in my search for the documents, since it does serve to make your poem so intensely and thoroughly an example of its kind.

I think your way of replacing Charlie was a great improvement. The only line I disliked in the poem was, "In the kingdom of bang and blab," though I can't explain just what bothers me about it. I guess it's because it suggests to me Stuart Chase's terms for debunking whatever expressions he considers meaningless. In the bottom stanza of page 2, the beginning and ending on "hunting" seems too symmetrical to me. For my slightly lop-sided taste, it would seem better if "hunting" were brought up into the line above, thus:

"By the shrunken lake hunting, in the heat of summer."

But though I agree that "hunting" should be repeated in that stanza, I can't see that a thing is gained by the repetition of "resound" in the line you inserted on page 5. The only other thing that bothered me was a question (not very strong) whether the quasi-Gothic jingles on the crawling things were wholly effective. (I mean such as the "serpents and hogs" lines on p. 4; though I see, looking again, that "crawling things" doesn't quite accurately classify the lot.)

But these doubts are minor indeed; and one thing is certain: the overall mood is very effectively sustained. Many thanks indeed for letting me see the poem. And I hope that eventually I shall be saying more about it.[20]

Typically, Roethke deferred to most changes recommended by Burke - although he wisely kept the suggestive phrase 'In the kingdom of bang and blab'. Earlier letters show that Burke had constant access to Roethke's

rough drafts - and one can only be grateful for this accidental crossing of two lively minds, one creative and the other critical. It is also fortunate that Roethke, who was unduly influenced by authority-figures, should have encountered a man of Burke's sophistication and sympathies.

The series of poems which comprise the "Lost Son" sequence up to 1948 includes three poems which continue the cyclical movement established in the central poem itself: regression alternating with progression. "The Long Alley" is a difficult poem, but an important one in the sequence as a whole. It follows "The Lost Son", and as we know from that poem, Roethke conceived of reality as a process. The stage of illumination is never final. And so the illumination apprehended at the end of "The Lost Son" must give way once more to the darkness (regression) if further progress is to be attained. The insights of the earlier poem are temporarily lost as the protagonist slips back into the mire again. The poem opens with images of the river mentioned in the first section of "The Lost Son" -

> A river glides out of the grass. A river or a serpent.
> A fish floats belly upward,
> Sliding through the white current,
> Slowly turning,
> Slowly.
>
> The dark flows on itself. A dead mouth sings under an old tree.
> The ear hears only in low places.
> Remember an old sound.
> Remember
> Water.[27]

The old associations of father with guilt and the fear of death resurface. The fish is dead (father-symbol). Also, the 'old mouth' is probably the deceased Otto buried under a tree and unwilling to let go of his son even from the grave. Sexual guilt once again connects to the ghost of Father Fear. The old dialectic re-emerges:

> This slag runs slow. What bleeds when metal breaks?
> Flesh, you offend this metal. How long need the bones mourn?
> Are those horns on top of the hill? Yesterday has a long look.

The hero meditates on images of industrial waste, jumping from line to line

by the associational logic one encounters in dreams. Cinders, slag, metal, sulphurous water and other remnants of factory production abound through the first part of "The Long Alley". Roethke links materialism in its most sordid aspects to repressed or wasted sexuality as in the third section of "The Lost Son" ('I have married my hands to perpetual agitation/ I run, I run to the whistle of money.') The illusive question, "Are there horns on top of the hill?" is sufficiently ambiguous to combine both elements of the analogy. The protagonist is left alone with his questions at the end of the first section.

He repeats the leading question at the outset of section Two: "Lord, what do you require?" When no response is forthcoming, he appeals to the goddess-mother, the feminine principle:

> Come to me, milk-nose. I need a loan of the quick.
> There's no joy is soft bones.
> For whom were you made, sweetness I cannot touch?
> Look what the leeks do.
> Luminous one, shall we meet on the bosom of God?
> Return the gaze of the pond.

The effect is antiphonal. The questions are all the same in essence: how can the hero find gratification for his desires? Again, the ritual of the puberty rite comes into play. The boy asks about sex. The responses are cryptic, the answers of a medicine man or an oracle. The advice, however, is clear enough in the final line; the boy is directed inward (Narcissus). But this only leads to isolation and balked sexuality.

The third section begins on a note of despair. The boy asks, "Can feathers eat me?" and reveals his uncommon fear of the natural world. He reluctantly admits that he has exhausted the rich depths of memory: 'There's no clue in the silt'. And so he enters the game of social interaction. The central stanzas of this section affect a childlike, ritual language:

> A waiting ghost warms up the dead
> Until they creak their knees:
> So up and away and what we do
> But barley-break and squeeze.

The game of barley-break continues in this scarcely intelligible fashion. The game itself was one that Roethke may have played as a child in rural Michigan. Three couples were needed to proceed. They would pair off into three separate and contiguous squares. The couple in the middle had to catch the end couples as they attempted to cross the dangerous central zone untouched. Significantly, the middle plot was referred to as hell. The game represents the frantic catch-as-catch-can world of sexual encounters. And the poem itself may be seen as the adolescent's entry in this brutal world of partially satisfied desire. "The Long Alley" elaborates that part of the hero's journey concerned with the winning of a bride. But Roethke may well be criticized here for obscurity. Only the most intimate knowledge of Roethke's personal symbolism renders the poem intelligible in any way.

The fourth section describes the relief of sexual and spiritual anxiety that pervades the earlier ones (recalling the goal of the puberty rite: spiritual rebirth). It parallels the section in "The Lost Son" called "The Return", taking the boy once again back to the Greenhouse Eden. Here are 'The long alleys of strings and stem' which give the poem its title. The flowers become little girls and animals. And the boy experiences a lyric moment, what Joyce calls an epiphany:

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

The fifth section resolves the main antagonisms in the poem:

> Bricks flake before my face. Master of water, that's trees away.
> Reach me a peach, fondling, the hills are there.
> Nuts are money: wherefore and what else?
> Send down a rush of air, O torrential,
> Make the sea flash in the dust.
> Call off the dogs, my paws are gone.
> This wind brings many fish;
> The lakes will be happy:
> Give me my hands:
> I'll take the fire.

Out of the context of Roethke's personal symbolism, this conclusion appears incoherent. But for the protagonist of The Lost Son this is a crucial moment

of illumination. The bricks of isolation are flaking off. The importunate ghost of Father remains 'trees away'. And the adolescent has accepted his sexuality as a natural part of life ('Reach me a peach, fondling...'). The false equation of sexuality with materialism is replaced with a more healthful outlook ('Nuts are money'). So the protagonist cries out for wind and rain (spiritual replenishment), although his urges are still auto-erotic at the end. The difference is that he now can accept his impulses as part of the natural order and says, "I'll take the fire." For the moment there is resolution, but impermanent resolution.

Once again, Kenneth Burke's private comments to Roethke increase our understanding of the poem. An interesting letter follows:

Andover,
New Jersey,
August 12, 1940

Dear Ted,

Delighted to hear from you. And many thanks indeed for the poem, which I have copied for my subsequent ponderings.

It is very lovely. Or rather, becomes so, up out of the convincingly and newly expressed depression. The great girlies-posies-fishlets cavalcade in part 4 goes over very well.

But it does take many readings, before things begin to emerge as satisfactorily as one cries for. (The general tenor, I think, is clear enough at first - and perhaps that is enough for meeting the minimum requirements of communication.) I wish I had a chance to ask you about details. (Incidentally, some comments you made, in an earlier letter, about a progression in one of your hothouse poems suggested a lot to me. So don't hesitate to say something about the ars poetica whenever it occurs to you. After all, you are more up on your ways than anyone else can be - and one can easily miss, or fail to evaluate properly, something that seems obvious to you.)

Above all, I'd like to ask you something about the structure. At first, noting that it was a five-stanza poem, I began trying to build it about part 3 as fulcrum (looking for the same kind of form I thought I saw in the Keats Ode). But later, I decided rather that One and Three are in order, and Two and Four in another order. I.e., I would consider Two as antiphonal to One, Four as anti-

phonal to Three, with Three developing the motive of Two. Whereupon, Five would be the resolution of the two orders (a kind of 'irresolute resolution'?).

I call Five an 'irresolute resolution' because, although things seem to be clearing up, with the poet getting ready for the next time, the new fire must be taken in the hands, it thus being a not wholly communicative fire, but somewhat self-involved still. Would you agree? To review the whole series of summarizing lines, however, is to see that such a quality must be retained even at the last, if only for purposes of consistency. (By the summarizing lines, I mean: "My gates are all caves...Return the gaze of the pond... I'm happy with my paws... The tendrils have me... I'll take the fire". Indeed I wonder whether it might be a good idea, for editorial purposes, and for pointing a direction in a way not alien to the quality of the poem itself, if you used these lines as titles for the five stanzas, instead of merely using numbers.)

My only complaints are:

'Slowly turning,/ Slowly' seems spoiled by the second 'slowly'.

Similarly, I begrudge the repetition of 'remember' in the next stanza.

Where you establish a tonality so thoroughly as you do, such purely mechanical repetitions seem bothersome to me. In another kind of poetry, where they were more necessary, I don't think I'd object to them.

I'd be happier (slightly) if 'Can you name it?'I can't name it' had just the second half.

As the author of a book on the grammar of who, what, when, where, how, I object to your one moment of weakness where you fell into my territory, in the line, "Wherefore and what else." I can't see that it conveys anything at all. And suspect that you put it there simply because you wanted to use up some time, so that the line would be the same length as its compatriots.

As for the beginning of that same line, "Nuts are money," it suggests wayward notions to me, alien to the quality of you poem. I once knew a guy who said the same thing, but he meant it in a Petronius sort of way.

Incidentally, as regards the ultimate equational recipe in your work, the 'nuts are money' formula (taken seriously, not in the above suggested burlesque) has started me on a line of speculations I am still vague about. In your Phase One, you had money and

> water in antithetical relation (or at least, so I tentatively thought). But in this last stanza of Phase Two, where fires would be asked to burn under water, the aqueous tree-harvest becomes equated with manuma. You got me to thinking about starting some new bookkeeping at that point. Any advice, that can assist me in my system of psychic accountancy, would be appreciated.
>
> However, in sum total, let me once again congratulate you on the poem as a whole. It sounds very appealing indeed. And you are certainly working out an interesting language, which I do want to try to learn well enough to be able to find my way about town.[28]

Again, Burke is perceptive and sympathetic. His technical comments testify to his acute understanding of the poetic process. And he demonstrates obvious enthusiasm for Roethke's experiments with the language. This hearty endorsement by a highly respected critic can only have encouraged Roethke to continue his experiments. He did: to the point where language itself gives way (or becomes something else) as in Pound's Cantos, Joyce's Finnegan's Wake, and Roethke's later poems in the "Lost Son" sequence. Nonetheless, when these poems succeed, as most of the poems from the 1948 volume do, the result is to extend consciousness into a further and unexpected dimension. "The Long Alley" demands close attention and a willing suspension of all common notions of grammatical progression. The poet has invented a new language and established a system of reference which is internally consistent, but unintelligible out of the context of Roethke's personal mythology.

"A Field of Light" follows directly upon this and perpetuates the stage of illumination with only a momentary regression. The poem begins with the hero coming to a stagnant lake where moss and leaves float on the surface of the water and strange eyes stare up from the murky bottom. In this netherworld nothing happens as it should. The hero

> Reached for a grape
> And the leaves changed;
> A stone's shape
> Became a claw.[29]

The second section of this three-part narrative repeats the question-

answer motif that marks similar stages of earlier poems in this sequence. The Job story reappears:

> Angel within me, I asked,
> Did I ever curse the sun?
> Speak and abide.

The lost son once more appeals to the father and swears that he has been loyal. A sense of atonement pervades the final section. The protagonist perceives the multiplicity of all things and the unity as well. The contraries of the One and the Many are reconciled:

> I could watch! I could watch!
> I saw the separateness of all things!
> My heart lifted up with the grass blades;
> The woods believed me, and the nesting birds.
> There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak of cedars,
> And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.
> The worms were delighted as wrens.
> And I walked, I walked through the light air;
> I moved with the morning.

The moment of resolution comes, notably, in the middle of a field. The image of an open field in summers recalls the winter field of the final section of "The Lost Son". One can from this simple fact infer a kind of progress. Rather than a world of 'frozen' symbols, life in potentia, "A Field of Light" offers us living things in profusion: bees, worms, wrens, flowers and weeds! Here (amidst the mystical perception of the One in the Many) the lost paradise of childhood is apprehended. The exhilaration that the boy experiences at the end of the poem recalls for him the original union with the natural world which precedes the fall of man (regarded as in Blake as concurrent with the fall into temporal existence or creation). The child is still close enough to the source (birth) to apprehend the eternal in the temporal. But the older a man gets, the farther removed he becomes from the sense of unity he once knew. Significantly, Roethke copied De Quincey's famous statement into his notebooks only a few years before composing the "Lost Son" sequence:

> The infant is one with God and one with everything
> in our universe through the medium of love... The

> adult mind must regain this vision, this secure unity.[30]

Such was the Romantic belief. One recalls that Wordsworth idealized the period of childhood and tried to recapture the innocent vision of the eternal which comes so easily at an early age but is later difficult to repossess. In an important way, "A Field of Light" and other poems in the sequence continue the Romantic quest for a paradise within.

"The Shape of the Fire" completes the sequence up to 1948. Making a sharp turn about from the illumination of the open field in the preceding poem, we encounter at last the total regressus ad uterum. This five-section poem repeats the pattern already firmly established: dark places into light, regression becoming progression. The first two sections of the poem offer the scarcely human speech of the hero-infant still wrapped in the watery drowse of the womb. The imagery is always primal, full of obscure yet suggestive associations. This womb, however, is no place of effortless repose. From the moment of conception life is seen as a struggle with desires that must be either satisfied or repressed. Hunger is the most basic of these urges; and preoccupies the infant who asks:

> What's this? A dish for fat lips.
> Who says? A nameless stranger.
> Is he a bird or a tree? Not everyone can tell.[31]

The question-answer ritual arises once again. The child speaking in the above passage cannot distinguish between food and mother, mother and father (bird or tree). This passage is in essence a flash forward, for soon after comes the cry, "Mother me out of here." Then imagery of birth occurs:

> Shale loosens. Marl reaches into the field. Small
> birds pass over water.
> Spirit, come near. This is only the edge of whiteness.
> I can't laugh at a procession of dogs.

Such obscurity is nearly maddening. But in context one can assume that Roethke is trying to approximate to the infantile consciousness. The imagery proceeds by association. 'Shale loosens' suggests by metaphor the giving way

of the muscles which enclose the infant in the womb. The child eventually cries out, "Mother, mother stir from your cave of sorrow." And then comes the birth:

> A low mouth lops water. Weeds, weeds, how I love you.
> The arbor is cooler. Farewell, farewell, fond worm.
> The warm comes without sound.

There is little joy here. The fall of man is the fall into temporal existence. And so, the infant bids farewell to the slime he has come to know over the past nine months. He senses that it will be a long time before he recovers such peace.

In the second section of the poem Roethke uses the nursery rhyme once again to suggest a particular state of development. The imagery employed is that of the cradle. The doctor (or father) comes to poke the child, who observes:

> Time for the flat-headed man. I recognise that listener,
> Him with the platitudes and rubber doughnuts,
> Melting at the knees, a varicose horror.

But the child is still little more than a beast who

> Must pull off clothes
> To jerk like a frog
> On belly and nose
> From the sucking bog.

The amphibious associations of 'frog' and 'bog' point to a very low stage of the child's development. One could almost believe that the child has re-entered the womb where all stages of the phylogenetic scale are encountered by the foetus during the period of gestation (ontogony recapitulates phylogeny). Nevertheless, the third section of the poem is the chrysalis, the fulcrum on which the whole poem turns:

> The wasp waits.
> The edge cannot eat the center.
> The grape glistens.
> The path tells little to the serpent.
> An eye comes out of the wave.
> The journey from flesh is longest.
> A rose sways least.
> The redeemer comes a dark way.

The wasp (representing the alien aspects of nature) attends the birth and may sting the infant. It is an omen of future pain. The response is comforting. 'The edge cannot eat the center' as the mother cannot destroy what is inside of her (the child) and the body cannot rout the spirit which resides at the core of all being. One must not hope for more specific interpretations than that, for this litany of aphorisms remains cryptic throughout, a kind of Delphic prophecy. The glistening grape which follows, for example, merely symbolizes ripeness. And the serpent (which may be phallic) does not understand what is happening. The eye in the wave embodies the artist's perception of a higher order in the midst of seeming chaos. And the journey from flesh is viewed as twofold: the birth of the body and the rebirth of the spirit. At the centre of all these contending opposites is the mystic's rose, the still point of the turning world. By going back far enough in time, the dark way of the regressus ad uterum, the hero has caught a glimpse of the eternal, the redemptive vision of timelessness which is the goal of all meditation.

The last two sections of "The Shape of the Fire" celebrate the momentary recovery of the past in the womb where

> Death was not. I lived in a simple drowse:
> Hands and hair moved through a dream of wakening blossoms.
> Rain sweetened the cave and the dove still called;
> The flowers leaned on themselves, the flowers in hollows;
> And love, love sang toward.

Not surprisingly, the poem (and the sequence for the time being) ends in the greenhouse. The flowerheads are flooded with bright sunlight. The rose awakens, rising from its bed 'Still as a child in its first loneliness'. And the hero rejoices in the new knowledge (the boon) which he has gained by the tortuous descent into the past: the knowledge of grace. The end of this heroic journey has been accomplished. Having sustained the trials and ordeals of the rite of passage, the hero is reborn, spiritually. He has finally come

> To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing,
> As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick pouring,

> Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,
> Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.

5. The Kingdom of Bang and Blab

> Thus, what we need is an irrational language with a new vocabulary, something like what modern art is trying to find for an expression of the sub-conscious.
>
> Otto Rank, Beyond Psychology (copied by Roethke into his teaching notes).[1]

> What a whelm of proverbs, Mr. Finch!
>
> Roethke, "Praise to the End"

With the publication of The Lost Son Roethke emerged from relative obscurity in the literary world and most critics were highly sympathetic (on both sides of the Atlantic). So Roethke was encouraged to pursue this vein of 'irrational language' yet further. The next two collections of poems, Praise to the End! (1951) and The Waking (1953), contained the results of these efforts. They continue the "Lost Son" sequence by using the same techniques of organization, associational imagery, and infantile or 'irrational' language already established in the central volume. But they do not share quite the same success. Only a few of the poems which complete the sequence maintain the same perilous balance between order and chaos which typifies the earlier "Lost Son" poems. Too often the symbolism appears arbitrary in the additional poems which contain many passages that are undoubtedly among Roethke's best work. In any case, these new adventures in experimental verse testify to one major fact: Roethke's growing self-confidence as an artist. After the publication and success of The Lost Son Roethke no longer needed quite the same amount of attention from a father-figure, such as Humphries or Burke. He could work on his own from now on, for the most part, trusting to his personal judgement; although he was never beyond showing work-in-progress to friends whom he could trust, seeking out their opinions and their praise.

Roethke finished at Bennington College in 1946, then passed a final term at Pennsylvania State before taking up his final appointment at the University

of Washington in Seattle. Once again, he was lucky enough to find himself in attractive surroundings. The state of Washington remains one of the last outposts of American wilderness, comparable only to Maine on the East Coast. The city of Seattle itself commands a spectacular view of Mount Rainier, a snow-capped landmark of extraordinary beauty. And the university campus has all of the advantages of the traditional college, including access to a major city without the anxieties of city living. The campus is pastoral and secluded, a natural preserve against the inevitable mindless expansion of the urban centre.

In this setting Roethke set to work on Praise to the End!. He had remained single and so had few family obligations. And his new job was hardly taxing. He was asked to conduct only two seminars per term for a small number of special students. So there was ample time to get on with his writing. One might have expected a radical change of direction to accompany this major change of environment. But the new poems from the early years in Washington essentially recapitulate the primal experiences of The Lost Son and seek an accumulation of insights, most of which have been encountered in some form in the earlier volume. Typically, Roethke was reluctant to let go of a good thing. So he pursued the experimental vein until it was exhausted.

Praise to the End! begins with a poem taking its title from Christopher Smart's Song to David (Part LXXVII): "Where Knock Is Open Wide", picking up the development of the hero at a very early stage. He is a young child now, and the language tries to approximate to the speech-pattern commonly associated with this age-group. Familiar elements of the child's world reappear: mother, father, pets. About half-way through the first stanza a nursery rhyme occurs:

> Once upon a tree
> I came across a time,
> It wasn't even as
> A ghoulie in a dream.
>
> There was a mooly man
> Who had a rubber hat
> The funnier than that,-
> He kept it in a can.[2]

The passage inevitably suggests a similar one in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was
> there was a moocow coming down along the road
> and this moocow that was coming down the road
> met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo...[3]

The technique is similar. Both Joyce and Roethke saw the amazing potential for nuance and suggestion in 'baby-talk'. This 'irrational language', taken to excess in some of Roethke's "Lost Son" poems and in all of Finnegan's Wake, merely points once more to the growing isolation of the artist since the advent of the Romantic Movement. The Kunstleroman of Joyce may be seen as the final development (or farthest extension) of the mode of autobiographical writing begun with The Prelude of Wordsworth, the source of Roethke's title: Praise to the End!. The sense of isolation, then, prevails in "Where Knock Is Open Wide" as the hero inquires:

> What's the time, papa-seed?
> Everything has been twice.
> My father is a fish.

Roethke's common association of 'father' with 'fish' recurs. There is an intimation of reincarnation here, or possibly, the idea that each son is a reincarnation of his own father, hence the connection 'papa-seed'.

The second section is directly autobiographical. Roethke refers to his Uncle Charlie, whom he disliked. Charlie shared ownership of the greenhouse with Otto until his suicide, the great skeleton in the Roethke closet. This receives seething attention in the hero's ostensibly light nursery rhyme:

> I sing a small sing,
> My uncle's away,
> He's gone for always,
> I don't care either.
>
> I know who's got him,
> They'll jump on his belly,
> He won't be an angel,
> I don't care either.

The wildly exaggerated fears of a child absorb the hero in the third section of the poem as he cries out to God (or father) for help in a language

of obscure puns and private imagery:

> God, give me a near. I hear flowers.
> A ghost can't whistle.
> I know! I know!
> Hello happy hands.

Section Four recalls the stage of return and reunion with Papa which often follows a 'chaos-passage' and precedes an illumination. The reader should be familiar with this pattern by now. But the unexpected takes over in this poem when the boy recalls a fishing trip with his father which led to humiliation:

> We went by the river.
> Water birds went ching. Went ching.
> Stepped in wet. Over stones.
> One, his nose had a frog,
> But he slipped out.
>
> I was sad for a fish.
> Don't hit him on the boat, I said.
> Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
> Papa threw him back.
>
> Bullheads have whiskers.
> And they bite.

No single experience is more basic to an American boyhood: a fishing trip with one's father. And few themes are more dominant in the literature of American Romanticism than that of man (or boy) against nature. One can follow its various manifestations from James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain through Hemingway's "Nick Adams" stories. Obviously, Roethke idealized this myth and was disappointed by the reality of experience, as the above passage shows. The first stanza approximates the fitful nature of memory. The lines jerk along, missing out the usual pronouns and connectives that render normal speech intelligible. But nothing is obscure. In the second stanza the sensitive child confronts the father who discourages any manner of feminine sympathy with the creature. He rebukes the son for being ignorant of a natural fact: bullheads bite. This is simple enough for the father. But the child reads things differently. He sees the father asserting his authority and feels afraid, quashed. Events which appear so insignificant to parents

are often dreadfully important to children; of course. But the father (Otto) in this short tale does not understand this. A fact is a fact: 'Bullheads have whiskers./ And they bite.'. But the child has been sharply offended. And no reconciliation can follow immediately from this harsh memory. Instead, the hero conjures images of the father-florist's death, mingling affection, wonder, and grief. There is a sense of separation, not atonement:

> He watered the roses.
> His thumb had a rainbow.
> The stems said, Thank you.
> Dark came early.

Illumination cannot follow from this state of mind, only further alienation and separation. This is one of the few poems in the "Lost Son" sequence wherein regression does not lead to some form of progression (insight or illumination). After a frightening portrait of the dead father in the fifth section of the poem ('He was all whitey bones/And skin like paper'), the child concludes, grimly:

> One father is enough.
>
> Maybe God has a house.
> But not here.

From this unfruitful meditation on the father, the poet offers a shorter, four-section meditation on the mother whose awesome responsibility is to provide double love to a fatherless son. "I Need, I Need" opens with a recreation of the infantile mentality of Freud's oral stage. The baby wishes to 'taste' the mother:

> A deep dish. Lumps in it.
> I can't taste my mother.
> Moo. I know the spoon.
> Sit in my mouth.[4]

The poem then slips ahead to childhood at a later phase - when sociability becomes a necessity. Two children are imagined, skipping rope, chanting a tell-tale rhyme:

> A one is a two is
> I know what you is:
> You're not very nice,-
> So touch my toes twice.

I know you are my nemesis
So bibble where the pebble is.
The trouble is with No and Yes
As you can see I guess I guess.

Life, whether in a game or for real, involves the hero in decision-making. He must choose again and again between No and Yes. These are the contending opposites which later occupied Roethke on a more abstract level, as in "The Pure Fury" where the lines occur, "How slow the changes of a golden mean:/ Great Brahma rooted all in Yes and No.". The child especially tends to see things in black and white, of course, and the death of a parent is often regarded as a kind if willful rejection. Unfortunately, this sense of alienation from the father was never completely reconciled by Roethke '(if the poems can be taken as evidence).

The brief third section reveals the final inadequacy of a mother's love which helps the son ('sun') but does not satisfy the deeper craving for Papa. The child cries:

Stop the larks. Can I have my heart back?
Today I saw a beard in a cloud.
The ground cried my name:
Good-bye for being wrong.
Love helps the sun.
But not enough.

Here the poet makes a direct equation between father and God ('a beard in a cloud'). However, while the father is a cloud, the boy remains earth-bound and separated. It should not be a surprise that the hero turns to the ground for sustenance in the final section:

When you plant, spit in the pot.
A pick likes to hit ice.
Hooray for me and the mice!-
The oats are all right.

The child-hero returns to the natural order where things respond to his needs ('A pick likes to hit ice'). If you water a plant the chances are good that it will grow. The poem ends, nevertheless, ominously: 'I know another fire'. Fire, one may recall, is always associated with sex in Roethke. So the old problem of natural urges which produce guilt feelings recurs. The

sense of illumination, although present, is weak. The hero seems to have lost much of the ground gained by the end of The Lost Son; but in truth the poet has learned a great deal about himself.

"Bring the Day!" embodies the scarcely perceived and accumulated insights of the earlier two poems. Using the exhilarating rhythms of a nursery jingle, Roethke portrays a lost paradise of childhood sexuality without guilt:

> Bees and lilies there were,
> Bees and lilies there were,
> Either to other, -
> Which would you rather?
> Bees and lilies there were.
>
> The green grasses, - would they?
> The green grasses?-
> She asked her skin
> To let me in:
> The fur leaves were for it.

In this magical world the herrings sing to each other, whispers become kisses, and the grasses and wind offer sympathetic advice. The hero feels assimilated into the natural process ('When I stand, I'm almost a tree'). The poem ends with a sense of joyous expectation:

> The spiders sail into summer.
> It's time to begin!
> To begin!

The image of the self-as-tree is central to the poem which follows: "Give Way, Ye Gates". Here the slightly older hero struggles to put down roots and make his own way. Reviving the Oedipal dream, the son courts the mother, attempting to replace the father who has gone with himself. He addresses his 'Mother of blue and many changes of hay' as a lover:

> We're king and queen of the right ground.
> I'll risk the winter for you.

Further down he makes the lover's proposal of union: 'We'll swinge the instant!' This peculiar Joycean pun 'swinge' combines 'swing' and 'singe' - a nexus of erotic possibilities. Later, he is more explicit:

> 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 toward what we are.

These last two lines suggest Roethke's overall direction throughout these poems; progress is 'the business of what might be' but can only come from 'what we are' already. The brief third section of this four-part poem, however, changes the pace; the speaker addresses himself:

You child with a beast's heart,
Make me a bird or a bear!
I've played with the fishes
Among the unwrinkling ferns
In the wake of a ship of wind;
But now the instant ages,
And my thought hunts another body.
I'm sad with the little owls.

Childhood (as an idyll) recedes as 'the instant ages'. The wish to become a bird or a bear cannot be fulfilled. The body of mother (a symbol of sympathetic Nature) must be given up as the boy matures. Melancholy overwhelms him. But the fourth, last section affirms that this delving into the past was not without benefit:

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

"Sensibility! O La!" recreates the young adolescent of The Lost Son. Hence the language sharpens into coherence; although the poet maintains the jerky, associational movement characteristic of all poems in this sequence. In this one the hero confronts his own, fresh sense of sexuality for the first time and prepares to make use of his new powers. The first section pictures an adolescent fantasy of Venus (Woman) rising out of the waves, couched in a strange, pseudo-medieval language: 'In the fair night of some dim brain,/Thou wert marmorian born.'.[8] But the reality of physical love remains far out of the boy's grasp. The second section presents the discovery of new sexual powers, nevertheless, in language that is comic and immediate:

A shape comes to stay:
The long flesh.
I know the way out of a laugh;
I'm a twig to touch,
Pleased as a knife.

Unfortunately, these powers are thwarted by the ghost of Papa in the third section: 'There's a ghost in the long grass!'. Even Mama will not let the son be, provoking him to shout back at her; "Mama! Put on your dark hood;/It's a long way to somewhere else." At last the hero refuses to succumb to these importunate ghosts and protests:

I'm somewhere else,-
I insist!
I am.

The first half of this new collection of "Lost Son" poems from Praise to the End! finishes with the affirmative "O Lull Me, Lull Me" which shows the hero with an increasingly firm sense of a new selfhood. He stands braced for experience to come. The sexual imagery which characterizes the poems immediately preceding this one is played down. The hero asks the wasp (who represents the dangerous aspects of nature once again); "Tell me, great lords of sting/Is it time to think?"[9] But even in this first section of the poem such a question is rhetorical. The boy demonstrates his new confidence, declaring, "I know my bones."

The second half of this brief poem celebrates the hero's self-discovery. Nature appears entirely sympathetic to the hero, who sings out, "The air, the air provides./Light fattens the rock." This childlike belief in the responsiveness of nature harks back to may passages of similar ecstasy in earlier pieces. It demonstrates that the child has not been exorcized from the hero, but in fact the opposite is true. A fundamental insight gained by the lost son on his interior quest has been that the capacity for joy must not be relinquished in favour of adult sobriety. "O Lull Me, Lull Me" indicates that the ground lost in the early poems of Praise to the End! is swiftly being recaptured. The last stanza of the poem offers another 'irresolute resolution' (to use Burke's phrase). The hero is attentive, possessed of his forces, ready to

begin again. After appealing once more to Mother Earth ('Soothe me, great groans of underneath'), the hero declares:

> I'm all ready to whistle;
> I'm more than when I was born;
> I could say hello to things;
> I could talk to a snail;
> I see what sings!
> What sings!

It should be noted that Roethke included the other "Lost Son" poems from the 1948 volume in his new one, Praise to the End! Throughout his career he was given to republishing his favourite poems again and again in successive volumes, partly because of the need to fill out what would otherwise be 'slim volumes' of almost anaemic size! But it was a shrewd decision to include the four "Lost Son" poems dealing with adolescence at the appropriate point in the sequence as it stood in 1951. Thus, Part II of Praise to the End! began with "The Lost Son", "The Long Alley", "A Field of Light" and "The Shape of the Fire" (which have already been discussed). And the last three new poems have yet to be considered.

The important poem, "Praise to the End! draws its title from Wordsworth's Prelude and makes Roethke's sympathies with the Romantic view of nature and childhood explicit. Both poets were writing spiritual autobiographies describing the path of the sensitive individual (in each case an artist) from childhood to maturity. In the passage from The Prelude which Roethke calls attention to by his title, Wordsworth exclaims:

> ...How strange, that all
> The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
> Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
> Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,
> And that a needful part, in making up
> The calm existence that is mine when I
> Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end![10]

Roethke, throughout the "Lost Son" sequence, affirms after Wordsworth that the early miseries are an essential part of that process which leads to a mature, firm sense of self. "Praise to the End!" rehearses the difficult primal experiences once more, summarizing the sequence as a whole. Predictably, the

first section re-examines the feelings of sexual guilt experienced by the adolescent hero:

> It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.
> For whom have I swelled like a seed?
> What a bone-ache I have.
> Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last.[11]

The sex involved here is obviously self-directed and unrewarding. The boy cries out, "Father, forgive my hands."

The second section presents a nostalgic view of childhood and the child's guiltless sexuality:

> Once I fished from the banks, leaf-light and happy:
> On the rocks south of quiet, in the close regions of kissing,
> I romped, lithe as a child, down the summery streets of my veins,
> Strict as a seed, nippy and twiggy.

Further regression occurs, as evidenced by another nursery jingle that meditates on the ghostly images of father and mother once more. Then the hero complains, "An exact fall of waters has rendered me impotent." So he must look elsewhere for renewal.

Illumination comes as always out in the open, 'Walking along the highway,/ Mincing like a cat'. The wind and stones are in evidence: two common symbols of redemption in Roethke's work. The boy-hero is now thirteen years old and ready for adult life. He dreams of Jesus, the fisherman (Papa) who throws him back into the water as his father did to the fish in "Where Knock Is Open Wide". Water is a life-symbol, of course, an indication of spiritual renewal. This gives the boy confidence, and he confronts the undying image of his father boldly, saying, "Ghost, come closer."

Having encountered the ghost of Papa successfully(thus repeating the stage of Campbell's heroic journey associated with atonement), the boy-hero celebrates his graduation to a new stage of life (recalling the puberty rite) and a new sense of selfhood. He becomes, for the time being, unhitched from the past. And so the fourth section, as we have come to expect by now, is that of celebration, an apotheosis of desire which contains some of Roethke's best writing. The hero very nearly loses the sense of personal identity, however,

in the ecstasy that overwhelms him. One must recall that what the mystic forfeits in his moment of rapture is the same thing which the lost son has been struggling to attain: a conception of selfhood. And so the hero cries out at last:

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

The next poem, "Unfold! Unfold!" represents a last attempt at regression. The sense of impending illumination is present, but the hero suddenly fears this and would hide in the dark stupor of the unconscious. Extracting oneself from this mire requires a positive step, an assertion. And this terrifies the hero more than anything. Moving into the open field (where rapture can occur) is tantamount to exposing oneself to the cruel elements without the protecting slime. And there is the danger of mystic identification, the absorption of self in the body of nature, losing the sense of the personal (which is temporal) in the presence of the eternal. To the hero's dismay, death seems as near as birth at the outset:

> Eternity howls in the last crags,
> The field is no longer simple.
> It's a soul's crossing time.
> The dead speak noise.[12]

The hero is standing on a windy bluff reminiscent of Lear. Confusion has taken over. But advice is forthcoming in the second section where the hero's alternatives are presented before him as if by some ghostly attendant: 'It's time you stood up and asked/-Or sat down and did'. Such advice would seem to come from the father, who offers four separate proverbs intended as guides for the hero on his quest for self-realization. Such a use of the proverb recalls Kenneth Burke's theory of literature as an effort to solve one's problems by framing the situation proverbially, language thus becoming a strategic weapon. But the response of the hero is less than grateful in the third section, reinforcing the idea that the proverbs came down from Papa. The hero retorts,

"What a whelm of proverbs, Mr. Pinch!"[13] He begins to realize his over-dependence on regression:

> I was far back, farther than anybody else.
> On the jackpine plains I hunted the bird nobody knows;
> Fishing, I caught myself behind the ears.
> Alone, in a sleep-daze, I stared at billboards.

This wallowing in the mires of the unconscious can only lead to solipsism, the despair of Blake's Ulro. It becomes too simple merely to depend on the past ('Easy the life of the mouth') and the hero asks himself pointedly in the fourth section, "What else has the vine loosened?" In other words, what unexpected knowledge has come of all this probing?

The revelations of the fifth section come as no surprise to the attentive reader of the earlier poems. The speaker cries out:

> Sing, sing, you symbols! All simple creature,
> All small shapes, willow-shy,
> In the obscure haze, sing!

This special knowledge, that the forms of the eternal world are present in the temporal one, was important to Wordsworth in The Prelude as well:

> ...The unfettered clouds and regions of the heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light -
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
> Characters of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity.[14]

Reconciliation with Papa happens casually in "Unfold! Unfold!". The leaves begin to shake in the wind: 'A slow sigh says yes'. The father acknowledges the son and approves, but the speaker can scarcely believe his ears and asks:

> Is it you, cold father? Father
> For whom the minnows sang?

And the father responds:

> A house for wisdom; a field for revelation.
> Speak to the stones, and the stars answer.
> At first the visible obscures:
> Go where light is.

Clearly, the father points to the mystic way of redemption, embracing a Platonic

view of the universe. The stones are the earthly conterpart to the stars. The visible world obscures at first, but meditation reveals the essential spirit behind the subject. This is the method adopted by Roethke in the last poems (1953-1963). But coming where this does in the "Lost Son" sequence, it looks fresh and exciting. The hero now accepts his new self as good. And he rehearses the lesson of the plants just to be certain of his knowledge:

> What grace I have is enough.
> The lost have their own pace.
> The stalks ask something else.
> What the grave says,
> The nest denies.

The hero shows that he has gained his maturity by accepting the advice of the dead in an adult way instead of protesting like a child, relinquishing the good with the bad. The last stanza of the poem embodies this insight. The hero admits:

> In their harsh thickets
> The dead thrash.
> They help.

The last poem of Praise to the End! is "I Cry, Love! Love!" and as the title indicates, it contains the hero's last-ditch efforts to summon the love which can make him whole. The poem begins with childhood recollections of uncertainty and joy intermingled. The boy declares:

> I hear a most lively huzza:
> I'm king of the boops![15]

Such near-nonsense language gives way to more rational (mature) contemplation in the second section. The traditional Romantic bias toward intuition comes through in the opening rant:

> Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!
> The hedgewren's song says something else.
> I care for a cat's cry and the hugs, live as water.

The speaker then loses himself in the world of concrete things which cry out to his senses from all directions, unleashing 'That anguish of concreteness!'. Pain, however, combines with a deep sense of mystical rapture. He says, "I

proclaim once more a condition of joy." But Roethke hangs on firmly to the material world around him, never giving up to the airy unreality of the transcendental vision which tempts him again and again. Ecstasy means literally "to stand outside oneself" (Ekstasis), and the poet would remain where he is - for love calls us to the things of this world. Love, the hero declares is everywhere around us:

> Behold, in the lout's eye,
> Love.

The concluding section takes us to a lakeside. Bats weave among the willows and veer out over the motionless water. A fish leaps and disturbs the moonlight image on the water's surface:

> The shine on the face of the lake
> Tilts, backward and forward.
> The water recedes slowly,
> Gently rocking.

When finally the protagonist asks, "Who untied the tree?" And then he remembers. It was someone he met before he lived. But we are left guessing, although it seems evident that the Father (God-Otto) is responsible for untying the tree (letting the son loose from the bliss of pre-existence into the fallen condition of mortal man). Remembering that the fall of man is coincident with the creation, such relatively obscure imagery becomes accessible. The father brought the son into existence, then abandoned him. This is the primal crisis around which the entire sequence revolves. And "I Cry, Love! Love!" does not provide a positive ending to the hero's quest.

Thus, Roethke added a further poem, "O, Thou Opening, O", to complete the series on a note of progress. It was published in his next volume, The Waking (1953) and represents an anthology of the hero's previous illuminations, all of which take the form of proverbs (after Burke's advice). No wonder that the speaker feels rather overloaded with insights and calls out:

> Dazzle me, dizzy aphorist.
> Fling me a precept.
> I'm a draft sleeping by a stick;
> I'm lost in what I have.[16]

And the aphorisms follow in good number. The hero recalls, "I've seen my father's face before/ Deep in the belly of a thing to be."

The second section is one of Roethke's most curious. The poet attempts a prose-poem consisting of two paragraphs rejecting the easy answers offered by religion, 'that peludinous Jesus-shimmer over all things'. He says, "I'm tired of all that, Bag-Foot. I can hear small angels anytime." Like Blake, Roethke prefers to make his own myths rather than be enslaved by another man's. Religions in their institutionalized forms never interested him. Poetry is religion in the making. Religion is stale poetry. So the hero rejects the tired aphorisms of old Bag-Foot (another version of the God-Father symbol cluster). He rages against all authority derived from power (Bag-Foot equals Big-Foot) achieved by force. This becomes evident in the question, "Who ever said God sang in your fat shape?" Once again the young adolescent expresses his resentment of the demanding parent. This is the stage of separation. And the hero tries to rationalize his despair by declaiming, "A son has many fathers."

The final section testifies to the wisdom that has nonetheless accumulated throughout the long sequence. The possibilities before the young man are clearly apprehended. He says:

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

All of these will be part of the hero's life to come: ecstatic identification with nature, physical love and the joy of song. These are but a few of the contraries without which there can be no progression. The final passages express the excitement of fresh discovery and a sense of release:

> I'm twinkling like a twig!
> The lark's my heart!
> I'm wild with news!
> My fancy's white!
> I am my faces,
> Love.

Self-discovery leads to self-acceptance ('I am my faces'). One of the last

lines in the poem is the aphorism, "Going is knowing." This highly informative line prefigures a greater line in "The Waking", the title poem in this new volume: 'I learn by going where I have to go'.[17] Such knowledge, however imperfect, remains the final lesson for the lost son. The heroic journey is a long one and difficult - yet everyone must make this journey, advertently or inadvertently. And one learns by going; there is no other way.

Looking back on the "Lost Son" sequence as a whole one can only marvel at the density of Roethke's achievement. The Lost Son is the centre of a whirlpool, accommodating all manner of flotsam and jetsam from the unconscious in its spiral. All other poems emanate from this focus. Nearly all of Roethke's major symbols are here present and active. Although obscurity often frustrates the reader who depends too heavily on normal patterns of logical progression for meaning, the sympathetic student of this material will not be unrewarded for very long. After several readings, the symbols begin to explode. The strange dream-logic and the primitive imagery begin to cohere. And the sequence as a whole becomes accessible and compelling. If one understands the basic myth which underlies most of the poems, that of the heroic journey, things fall into place more readily. This is quest literature which harks back to a long tradition. But in typical Romantic fashion the quest is internalized, hence made valid in terms of the present century.

The poems dealing with infancy and early childhood (usually employing the ancient technique of regressus ad uterum) tend to be the most difficult. Those which concentrate on the adolescent stage (using the journey motif as a rite of passage) are more easily comprehended and better poems for it. Nevertheless, the sequence must be judged as it was intended - as a whole. As such there can be no doubt that it forms the hard centre of Roethke's work. All major aspects of the Roethke universe are contained and developed in the individual poems of the sequence. And Roethke would never again come so close to a voice of his own as he did in this period (1943-1953). These years were painful and exhausting, as the notebooks indicate, and filled with all manner of personal anxieties. But they were fruitful as well, even therapeutic. For

the poet took upon himself the task of the New Perseus. He looked the frightful beast of his own dark past in the eye, coldly, then killed it. And in so doing he unleashed a torrent of previously unsuspected feelings. He was renewed and illumined. He was freed from the bondage of the past to live for himself (not his parents) in the present. This, of course, is the goal of all psychoanalysis (or psychotherapy) and demonstrates that a significant common ground exists between literature and psychology.[18]

IV.

THE LONG JOURNEY OUT OF THE SELF

1. The Lesson of the Mask

'Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes.'
'O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.'

'I would but find what's there to find,
Love or deceit.'
'It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what's behind.'

'But lest you are my enemy,
I must enquire.'
'O no, my dear, let all that be;
What matter, so there is but fire
In you, in me?'

Yeats, "The Mask"

From its beginning the main subject of Romantic poetry has been the mind of the poet himself. Wordsworth, although preaching against the self-absorption of the Solitary in The Excursion, is a seminal example. The hero of The Prelude is the artist himself; but this poem contains more than a simple account of one man's life. The poet offers himself as the prototype for all modern artists: alone with himself, alienated from society, and aware of the separation of man (subject) from the physical world (object). The poet's quest is for a reconciliation of internal and external realities. The poet seeks after a paradise within a world, wherein seer and seen are one. This quest preoccupied Roethke and points to the leading question of modern poetry: Is there any way out of the self?

Blake fought against the self-absorption which preys on the Romantic poet like a fiend. This is the Spectre of Urthona as embodied in the last of the epics, Jerusalem. Blake goes so far as to claim that if man will build up the earthly, paradisal city of Golgonooza, he must relinquish selfhood altogether. He prays:

> O Saviour, pour upon me thy spirit of meekness & love:
> Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!
> Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages,
> While I write of the building of Golgonooza...[1]

Only by extinguishing the self can the imagination gain autonomy. But for modern man, fleshbound within the prison of self-consciousness, the question occurs: Is there any way out?

The liberating power of the imagination (the Romantic panacea) must somehow be realized. Yeats believed that the ancient doctrine of the mask could be of use. As Professor Ellmann explains:

> The doctrine of the mask is so complex and so central in Yeats that we can hardly attend to it too closely. Even at this early stage of its development (1910) it has multiple meanings and is a variable concept. To start with its simplest meaning, the mask is the social self. Browning had spoken of 'two soul-sides, one to face the world with,' and one to show the beloved. But Yeats's doctrine assumes that we face with a mask both the world and the beloved. A closely related meaning is that the mask includes all the differences between one's own and other people's conception of one's personality. To be conscious of the discrepancy which makes a mask of this sort is to look at oneself as if one were somebody else. In addition, the mask is defence armour: we wear it, like the light lover, to keep from being hurt. So protected, we are only slightly involved no matter what happens. This theory seems to assume that we can be detached from experience like actors from a play. Finally, the mask is a weapon of attack; we put it on to keep up a noble conception of ourselves; it is a heroic ideal which we try to live up to.[2]

One discovers a wide-ranging variety of masks in Yeats's verse from the Wandering Oisin of the "Celtic Twilight" phase to the revolutionary nationalist Owen Aherne and his contrary, the mystical Michael Robartes. Often Yeats's mask bore no special name but was simply a projected version of the self. One thinks of the embittered lover of "No Second Try", the concerned father of "A Prayer for my Daughter", the smiling, public man of "Among School Children" or the old man of "The Tower". A poet always wears some kind of mask, naturally, but the more conscious he is of this fact the better. For literature participates in that realm of play where the conditional - as if - holds first place.

Professor Campbell has some illuminating remarks on the lesson of the mask in Primitive Mythology. He explains that, "the mask in a primitive festival is revered and experienced as a veritable apparition of the mythical being that it represents - even though everyone knows that a man made the mask and

that a man is wearing it. The one wearing it, furthermore, is identified with the god during the time of the ritual of which the mask is a part. He does not merely represent the god; he is the god."[3] The device is familiar. Like an actor in a play who forgets for the time being that he is acting, the man becomes the mask; in doing so he learns a great deal about himself. He may have discovered an ideal, something to live up to. Or he may have discerned an evil spirit within himself which must be repressed or driven out.

Masks also serve to provide a given society as a whole with form. The old analogy of the state as a living body holds true. The individual cells die out, but the body persists. The masks, being a form of eternity, offer security. It should not be any more surprising that primitive man, with his intuitive grasp of what is essential to life, believed in the reality of the mask than it is that modern man can accept the words of the Christian priest over the communion table: Hic est enim Calix Sanguinis mei, novi et aeterni Testamenti: Mysterium fedei: qui pro vobis et pro multis effendetur in remissionem peccatorum. (For this is the Chalice of My Blood, of the new and everlasting testament: the mystery of faith: which shall be shed for you and for many unto the remission of sins.)

The literary mask may demand more of the individual who either wears the mask or confronts it that religious faith; for the element of play requires an energetic suspension of disbelief, a concentration of all those powers loosely covered by the term 'imagination'. To move outside oneself (or the narrow self-consciousness which Blake decried) may be frightening. Most people dread the possibility of self-annihilation. But the artist should understand that one must be first lost in order to be found; one has to make what Roethke called 'the long journey out of the self'.[4] As Campbell observes:

> we are to enter the play sphere of the festival, acquiescing in a game of belief, where fun, joy, and rapture rule in ascending series. The laws of life in time and space - economics, politics, and even morality - will thereupon dissolve. Whereafter, re-created by that return to paradise before the Fall, before the knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, belief and dis-

> belief, we are to carry the point of view and spirit of man the player (Homo ludens) back into life; as in the play of children, where, undaunted by the banal actualities of life's meager possibilities, the spontaneous impulse of the spirit to identify itself with something other than itself for the sheer delight of play, transsubstantiates the world - in which, actually, after all, things are not quite as real or permanent, terrible, important, or logical as they seem.[5]

Roethke understood the dilemma of modern poetry and refused, like many of his contemporaries, to remain locked inside of himself. If one recalls his struggle (or that of his fictive hero in The Lost Son) to gain a firm sense of self, it becomes doubly impressive that he should have learned the lesson of the mask and sought a way out of the selfhood which could have become his prison. Ironically, he knew at last that he must transcend the self purchased so dearly if he would be free.

The Lost Son period (1943-1953) wore Roethke out to a huge extent. Having probed deeply in his past and revealed himself to the public, it seemed that further development along these lines was unlikely or impossible. The poems of Praise to the End! which employ the technique of regressus ad uterum took the language of poetry to the far borders of consciousness and often spilled over into chaos. So Roethke had to retreat quickly from this direction if he wanted to keep his work within the boundaries of intelligibility. Like the Robert Lowell of Life Studies, he had discovered a voice of his own in the Lost Son decade. But that mask (again inviting comparison with Lowell) was so desperately thin that the imagination could only suffer in the long run from utter exhaustion, the poet finally either repeating himself or collapsing into silence. The imagination needs room in order to exercise its power and sufficient distance from the subject if it would overcome the Romantic contraries of self and nature. Again, this is the lesson of the mask. A poet needs what Wallace Stevens calls a 'supreme fiction' if he is to keep his poem within the realm of play where discoveries are made. At the very end of his Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction Stevens observes:

...Monsieur and comrade,
The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,
His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real,
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.[7]

That is: men need a role, a persona in order to discover themselves. 'How simply the fictive hero becomes the real', just as the primitive man engrossed in the ritual of the mask becomes a god and just as the communion wine miraculously becomes the blood of Christ. The examples of Yeats and Stevens served Roethke well; he created a fictive hero in his own image and identified with it.

In the later poems (1953-1963) Roethke extends the self of the Lost Son period to include more adult patterns of behaviour, and he eventually seeks to complete the mystical identification with nature presaged in the ecstasy passages of earlier poems, such as the last section of "A Field of Light". Such extension of the self leads, paradoxically, to dissolution of the self as we have seen. But this risk was taken. Unfortunately, Roethke increasingly depends on crude abstractions in his later poems, and The Far Field suffers from this. Instead of actually presenting the experience of identification by way of concrete detail or suggestion, he tends to merely describe the experience from the outside. A successful poet must do more than simply tell us that something has happened. He must show us it; he must recreate the experience for the reader imaginatively. Nonetheless, some of the later work does merit close attention. The image of the Greenhouse Eden remains unchanged, but the persona of the hero widens considerably. The adolescent of The Lost Son and Praise to the End! becomes the adult lover of Words for the Wind (1958), a logical development that is worth observing. The father-florist who sits in judgement upon the prodical son becomes the less visible God of the later meditations. But the lost son continues to rage against the Father, call him Otto or Jehovah; they are interchangeable as symbols within the dynamics of Roethke's personal myth.

Essentially, the masks of adult lover and mystic are developments. The ghosts of Yeats and Whitman loom up from the shadows continually in the rhetoric and subject matter of the poems. Roethke consciously imitates the highly stylized manner of his predecessors as was his habit. But often these echoes are not properly assimilated. The singularly original voice of The Lost Son and Praise to the End! disappears for the most part. Certainly, the notable intensity of language and compression of detail familiar to the Lost Son decade is uncommon in the later work. And one can only regret this loss. Nevertheless, there is much to value in the later poetry as I hope to show; American letters would be that much poorer were it not for Roethke's last three collections: The Waking, Words for the Wind, and The Far Field.[8] These volumes point to a way out of the prison of self-consciousness: the way of identification (with lover or with nature) and demonstrate the persistence of Romanticism and the Romantic solution in this century. Roethke has had no original ideas; few poets ever do. But he does present the fundamental Romantic insights in language of force and great beauty in spite of the tendency toward abstraction and the notable lessening of compression. American Transcendentalism found new life in the later Roethke; so the later poems should not be ignored.

Finally, the last poems complete the cycle of the Lost Son poems. Through further regressions and diversions, progress continues. New masks are tried on, allowing the vital element of play full reign; the imagination is called on to supply that ultimate boon to the aging hero: Unity of Being. This was Yeats's confessed goal from the start, of course. And Roethke's model was always Yeats. So the quest for an earthly paradise occupies the poet in his final period; Roethke's version of Byzantium was the open field bathed in sunlight behind the greenhouse. It is the central image of the posthumous volume, The Far Field (1964). The hero-cycle and the Way of Illumination are condensed in the brilliant poem, "Once More, the Round", which brings Roethke's work to a close:

> What's greater, Pebble or Pond?
> What can be known? The Unknown.
> My true self runs toward a Hill
> More! O More! visible.

Now I adore my life
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the Fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for love's sake;

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.[8]

2. Love's Proper Exercise

Dauncing (bright Lady) then began to be,
When first the seedes whereof the world did spring,
The Fire, Ayre, Earth, and water did agree,
By Loues persuasion, Natures mighty King,
To leaue their first disordered combating;
And in a daunce such measure to obserue,
As all the world their motion should preserve.

Since when they still are carried in a round,
And changing come one in anothers place,
Yet do they neyther mingle nor confound,
But everyone doth keepe the bounded space
Wherein the Daunce doth bid it turne or trace;
This wondrous myracle did Loue deuise,
For Dauncing is Loues proper exercise.

Sir John Davies, Orchestra (1596)

The year of 1953 marks another turning point in Roethke's career. That was the year of his publication of The Waking: Poems 1932-1953, which completes the "Lost Son" sequence with the poem "O, Thou Opening, O" and announces a new highly formal style in the rhetorical manner of the later Yeats and harking back especially to the Elizabethan poet Sir John Davies. Also, on January 3, 1953, Roethke married Beatrice Heath O'Connell; this came as a great surprise to everyone, for Roethke had hitherto been a confirmed bachelor. His own attitude to this sudden development is seen in his letters to friends; for example, he wrote to one old acquaintance, A.J.M. Smith (a Canadian poet whom he met through Stanley Kunitz), on January 19:

Dear Arthur,

I got married - don't faint - on January 3 to Beatrice O'Connell of Winchester, Va., and N.Y.C. Auden was best man & Bogan the matron of honor (the only attendants except for her ma & pa & brother). She's v. pretty (26); Irish & German & no fool. You'll both like her, I know. I've

known her for nearly ten years.[1]

True, he had known Beatrice for nearly ten years, but only slightly. She had been his student at Bennington in the mid-Forties and had admired him very much from a distance at that time. But their acquaintanceship had lapsed badly since then. This was remedied by a chance meeting in December of 1952 when Roethke visited New York for a reading at the Poetry Centre. Although Roethke was forty-four by this time, he still considered himself highly eligible and youthful. Obviously Miss O'Connell agreed: they were married only one month later attended by the handful of guests mentioned in Roethke's letter above. Auden, the best man, generously offered the newlyweds his Italian villa. After fulfilling a number of pre-arranged engagements on the East Coast, Roethke and his new wife sailed to Naples in March, crossed over to the island and took up residence in the Via Santa Lucia, Florio. They remained on Ischia until near the end of May, then travelled to Rome for a month; leaving Italy they proceeded to England via Geneva and Paris, arriving at their destination in late July. This was Roethke's first visit to Europe and he was elated by what he saw and the people he met. His affection for Italy was such that he would return for the entire academic year of 1955-1956 to Florence. He would make his final European sojourn in 1960, and the object of that visit was Ireland - a country of so many literary and personal associations for Roethke and Beatrice. Nevertheless, this first visit was especially important.

Roethke gained enormous confidence in himself during this period. In London he befriended Dylan Thomas and did a broadcast for the B.B.C. called An American Poet Introduces Himself and His Work (July 30, 1953). And this was well received. A sense of accomplishment surrounded him, and he returned to America and his teaching post in Seattle with many of his old anxieties dissipated (or so it seemed).

But the illness which had often plagued him in the past would not let him be. Roethke was briefly overtaken by one of his familiar 'manic phases' in late autumn and was forced to spend a fortnight in the Columbus Hospital.

He recovered quickly this time, but now it was obvious that no measure of worldly success would defer bouts of mental illness; in fact, the likelihood of sickness tended to increase in direct proportion to his public success. Such was his lack of self-confidence that he could never believe he deserved the acclaim showered on him with the publication of each new book. Yet it was typical of Roethke to turn his personal defects to advantage in his poetry. He liked to identify with other 'mad' poets of the past: Christopher Smart, Blake and John Clare in particular. And so he cultivated this <u>persona</u> in the poems, relating his own brand of mental illness to the great visionary experiences of his predecessors. Roethke's interest in mysticism certainly relates directly to his efforts to achieve a wider vision. And the fact that Roethke took pride in his 'madness' is obvious in his consummately mystical poem, "In a Dark Time", where he asks, "What's madness but nobility of soul/ At odds with circumstance?"[2]

The life of a poet does not necessarily lend itself to biography as does that of a politician; a poet's biography resembles a saint's in that it must chronicle the progress of the spirit - which is in many ways so inaccessible to direct observation. And the poet's life in public is of interest only so far as it enhances our understanding of the poems he writes, the genuine signposts of his interior odyssey. In Roethke's case: one can learn a great deal about him as a poet by observing him as a teacher. Whereas the notebooks of the <u>Lost Son</u> period are an indispensable guide to what Roethke was thinking about <u>outside</u> of the poems at that most crucial time of development, so his teaching notes provide useful background material to his later career as a poet. One sees Roethke's personal obsessions with technique, his concern with the poetic tradition, and his rapidly expanding knowledge in such areas as philosophy and religion emerging in these notes. And all reports by former students concur that Roethke was a candid and inspiring teacher; he shared his burdens readily with those in his charge; and his <u>persona</u> as a teacher measured up to the most elemental feature of his <u>persona</u> in the later poems - that of an intelligent and passionate man wholly given over to understanding the human

condition and making the difficult translation of this understanding into words.

Roethke was also a pioneer in the highly suspect field of 'creative writing'. With good reason he asked himself the basic question: Can one teach creative writing? In a short and brilliant essay called "The Teaching Poet" he makes some useful points:

> Let's say no one would claim to make poets. But a good deal can be taught about the craft of verse. A few people come together, establish an intellectual and emotional climate wherein creation is possible. They teach each other - that ideal condition of what once was called "progressive education". They learn by doing. Something of the creative lost in childhood is recovered. The student (and the teacher) learn a considerable something about themselves and the language. The making of verse remains a human activity.[3]

He goes on to make a further point: that creative writing represents a departure from the normal pattern of activity at the university. Most thinking which takes place within the academic context is reductive, analytical. One takes things apart in order to understand them. But the metaphor (so essential to the creative act) represents a way of synthesizing experience; creativity involves building up, forming new wholes (as Eliot said). Hence, a complete reversal of the typical academic thought-process must take place within the student of creative writing: however bad he may be! The goal of such activity is not, as Roethke emphasized, to make poets; he asks, "How many in any one generation are true poets?" Rather, the students participate in such a course for other reasons: to gain insight into what a poem is, to learn something about themselves, to improve their own ability to communicate in language at once suggestive and precise. Surely all of these are valid and demonstrate Roethke's unusual polemical abilities.

In any event Roethke's students considered him to be a great success; and many of them went on to be wellknown writers (Richard Hugo, David Wagoner, Carolyn Kizer and James Wright being among the acclaimed). Roethke's colleagues

valued him highly as well, the older ones often becoming father substitutes (such as Kenneth Burke and later, Robert Heilman). Professor Heilman, the Elizabethan scholar and Department Chairman at Washington during Roethke's tenure, became one of the poet's strongest supporters, often coming to his defence and aid in times of crisis (especially during the final years when long periods of recuperation became necessary). In a memoir written shortly after Roethke's premature death, Heilman recalls the poet in his persona of university teacher:

> As a colleague he was a man of great conscience. He was not useful in ordinary ways in the department or the university; he was not a committee man. But he was not aloof, indifferent, a great man who could not be bothered. He was profoundly concerned about the department, more so, perhaps, than some people who took their own good citizenship for granted. He thought about colleagues much more than most of them knew. He had fantasies of demoting and ousting those who he thought did not contribute. But more important, he had a keen eye for quality, or rather, a passion for it. His eye might err, but he did not disdain the lenses of new evidence. He could sound ferocious about those who seemed untalented or lacking in some way or who seemed to be pursuing only private ends, and yet have a very kindly feeling for someone in whom he sensed warmth and the right devotion. He wanted to make the people of quality effective, influential, powerful.[4]

Heilman's encomium provides a clear portrait of Roethke as a teacher: he was conscientious and concerned about quality in himself and those around him. Heilman describes some of Roethke's idiosyncrasies, of course; how the poet would needle others in jest, sometimes mischievously. But when Roethke's behaviour became excessively unusual, Heilman shrewdly understood what was happening and prepared the poet's friends for another bout of mental illness. One could see the manic state coming well before it arrived, thankfully. Roethke's good fortune was to be among so many true friends in Seattle; their sympathy must have often been indispensable. Generously, Heilman concludes his memoir with these observations:

> He was always compelling. It was part of the good luck of my own life to know him well, for fifteen years, this witty and imaginative man, sometimes combative but more often playful, yet always of high earnestness and conscience in his double vocation of teacher and poet - a man in whom I felt something that, I come in time to know, was to be called greatness.[5]

Looking over Roethke's teaching notes one discovers the intimate relationship that existed between his roles as poet and teacher. Rather than conflicting, as one might expect, they serve each other in the best possible way. Roethke needed the live audience before him to bring out the best. This kept him working for a start: reading widely, digging up materials of interest to his classes, following up leads offered by students. He wanted to inspire those under him and to be, in turn, admired. Thus both sides benefited from the contact. Also, being a teacher forced Roethke into the posture of continuing self-definition; the poet is always forced to do the very same. Every poem must be a new beginning; it must seem as though the poet <u>invented</u> the language just for that one poem; and the poet must be perpetually reborn to himself if he wishes to justify the poem at all. Ideally, the teacher must do the same.

Roethke wrote in his teaching notes at Washington,"Poetry - the emotional equivalent of thought."[6] Such a conception of his art meant that he demanded a high charge of emotional content in verse. It follows that this was expected of his students of creative writing. He must have terrified undergraduates (who are often as uncertain of what they <u>feel</u> as of what they <u>think</u>). Yet his example was outstanding; here was a man whose emotions were strong and articulated with precision. Certainly, Roethke won the devotion of his students as all reports testify.[7] To illustrate the nature of Roethke's classroom content, there follows a brief excerpt from his unpublished teaching notes at Washington:

> You will notice that we don't begin with a great many rules and precepts: but we do begin! Another way to look at it: as a teacher I'm like a little kid who has done something bad. I don't tell about it all at once: it has to break out gradually.

> This course is based on the assumption that these particular old forms have served many minds nobly. They may be able to catch some of the things you have to say. At any rate, they will give you practice. We begin, to continue the child analogy, with small things. Now along with this I want you to follow your own impulses about the shapes of poems. Put down ideas in your notebooks. Expand them into poems. Always try to get a rhythm, a shape that seems to fit the material.[8]

Here the roles of teacher and poet concur. Roethke is advising his students to do just as he does himself. These notes offer a fundamental insight into the poet's working method. First, one must have ideas (whether gained through experience or reading), then one must put them into prose (like Yeats) and expand them into poetry, always seeking out 'a rhythm, a shape that seems to fit the material'.

Examining the ideas which Roethke put before his students, one sees a growing interest in meditation and the mystical experience. From the early Forties his notebooks are filled with references to various mystical writers, East and West, perhaps triggered off by the poet's discovery of Yeats's translation of The Ten Principle Upanishads (with Shree Purohit Swami).[9] One recalls Yeats's interest in arcane doctrines, of course; he had been a follower of Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy (which emphasized the superior wisdom of the Orient, admiring Boehme and Paracelsus in the Occident). Later Yeats joined the less philosophical and more magical sect called the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn. The esoteric rituals of this group fascinated Yeats and enhanced his doctrine of the mask. Professor Ellmann doubts that Yeats was a literal believer in these occult doctrines; instead, the poet used these beliefs as a kind of mask.[10] Like the primitives of the mask ritual, Yeats really believed in the magic while the ceremony lasted, thereby learning something of himself. Certainly, Roethke did not go so far as Yeats: but his ever-increasing knowledge of various mystical doctrines began with his readings in Yeats. Roethke's basic conception of the universe was ultimately Neo-Platonic - another inheritance from Yeats; and like his master, Roethke studied and revered

Plotinus. The mysticism of Roethke's later poetry owes as much to this late Greek philosopher as any, but much of this material came down to the poet via Yeats. The notebooks of the Forties do, however, refer to some well-known contemporary scholars of mystical religion such as E. Allison Peers and Evelyn Underhill (the latter a disciple of the Baron Friedrich von Hügel, an important influence on Yeats). The following notes on the mystic's development of consciousness, taken directly from Miss Underhill, appear in the notes:

> 1. Awakening -- to a sense of reality.
>
> 2. Purgation of the self, when it realizes its own (unprojecting) divine.
> 3. An enhanced return of the sense of the divine order, after the Self has achieved detachment from the world.
>
> 4. Dark Night of the Soul.
>
> Sacramental perception.
>
> **********
>
> Singleness: Discovery of singleness of self is the same as discovery of God in oneself.[12]

These are the kinds of 'idea' which Roethke made poems of.

It will be helpful to recall the various stages of mystic consciousness when examining Roethke's last poems. Underhill actually divines five progressive stages on the scale of awareness. My own summary follows: (1) Awakening of the Self to consciousness of the Absolute, marked by feelings of intense joy, exhilaration. (2) Awareness of the Gulf between Self and Absolute which leads to purgation: the attempt to eliminate extraneous factors which stand between the Self and God. Pain and effort are in evidence. (3) Illumination: the contemplative state par excellence. It is the goal of most artists: clear vision of the Absolute, a sense of Divine Presence, but not union. Happiness predominates; this is the final stage for most mystics, especially for artists. Ecstasy comes into play here. (4) Dark Night of the Soul: an awareness of Divine Absence. This stage resembles the second stage but is a higher exponent of it. The sense of personal satisfaction, gained by the third stage, must be

lost before the final stage can be attained. Selfhood must be surrendered. Despair and anguish accompany this stage. (5) Union: the goal of all mystic quests. This stage demands more than perception of the Absolute; it requires merger. Especially in Oriental mysticism, this stage includes a total annihilation of the Self, as in Nirvana. Self-consciousness gives way to complete consciousness. Serenity predominates, but not necessarily ecstasy.[13]

As Underhill points out, the artist rarely goes beyond the third stage, Illumination. This is almost certainly as far as Roethke ever got, although some of the last poems pretend to more.[14] It would seem easy to mistake some aspects of the manic-depressive syndrome for mystical experiences, which is not to deny Roethke's claim to a heightened form of consciousness. We can discern one or more of the first three stages of Miss Underhill's scale in many of the poems of Roethke's final decade.[15]

A fundamental aspect of Romanticism was, of course, the tendency to see the universe in a Platonic way, and so Roethke interpreted the natural world as 'a steady stream of correspondences'.[16] The earliest notebooks reveal a deep appreciation of the fundamentals of idealism:

> Plato: the true order of going...is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which he mounts upwards for the sake of that other Beauty.[17]

This most basic of mystical concepts underlies much of the poet's later verse. In those poems there is often the sense that one is being shown the particulars of reality only to suggest a higher Reality lying beyond the visible manifestations. Roethke's metaphysics reflect the influence of Jacob Boehme, the German mystic, who wrote in his Confessions:

> Dost thou think my writing is too earthly?
> If thou wert to come to this window of mine
> thou wouldst not then say that it is earthly.
> Though I must indeed use the earthly tongue,
> yet there is a true heavenly understanding
> couched under it, which in my outermost moving
> I am not able to express.[18]

Roethke's mysticism also participates in the visions of Eros and God, but the

unfortunate truth remains: his poetry improves in inverse ratio to the increase of mystical content. His worst poems are those which lose that firm grip on the particulars of experience which sets The Lost Son apart from all other volumes. Nonetheless, Roethke tried to extend himself; and this is always to be admired. His late foray into new areas of experience suggests an unwillingness to fall back upon earlier successes and a need to go beyond the confines of Romantic self-consciousness.

The most significant addition to Roethke's vision in the 1953 collection is the image of Woman as lover. For the most part Roethke never speaks about a specific woman; he appeals to the archetype, what Jung called the 'primordial image'. Significantly, Roethke transcribed huge passages from Jung into his teaching notes. One key passage relating to the concept of 'primordial images' follows:

> The primordial image or archetype is a figure, whether it be daemon, man, or process, that repeats itself in the course of history wherever fantasy is fully manifested. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythical figure. If we subject these images to a close investigation, we discover them to be the formulated resultants of countless typical experiences of our ancestors. They are, as it were, the psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same type.[19]

The primordial image of Woman first appears as the Mother of the Lost Son poems. But in The Waking she has become the Lover. In the first manifestation of Woman in "The Visitant" we cannot even be sure if the transformation has been completed. The visitant is female, but she remains wraith-like, disembodied, almost terrifying:

> Slow, slow as a fish she came,
> Slow as a fish coming forward,
> Swaying in a long wave;
> Her white arms reaching toward me.[20]

This abstract Woman receives an earthly habitation and a name in the beautiful "Elegy for Jane", one of Roethke's most widely known anthology pieces. Nevertheless, the death of the girl (Roethke's student who was thrown from a horse

and killed) is no more the subject of the poem than was Edward King the subject of Lycidas. The girl's death was rather the occasion for a poem calling up a certain emotional state. The real subject of the poem is the poet, whose feelings of pity and grief transcend the occasion. Like the best of Roethke, "Elegy for Jane" was compiled of fragments scattered throughout the notebooks over a period of many years. The poem begins in the manner of the seventeenth century meditative poets with the memory and a concrete recreation of the subject:

> I remember the neck curls, limp and damp as tendrils;
> And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
> And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
> And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
> A wren, happy, tail into the wind.
>
> 21

The phrase,'a sidelong pickerel smile', for example, first appears in the notebooks from 3 March, 1945. Roethke, like many writers before him (Pope being an obvious example), used his notebooks as a phrase-book, storing up good images or expressions to be rescued from oblivion when the time was ripe. In these clever opening lines of Roethke's elegy all images are concrete and natural - identifying the girl by association with the elemental aspects of nature: the tendrils of plants, the pickerel, the wren. Continuing this stanza the poet makes the association more explicit taking his images right down the scale-of-being to the mold itself:

> The shade sang with her;
> The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
> And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.
>
> 22

The poet writes of his subject's capacity for despair, how 'she cast herself down into such a pure depth,/ Even a father could not find her'. Thus, having defined the situation by analogy, associating the girl with the damp and mossy earth, Roethke speaks to the subject directly: a predictable turn for a poem in the tradition of meditation to take. He says, "My sparrow, you are not here,/ Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow." And he concludes:

> If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
> My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
> Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
> I with no rights in this matter,
> Neither father nor lover.

The emotion perhaps outstrips the occasion, but this is so with many great elegies. The occasion provides a convenient stage for the poet, allowing him to call upon the full ranges of grief and pity which seem otherwise inappropriate. There is a sense in which the elegiac poet mourns for himself and for all of us.

Continuing his exploration of the anima, Jung's term for the feminine principle, Roethke shows an entirely new style of writing and a fresh mask. In "An Old Lady's Winter Words" in Words for the Wind (1958), which followed The Waking (1953), a whole section is given over to the mask of an old woman (Meditations of an Old Woman). But this is the source-poem, a bitter dramatic monologue which explores the problem of old age (and ontological anxiety). One of the great drawbacks of this poem (and its later version) is that the old woman might just as well be an old man. There seems to be nothing especially feminine about the individual reaction to this situation. But the poem otherwise manages to convince us.

At the outset the speaker clings to the past, comparing herself to 'the half-dead', the aged who hug their last secrets. She yearns for a glimpse of what lies beyond the grave: '0 for some minstrel of what's to be'. She wants God, or at least a sign, "a gleam,/ Gracious and bland,/ On a bright stone." But she struggles to recall her youth in vain, "The doors swinging open,/ The smells, the moment of hay." She comes to the realization that, "The good day has gone." Using highly concrete analogies from her daily experience, the old woman meditates on the death of her spirit and her body:

> I have listened close
> For the thin sound in the windy chimney,
> The fall of the last ash
> From the dying ember.
> I've become a sentry of small seeds,
> Poking around in my garden.

Like the fallen student of "Elegy for Jane", the old woman is associated with

the earth in this poem. She has broken down into seeds and stands guard over her fragments. Will they blossom? No answer is forthcoming. In the manner of the old man of Yeats's last poems, rage takes over when the emotions cannot cope with what the understanding whispers. The old woman speculates:

> If I were a young man,
> I could roll in the dust of a fine rage.

The correspondences between inner and outer weather continues in the final stanza. Nature is barren; it is winter-time, as the title suggests, and cindery snow sticks over the stubble. The persona asserts her wish to be free of the body: 'My dust longs for the invisible'. Staying alive has become a chore. The last lines embody the old woman's existential despair:

> I fall, more and more,
> Into my own silences,
> In the cold air,
> The spirit
> Hardens.

The poem inevitably reminds us of Robert Frost's "An Old Man's Winter Night" from Mountain Interval (1916). This antecedent of Roethke's "Old Lady's Winter Words" captures a similar state of mind, using the imagery of winter to suggest a corresponding season of life. Roethke's old woman says:

> I'm reminded to stay alive
> By the dry rasp of the recurring inane,
> The fine soot sifting through my windows.

Whereas Frost says of his old man:

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
> That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
> What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
> Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.[23]

Both are sustained, though barely, by the external world which will not let them simply fall back into the silence or the darkness.

Roethke's magisterial sequence Four For Sir John Davies comes next, announcing yet another major new style: the end-stopped, highly formalized and rhetorical iambic pentameter, in which so much of his later verse is written.

Perhaps out of fear that anyone should accuse him of copying his master's style, Roethke makes the famous assertion which he would later regret in the first section of the cycle: 'I take this cadence from a man named Yeats'.[24] In reality, Yeats rarely made much of this end-stopped line, although his verse was always formal and often rhetorical. Roethke's allusion to the late sixteenth century author of Orchestra (1596) is more astute. The quotation from Davies which serves as an epigraph to this part of my study points to Roethke's true affinities. This is an example of the Elizabethan 'plain style' associated with such writers as Goodge, Gascoigne, Greville, Ralegh and Davies.

With regard to content, Roethke comes much closer to Yeats. They share a Platonic conception of the universe, and the tortuous split between mind and body which follows by necessity from the anti-materialistic view of reality is a central theme in the later poetry of both writers. Their common interest in mysticism arises from the desire to participate in the eternal while still living in the temporal. Both Yeats and Roethke believed in the power of art to 'redeem the time' by creating that 'artifice of eternity' which takes man out of nature - a part of the Romantic quest for paradise. Finally, both poets wrote a great deal of autobiographical verse, often speaking of private passions in a public way. Roethke may have had Yeats's example in mind when he changed his style so deliberately in the last decade of his career. He turned away from the personal and immediate voice of the Lost Son period and adopted the formal and stylized voice (mask) of Four For Sir John Davies (from The Waking, 1953). Although many of these later poems are successful, Roethke was mistaken to believe that by merely altering his outward style he could change his vision as well. He could master many of Yeats's mannerisms, but he could not entertain the great philosophical abstractions that the master took in his stride. And so Roethke's later work suffers a loss of power, excepting where the familiar myth of the Greenhouse Eden takes over again and the personal voice of the Lost Son leaks back into life.

The Davies sequence consists of four separate poems, each of which is

divided into four six-line stanzas, which maintain a strict rhyme scheme.(ABABCC). Such formality contrasts with the free verse of The Lost Son and Praise to the End! and recalls the early virtuosity of Open House. The central reference in the sequence is to Davies's theme of the universal dance. Davies bids his reader to learn the dance for himself and be in harmony with the heavens:

> Since all the worlds great fortunes and affaires
> Forward and backward rapt and whirled are,
> According to the musicke of the spheares:
> And Chaunce her selfe, her nimble feete upbeares
> On a round slippery wheele that rowleth ay,
> And turnes all states with her impetuous sway.[25]

Roethke launches off from there with a question, then he makes an assertion:

> Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
> That made me think the universe could hum?
> The great wheel turns its axle when it can;
> I need a place to sing, and dancing-room,
> And I have made a promise to my ears
> I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears.[26]

Roethke's opening question implies that something has happened since the time of Davies to disturb the easy harmony of the universe. Man no longer hears the celestial music, but the poet nevertheless needs to dance: hence the assertion of the stanza's final couplet. Roethke often refers to the bears in the following stanzas; they symbolize spontaneous and joyous play, that magical zone where the mask can become real, where the game is taken seriously. They also represent the celestial bears - Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. The poet explains that it was difficult to learn to dance alone, but that he did. References to his spiritual master, Yeats, proliferate (as in the final couplet of this first poem in the sequence: 'Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how/ That came to be the bears and Yeats would know'.).

"The Partner" follows "The Dance" and introduces once more the anima or feminine principle of some of Roethke's earlier poetry. The elements of mysticism which rise to the surface here participate in what Auden calls the Vision of Eros. The poet asks himself, "What is desire?/ The impulse to make someone else complete?" Then he affirms, "That woman would set sodden straw on fire." This can be no vague primordial image of woman; the implications of

fire are explicit soon after as the poet asks, "Who can embrace the body of his fate?" The comic ambiguities of that line are delightful, and the poet answers his own question. Who can? He can. He embraces the body of his beloved and says, "She kissed me close, and then did something else./ My marrow beat as mildly as my pulse." And concluding the poem he goes farther:

> This joy outleaps the dog. Who cares? Who cares?
> I gave her kisses back, and woke a ghost.
> O what lewd music crept into our ears!
> The body and the soul know how to play
> In that dark world where gods have lost their way.

The last couplet suggests that mystic illumination is gained in the realm of sexual play and that human beings have an advantage over the gods in that they are possessed of bodies. This idea runs through the mystical literature of the West, of course. One thinks immediately of the Song of Solomon. As Miss Underhill explains:

> It was natural and inevitable that the imagery of human love and marriage should have seemed to the mystic the best of all images of his own 'fulfilment of life'; his soul's surrender, first to the call, finally to the embrace of Perfect Love. It lay ready to his hand: it was understood by all men: and, moreover, it most certainly does offer, upon lower levels, a strangely exact parallel to the sequence of states in which man's spiritual consciousness unfolds itself, and which form the consummation of the mystic life.[27]

The genuinely mystical nature of the Eros described in "The Partners" emerges in "The Wraith" as the poet reflects more deeply on the symbolical aspects of the love-act:

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

Eros is an affirmation of Being against Non-Being, 'the lonely pastures of the dead' which lie at either end of life. The two lovers 'take arms' against the threat of Non-Being, a brilliant play on the language. This is the private passion expressed in public and formal verse which reminds one of Yeats. A

key line in "The Wraith" comes later: 'The flesh can make the spirit visible'. This realization serves to reconcile the Platonic dichotomy (made explicit in Descartes) of body and spirit. Not surprisingly, Roethke had been reading the theologian Paul Tillich during the early Fifties. The Courage To Be, Tillich's most popular work, sometimes crops up in odd phrases in Roethke's later verse. Courage, according to Tillich, is Self-affirmation in spite of Non-Being. The Vision of Eros constitutes a kind of mutual self-affirmation, as when Roethke's partners 'Took arms against their own obscurity'.

The influence of Tillich on Roethke was subtle, but profound. Roethke did not read systematically in philosophy or theology, but the little book, The Courage To Be, represents a most illuminating synthesis of various speculative traditions. Tillich's basic existentialism comes through in "The Vigil", Roethke's final poem in the four-part sequence. The central motif is that of Dante's ascent through purgatory, and the point is that Dante believed in the vision he owned. The first stanza of this section ends:

> Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?
> All lovers live by longing and endure:
> Summon a vision and declare it pure.

This advice, to summon a vision, has parallels in Tillich where he claims that a creative vision is one sure way of overcoming the threat of Non-Being: 'Spiritual self-affirmation occurs in every moment in which man lives creatively in various spheres of meaning'.[28] Creative vision extends beyond the artist, according to Tillich, to whomever participates spontaneously in action and reaction to a vision. "Everyone who lives creatively in meanings affirms himself as a participant in these meanings." Ontological anxiety is the result of non-creativity, which is to say, non-participation in the lively dance of the universe summoned by Davies and affirmed by Roethke. The rewards of participation are documented in the last lines of the sequence, suggesting a state of mystical illumination or possibly, union:

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

"The Waking" serves as an epilogue to Four For Sir John Davies, although it is a completely separate poem in its own right and the title poem for the volume as a whole. It remains one of Roethke's finest achievements in formal verse. Form and content merge in this sharply end-stopped villanelle, a highly contrived French import which demands of the poet at least two brilliant refrain lines if he aspires to anything more than monumental dullness and repetition. The villanelle must be carefully built around these refrains, each stanza in turn expanding the meaning of the lines. The themes of the Davies sequence, such as the dance, the partners, the way to spiritual awakening through physical experiences, the need for self-affirmation, are again taken up in "The Waking". The last magnificent stanza summarizes much of the content of The Waking as a volume:

> This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
> What falls away is always. And is near.
> I wake to sleep and take my waking slow.
> I learn by going where I have to go.[29]

The poem embraces many of Roethke's key paradoxes: one must learn by going (the reverse of what is usual); one must wake to sleep (the gradual awakening of the spirit); movement steadies the uncertain man; and things must not be taken for what they seem (Plato's paradox), for what falls away, i.e. the physical world, is really always at hand in the ideal world of spiritual reality which sustains all ephemeral manifestations.

Words for the Wind was published in 1958; in it Roethke preserves all earlier poems that he still admired and adds some new ones. The five sections of new poems are divided into five parts as follows: (1) Lighter Pieces and Poems for Children; (2) Love Poems; (3) Voices and Creatures; (4) The Dying Man (In Memoriam: W.B. Yeats); (5) Meditations of an Old Woman. There are no real departures from what has gone before, however, merely extensions and elaborations. And these will be discussed briefly.

The first group of lighter pieces may be ignored. Roethke was by reputation a most amusing individual at times (those who knew him invariably vouch for this), but his lighter poems are rarely funny and often dull. His children's

verses have slight bearing on his serious poetry. More interesting are the love poems written shortly after his marriage to Beatrice O'Connell; the title poem itself contains some of the poet's best love poetry. But once again the problem of abstraction arises. The woman in many of these poems is unreal, dreamlike, the Platonic form of Woman or the Jungian primordial image. If Roethke wished for a mystical effect by this means, he failed.

In "The Dream", for example, the woman encountered is a wraith. The poet says, "She came toward me in the flowing air,/ A shape of change, encircled by its fire."[30] The title, of course, would not lead one to expect more, but the effect of such abstraction is that of power diffusion. That 'anguish of concreteness' is gone, and we are left floating in the air, unanchored to experience. Roethke has forgotten his maxim, "The flesh can make the spirit visible."[31] The same thing happens in other of the love poems: "All the Earth, All the Air", "She", "The Voice", "The Other", and "The Swan" are prone to this condition, losing that grip on the particulars of experience which is so necessary for good poetry.

The two most successful new love poems are "Words for the Wind" and "I Knew a Woman"; both extend the image of Woman into fresh areas of experience for Roethke, the first one being a celebration of marital love, the second representing a delightful blend of the comic and the serious which has few parallels in Roethke or elsewhere. These poems were written shortly after the poet's marriage and reveal a luminous sense of participation in the dance or what Wallace Stevens called "Celebrating the marriage/ Of flesh and air."[32]

"Words for the Wind" celebrates the beloved in a strong three-beat line reminiscent of Yeats; part of its success comes from the effect of this regular rhythm working against slant rhymes (odd-glad, down-own, beak-back). The first lively stanza sets the playful and spirited tone of the long poem:

> Love, love, a lily's my care,
> She's sweeter than a tree.
> Loving, I use the loving air
> Most lovingly: I breath;
> Mad in the wind I wear
> Myself as I should be.

All's even with the odd,
My brother the vine is glad.[33]

Familiar themes recur: that dancing which keeps the poet in harmony with the universe ('Motion can keep me still'), the way the spirit reveals itself in the shape of the beloved ('The wind's white with her name') and the fact that the spirit stays after the material world goes ('What falls away will fall;/ All things bring me to love'). The concluding stanza offers a summary of Roethke's philosophy of love:

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

Roethke's interest in contemporary existential theology included Martin Buber, author of the classic I and Thou. The poet's relationship with the beloved as illustrated by "Words for the Wind" is that of I-Thou (in Buber's terms): the individual affirms his own being in the presence of another. As Buber explains this:

> Every REAL RELATION with a being or life in the world is exclusive. Its Thou is freed, steps forth, is single, and confronts you. It fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing else exists; but all else lives in its light. As long as the presence of the relation continues, its cosmic range is inviolable.[34]

This is the final point of "Words for the Wind".

"I Knew a Woman" combines innuendo and wit in a fashion without precedent in Roethke. Using the strong line movement (iambic pentameter) encountered earlier in the Four For Sir John Davies, this poem exploits the medium brilliantly. We hear the voice of the innocent lover who can do nothing but exaggerate his beloved's qualities in the first stanza:

Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).[35]

The next two stanzas develop an intricate series of conceits; one of them, full of sexual punning, compares the lovers to sickle and rake (rake meaning 'a man of loose morals' as well as a garden tool) in the act of mowing (which connotes sexual play). The poet says:

> She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
> Coming behind her for her pretty sake
> (But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Such word play continues until the last, more serious stanza which reflects on the meaning of this sexual play:

> Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
> I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
> What's freedom for? To know eternity.
> I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
> But who would count eternity in days?
> These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
> (I measure time by how a body sways).

This seemingly random juxtaposition of aphorisms is deceptive. There is a logical progression here. The first lines reflect on the lesson of the plants - all things must fulfil their natural cycle: seed becomes grass becomes hay. This motion exists outside of the individual (hence his martyrdom). But the freedom lies with choice - the lover's prerogative. Once again, white and stone are associated with redemption or eternity (hence the shadow cast by the beloved). The last three lines make a startling comment about time. As the lover at the end of "Words for the Wind" saw himself in his counterpart, so does the persona of "I Knew a Woman". Ordinary time (clock time) matters little to lovers, except in so far as they must be separated at some future point. When they are together, time becomes an irrelevant abstraction. The concept put forward by the poet is just slightly mystical in that the idea of participating in the eternal while still being in the temporal is central to mysticism. It also suggests a concept of time akin to the aevum of Thomas Aquinas, that which is 'intermediate between Time and Eternity, participating in both, since, while Time has a before and after, and Eternity has not, aevum has not a before and after, but they can be conjoined to it'.[30] This concept

of time grows and becomes more explicit in Roethke's later poems. But "I Knew a Woman" owes its success to the comic freshness of the opening which allows the last, more serious stanza an air of giddiness which would in another poem be taken for pretension.

The necessity to progress from flesh to spirit dominates these love poems throughout. In "The Sententious Man" the poet scorns those who refuse to go beyond the material world; he remarks that, "True lechers love the flesh, and that is all."[37] But the genuine lover must be conscious of the spirit which lies beneath the flesh. Roethke explains:

> I stay alive, both in and out of time,
> By listening to the spirit's smallest cry;
> In the long night, I rest within her name -
>
> As if a lion knelt to kiss a rose,
> Astonished into passionate repose.

The identification of the beloved with the rose and the lover with the lion harks back to ancient mystical symbolism. Miss Underhill says that the lion is,"in his strength and wholeness...the only creature potentially able to attain Perfection."[38] The rose, of course, reveals the highest form of spiritual reality in a sensual object and has famous precedents in Christian mystical literature. The same poem continues by exploiting various other famous mystical symbols, such as the alchemical Lapis Philosophorum: 'I know the notion of the deepest stone./ Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone'. The philosopher's stone, in true Hermetic custom, cannot be found. It must be made; hence, it is analogous to poetry. All things are contained within it, as Boehme said:

> In this stone there lith hidden, whatsoever God and the Eternity, also heaven, the stars and elements contain and are able to do. There never was from eternity anything better or more precious than this, and it is offered by God and bestowed upon man; every one may have it...it is in a simple form, and hath the power of the whole Deity in it.[39]

"The Sententious Man" remains, in spite of the procession of mystical symbols,

curiously disjointed, especially with regard to tone. Whereas "I Know a Woman" combines the serious with the comic to the advantage of both, this poem seems either overly serious ('Is pain a promise? I was schooled in pain') or unsuccessfully comic ('I'm tired of brooding on my neighbor's soul;/ My friends become more Christian, year by year').

"The Pure Fury" illustrates the difficulty poets often have with philosophical abstractions. Yeats could make philosophical points in verse without appearing to strain the medium, but Roethke achieves nothing except bathos in the following stanza:

> The pure admire the pure, and live alone;
> I loved a woman with an empty face.
> Parmenides put Nothingness in place;
> She tries to think, and it flies loose again.
> How slow the changes of a golden moon:
> Great Boehme rooted all in Yes and No;
> At times my darling thinks in pure Plato.[40]

The poet has very nearly transcribed verbatim a paragraph from <u>The Courage To Be</u>:

> Non-being is one of the most difficult and most discussed concepts. Parmenides tried to remove it as a concept. But in order to do so he had to sacrifice life. Democritos re-established it and identified it with empty space, in order to make movement thinkable. Plato used the concept of non-being because without it the contrast of existence with pure essences is beyond understanding. It is implied in Aristotle's distinction between matter and form....Jacob Boehme, the Protestant mystic and philosopher of life, made the classical statement that all things are rooted in a Yes and a No.[41]

The great threat to modern man, then, the cause of existential <u>angst</u>, is Non-Being. But self-affirmation of oneself in the 'empty face' of the beloved includes Democritos's idea of movement. One dances in the space of another, each affirming his own and the other's Being. Nevertheless, such a diverse philosophical range in one stanza of poetry tends to produce <u>bad</u> poetry. "The Pure Fury" lacks the centre of gravity which holds a poem together; it is an amalgam of separate lines varying in quality (and 'My darling speaks in pure Plato' may be the worst line in Roethke's published verse).

"The Renewal" contains some philosophical material, but this time the poet manages to hold on to his theme; he returns to many of the old images from the Greenhouse Eden and expands them, for example - the self-as-a-tree: 'I teach my sighs to lengthen into songs,/ Yet, like a tree, endure the shift of things'.[42] The ghost of Otto Roethke reappears: 'The night wind rises. Does my father live?'. But the poet is not shaken by this experience. He assures himself, "Love alters all." "The Renewal" consists of one man's meditation on the power of love to freshen the sense of selfhood, to affirm Being in spite of Non-Being. In the penultimate stanza the question arises: 'Will the self, lost, be found again?'. The last stanza confirms our expectations: love causes a renewal of the self through mystic illumination,'Illumination brought to such a pitch' that the poet at last declares, "I find that love, and I am everywhere."

In these and other love poems from this period one thing becomes clear: the lost son has begun to find himself. The clues were there in the earlier work, as in "The Lost Son" when the ghostly presence speaks out:

> Dark hollows said, lee to the wind.
> The moon said, back of an eel,
> The salt said, look by the sea.[43]

That is - follow your own inclinations; seek out your opposite; go back to the source. These salient proverbs aid the young man on a quest for self-discovery and self-affirmation. The love poems celebrate a further stage of the progression of the hero. Now he has accepted the sacred fire, although not without difficulties as the last stanza of "Love's Progress" intimates:

> The close dark hugs me hard,
> And all the birds are stone.
> I fear my own joy;
> I fear myself in the field,
> For I would drown in the fire.[44]

The section entitled Voices and Creatures reveals that the old sense of guilt which plagued the lost son is still active. The old ghosts ('grey sheep') return at the beginning of "The Exorcism":

The grey sheep came. I ran,
My body half in flame.
(Father of flowers, who
Dares face the thing he is?

As if pure being woke,
The dust rose and spoke;
A shape cried from a cloud,
Cried to my flesh out loud.[45]

The poem errs sharply on the side of obscurity, and without intimate knowledge of certain biographical details such lines would be scarcely intelligible. The 'Father of Flowers' and the shape crying from a cloud are obviously variations on Roethke's familiar father-florist theme (he calls from the cloud, of course, because he is dead). The second stanza picks up with a bold trimeter reminiscent of Yeats:

In a dark wood I saw -
I saw my several selves
Come running from the leaves,
Lewd, tiny, careless lives
That scuttled under stones,
Or broke, but would not go.

This is the same dark wood where the lost son hunted by the banks of a river, the same 'bug-riddled foliage'.[46] In essence, these poems expand the various parts of "The Lost Son", sometimes acting almost as footnotes to that great central work.

"The Song" recalls 'the small voice of a child,/ Close, and yet far away'. As usual, the past will not let the poet alone. His old selves, imperfect and fragmented, come running back to him as in "The Exorcism". And in "The Small" the poet complains, "The dead will not lie still." The overwhelming and familiar guilt called up by these ghosts causes the following morbid speculation in "Elegy" (ostensibly written for Dylan Thomas):

Should every creature be as I have been,
There would be reason for essential sin;
I have myself an inner weight of woe
That God himself can scarcely bear.[49]

But the best poem from this dark section is "A Walk in Late Summer" which at first glance appears to be the meditations of a peripatetic:

A late rose ravages the casual eye,
A blaze of being on a central stem.
It lies upon us to undo the lie
Of living merely in the realm of time.
Existence moves toward a certain end -
A thing all earthly lovers understand.
That dove's elaborate way of coming near
Reminds me I am dying with the year.[50]

This language, although tending toward abstraction, is redeemed by the ingenious word play (the quibble on 'lie' and the ambiguity of 'Existence moves toward a certain end') and the singular passion which unites the poem as a whole. The poet links the familiar rose with the end of existence and the task of the lovers - to unmake the myth of time. One must experience the eternal within the temporal, as in an earlier line in the same poem where the poet says, "My moments linger - that's eternity," and in the last stanza, "Being delights in being, and in time."

The three animal poems which complete Voices and Creatures are playful, but they show Roethke's continuing obsession with the lower orders of the phylogenetic scale. In "Snake", "Slug" and "The Siskins" the poet expresses his wish to become like the creatures under contemplation. After describing the snake, for example, he says:

I longed to be that thing,
The pure and sensuous form.

And I may be, some time.[51]

In "Slug" he says, "I'm sure I've been a toad, one time or another."[52] And in "The Siskins" he merely leans forward, rapt in contemplation, as the tiny birds skip over the flowers as 'Light as seed blowing off thistles'.[53] This highly Romantic desire to identify with the natural world seems ubiquitous in Roethke's work from beginning to end. Having grown up close to the cycle of birth and rebirth around the greenhouse, no wonder that he should believe in reincarnation! In these animal poems Roethke returns to the concrete imagery of The Lost Son; this gives the poems a vitality missing in the more philosophical work. Instead of making general statements, the poet (like Lawrence) embodies aspects of his own personality in the animals he writes about. These rather slight poems hint

of better things to come.

The two sections which complete Words for the Wind contain some of the best writing of Roethke's later career, especially the Meditations of an Old Woman, written in a free verse not unlike that of Praise to the End!. The imagery is associational (stream-of-consciousness) and the language is pithy, proverbial. The preceding sequence, The Dying Man (In Memoriam: W.B. Yeats), imitates the Yeatsian formality and represents the culmination of this style in Roethke.

Although The Dying Man pays homage to the master, the poem has more to do with Roethke than Yeats. Once again the lesson of the mask is practised, especially in the first section, entitled "His Words", suggesting that we are really listening to Yeats himself. He says:

> "My soul's hung out to dry,
> Like a fresh-salted skin;
> I doubt I'll use it again.
>
> "What's done is yet to come;
> The flesh deserts the bone,
> But a kiss widens the rose;
> I know, as the dying know,
> Eternity is Now.
>
> "A man sees, as he dies,
> Death's possibilities;
> My heart sways with the world.
> I am that final thing,
> A man learning to sing."[54]

The logic here seems tenuous at first. The soul, we are told, has been cured in the sun and may be of no further use; but this is contradicted immediately by 'What's done is yet to come'. This paradox only becomes intelligible by the proverbial 'Eternity is Now'. Time, seen from the mystical and Oriental point-of-view, is not linear but circular. At the centre of the great wheel (perceived as temporal and linear time normally) lies the hub, timeless, represented by the rose. The extreme circumstances of approaching death bring this into focus. One discovers the beginning in the end, (as in Eliot's East Coker).

In "What's Now?" the poet asks, "What's beating at the gate?" He wants to know what lies beyond the physical life in this second section of the sequence. The identities of Yeats and Roethke merge as the persona recounts the progress he has made from fleshly to spiritual interests:

> I burned the flesh away,
> In love, in lively May.
> I turn my look upon
> Another shape than hers
> Now, as the casement blurs.

The casement, the body, falls away and allows the individual to transfer his attention from the beloved to God. But in the third section, "The Wall", an old ghost materializes - Papa. "A ghost comes out of the unconscious mind/ To grope my sill..." A revealing statement comes a little later: 'I found my father when I did my work'. Using the same symbol-clusters encountered earlier, Roethke associates the ghost of father with a wall, something which obscures, divides, encloses. Roethke associates the wall with night, the mystic's Dark Night of the Soul. The poet speaks of himself as 'A spirit raging at the visible', which recalls 'The visible obscures' in Four For Sir John Davies.[55] Reality, in the Platonic sense, lies behind the material world; using traditional mystical imagery, Roethke calls the Ultimate 'a dazzling dark behind the sun'.

"The Exulting" recalls the ecstasy passages of the Lost Son poems; the self-as-tree image returns; and the poet declares, "I love the world; I want more than the world,/ Or after image of the inner eye." Roethke had worked out this Platonic concept in an earlier notebook: 'The eye, of course is not enough. But the outer eye serves the inner eye, that's the point'.[56] As usual, illumination occurs in connection with positive images of the father, and this poem is no exception. The poet (still ostensibly Yeats, of course) says:

> I saw my father shrinking in his skin;
> He turned his face: there was another man,
> Walking the edge, loquacious, unafraid.
> He quivered like a bird in birdless air,
> Yet dared to fix his vision anywhere.

This father-image owes more to Otto Roethke than to John Butler Yeats (or W.B. Yeats if the poet intends us to think of his spiritual father). The idea, in any case, is that each son <u>becomes</u> his father in time. One man dies, another takes his place. The new man, however, must not be timid; he must 'Summon a vision and declare it pure' as Roethke advised in the <u>Four For Sir John Davies</u> (which underlies much of this later poem). The poet, like the mystic, surveys the material world in search of the purer, spiritual world which sustains all things.

"They Sing, They Sing" evolves one further stage beyond the <u>Lost Son</u> cycle as the poet attempts an apotheosis of Woman. The dance (almost interchangeable as a metaphor with singing) returns, plus an all-encompassing image of Woman (which includes vestiges of mother, moon and earth goddesses):

> All women loved dance in a dying light -
> The moon's my mother: how I love the moon!
> Out of her place she comes, a dolphin one,
> Then settles back to shade and the long night.
> A beast cries out as if its flesh were torn,
> And that cry takes me back where I was born.

Roethke's image of Woman resembles, of course, Graves's White Goddess who combines the triple qualities of mother, bride and killer-hag.[58] One also thinks of the Greek goddess of three aspects: Artemis (night-huntress), Hecate (moon) and Persephone (Queen of Hades). Roethke possessed a copy of Graves's famous <u>White Goddess</u>; and he often invokes the traditional symbol of the moon when alluding to the feminine principle. He associates poetry (as song) with women in "They Sing, They Sing". The woman of the stanza quoted above is most obviously mother, connected with the dolphin image familiar in Yeats, although the reference to a beast suggests the beloved of "Words for the Wind" (as in "She frolicks like a beast").[59] One can only assume that the Oedipal pattern works throughout Roethke at the level of the subconscious; but certainly the formulation recurs - Woman equals Lover equals Mother. As he says above - the cry of the beast (the beloved) takes the poet back to the point of birth.

The final and inspired stanza of "They Sing, They Sing" (which concludes the Dying Man sequence as a whole) sums up Roethke's thoroughly Romantic belief in the necessity of the human spirit's quest for self-affirmation in spite of the Non-Being which threatens from every side:

> 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.

The lengthening of the ultimate line to an alexandrine gives extra weight to the final image. Tillich has said, "Emptiness and loss of meaning are expressions of the threat of non-being to the spiritual life. This threat is implied in man's finitude and actualized by man's estrangement. It can be described in terms of doubt, its creative and its destructive function in man's spiritual life. Man is able to ask because he is separated from, while participating in, what he is asking about." One must dare to beat one's wings against the emptiness, accepting doubt as a condition of life. As Tillich continues, "One takes the risk of going astray and the anxiety of this risk upon oneself. In this way one avoids the extreme situation until it becomes unavoidable and the despair of truth becomes complete."[60] Thus, the unavoidable task for the modern writer is always the affirmation of Being in spite of Non-Being. Roethke accepts this, and in so doing places himself beside his older contemporary Stevens who concludes the Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction with this statement: 'I have not but I am and as I am, I am'.[61] This should not be mistaken for the self-absorption which ruins men in Blake's Ulro; it is the self-affirmation of the man-qua-poet, beholding what he has created and declaring its purity. As Roethke would come to say in a very late poem, "The Abyss", "Being, not doing, is my first joy."[62]

The last section of "Words for the Wind" contains the five separate poems of the Meditations of an Old Woman. They resemble in form and manner the poems of Praise to the End!. Roethke exchanges an old woman loosely

modelled after the poet's mother, Helen Roethke, for the adolescent hero of the early poems. The journey motif takes on a new dimension in this sequence, for the heroine is actually going somewhere on a bus (although metaphorically she moves toward death). In essence the sequence evolves into a meditation on death much like the earlier poem "Old Lady's Winter Words" out of which this new one arose. Like all of Roethke's mythical journeys, regression plays a vital part in the movement. These regressions produce tentative illuminations, ecstasy and relapse. At last, a more substantial illumination takes possession of the heroine, reinforcing the old maxim that one must go back to go forward.

The "First Meditation" establishes the free verse rhythms of the sequence, and the poet regains the concrete texture of his earlier work to great advantage:

> On love's worst ugly day,
> The weeds hiss at the edge of the field,
> The small winds make their chilly indictments.
> Elsewhere, in houses, even pails can be sad;
> While stones loosen on the obscure hillside,
> And a tree tilts from its roots,
> Toppling down an embankment.[63]

Nature, as usual, is sympathetic. The external world reflects the internal world: that is the Romantic assumption. And so the old woman finds nature alien at this point in her journey, conceived of as spiritual from the beginning: 'The spirit moves, but not always upward'.

Meditating on her journey, the woman says,"...I seem to go backward,/ Backward in time." This regressive movement, not surprisingly, takes her back to the greenhouse. She remembers

> Two song sparrows, one within a greenhouse,
> Shuttling its throat while perched on a wind-vent,
> And another, outside, in the bright day,
> With a wind from the west and the trees all in motion.

This symbolizes the Romantic dichotomy of interior and exterior realms. "One sang, then the other." It is as if they call to one another, as if they would be united. In any case, the journey of the spirit (the long journey out of the

self) is tortuous, proceeding much as

> ...a salmon, tired, moving up a shallow stream,
> Nudges into a back-eddy, a sandy inlet,
> Bumping against sticks and bottom-stones, then swinging
> Around, back into the tiny maincurrent, the rush of brownish-white water,
> Still swimming forward.

The old woman ends by saying that she has occasional moments of insight, usually at the far ends of the day, when she sees 'A flame, intense, visible'. The open field serves her as well as the lost son as a place of redemption. She concludes, "In such times, lacking a god,/ I am still happy."

"I'm Here" follows and takes the heroine back once again into the depths of memory. Like the old woman in "Old Lady's Winter Words" she recalls a green time, saying:

> I was queen of the vale -
> For a short while,
> Living all my heart's summer alone,
> Ward of my spirit,
> Running through high grasses,
> My thighs brushing against flower-crowns.

But she acknowledges that adolescence is for the most part a time of waiting, 'A longing for another place and time,/ Another condition'. Hence, each age group wishes it belonged to another. Satisfaction seems unobtainable in the present, except in those rare moments of illumination. And often, the heroine complains, she has not prepared for illuminations. She recounts one instance of this: walking down a path one day she caught her dress on a rose-briar and upon bending over to untangle herself she says that, "The scent of the half-opened buds came over me./ I thought I was going to smother." She was overwhelmed by sensuality; one recalls a line from "A Walk in Late Summer": 'A late rose ravages the casual eye'.[64] In both cases the individual was unprepared for the experience and was either ravages or smothered, nevertheless shaken to an awareness of sensuality hitherto repressed. This is for Roethke the important first step toward illumination: sensuality may become spirituality in the right circumstances.

A tentative resolution occurs in "Her Becoming", the third poem in the sequence. The protagonist has 'learned to sit quietly' and meditate. Roethke had always respected the art of meditation, of course. He copied the following into his notebook:

> Everything will be found to hinge finally on the idea of meditation. This idea has suffered a steady decline in the Occident, along with the transcendent view of life in general...yet it is not certain that religion itself can survive unless men retain some sense of wisdom which may be won by sitting in quiet meditation.[65]

And so the old woman proceeds. By careful observation of details, by turning images over quietly in her head, she learns that, "There are times when reality comes closer,/ In a field, in the actual air." The symbol of the open field persists. Illumination comes and in attendance are the usual stones and the light wind. The poem's last lines suggest a state of equilibrium and self-confidence as well as a sense of transcendence:

> My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;
> I live in air; the long light is my home;
> I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;
> A light wind rises: I become the wind.

The "Fourth Meditation" brings the heroine outside herself; she speculates on the meaning of her experience, beginning with a confession:

> I was always one for being alone,
> Seeking my own way, eternal purpose;
> At the edge of the field waiting for the pure moment;
> Standing, silent, on sandy beaches or walking along green embankments.

Nevertheless, her disposition to contemplate, to wait for the 'pure moment', can only just survive the unexpected demands of her past: 'The dead make more impossible demands from their silence'. She cannot escape herself, her own history, old ghosts. This realization is accompanied by the image of a lark rising from a stone, yet songless: an aberration. Something is amiss. The questioning section, a standard part of the Roethke poem-pattern, begins:

> What is it to be a woman?
> To be contained in a vessel?

To prefer a window to a door?
A pool to a river?

Whether or not Roethke correctly assigns these likes and dislikes cannot be determined, but it would seem unlikely that women prefer windows to doors or pools to rivers. But we can allow this manner of questioning given the protective persona. The heroine scorns the conventional roles of women in society, the 'match-makers, arrangers of picnics'. She asks, "What do their lives mean,/ And the lives of their children?" Answers are not forthcoming, but one begins to expect help from the dead: 'Near the graves of the great dead,/ Even the stones speak'.

"What Can I Tell My Bones?" completes the sequence and the new collection as a whole. It takes up where the "Fourth Meditation" ends - on a note of uncertainty:

Beginner,
Perpetual beginner,
The soul knows not what to believe.

She asks, "Before the noon draws back,/ Dare I blaze like a tree?" The question of self-affirmation is at hand. The answer would seem obvious: Yes. But the old woman does not possess Boehme's resounding courage to affirm. She hears conflicting reports from inside:

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

Here Tillich's advice to incorporate doubt within faith could be useful. The old woman declares, "I am," but feels less certain of her own existence because of her disbelief in the reality of the spiritual world. One should recall that she is 'lacking a god'. But need draws her closer to faith than one would have expected at the outset of the Meditations:

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

This realization leads to various illuminations in the final part of the poem.

She discovers the healing power of love and declares:

> I'm released from the dreary dance of opposites.
> The wind rocks with my wish; the rain shields me;
> I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;
> Sometimes I think I'm several.

This old woman closely resembles the 'natural man' of Wallace Stevens's "Esthetique du Mal" who explores the physical world carefully and observes the horizon's limits, all the while participating in a full life of the imagination. Stevens says that

> ...out of what one sees and hears out
> of what one feels, who could have thought to make
> So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
> As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
> With the metaphysical changes that occur,
> Merely in living as and where we live.[66]

The old woman delights in living as and where she lives. She sings:

> The sun! The sun! And all we can become!
> And the time ripe for running to the moon!
> In the long fields, I leave my father's eye;
> And shake the secrets from my deepest bones;
> My spirit rises with the rising wind.

The earthly paradise of identification has been accomplished. The contraries have been overcome, the 'dreary dance of opposites'. The final illumination in this last section of the sequence strikes the old woman as being 'Unprayed-for,/ and final'.

The most obvious criticism of the Meditations is that the voice of the persona is Roethke's, not an old woman's. One cannot easily distinguish the voice of the hero of The Lost Son or Praise to the End! from the heroine of the Meditations. In each case the preoccupations of the protagonists are those of Roethke himself. They all share the same fears, the same delights; what differences occur are superficial, for the poet is behind each of his masks in an obvious way. Nonetheless, the Meditations does succeed. Roethke writes with the same original vigour which sets the poems of the Lost Son period apart; he stays close to the physical, sensuous world of the greenhouse and recovers 'that anguish of concreteness' which is often missing in the

later poetry.

Taken as a whole, Words for the Wind constitutes the basic Roethke canon. It preserves the best poems from the Open House volume through the Lost Son period and up to the later love poems and meditations. By the time of its publication (1957 in Britain, 1958 in America) Roethke had developed his personal myth in nearly all possible directions and accomplished his best work. What remains, The Far Field, recapitulates many of the earlier themes, expanding some of the earlier illuminations into whole poems. There are no innovations of style or technique, although the influence of Whitman which has always been veiled now comes to the fore. But the last book must not be underestimated. It contains a fair number of exceptionally fine poems.

3. The Way of Illumination

> Illumination equals adjustment of outer life
> and inner life; equilibrium.
>
> Roethke, Teaching Notes (72-13)

> Self is the bridge. When man crosses that bridge,
> if blind, he shall see; if sick, he shall be well;
> if unhappy, he shall be happy. When he crosses
> that bridge, though it be night, it shall be day;
> for heaven is shining always.
>
> Chhandogya-Upanishad VIII,4

> The self must be a bridge, not a pit.
>
> Roethke, Notebooks (31 March, 1945)

The publication of Words for the Wind was a major event in the literature of American Romanticism; critics recognized this immediately and showered the poet with high praise and prizes, including the coveted National Book Award. Everything seemed to be going smoothly for Roethke, but insecurity and mental illness continued to plague him, often worsening in inverse proportion to his public success. It was as if he could not really believe he was as good as everyone said.

Roethke found himself deeply appreciated in the university by students

and colleagues, and still he was restless. He always thought he could get a better offer elsewhere and applied frequently for new jobs. But no institution would offer him a better position that that which he already enjoyed at Washington, so he stayed, putting up with the damp climate of the northern Pacific coastline which aggravated his arthritis and force him to give up tennis, his favourite sport. Aches and pains besieged him constantly, so he said. And in the first months of 1959 he fell seriously ill again with depression and was forced to retreat into the Halcyon House Sanatorium. There he managed to continue writing throughout his stay of several months. The amazing fact of it is that Roethke published sixty-one poems between 1959 and 1963 in spite of ill health! For him, writing poetry was a necessary and inevitable activity.

One incident in January of 1959 will serve to illustrate the kind of support Roethke got from his department, headed by Professor Heilman. Rumours of the poet's mental illness had reached the legislative body of the state of Washington just as they were preparing the year's budget. Some protests issued from various quarters concerning the amount of money being spent to finance a university which harboured mad poets such as Roethke. The Vice-President of the university was alerted, and he consulted Professor Heilman; in a long and remarkable letter Heilman provided the details of Roethke's achievements as poet and teacher: the conclusion to this letter follows:

> In all of these ways - teaching, developing interest in a great literary form, training writers who themselves go on to be known, and doing his own distinguished writing which has won all kinds of acclaim - Roethke is performing what I call a <u>continuing service to the University</u>, which goes on whether he is ill or well. When we keep him on the payroll when he is ill, we are not merely helping a sick man or aiding a fine artist; in realistic terms, we are simply continuing to pay a great University debt. I shall continue to recommend we continue with this policy whenever he is ill.[1]

Roethke was well enough to teach again by the spring quarter of 1959. He

had been awarded a grant by the Ford Foundation in February, so he decided to have a leave of absence for the coming year. He did, and during the year he made preparations to revisit Europe that summer (1960). On 3 June he and Beatrice sailed to France where they spent a month before going to Ireland, the main object of this journey. Roethke had always been fascinated with Ireland; then there was his special attachment to Yeats; and Mrs. Roethke was, of course, an O'Connell. All of these factors drew the Roethkes to Ireland. They were the guests of the poet Richard Murphy for some time on Inishbofin, an island off the Connemara coast. They planned to remain there through the winter, but Roethke's illness forced them to go to London where better psychiatric treatment was available. A famous London doctor, William Hoffer, had great success with Roethke, and he continued to be prolific throughout the winter, preparing the book published posthumously as The Far Field. The Roethkes lived in Chelsea at this time, an area with so many literary connections (George Eliot, the Rossettis, Swinburne). This was to be Roethke's last time in Europe. He returned reluctantly to his post in Washington that March (1961) for the spring quarter.

One of the most peculiar things about Roethke's last years was his growing awareness of his approaching death and his frantic search for a way out. He made a huge effort to smooth over all past abrasions and prepare for a final atonement with the Father (God-Otto). His closest friends have reported this, and the poems and notebooks offer confirmation. Toward the very end of his life he wrote in his notes:

> Death is a fruit which each life bears; we must
> bring forth the death which is ours.[2]

The last poems, as we shall see, tell of Roethke's increasing interest in mystical experience and his final efforts to identify with nature ('illumination' or the 'adjustment of outer and inner life') and make peace with his Father. He was getting the poems of The Far Field ready for the publishers when his premature death occurred; he was swimming in a friend's pool on Bainbridge

Island when his heart simply failed. That was on the first of August, 1963.

The Far Field was published shortly thereafter and is made up of four sections: North American Sequence, Love Poems, Mixed Sequence and Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical. Only the first section contains anything which might be considered a development. The long, meditative poems of this sequence show a new ease of being, a sense of acceptance and reconciliation. There is a sudden expansiveness reminiscent of Whitman; it is characterized by the cataloguing of images and the repetition of certain free verse rhythms. These poems are accomplished meditations, the final product of a man sure of his technique and confident that what he has to say matters. The old motifs are once again rehearsed: the regressive journey, the greenhouse and the open field, the need for atonement with the father-florist. The mystic ascent begun in the Four For Sir John Davies (up the Purgatorial Hill) reaches a conclusion in this posthumous volume. The poet accomplishes his long journey out of the self. Such a rounding-off of a writer's career is unusual, especially when the one involved is so young. But Roethke had within him the sense of an ending.

North American Sequence records one man's attempt to transcend the sensual world, but not by doing away with it. In lines which recall the earlier Greenhouse Poems, "The Longing" surveys

> A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
> Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
> Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
> Saliva dripping from warm microphones.
> Agony of crucifixion upon barstools.[3]

As always, the sensual world leads to exhaustion. "Lust fatigues the soul," he says and then asks, "How to transcend this emptiness?" The poet pursues this question relentlessly. Exactly what the title - "The Longing" - means becomes clear toward the end of the poem. The poet longs to be identified with nature. He says:

> I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the mad lemmings,
> The children dancing, the flowers widening.
> ... ...

I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form.

These longings appear contradictory and are. Nature does not partake of any recognizable form, at least in the beginning. Any child can witness daily the capricious aspects of nature, the random element, the formlessness. Only in the realm of art, as Yeats acknowledged in "Sailing to Byzantium", does real form exist. It is the imagination which resolves the paradoxes and makes the temporal eternal, gives form to what is formless. Alluding to the Jonah myth, Roethke says, "I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of night is still wide." Mocking Eliot, he asks, "Old men should be explorers?" He is not quite sure.

"Meditation at Oyster River" begins the mystic quest for what Underhill calls 'illumination of the Self'. She divides this stage of the mystic quest, the final one for most poets, into three phases:

> 1. A joyous apprehension of the Absolute: still distinct from the self.
> 2. Clarity of vision: the phenomenal world becomes extremely visible and particular: heightening of perception generally: a sense of the true significance of the physical world as an external thing.
> 3. A strong sense of the transcendental self - psychic energy increases.[4]

Clarity of vision marks the opening section of the "Meditation":

> Over the low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,
> Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without sounds, toward me,
> Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the rows of dead clam shell
> Then a rumnel behind me, creeping closer,
> Alive with tiny striped fish, and young crabs climbing in and out of the water.[5]

These accumulated details show the direct technical influence of Walt Whitman, the 'maker of catalogues'. Roethke presents the minute particulars of sense-experience, then attempts to mount them, stepping above them into a spiritual world. This is the basic method of meditation used in The Far Field, all toward the same end: a way out of the self and the physical boundaries which enclose it. But as Roethke says in this poem, "The self persists like a dying star."

Taking his lead from Wallace Stevens, Roethke seeks out the 'pure moment', the point in time where timelessness is intersected (Eliot's preoccupation in "The Dry Salvages"), the point of equilibrium which prepares the way for illumination:

> In this hour,
> In this first heaven of knowing,
> The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit,
> Acquires, for a time, the sandpiper's insouciance,
> The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's cunning.

The poem ends with an illumination not unlike that of "A Field of Light" from The Lost Son. The poet declares, "I rock with the motion of morning." Identification has taken place.

"Journey to the Interior", a key poem in the North American Sequence, begins:

> In the long journey out of the self,
> There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places
> Where the shale slides dangerously
> And the back wheels hang almost over the edge
> At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.[6]

The poet returns to the familiar journey motif, and this time the voyage out of the self is likened to a dangerous car trip. Roethke recalls crossing the American West. The Teton mountains figure importantly, and the grassy plains. The close observation of natural details continues, forming a rich panoply of images. But all the while we are aware that the speaker is not an external examiner; he is on the inside, a part of what he reports: 'I have known the heart of the sun'. He compares himself ultimately to 'a tree idling in air', another familiar theme. Although he journeys inward (into the continent and into himself) there is no hectic motion; a sense of balance prevails. The self provides a fixed point of reference, a sense of gravity, a still point in the turning world.

Roethke disparages the completely physical 'world of the day', the lowest rung on the Platonic ladder at the outset of "The Long Waters".[7] He admits to his 'foolishness with God' in demanding 'peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists' - all the extremes of experience. He invokes Blake's helpful

nurse, Mnetha, Mother of Har, another symbol of the feminine aspect which provides the essential balance in nature. The poet once more takes the advice offered by the otherworldly voices of "The Lost Son" ('The salt said, look by the sea'); he returns to the water's edge:

> To a rich desolation of wind and water,
> To a landlocked bay, where the salt water is freshened
> By small streams running down under fallen fir trees.

This return visit to the seaside takes him back to memories of a place 'Where impulse no longer dictates, nor the darkening shadow'. This is the lost paradise of mankind before the Fall (the creation). The redemptive symbol of the stone recurs. The final stanzas of "The Long Waters" compose a picture of childhood as an idyll. The image of a child (the poet recalling his own youth) is magically transformed into a symbol of eternity:

> I see in the advancing and retreating waters
> The shape that came from my sleep, weeping:
> The eternal one, the child, the swaying vine branch,
> The numinous ring around the opening flower,
> The friend that runs before me on the windy headlands.
> Neither voice nor vision.

The poet concludes, not by rejecting the physical world completely, but by welcoming it: 'I embrace the world'. This prepares the way for the central poem in the collection, "The Far Field".

"The Far Field" represents the gathering of a lifetime's creative energy in summary form. It tells us nothing new about Roethke, but rather like Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion", this important poem enumerates old themes. It is the work of a man bringing his career to a conclusion. The subject of the poem is the <u>self</u> which persists eternally, illumined by years of meditation. It is an affirmation of being. And as one might expect, the journey motif provides the poem with a centre. Again, the journey is by car; but now the metaphorical aspects are explicit. The first stanza of this four-part poem makes it clear that this is a <u>dream</u> of journeys, not a specific instance. It is a record of the soul's perilous journey from flesh to spirit, like

...driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror.[8]

This lonely passage through a stormy night by car is the contemporary counterpart to the more traditional image of the lonely ship at sea in a great storm. The sense of human frailty against the violent strength of natural forces has always been a subject for great poetry. The terror of being stalled in a snowdrift is unrelieved by the end of the first section.

Switching the scene to the open field near the greenhouse, now a familiar haunt in the Roethke landscape, the poet explains that, "at the field's end,"

Not too far away from the everchanging flower-dump,
Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,-
One learned of the eternal.

He recalls his childhood throughout the long second section of the poem. The image of the sensitive young boy who suffers for the animals and fishes has been encountered before. The poet says:

My grief was not excessive.
For to come upon warblers in early May
Was to forget time and death.

These are traditional Romantic sentiments, of course, but well expressed. A portrait of the young boy follows; he lies down in the silt of a slowly moving river and puts his fingers into an empty shell, thinking, "Once I was like this, mindless,/ Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar." A believer in reincarnation, the boy with skinny knees sits astride a wet log and thinks to himself:

I'll return again,
As a snake or a raucous bird,
Or, with luck, as a lion.

This was an important time for the boy, a time when he 'learned not to fear infinity'.

The poet isolates and develops this point in the third part, a meditation on approaching death. The image of the tree which 'retreats into its own shadow'

parallels the retreat of a man into himself, curling up in the darkness (recalling the advice of the ghostly voice in "The Lost Son": 'Dark hollows said, lee to the wind'). Here one can discover the true centre of being. Alluding to Eliot, the poet says:

> I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
> A point outside the glittering current.
> *** *** *** *** *** ***
> I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
> The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
> The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
> What I love is near at hand,
> Always, in earth and air.

Roethke loves that taste of the eternal which he finds in the present, physical world. Technically, the poet owes as much or more to Eliot's Four Quartets as to the Leaves of Grass. The device of accumulated instances set out in highly rhetorical and formal rhythms is common to the later Eliot and a source for Roethke. The following passage from Burnt Norton illustrates:

> To be conscious is not to be in time
> But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
> The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
> The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
> Be remembered...[9]

In the fourth and final part of "The Far Field" Roethke offers an image of the Protean self that survives time and circumstances. He says:

> The lost self changes,
> Turning toward the sea,
> A sea-shape turning around,-
> An old man with his feet before the fire,
> In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

This is the illumined and eternal self which persists like a dying star. He continues to describe the 'final man' (perhaps taken from Wallace Stevens's concept of the 'central man' in the Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction):

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

The last stanza of this poem expands its first line: 'All finite things reveal infinitude' - a concept met earlier in Roethke. At the end, the poet reflects

on the 'pure serene of memory in one man' - a poetic version of the jotting made in his notebooks almost twenty years earlier: 'All the present has fallen: I am only what I remember'.[10]

One cannot overstress the importance in Roethke's poetry, as the above quotations indicate. He is a meditative poet in the tradition of Donne, Yeats and Eliot. So the present is inevitably bound up with the past. The moments of illumination which the poet experienced in the open field not far from the greenhouse as a boy are eternal moments; meditation connects the poet to this timeless reality again and again, it is an act of renewal. As consciousness expands within the memory of a single man, it embodies at last something more than itself, much as 'A ripple widening from a single stone/ Winding around the waters of the world'. In Roethke's subjective art the memory becomes a stage whereon the poem of the mind is enacted.

"The Rose", the last poem in the North American Sequence, contains Roethke's most complete presentation of the mystical Way of Illumination. Miss Underhill's stages of consciousness emerge: awareness of the Absolute, heightened perceptual powers, the awakening of the transcendental self. The poem begins with an emphasis on the physical place where this illumination happens; the poet explains:

> There are those to whom place is unimportant,
> But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,
> Is important.[11]

Here the eternal and temporal intersect for a moment. All manner of images follow; there is a Whitmanesque catalogue of birds, and special significance is given to the kingfisher whose wings flash in the sun. The poet asks himself:

> Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment
> While on a far point of the rocks
> The light heightened,
> And below, in a mist out of nowhere,
> The first rain gathered?

Throughout a succession of images of illumination - the poet is becoming aware of an eternal presence, the Absolute.

The second part takes us back to the greenhouse with the symbol of the rose; once again, the poet explores the memory. Meditation always takes him back to the past. Now, standing by the sea, the poet sees a 'rose in the sea-wind'; this rose stays in place even as the wind blows over it: a still point in the turning world. This vision triggers off the crucial memories of a childhood paradise. Roethke says:

> And I think of roses, roses,
> White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses,
> And my father standing astride the cement benches,
> Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, the Mrs. Russells,
> and his own elaborate hybrids,
> And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me,
> to beckon me, only a child, out of myself.

He then asks a crucial question: 'What need for heaven, then/ With that man, and those roses?' There was an earthly paradise and Otto was God. Nothing more was needed. And so the conclusion: one can seek out and restore the lost Eden of childhood by searching the memory, by meditation. The final paradise is, as the angel Michael promised Adam, a paradise within.

The third part of the poem, in the manner of all meditative poetry, provides an anthology of concrete details for contemplation. The Michigan landscape is recalled with all of its birds, flora and fauna, its various weathers. One might call this part of the sequence a celebration of the sense of place. Whitman presides over these stanzas like an abiding spirit - the long, rolling lines echoing the master at every turn. The poet exclaims, "Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire."

The concluding part of this sequence offers an eloquent description of the moment of mystical perception. The Absolute, embodied in the symbolic rose, is revealed; the self, not merging with the Absolute as in the final stage of mystic consciousness, becomes aware of its distinct and transcendental nature. The poet says:

> Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,
> Among the half-dead, I came upon the true ease of myself,
> As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,
> And I stood outside myself,
> Beyond becoming and perishing,
> A something wholly other.

This is genuine 'ecstasy' (ek-stasis) - standing outside oneself.

A summary image of the rose, "this rose in the sea-wind,/ Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light" completes the poem. We are inevitably reminded of the final image of the Four Quartets:

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of thing shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.[12]

The parallels between Roethke and Eliot are significant. Both poets wish to 'redeem the time', to discover the timeless moment in time. Both employ traditional mystical and Christian symbolism (the kingfisher, the fire, the rose). But Roethke eschews the specifically Christian aspects of this symbolism and does not share Eliot's concern for history. Roethke's mysticism owes a great deal to Plotinus, and his rose bears close resemblance to the concept of the One, the Absolute which forms the core of all being. As Plotinus explains:

> The One does not aspire to us, to move around us; we aspire to it, to move around it....We are always around The One. If we were not, we would dissolve and cease to exist. Yet our gaze does not remain fixed upon The One. When we look at it, we then attain the end of our desires and find rest. Then it is that, all discord past, we dance an inspired dance around it.[13]

By substituting the word 'rose' for 'The One' in the above passage, a fair paraphrase of the last part of Roethke's meditative poem "The Rose" would be accomplished. The poem as a whole must be praised for its sureness of rhythm, its accurate and interesting diction, and its overall conception. But it may be criticised sharply for describing rather than suggesting or embodying the experience it attains to. Perhaps this is simply the disadvantage of all mystical literature. The author is expected to describe the indescribable; or better, he must contain what can never be contained. Every mystical experience is uniquely personal, however many superficial elements are shared and describable. "The Rose" does manage to convey something of the poet's

ecstasy, at least. Perhaps no more should be hoped for.

The brief sequence of Love Poems which follows looks meagre beside the vast reaches of the North American Sequence. A few of these small poems are highly entertaining nonetheless. "Her Longing" summons many of the techniques developed in the previous sequence (concrete details, repetition of images and rhythms), but the overall conception remains weak. The brief poems - "Her Words", "The Apparition", "Her Reticence", "Her Time" and "Song" - all suffer from unnecessary formality, abstraction, and a triteness of language unusual in Roethke. "Light Listned", however, recalls the delightful word-play of the earlier poem "I Knew a Woman":

> O what could be more wise
> Than her ways with a man?
> She kissed me more than twice
> Once we were left alone.
> Who'd look when he could feel?
> She'd more sides than a seal.[14]

The verse continues in this jocular manner, but never rises above light entertainment (as did "I Knew a Woman"). "The Happy Three" follows this poem and fails; intended to be funny, it is simply dull. Roethke had a great facility for verbal play, but his general sense of humour often seems overbearing. "The Happy Three", for example, describes a slight domestic squabble in mock serious tones which misfire completely. "The Foreboding" deserves more attention. Although very brief, it makes a sharp impact. The poem speaks of loneliness, of separation from 'one comely head', that of the beloved (a common theme throughout Roethke's career has been separation and foreboding).[15] The strange impression of impending death created by this poem owes as much to the abrupt trimeter and spare diction as to the subject matter itself. The third of four stanzas illustrates this style:

> I sing the wind around
> And hear myself return
> To nothingness, alone.
> The loneliest thing I know
> Is my own mind at play.

The last of the love poems to merit attention is the "Wish for a Young Wife". The poet identifies the beloved with the reptilian species, linking her back to the netherworld of "The Lost Son". The final lines are clearly those of a dying man:

> My lizard, my lively writher,
> May your limbs never wither,
> May the eyes in your face
> Survive the green ice
> Of envy's mean gaze;
> May you live out your life
> Without hate, without grief,
> And your hair ever blaze,
> In the sun, in the sun,
> When I am undone,
> When I am no one.[16]

The later Yeats is present in this poem, but it is also unmistakably Roethke's. The peculiar lilt of the first line, the taut lyric structure, the intense emotion highly formalized: all these are characteristic of Roethke at his best.

The cycle of Love Poems does not form any coherent pattern, but the Mixed Sequence suffers from even greater randomness. These poems cover a wide range of already familiar topics: the abyss, the greenhouse Eden, the father-florist, the need for a balancing feminine principle, the pure moment of mystic perception. The best of these is the first, "The Abyss", which returns to the techniques of Praise to the End!. A poem in five parts, the first offers a quick, two-beat movement - evoking the world of childhood with its rope-skipping rhymes and rhythms reminiscent of the nursery jingle. Voices alternately question and respond:

> Is the stair here?
> Where's the stair?
> "The stair's right there,
> But it goes nowhere."
>
> And the abyss? the abyss?
> "The abyss you can't miss:
> It's right where you are -
> A step down the stair."[17]

This idea, that Non-Being is ever-present, has been encountered before. But the abyss hides behind the immediate world of objects which dazzle and mislead one into thinking that the abyss is not really there. The second part rehearses

that 'anguish of concreteness' we have met earlier:

> Be with me Whitman, maker of catalogues:
> For the world invades me again,
> And once more the tongues begin babbling.
> And the terrible hunger for objects quails me:
> The sill trembles.

The poet claims that the caterpillar (a variant of his ubiquitous worm) is his chief symbol: 'For I have moved closer to death, lived with death'. He no longer identifies with the kingfisher or eagle as in the North American Sequence. He would now be associated with 'a mole widing through earth,/ A night-fishing otter'. He courts the dark side of the universe, knowing that self-affirmation demands a confrontation with Non-Being.

The third part shows the poet in withdrawal for the time being. He observes, "Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit," (an obvious echo of Eliot). He probes the memory for examples. Naturally, the greenhouse reappears. He recalls a door opening 'in a florist's storeroom' and the subsequent 'rush of smells'. He laments the 'terrible violence of creation' which is identical with the Fall of Man. But he consoles himself with the fact that meditation can restore the calm and clarity of pure consciousness. Here, Roethke approaches the Oriental ideal of an empty mind, the mind linked back to its source, which is the ultimate goal of yoga and religion in general (re-ligio). The withdrawal from the world of sense-experience that marks this section is, in effect, a retreat into a deeper reality. But the world always invades again.

And so the fourth part of the sequence presents the re-entry of the hero, who asks, "How can I dream except beyond this life?" This section parallels the return passage in "The Lost Son". The hero returns from his descent into the abyss full of insights, reborn. The texture of the following lines recalls The Lost Son:

> I envy the tendrils, their eyeless seeking,
> The child's hard reaching into the coiled smilax,
> And I obey the wind at my back
> Bringing me home from the twilight fishing.

The rhythms and diction are well-tried. In a summary passage the poet says:

> I rock between dark and dark,
> My soul nearly my own,
> My dead selves singing.

This warrants examination. The two darks are one: the eternal emptiness at either side of life. The hero rocks through temporal existence, nearly possessing his own soul after a lifetime of seeking after it. What we hear are the poet's 'dead selves' - no longer visible. This recalls Eliot's wonderfully perceptive lines from "East Coker". The poet there speaks of himself 'in middle way' -

> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way
> in which
> One is no longer disposed to say it.[18]

Roethke invokes supernatural advice to aid the hero of "The Abyss". The shade, a ghostly presence which often advises the heroes of Roethke's poems, speaks out of the abyss itself:

> "Adore and draw near,
> Who knows this -
> Knows all."

The final part celebrates the renewal of the self in a typical illumination passage. One interesting variation is the reference to Buddhism. The Bo-Tree, of course, was the place where the Buddha gained permanent illumination. It was thought of as the central point of the universe, the world axis, the place where time and eternity intersected. Roethke declares:

> The Lord God has taken my heaviness away;
> I have merged, like the bird, with the bright air,
> And my thought flies to the place by the bo-tree.
>
> Being, not doing, is my first joy.

The concluding section of "The Abyss", as in the above lines, is hieratic, prayerful. The sure rhythms suggest the influence of the King James Bible.

The wonderful line 'Being, not doing, is my first joy' reminds us of the poet's fondness for aphorisms, the abiding influence of Kenneth Burke. Roethke has come to a traditional Romantic resolution in this passage; he affirms the triumph of the self which has been so expanded as to include all external regions. The period of strife is over; the crisis of identity has been resolved. The poet proclaims a bliss of being for himself not unlike the mystic's final stage of consciousness.

The poem "Elegy" records the death of Roethke's Aunt Tilly who(like Mnetha, Mother of Har) was an attendant nurse-spirit. She 'sat with the dead when the relatives left' and 'tended the infirm, the mad, the epileptic'.[19] She was completely selfless, 'and yet she died in agony,/ Her tongue, at the last, thick, black as an ox's'. In spite of these few good lines, however, the poem fails. It lacks the unity of tone characteristic of Roethke's best work. The poem is without an apparent principle of organization. And the passion which modifies the great "Elegy for Jane" is conspicuously missing from this poem. In "Otto" Roethke offers another portrait of his Prussian father, a theme so important to the poet and charged with deep-seated feelings. The poem is anecdotal; we see the pig-headed man who would never suffer fools gladly, who would chase poachers with a shotgun, and yet who could build a 'house for flowers'![20] An image of the lost paradise of the Greenhouse Eden encompasses the closing stanza, and it matches up to many of the earlier ones. The poet is nearly overcome with nostalgia by the end of the poem as the accumulated details of the past flood out of his memory. A sense of inexorable separation pervades the final couplet:

> In my mind's eye I see those fields of glass,
> As I look out at them from the high house,
> Riding beneath the moon, hid from the moon,
> Then slowly breaking whiter in the dawn;
> When George the watchman's lantern dropped from sight
> The long pipes knocked: it was the end of night.
> I'd stand upon my bed, a sleepless child
> Watching the waking of my father's world -
> O world so far away! O my lost world!

The quest for a childhood paradise continues in "The Chums" as the poet remembers his boyhood friends, some in prison, some dead, more of whom never read any of Roethke's books. The poem is tinged with bitterness, for the poet recalls that when he slipped on ice, "They saw I fell more than twice."[21] This little poem serves to modify the nearly excessive nostalgia of "Otto".

In "The Lizard" and "The Meadow Mouse" the poet identifies with each animal in turn. These poems are unexceptional, but the latter ends with a startling and impersonal view of the universe not unsimilar to Frost's in "Design". Roethke concludes:

> I think of the nestling fallen into the deep grass,
> The turtle gasping in the dusty rubble of the highway,
> The paralytic stunned in the tub, and the water rising,-
> All things innocent, hapless, forsaken.[22]

The last poems in Mixed Sequence are even more random than the section's title would suggest. Of course, Roethke died while the manuscript of The Far Field was still being worked over, so we cannot really blame him for the organization of the present volume. But as it stands, the poems in this sequence tend to clash. Up to "The Meadow Mouse" there is the common theme of the return to childhood and the natural world, but this breaks up quickly. The ironic "Heard in a Violent Ward" follows "The Meadow Mouse" for no particular reason. In this poem Roethke installs himself rather grandly in the company of Blake, Smart, and John Clare - the 'mad' poets. This leads on to "The Geranium" - another uneasy transition. In this poem the poet recalls many of the early Greenhouse Poems, though he now gives the flower a fresh setting in suburbia, not the usual hothouse. The light tone of the poem masks a sense of desperation; the poet establishes an intimate relationship with the personified flower. He loves it, yet mistreats it. And when the maid accidentally throws the flower away, the poet feels lonely. He fires the maid a week later! Although the tone of such a poem must be facetious, the poet nonetheless establishes a mock I-Thou relationship with the plant. He comes to regard the inanimate world as sympathetic, much as a child views nature. Perhaps "The Geranium" is an attempt to recover this innocence; but

it is just too heavy-handed.

"On the Quay" and "The Storm" provide descriptions of the sea in turmoil, the latter poem taking place on Ischia, the island off Naples where Auden lived. The first one is unspecific, a terse epigrammatic piece without enough to it to matter. Neither poem merits close examination, and had Roethke survived they might never have been published. They are followed by twin animal poems: "The Thing" and "The Pike". The former narrates the annihilation of a smaller bird, "the thing", by a flock of larger birds. At first they merely trail the smaller bird along:

> Then the first bird
> Struck;
> Then another, another,
> Until there was nothing left,
> Not even feathers from so far away.[24]

An analogy is established between the birds eating the innocent prey and some picnickers who eat veal and 'little larks arranged on a long platter'. But the poet makes no value judgement. He simply states the obvious connection and presents a side to nature (animal and human) which should not be ignored. Likewise, in "The Pike", another evil aspect of nature is examined. The terrifying pike strikes from 'beyond the end of a mossy long' and disturbs the unreal stillness of a pond.[25]

In "All Morning" Roethke catalogues a vast array of natural creatures: pigeons, jays, vireos, hummingbirds, gulls - 'A delirium of birds!'[26] The birds seem to come out of the past, yet they are immediately present to the poet. Perhaps alluding to Eliot's Burnt Norton the poet declares, "It is neither spring nor summer: it is Always." Time past is present in time future. Eternity is Now. This theme persists throughout the later Roethke.

"The Manifestation", which follows, is one of the more interesting poems in this sequence. Again, it seems out of place where it occurs. But this does not alter the quality of the poem itself. The poet reflects:

> Many arrivals make us live: the tree becoming
> Green, a bird tipping the topmost bough,
> A seed pushing itself beyond itself,
> The mole making its way through darkest ground,
> The worm, intrepid scholar of the soil.[27]

In other words, there are many points of illumination on the long journey out of the self. Roethke employs a large number of familiar metaphors of the Protean self in this small poem: tree, bird, plant (seed), and worm. In each instance the self strains itself to become something more than it is, always attempting to go beyond itself. Then Roethke asks, "Do these analogies perplex?" and offers four more images, all of them portraying motion within a larger context of rest, illustrating the point that the self is permanent, that the momentary fluctuations of time must be viewed against the wide context of eternity:

> a sky with clouds,
> The motion of the moon, and waves at play.
> A sea-wind pausing in a summer tree.

Concluding the poem, Roethke generalizes, "What does what it should do needs nothing more." This certainly echoes the Scotian doctrine of Gerard Manley Hopkins - namely, that each created thing should strive to do whatever it was made for. In the metaphysics of Duns Scotus, all creation was seen as process or Becoming. Later, Bergson and Whitehead would take up the same theme. In this world-view of the individual self one never arrives at a condition of static Being, rather Being involves constant evolution. One stage gives way to another (the 'seed pushing itself beyond itself'). This apparently contradicts the last line of "The Abyss". ('Being, not doing, is my first joy.') Perhaps one may reconcile Being with Becoming in the same way that motion and rest find a common image in 'the waves at play'. The sea corresponds to Being in this analogy, the waves to Becoming. In any case, Roethke was never burdened with the philosopher's need for consistency.

The image of motion within rest recurs in "The Tranced": 'We counted several flames in one small fire'.[28] This time the poet struggles once more with the opposite of flesh and spirit. The lovers confront Non-Being and affirm their separate existences. The poet claims that, "Being, we came to be/ Part of eternity."[29] A short and very fine poem called "The Moment" follows. Confronting the void again, the lovers meet and, so the poet claims,

"the bleak abyss/ Shifted with our slow kiss."[30] Together the lovers face the Absolute, the place where 'Sound and silence sang as one' - all contraries being reconciled. The poet summarizes:

> All flowed: without, within;
> Body met body, we
> Created what's to be.
>
> What else to say?
> We end in joy.

The progress from the abyss to the Absolute is standard mysticism; "The Moment" offers a suitable conclusion to the Mixed Sequence, which covers the whole range of Roethke's poetry. It is a poem of resolution; it trumpets the end of discord.

Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical completes The Far Field; it is by no means random or slight. In these few last poems Roethke makes his consummate statement about the mystical Way of Illumination. Although it remains doubtful whether or not Roethke ever went beyond the earliest stages of mystical consciousness (in Miss Underhill's system), he certainly aspired to more in these poems. "In a Dark Time", the central poem of this final sequence, provides a vivid account of the individual's progress through a traditional Dark Night of the Soul to ultimate Union with the Godhead, the true goal of all mystical experience. This is the key poem to all of the poet's other mystical verses, and it must be carefully examined. In a sense, the poem renders into poetry the account of a mystical journey as described by Evelyn Underhill in Mysticism, a book well known to Roethke. This must be our starting point.

Miss Underhill explains the concept of the Dark Night with eloquence:

> The 'mystic death' or Dark Night is therefore an aspect or incident of the self's self-loss in the Abyss of the Divine Life; of that mergence and union of the soul with the Absolute which is the whole object of the mystical evolution of man. It is the last painful break with the life of illusion, the tearing away of the self from that World of Becoming in which all its natural affections and desires are rooted, to which all its intellect and senses correspond; and the

> thrusting of it into that world of Being where at first, weak and blinded, it can but find a wilderness, a 'dark'. No transmutation without fire, say the alchemists: No cross, no crown, says the Christian. All the great experts of the spiritual life agree - whatever be their creed, their symbols, their explanation - in describing this stress, tribulation, and loneliness, as an essential part of the way from the Many to the One.[31]

Thus, Roethke explains that, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see."[32] He then relates the particulars of his experience:

> I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
> I hear my echo in the echoing wood -
> A lord of nature weeping to a tree.

The poet enters the 'echoing wood' of Dante and meets his 'shadow' in the 'shade', a conscious pun on the latter word (shade meaning 'ghost', establishing the connections between the physical and spiritual world). By announcing himself 'A lord of nature', who nevertheless weeps before a tree, Roethke introduces an ironic aspect into the tone which must be watched carefully, lest we take too much at surface value.

The second stanza opens with the Yeatsian rhetoric of 'What's madness but nobility of soul/ At odds with circumstance?' A magnificent line in itself, it points to the relativity of the concept of madness and touches upon an important autobiographical note. Roethke is here trying to justify his own 'madness', which is closely allied to the feeling of immense despair which marks the depressive personality on its down-swing. But Roethke enobles this despair, claiming, "I know the purity of pure despair." As Miss Underhill explains such misery, "The various torments of the Dark Night constitute this last and drastic purgation of the spirit; the doing away of separateness, the annihilation of selfhood, even though all that self now claims for its own be the Love of God."[33] The poet has come to a crucial point in his journey, a 'place among the rocks' which leads either to a cave (death) or a winding path (up the Purgatorial Hill). He stands on the edge of the abyss and wonders what will happen.

The third stanza includes a summary of the mystical perception of natural correspondences, the feeling of self-loss which is essential to a genuine Union with God, and the strange ('unnatural') luminosity of the Dark Night itself:

> A steady stream of correspondences!
> A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
> And in broad day the midnight come again!
> A man goes far to find out what he is -
> Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
> All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

In the final stanza the poet climbs to the peak of the scale of consciousness and attains Union. But first, the soul is compared to 'some heat-maddened summer fly' that keeps buzzing at a window. The pane of glass must be removed before the mystic can assume the full freedom of ultimate Reality. The soul must be willing to renounce for good all aspects of selfhood; Miss Underhill says, "The self, then, has got to learn to cease to be its own centre and circumference: to make that final surrender which is the price of final peace."[34] After making a final query into the nature of his real self ('Which I is I?') the poet ends his journey:

> A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
> The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
> And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

"Fallen" is to be read ironically. Roethke has fallen <u>from</u> flesh to spirit and hence <u>from</u> fear. The peculiar concept of the mind entering itself and God entering the mind comes from Richard of St. Victor; it suggests the dissolution of all boundaries between self and soul, between soul and God. The One of Plotinus appears in the last line; Roethke makes us aware of the non-Christian tenor of his mysticism. In this final Union all contraries are resolved; the Many is swallowed up into the One. A new freedom is gained, but not a freedom from responsibilities. The 'tearing wind' that completes the poem suggests the perilous nature of this freedom. Mystical Union is awesome, frightening. There is no guarantee that Union will continue. The need for constant meditation and renewal does not simply disappear. The mystic,

like anyone else, has to live in the physical world until that final release in death.

"In a Dark Time" contains Roethke's clearest account of the mystical experience, which he no doubt claimed for himself. This is not for us to question; but the bare fact remains that "In a Dark Time" is a boring poem. It reads like a conscious versification of Underhill's description of such an experience. Abstractions intrude everywhere and probably show that good mystical poetry is next to impossible to write. How can one hope to describe an experience which is by its very nature indescribable? With the possible exception of St. John of the Cross, most 'mystical poetry' does not attain to the final stages of consciousness. Wordsworth and Hopkins, for example, rarely go beyond the exaltation of the created world. Any attempt to go further, such as in Blake's Prophetic Books, usually leads to disorder or abstraction. The latter befell Roethke, especially in this particular poem. If Roethke is writing from genuine experience, he does not do what all poets must do for their readers, i.e. recreate the experience itself. This is the essential failure of so much of Roethke's later poetry.

The remaining poems in Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical, of varying quality, expand or qualify particular sections of the opening poem "In a Dark Time". The terror of being overwhelmed which precedes the final merger with the One, for example, is the subject of "In Evening Air". The poet prays, "Make me, O Lord, at last, a simple thing/ Time cannot overwhelm."[35] The poem is set at nightfall around a campfire, and flames flicker off a wall (symbolizing the veil between time and eternity, body and spirit). The poet reflects in the last stanza, "How slowly dark comes down on what we do."

"The Sequel" provides an epilogue to "In a Dark Time". Now the poet wonders, rightly, "Was I too glib about eternal things?" Indeed. In spite of many irritating abstractions, this poem seems more honest than many; the poet makes no grand claims to transcendental flights. He returns to the earlier theme of the lovers at their dance. He says:

> We danced, we danced, under a dancing moon;
> And on the coming of the outrageous dawn,
> We danced together, we danced on and on.

Roethke lapses back into the sensual world because the dead-white walls of the Absolute do not satisfy a living man for long. True union with the One, despite the clamour of "In a Dark Time", has not been gained.

"The Motion" confirms this. The poet cannot desert the flesh; he needs his earthly love too dearly:

> By lust alone we keep the mind alive,
> And grieve into the certainty of love.[37]

This is the finest side to Roethke: the same man who wrote that wonderful stanza from "Words for the Wind":

> What time's my heart? I care.
> I cherish what I have
> Had of the temporal:
> I am no longer young
> But the winds and waters are;
> What falls away will fall;
> All things bring me to love.[38]

So, in "The Motion" Roethke inquires, "Who but the loved know love's a faring-forth?" He appeals, like Wordsworth, to the child's special vision: '0 who would take the vision from the child?'[39] Again, these poems have none of the concrete particulars that single out the early poetry; "The Motion" itself is rhetorical, unspecific, full of aphorisms that sounds plausible enough. The subject matter continues to be highly Romantic, of course. But the great strength of Roethke at his best is regretably gone.

Roethke was keenly aware of his inability to think consistently, to develop a coherent philosophical base for his poetry. But poets have rarely been philosophers in the traditional sense (though Eliot is once again the exception); that each poem should be consistent within its own small world is the best one can hope for. And in "Infirmity" Roethke takes up just this theme. He explains that

> In purest song one plays the constant fool
> As changes shimmer in the inner eye.
> ... ...
> I love myself: that's my one constancy.[40]

Roethke then offers a sordid portrait of his weakening body, the fluid having been drained from a swollen knee and a shoulder pumped full of cortisone. He compares himself to an aging tree that is rotting from the inside out. Nevertheless, in the midst of physical disintegration, the poet takes comfort in the presence of the eternal which makes all things luminous: 'The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone;/ The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal'. This poem, like "The Sequel", rings truer than the mystical lyrics; now the poet acknowledges the grave difficulties which attend the Way of Illumination: 'Eternity's not easily come by'. Yet he can observe at the last, "How body from spirit slowly does unwind/ Until we are pure spirit in the end." A brief epilogue to this follows in "The Decision", where the same theme recurs: 'Damning from God's the longest race of all'.[41] There can be, it would seem, no escape from the gradual, painful unwinding of the spirit from the body.

The abiding problem of the relapse from mystical illumination to a lower state of consciousness absorbs the poet in "The Marrow". He asks, "What's the worst portion in this mortal life?" and answers, humourously, "A pensive mistress, and a yelping wife."[42] The pure moment of Union is over! But the poet refuses to give up trying to reach that height; as he says, "Brooding on God, I may become a man." This 'brooding on God' relates to the long tradition of religious meditation. Instances of mystical Union are rare indeed; but the practice of meditation is open to anyone. Before one even begins to ascend the scale of mystical consciousness, the preliminary step must be accomplished: the awakening of the self and the sense of Divine Presence. Meditation is that essential exercise which, constantly practised, establishes the sense of self and its relation to God. And so the final stage of any religious meditation is that of colloquy or conversation with God. Hence Roethke addresses the Godhead directly in "The Marrow":

> Godhead above my God, are you still there?
> .. ..
> Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day.
> From me to Thee's a long and terrible way.

This notion of the Godhead above God is an old one, but Roethke probably got it from the final chapter of Tillich's Courage to Be. It is essentially a rhetorical device by which theologians account for the anthropomorphic aspects of the Christian God; it is a further abstraction, resembling very much the One of Plotinus. A more literary source is Browning's Godhead, Quiet, who rules the universe and presides over the cantankerous God called Setebos in "Caliban Upon Setebos". In any case, the fine last lines of "The Marrow" which have been quoted above embody the main theme of these few last poems: faith is difficult, and the terrible sense of separation from the Father (Otto-God) persists in spite of repeated efforts to achieve atonement.

The last poems of the Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical tell of hope restored, of renewal and final illuminations. The movement in "I Waited" is from a barren landscape to a bright seaside where a sense of gladness comes to the poet after a long vigil. As in Eliot, the wind is a symbol of the spirit, a presage of rain. In "The Tree, The Bird", which follows, Roethke summons once more to great effect the image of the self-as-tree. The familiar 'voice calling from the cloud' (God-Otto) is present.[43] The bird has become a symbol of the ascending spirit as in the poetry of St. John of the Cross. This is a metaphysical poem, of course, as the title of this sequence allows. The tree represents the self, rooted in the physical world but prey to all the motions of the wind. The bird is the soul; it arises out of the tree and pierces the veil of heaven. A final illumination occurs in the last lines as Roethke concludes, "Thus I endure this last pure stretch of joy,/ The dire dimension of a final thing."

Similarly in the next poem, "The Restored", the soul enters the shape of a bird. But in this chilling poem the bird has lost use of a wing; disaster seems at hand until, miraculously, the wing is restored:

> That delicate thing
> Grew back a new wing.
>
> And danced, at high noon,
> On a hot, dusty stone,
> In the still point of light
> Of my last midnight.[44]

"The Right Thing" - penultimate poem in The Far Field as a whole - takes the form of a villanelle, recalling the earlier one called "The Waking". In that great poem of an earlier decade Roethke said:

> Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
> The lowly worm crawls up a winding stair;
> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.[45]

In other words: illumination comes, but often by surprise. The tree represents the permanent self. The worm is the sensual and temporal selfhood contained in the body and struggling to mount the stair of time and thereby get out of time. But the process is a slow one, painfully so. Those themes are recapitulated and given final form in "The Right Thing". The poet has confidence in what he has experienced, saying:

> Let others probe the mystery if they can.
> Time-harried prisoners of Shall and Will -
> The right thing happens to the happy man.[46]

Roethke lays claim to that Unity of Being which was the goal of Yeats, which is the goal of all serious men. He says, "God bless the roots! - Body and soul are one!" But one can only cringe at this bold assertion. The earlier villanelle, which proceeds by a carefully developed series of highly concrete images and symbols, excels in every way this later poem. Again, Roethke has resorted to telling us what has happened to himself, rather than showing us exactly how it happened.

Fortunately, Roethke ends The Far Field with a highly successful little lyric which could serve as an epilogue to the whole of his Collected Poems. The poet begins with a question: 'What's greater, Pebble or Pond?' and then asserts that the 'Unknown' can indeed be known.[47] Essentially, pebble and pond are the same substance. All things partake of the One, the ground of all being. And so the organic process of life from birth to maturity, old age, death and final rebirth is seen as a dance, an endless dance which results in a permanent Unity of Being in the end, a condition (as Yeats said) wherein the dancer and the dance are one:

Now I adore my life
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the Fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for Love's sake;

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.

The poem contains all of Roethke's favourite symbols of the Protean self: bird, tree,(leaf), fish, snail. And it is fitting that he should end with the dance of love. As Miss Underhill explains:

> Man, once conscious of Reality, cannot evade it. For a time his separated spirit, his disordered loves, may wilfully frustrate the scheme of things: but he must be conquered in the end. Then the mystic process unfolds inexorably: Love triumphs: the 'purpose of the world' fulfills itself in the individual life.[48]

The Far Field remains an imperfect volume, even though it contains poems which deserve to be counted among Roethke's best. Too much of this later work suffers from abstraction and rhetoric uninformed by genuine experience. But what makes the book important is its place on the long journey out of the self which preoccupied Theodore Roethke for the last ten years of his life. The North American Sequence and the Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical record one man's exhausting effort to get out of the Romantic condition of self-absorption which Blake called Ulro. The mystical Way of Illumination is a dangerous pathway, and it is open to only a few in any age. One can admire Roethke's effort without claiming too much for him either as a mystic or a poet. Certainly, American literature would be so much the poorer without Roethke's final and posthumous collection.

V.

CONCLUSION

> To have paced out the whole circumference of modern consciousness, to have explored every one of its recesses - this is my ambition, my torture, and my bliss.
>
> Nietzsche, copied by Roethke into his notebook of 24 January, 1963.[1]

Theodore Roethke copied the above quotation from the philosopher Nietzsche into his notebooks during the year in which he died, perhaps believing that his own ambition, torture and bliss were identified with the same task. If this is so, one can only conclude that Roethke failed; although one has to admit that Nietzsche demanded more of himself than was either reasonable or possible. Let us claim less for Roethke, which is still a great deal: he explored with an uncommon persistence the dim regions of the subjective unconscious; he could celebrate the joy of the physical world with unusual lyric talent and, alternately, convey that 'anguish of concreteness' which is inescapable; he made a valiant attempt to transcend the morbid self-consciousness inherited from the Romantics, a valuable addition to the literature of American Transcendentalism. If these claims are justified, as I believe they are, then Roethke is assured of a permanent place in the hierarchy of twentieth century poets.

In this study I have traced the development of the poet's work from the early Metaphysical lyrics, through the central Lost Son period when he did his finest writing, to the final decade of formal, Yeatsian lyrics and free verse meditations after Walt Whitman. But in all phases, the importance of his Romantic quest for a Greenhouse Eden has been stressed. The first volume, Open House, may be considered a fine apprenticeship for the difficult task ahead, which involved the discovery of the self and a reconciliation with the Father, Otto. To achieve this, Roethke was forced to go back farther and farther into memory, to explore the most terrifying regions of the unconscious mind. This is the quest of the modern hero, for the real conquests of today

are internal and subjective. The three volumes that give evidence of Roethke's quest are The Lost Son, Praise to the End! and The Waking. Much of this work is highly experimental, and a lot of it fails to achieve coherence. But the best poems of this period, such as "The Lost Son" itself, rank with the finest writing of this century in English. Less fortunate, however, are the later poems, many of which fall into the deadly trap of abstraction. Nevertheless, the love poems of Words for the Wind withstand the closest scrutiny and should survive. And some of the long, free verse meditations of The Far Field are of permanent interest because they succeed as poems in their own right and represent a valuable contribution to the literature of meditation and the way of mystical experience.

Apart from this general survey of the poet's life and work, an attempt has been made to link Roethke with the Romantic tradition. His poetics, as derived from his unpublished notebooks for the most part, show his unflagging dedication to the leading Romantic notions as I understand them. His dedication to the lyric mode is evidence of his belief in poetry as the expression of feeling, not thought. Like Wordsworth, he admired the wholeness of the child's view of the world and sought to recover this idyllic condition. Like Blake, he believed in the Romantic contraries: self and other, subject and object. He fashioned his own version of the Romantic questor; his 'lost son' is a later version of Wordsworth's Solitary, of Byron's pilgrim, of Shelley's wandering poet, of Keats's shepherd-prince, of Browning's Paracelsus and Childe Roland, of Yeats's Oisin. The search for identity continues to be the main theme of Romantic literature, and there is no evidence that this tradition is at an end. Roethke's contribution to this tradition is certainly important; a knowledge of Freud and Jung offers the modern Romantic questor a whole new area to explore, and Roethke pioneered in this direction, following the suggestions of Kenneth Burke.

But the business of ranking poets is futile, and I shall not attempt to place Theodore Roethke permanently on any shelf. It is for future readers to determine his true value. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that Roethke

possessed neither the enormous powers of sympathetic detachment which made Robert Frost America's great writer of dramatic lyrics, nor Wallace Stevens's wonderful gift for philosophic investigation in the medium of poetry. Instead, Roethke's was a talent for image-making, for the expression of intense personal feelings in concrete terms: always accompanied by a first-rate sense of rhythm, what poets call 'a perfect ear'. In the last analysis, it is Roethke's ferocious honesty with himself that seems most permanent in his verse. When he succeeds, it is because he has managed to speak directly about his most personal experiences; when he fails, as he often does in the later poems, it is because of self-deception or affectation. That he came to understand this is apparent in a touching poetic fragment which I have taken from one of his last, unpublished notebooks:

> Teach me, sweet love, a way of being plain!
> My virtues are but vices in disguise.
> The little light I had was Henry Vaughan's.
> I hunted fire in ice: the soul's unease,
> In the loose rubble, the least glistening stone,
> And what I found was but one riddled bone:
> I move, unseeing, toward an absolute
> So bright within it darkens all I am.[2]

NOTES

CHAPTER I.

Part One

1. The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 50. Hereafter cited as Collected Poems.
2. Ibid. p. 46.
3. Most of the material used to substantiate the arguments in this study is drawn from the unpublished notebooks, letters, manuscript drafts of poems, and teaching notes of Theodore Roethke; mostly in the possession of the University of Washington Libraries in Seattle, Washington. In referring to unpublished sources, I shall use the method established by the Curator of Manuscripts of that library. Box number and folder number are always quoted in the note. For example, the numbers 35-66 indicate the box and folder where the reference cited in the text can be discovered. Much of this material is either undated or imperfectly dated, but when dates are available they will always be included in the note. The notebooks are usually marked with the date when Roethke reviewed what he had written in the previous months. For example, 13 August is the date appearing on the upper right hand corner of the notebook numbered 35-66. This is the date when the poet scanned the material, looking for phrases or ideas that could evolve into a new poem. The later the notebooks go, the more they represent a confessional and become less of a working notebook. As we shall see, these notebooks are invaluable evidence of Roethke's constant evolution as a poet and thinker. They contain fragments of great poetry, systematic notes on the poet's reading, aphorisms, rough ideas for poems, and a painfully honest account of the poet's reaction to the life around him and within him. His letters are less interesting; usually short and pretentious, often a projection of the poet's public self. The teaching notes are often very helpful, and we can learn much about Roethke's theory of poetry from these notes. It should be noted that a small selection from these vast notebooks has been edited by David Wagoner under the title Straw for the Fire (New York: Doubleday, 1972). This is not a scholarly edition of the notebooks; it is a selection of poetic fragments arranged by the editor according to themes with no attention to dates of entry. It is of little or no use to the serious scholar, but provides some indication of the poet's thought-processes.
4. Cf. Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1969) and The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton University Press, 1954).
5. Princeton: P.U.P., 1966.
6. The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbyshire. 5 vols. (Oxford: O.U.P., 1940-1949); no. 5, pp. 338-9.
7. Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 218.
8. Cf. Richard Ellman, The Identity of Yeats (Oxford: O.U.P., 1964), p. 35.
9. Collected Poems, p. 105.
10. On the Poet and His Craft: The Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 69-70. Hereafter cited as Selected Prose.
11. Ellman, p. 35.
12. Unpublished notebooks. 34-41, 8 January 1944; 35-60, July 1945.
13. Unpublished notebooks. 34-41, 8 January 1944;
14. Isaiah 62:4. King James Version.
15. For a more complete discussion of Blake's concept of Beulah, see Harold Bloom, The Visionary Company (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 20-33.
16. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 288.
17. The line from Spenser and Milton through Blake, Shelley, Yeats and Wallace Stevens is studied by Harold Bloom in The Visionary Company and Yeats (Oxford: O.U.P., 1970). Also, see L.L. Martz, The Poem of the Mind (Oxford: O.U.P., 1969), which includes an essay on Roethke.

18. Collected Poems, p. 207.
19. Ibid., p. 193.
20. Ibid., p. 63.

Part Two

1. Collected Poems, p. 239.
2. The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: O.U.P., 1966), p. 149.
3. Ion, 533-4, as quoted by M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (Oxford: O.U.P., 1953), p. 189.
4. "Defence of Poetry", Shelley's Literary and Philosophical Criticism, ed. John Shawcross (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), pp. 133-5.
5. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads", in Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, ed. Nowell C. Smith (London: Henry Frowde, 1905), p. 23.
6. See earlier note on the Selected Prose, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr..
7. Unpublished notebooks. 35-60, July 1945.
8. Unpublished notebooks. 34-51, 1944.
9. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-21. (These are always undated)
10. Selected Prose, p. 42.
11. Cf. René Wellek, Confrontations (Princeton: P.U.P., 1965) for studies of the relationships between German and Anglo-American ideas in the nineteenth century.
12. Roethke's teaching notes reveal an interest in and understanding of the major romantic writers, with special interests in John Clare, Thoreau and Emerson, and in this century: Yeats and D.H. Lawrence.
13. Unpublished notebooks. 34-62, 16 December 1946.
14. Unpublished notebooks. 34-54, 1944.
15. Unpublished notebooks. 34-49, 3 August 1944.
16. Unpublished notebooks. 35-63, 26 July 1945.
17. Review of Lockhart's Life of Scott (1838) in Occasional Papers, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1877). Cf. Abrams, p. 145.
18. C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning (3rd. ed., London: Kegan Paul, 1930), p. 149; I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism, (5th. ed., London: Kegan Paul, 1934), pp. 267, 273. This was originally published in 1923.
19. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-20
20. Unpublished notebooks. 36-17, October 1947.
21. Ibid., 35-56, 31 March 1945.
22. Ibid., 34-34, 1943.
23. Ibid.,36-98, December 1947.
24. Collected Poems, p. 98.
25. Ibid., p. 108.
26. Unpublished notebooks. 36-89, January-October 1946.
27. Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, pp. 21-2.
28. Unpublished teaching notes. 55-18. (Marked 6 Sept. 1944)
29. Ibid., 65-2.
30. Ibid., 65-19.
31. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. George Watson, (London: J.M. Dent, 1956), pp. 173-174.
32. J.G. Herder, as quoted by Abrams, p. 204.
33. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays, (London: Faber, 1932), p. 287.
34. Unpublished notebooks. 34-41, 1944.
35. Ibid. 35-68, 23 October 1946.
36. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-19.
37. Unpublished notebooks. 34-44, 1944.
38. Ibid., 36-88, 23 October 1946.
39. Ibid., 34-49, 1944.
40. Ibid., 34-37, 1943.
41. Ibid., 34-49, 3 August 1944.

42. Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, pp. 32, 27, 10. Cf. Abrams, p. 103.
43. I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism.
44. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-19.
45. Collected Poems, p. 124.
46. Unpublished notebooks. 34-51, 1944.
47. Collected Poems, p. 58.
48. Ibid., p. 107.

Part Three

1. Arthur O. Lovejoy, Essays on the History of Ideas (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1948), p. 253.
2. Ibid., p. 229.
3. Cf. Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 119-137.
4. Ibid., p. 128. Hulme, as quoted by Kermode.
5. Apart from Kermode, cf. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (1953) and Natural Supernaturalism (Oxford: O.U.P., 1971).
6. Cf. H.J.C. Grierson's edition of The Poems of John Donne (Oxford, 1924) and his anthology, Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921).
7. Ibid. Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems, p. XXVIII.
8. See Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1954); The Paradise Within (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1964); The Poem of the Mind (1965).
9. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, tran. Anthony Mottola (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 54.
10. The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 94.
11. Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV, p. 174.
12. Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, v. III, p. 77.
13. Francois de Sales, A Treatise on the Love of God (1616), Book adapted from the translation of 1630; as cited by Louis L. Martz in "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation" in The Poem of the Mind.
14. Augustine, De Trinitate. 15.22. From Later Works, trans. John Burnaby (London: Library of Christian Classics, 1955), p. 15.
15. Collected Poems, p. 37.
16. Ibid., p. 135.

CHAPTER II.

Part One

1. Orestes Brownson, "American Literature", in Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists, ed. George Hochfield (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 252.
2. F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (London: O.U.P., 1941), p. viii.
3. George Ripley, "Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion", in the Hochfield selection.
4. Emerson read Cudworth as an undergraduate at Harvard. It was his first introduction to Plato. He read it once again just before composing Nature. Yet he confessed later (in 1845) to having found it difficult to read. He was devoted to Browne throughout his career.
5. The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903), pp. 329, 333.
6. Emerson, p. 9.
7. Emerson, p. 11.
8. Cf. Bishop Berkeley's famous dictum: Percipi est percipere.
9. Emerson, p. 10.
10. Hochfield, p. 84.
11. Emerson, p. 25.
12. Emerson, p. 25.

13. See "The Metaphysical Strain", in Matthiessen's American Renaissance for an elaborate discussion of Emerson and Thoreau in relation to the Metaphysical poets.
14. Emerson, p. 26.
15. Joseph Warren Beach, The Conception of Nature in Nineteenth Century Poetry (New York, 1936), p. 344.
16. Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (New York, 1936), p. 78.
17. Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1933), p. 403. Original edition: 1849.
18. Henry David Thoreau, Walden, ed. Sherman Paul (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1960), p. 62. Original edition: 1854.
19. See Matthiessen, p. 113.
20. See Matthiessen, p. 110.
21. Selected Prose, p. 70.
22. Walt Whitman's "These Carols", in Leaves of Grass, ed. H.W. Glodgett and S. Bradley (London: London U.P., 1965), p. 502.
23. See "Introduction" to A Choice of Whitman's Verse, selected by Donald Hall (London: Faber, 1968), p. 7.
24. The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, ed. C.C. Abbott (London: O.U.P., 1935), p. 155.
25. Ezra Pound, Personae: Collected Shorter Poems (London: Faber, 1953), p. 98.
26. Collected Poems, p. 220.
27. See essay entitled "That Anguish of Concreteness" by W.D. Snodgrass in Theodore Roethke : Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: U.W.P., 1965).
28. See "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" in Wallace Stevens's The Necessary Angel (New York: Knopf, 1951).

Part Two

1. Unpublished Notebooks. 32-1, 6 November 1930.
2. Richard Ellman, James Joyce (New York: O.U.P., 1959), p. 127.
3. Selected Prose, p. 8.
4. Ibid., p. 58.
5. See Alan Seager, The Glass House : The Life of Theodore Roethke, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 15-18.
6. Selected Prose, p. 16. In the seventh grade Roethke would have been 12-13 years of age.
7. This volume is in the University of Washington Theodore Roethke Papers, The Annotated Books Series.
8. Collected Poems, p. 239.
9. Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (London: Faber, 1970), p. 230. (Hereafter cited as Selected Letters.) The letter referred to was written by Roethke to Mills on 12 June 1959.
10. Selected Prose, p. 4.
11. Selected Letters, p. 172, for example.
12. Selected Prose, p. 68.
13. Ibid., p. 62.
14. Ibid., p. 69.
15. Ibid., p. 33.
16. In a letter to Alan Seager, Burke admitted, "I was one of Ted's Papas." See The Glass House, p. 136. The correspondence between Burke and Roethke suggests that Burke played the paternal role enthusiastically and that Roethke was always impressed, even overawed, by Burke's intellect and great learning. The influence of Burke on Roethke is explored in Chapter III.
17. The Theodore Roethke Papers, University of Washington. Box 8-33. This unpublished letter is among the many hundreds gathered in this collection.
18. Kunitz was often without a satisfactory job; and he had great difficulty in finding publishers for his second book. Also, he seems to have suffered a good deal of trauma over personal matters. His letters often reflect this,

and one could suggest that poetry provided a form of release that he enjoyed. As many modern poets have said, particularly Robert Graves, poetry can be defined as a resolution of conflicts, a kind of expiation through creativity. This is a highly Romantic notion and one which may be applied to Roethke as well without difficulty.

19. Selected Letters, p. 37.
20. The Theodore Roethke Papers, University of Washington. Box 3-14.
21. Ibid.
22. Commonweal, October 7 1931.
23. Selected Letters, p. 4.
24. Also included in Selected Letters, p. 23.
25. Ibid., p. 54.
26. Collected Poems, p. 6.
27. Unpublished notebooks. 32-4, July 1933.
28. See Alan Seager, p. 207 and Positive Disintegration by Casimierz Dobrowski (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964).
29. See Alan Seager, p. 101.
30. See R.D. Laing, The Divided Self (London: Tavistock Publications, 1960).
31. G. Bateson, (ed.) Perceval's Narrative: A Patient's Account of his Psychosis (Stanford, California: Stanford U.P., 1961), pp. xiii-xiv. Cited by R.D. Laing in The Politics of Experience (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), p. 81. Chapter V of Laing's study, "The Schizophrenic Experience", is especially interesting.
32. See The Divided Self.
33. I gathered a good deal of useful information in conversations with Professor Phillip A. Shelley of Penn State University. These conversations took place in June and September of 1972.
34. Unpublished notebooks. 35-50, September 1942.
Ibid. 34-38, 1943.
Ibid. 34-39, 1944.

Part Three

1. Collected Poems, p. 3.
2. From the Boston Evening Transcript (March 24 1941), p. 9. Also, see Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 23. Malkoff discusses the structure of Open House in terms of Holmes's perceptive early review. John Holmes was a colleague of Roethke's at Lafayette.
3. Collected Poems, p. 4.
4. Ibid., p.5.
5. Ibid., p.5.
6. Ibid., p.7.
7. Ibid., p.8.
8. Ibid., p. 108.
9. Ibid., p. 9.
10. Ibid., p. 11.
11. Ibid., p. 12.
12. The Theodore Roethke Manuscript Collection, Pennsylvania State University Libraries.
13. Collected Poems, p. 13.
14. Ibid., p. 15.
15. Ibid., p. 16.
16. Ibid., p. 17.
17. Ibid., p. 18.
18. The Complete Writings of William Blake, p. 149.
19. Collected Poems, p. 19.
20. Ibid., p. 21.
21. Ibid., p. 22.
22. Unpublished notebooks,. 32-4, July 1934.

23. Unpublished notebooks. 34-38, 1943.
.. .. 34-38, 1943.
.. .. 34-53, 19 January 1945.
.. .. 35-58, 31 March 1945.
.. .. 35-65. 12 August 1945.
24. Collected Poems, p. 4.
25. Unpublished notebooks. 34-34, 1943.
26. Ibid. 34-49, 3 August 1944.
27. Ibid. 35-66,13 August 1945.
28. Collected Poems, p. 28.
29. Ibid., p. 29.
30. Ibid., p. 31.
31. Ibid., p. 34.
32. Review of Open House by W.H. Auden from Browse, a publication of the College Bookstore of the Pennsylvania State College, 8 March 1941 (Number 7). This is an early version of a review which appeared a month later in The Saturday Review, 30 April 1941 (xxiii), p. 30. Auden wrote this as a favour to Roethke, whom he met when he came to Penn State to deliver a guest lecture. They remained friends until Roethke's death.
33. Unpublished notebooks. 34-54, 3 March 1945.

CHAPTER III.

Part One

1. Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form (Louisiana State University Press, 1941), p. 63.
2. Cf. Auden's comments on Open House at the end of Chapter II.
3. Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 118.
4. Geoffrey H. Hartman, The Unmediated Vision (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 156.
5. Ibid., p. 156.
6. Ibid., p. 155.
7. Ibid., p. 101.
8. Unpublished notebooks. 30-06, October 1947.
9. Ibid.. 54-55, 4 March 1945.
10. Ibid.. 34-49, 3 August 1944.

Part Two

1. Cf. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, Chapter VIII.
2. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, pp. 173-174.
3. Ibid., p. 177.
4. Unpublished notebooks. 34-42, 1942.
5. Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), originally published in 1931; Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose (New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1965), originally published in 1935; Attitudes Toward History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), originally published in 1937.
6. Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, p. 1.
7. Ibid., p. 3.
8. Ibid., p. 12.
9. Ibid., p. 17.
10. Ibid., p. 23.
11. Ibid., p. 26.
12. Ibid., p. 36.
13. Burke, Permanence and Change, p. 154, n.1.
14. Unpublished notebooks. 34-36, 3 April 1943.
15. Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan U.P., 1959), pp. 85-86.
16. Ibid., p. 86.

17. The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, ed. A.A. Brill (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), p. 492.
18. Ibid., p. 493.
19. Ibid., p. 497.
20. Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, p. 258.
21. Ibid., p. 258.
22. Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination (Garden City: Doubleday, 1953), p. 61.
23. Ibid., p. 44.
24. The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, p. 722.
25. As quoted by Trilling, p. 53.
26. Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, p. 268.
27. Unpublished notebooks. 34-41, 8 January 1944.
28. Ibid., 35-65, 12 August 1945.
29. Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, p. 269.
30. Ibid., p. 270.
31. Ibid., p. 273.
32. Ibid., p. 278.
33. Ibid., p. 285.
34. Ibid., pp. 38-39.
35. Ibid., p. 45.
36. Unpublished notebooks. 34-34, 2 February 1943.
37. Ibid. 34-36, 3 April 1943.
38. Ibid., 34-38, 25 December 1943.
39. Ibid. 34-39, 5 January 1944.
40. Ibid., 34-41, 8 January 1944.
41. Ibid. 34-45, 14 February 1944.
42. Ibid., 34-51, 1944.
43. Ibid. 34-52, 4 January 1945.
44. Ibid. 34-53, 19 January 1945.
45. Ibid. 35-54, 3 March 1945.
46. Ibid. 35-55, 4 March 1945.
47. Ibid. 35-58, 31 March 1945.
48. Ibid. 35-59, July 1945.
49. Ibid. 35-60, July 1945.
50. Ibid. 35-61, July 1945.
51. Ibid. 35-62, 25 July 1945.
52. Ibid. 35-63, 26 July 1945.
53. Ibid. 35-65, 12 August 1945.
54. Ibid. 35-66, 13 August? 1945.
55. Ibid. 35-67, 20 November 1945.
56. Ibid. 35-68, 25 November 1945.
57. Ibid. 36-69, 1945.
58. Ibid. 36-70, 1945.
59. The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. H.W. Garrod (London: O.U.P., 1950) p. 220.
60. Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, tr. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 50.
61. Unpublished notebooks. 35-65, 12 August 1945.
62. Ibid. 34-36, 1943.

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1. Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke", the Sewanee Review LVIII (Winter, 1950), p. 82.
2. Louis L. Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden", in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: U.W.P., 1965), p. 27. This essay is taken from the chapter on Roethke in Martz's The Poem of the Mind.
3. Unpublished notebooks. 35-59, July 1945.
4. Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke", p. 70.

5. American Mercury, v. 50 (1943), p. 306.
6. The Theodore Roethke Papers of the University of Washington. 23-49.
7. Ibid., 22-68. Roethke sent this poem to Katharine Stokes on 6 February 1944.
8. Collected Poems, p. 37.
9. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), p. 219. First published in 1916.
10. Collected Poems, p. 37.
11. John D. Boyd, "Texture and Form in Theodore Roethke's Greenhouse Poems", Modern Language Quarterly (September, 1972), p. 424.
12. Collected Poems, p. 38.
13. Ibid., p. 38.
14. Ibid., p. 39.
15. Unpublished notebooks. 34-42, 8 January 1944.
16. Collected Poems, p. 39.
17. Ibid., p. 40.
18. Ibid., p. 41.
19. Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, pp. 216-217.
20. Collected Poems, p. 43.
21. Ibid., p. 43.
22. Ibid., p. 43.
23. Ibid., p. 45.
24. Ibid., p. 46.
25. Ibid., p. 47.
26. Ibid., p. 49.
27. Ibid., p. 51.

Part Four

1. These volumes were all published originally in New York by Doubleday.
2. Unpublished notebooks. 36-97, October 1947.
3. Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 79.
4. The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung, ed. V.S. de Laszlo (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), p. 116.
5. Ibid., p. 284.
6. Ibid., p. 287.
7. T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems: 1909-1962 (London: Faber, 1963), p. 63.
8. Unpublished notebooks. 34-37, 20 November 1943.
9. Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future", in Life and Letters Today, vol. 15, No. 5 (Autumn, 1936), p. 80.
10. Joseph Campbell, Hero with a Thousand Faces (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), p. 246. Originally published in 1949.
11. Ibid., p. 10.
12. Ibid., p. 383.
13. Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 3. Originally published in 1958 under the title Birth and Rebirth.
14. Ibid., p. 3.
15. Ibid., p. 9.
16. Ibid., p. 9.
17. Ibid., p. 9.
18. Collected Poems, pp. 53-58 for "The Lost Son".
19. Unpublished notebooks. 34-50, 1944.
20. Cf. Campbell, p. 51.
21. Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 80.
22. Ibid., p. 81.
23. Ibid., pp. 85-86.
24. Roethke, Selected Prose, p. 38.
25. Ibid., p. 39.
26. The Theodore Roethke Papers of the University of Washington. 3-35.
27. Collected Poems, pp. 59-61 for "The Long Alley".
28. The Theodore Roethke Papers of the University of Washington. 3-35.

29. Collected Poems, pp. 62-63 for "A Field of Light".
30. Unpublished notebooks. 34-36, 1943.
31. Collected Poems, pp. 64-67 for "The Shape of the Fire".

Part Five

1. Unpublished teaching notes from The Theodore Roethke Papers of the University of Washington. 72-21.
2. Collected Poems, pp. 71-74 for "Where Knock Is Open Wide".
3. Joyce, p. 7.
4. Collected Poems, pp. 74-76 for "I Need, I Need".
5. Ibid., p. 133.
6. Ibid., pp. 77-78 for "Bring the Day".
7. Ibid., pp. 79-80 for "Give Way, Ye Gates".
8. Ibid., pp. 81-82 for "Sensibility! O La!"
9. Ibid., pp. 83-84.
10. William Wordsworth, The Prelude, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbyshire (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 22.
11. Collected Poems, pp. 85-88 for "Praise to the End!"
12. Ibid., pp. 89-91.
13. As Karl Malkoff suggests, Mr. Pinch may well be a reference to Pinch in Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors who tried to cure the insane by holy prayers. See Malkoff, p. 100n.
14. Wordsworth, The Prelude, VI, ll. 634-39.
15. Collected Poems, pp. 92-93 for "I Cry, Love! Love!".
16. Ibid., pp. 97-99 for "O, Thou Opening, O".
17. Ibid., p. 108.
18. One of the most important recent contributions to the field of psychotherapy is Dr. Arthur Janov's The Primal Scream (London: Garnstone Press, 1970). Dr. Janov's theories about the meaning of early experiences of parental rejection and the flight into neurosis were extremely useful to me in assessing Roethke's case in particular.

CHAPTER IV.

Part One

1. The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: O.U.P., 1966), p. 623.
2. Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 175-176.
3. Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology (New York: Viking, 1969), p. 21.
4. Collected Poems, p. 193.
5. Campbell, Primitive Mythology, p. 20.
6. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 58.
7. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1955), pp. 407-408.
8. These volumes were all published in America by Doubleday. I say "serious" verse because Roethke also published a collection for children called I Am! Says the Lamb in 1961.

Part Two

1. Selected Letters, p. 183.
2. Collected Poems, p. 239.
3. Selected Prose, p. 45.
4. Robert Heilman, "Theodore Roethke: Personal Notes", in Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee University Review (October, 1964), p. 62.
5. Heilman, p. 64.
6. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-20.
7. This has been confirmed by a large number of Roethke's former students and colleagues from Lafayette, Penn State, Bennington, and the University of Washington.

8. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-22.
9. The Ten Principle Upanishads, trans. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).
10. Cf. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, "Robartes and the Golden Dawn", Chapter VII.
11. Underhill is most famous for her Mysticism (London: Methuen, 1911); Peers's book, Spanish Mysticism (London: Dutton, 1930) is mentioned by Roethke in his notebooks.
12. Unpublished notebooks. 35-84, 6 April 1946.
13. Cf. Underhill, pp. 206-210.
14. Most of Roethke's associates at the University of Washington did not believe that he ever had genuine mystical trances like those experienced by true mystics. Instead, he reached the condition of heightened awareness and illumination which precedes the last mystical stages of consciousness.
15. See The Protestant Mystics, selected by Anne Freemantle, with an introduction by W.H. Auden (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), pp. 10-34. Auden provides a useful discussion of the varieties of mystical experience, and approach much different from Miss Underhill's.
16. Collected Poems, p. 239.
17. Unpublished notebooks. 34-36, 8 April 1943.
18. The Confessions of Jacob Boehme, ed. W. Scott Palmer (London: Methuen, 1920), pp. 27-28.
19. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-26. Taken from C.G. Jung's Contributions to Analytical Psychology (London: 1928), p. 246.
20. Collected Poems, p. 100.
21. Ibid., p. 102.
22. Ibid., pp. 103-104.
23. The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (London: Johathan Cape, 1971), p. 108.
24. Collected Poems, p. 105.
25. Sir John Davies, Orchestra or a Poeme of Dauncing (1596) (Middlesex: The Stanton Press, 1922), p. 30.
26. Collected Poems, pp. 105-107 for Four For Sir John Davies.
27. Underhill, pp. 162-163.
28. Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (London: Collins, 1952), p. 54.
29. Collected Poems, p. 108.
30. Ibid., p. 110.
31. Ibid., p. 100.
32. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 83.
33. Collected Poems, pp. 123-126 for "Words for the Wind".
34. Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. R.G. Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), p. 78. Based on the German edition of 1937.
35. Collected Poems, p. 127.
36. As quoted by W.R. Inge in his Mysticism in Religion (London: Rider, 1947), p. 75. The concept of aevum was introduced by Boethius and developed by Aquinas.
37. Collected Poems, pp. 131-132 for "The Sententious Man".
38. Underhill, p. 175.
39. Ibid., pp. 171-172. Taken from Boehme's "The Threefold Life of Man".
40. Collected Poems, pp. 133-134 for "The Pure Fury".
41. Tillich, pp. 41-42. Also, cf. Malkoff, p. 131.
42. Collected Poems, p. 135.
43. Ibid., p. 54.
44. Ibid., p. 138.
45. Ibid., p. 147.
46. Ibid., p. 54.
47. Ibid., p. 140.
48. Ibid., p. 148.
49. Ibid., p. 144.
50. Ibid., pp. 149-150 for "A Walk in Late Summer".

51. Collected Poems, p. 150.
52. Ibid., p. 151.
53. Ibid., p. 152.
54. Ibid., pp. 153-156 for The Dying Man.
55. Ibid., p. 107.
56. Unpublished notebooks. 36-88, 23 October 1940.
57. Collected Poems, p. 107.
58. Cf. Robert Graves, The White Goddess,(London: Faber and Faber, 1946).
59. Collected Poems, p. 126.
60. Tillich, pp. 55-56.
61. Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 405.
62. Collected Poems, p. 222.
63. Ibid., pp. 161-173 for the Meditations of an Old Woman.
64. Ibid., p. 140.
65. Unpublished notebooks. 35-63, 26 July 1945.
66. Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 320.

Part Three

1. As quoted by Seager, p. 256.
2. Unpublished teaching notes. 72-23.
3. Collected Poems, pp. 187-186 for "The Longing".
4. Underhill, pp. 288-289.
5. Collected Poems, pp. 190-192 for "Meditation at Oyster River".
6. Ibid., pp. 193-195 for "Journey to the Interior".
7. Ibid., pp. 196-198 for "The Long Waters".
8. Ibid., pp. 199-201 for "The Far Field".
9. T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems, p. 192.
10. Unpublished notebooks. 35-60, July 1945.
11. Collected Poems, pp. 202-205 for "The Rose".
12. Eliot, p. 223.
13. The Essential Plotinus, trans. Elmer O'Brian (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 84. Cf. Ennead VI: 9 (9).
14. Collected Poems, p. 212.
15. Ibid., p. 215.
16. Ibid., p. 217.
17. Ibid., pp. 219-222 for "The Abyss".
18. Eliot, pp. 202-203.
19. Collected Poems, p. 223.
20. Ibid., pp. 224-225 for "Otto".
21. Ibid., p. 225.
22. Ibid., p. 227.
23. Ibid., p. 228.
24. Ibid., p. 232.
25. Ibid., p. 233.
26. Ibid., pp. 234-235 for "All Morning".
27. Ibid., p. 235.
28. Ibid., p. 237.
29. Ibid., p. 238.
30. Ibid., p. 236.
31. Underhill, p. 480.
32. Collected Poems, p. 239.
33. Underhill, p. 474.
34. Ibid., p. 475.
35. Collected Poems, p. 240.
36. Ibid., p. 241.
37. Ibid., p. 243.
38. Ibid., p. 125.
39. Ibid., p. 243.
40. Ibid., p. 244.
41. Ibid., p. 245.
42. Ibid., p. 246.

43. Collected Poems, p. 248.
44. Ibid., p. 249.
45. Ibid., p. 108.
46. Ibid., p. 250.
47. Ibid., p. 251.
48. Underhill, p. 162.

CHAPTER V.

1. Unpublished notebooks. 43-211, 24 January 1963.
2. Ibid., 43-210, 1962.

APPENDIX.

1. Selected Prose, p. 35.
2. The Theodore Roethke Papers, Incoming Letters. 8-9.
3. Ibid., 8-7.
4. Ibid., 8-16.
5. Ibid., 8-17.
6. Ibid., 8-17.
7. Ibid., 8-18.
8. Ibid., 8-19.
9. Ibid., 8-33.
10. Ibid., 8-33.
11. Selected Letters, pp. 84-85.
12. The Theodore Roethke Papers, Incoming Letters. 8-33.

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APPENDIX

The Poet as Apprentice

In an essay entitled "Verse in Rehearsal", Theodore Roethke refers to his literary apprenticeship:

> The poet's fidelity, as Stanley J. Kunitz has said, is to the poem. In my own case, many pieces are completed without asking for or accepting comment, but I have received valuable criticism, from time to time, from people ranging from practising poets and editors to semi-literates who profess to hate poetry. The writer who maintains that he works without regard for the opinion of others is either a jackass or a pathological liar.[1]

Indeed, Roethke's literary apprenticeship was an open one; it demonstrates that it is, in fact, possible to help a talented young poet to develop his craft, despite many arguments to the contrary. An experienced teacher, preferably a poet with considerable technical knowledge and the gift of sympathetic criticism, can be of great service to the beginning writer early in his career. Roethke, for example, lacked the self-confidence and technical skill to make a flashy start as a poet. But the fact of his talent was grasped by three poets of recognized stature in American letters: Rolfe Humphries, Louise Bogan, and Stanley Kunitz. Some excerpts which I have gathered from the early letters from these poets to Roethke concerning his verse indicate the range of their experience and sympathy.

One letter from Humphries written from Belvidere, New Jersey, to the poet on 1 August 1941 reveals the great expertise of this older writer and his infinite patience with a young man's errors:

> Dear Ted,
>
> The new ones are good, I think. I wish you could get rid of dimly in the otherwise fine last stanza of Double Feature. The 'grey arsenical tree' is wonderful. In Pastoral it takes me longer than it should to realize the size of the mower; I think at first of a man pushing one around, but maybe this is just my own conditioned reflexes. In the last half I think some rearrangement of lines, or revision of punctuation, is needed. The way it is, that semi-colon after stop; and the new line beginning 'before the blade creaks over' are very hard for the ear to

manage without running them together as one sentence, contradictory to their meaning: if this is a matter of deliberate counter-pointing, I think it is too subtle. Would do it this way -

> ...until a quail flies up,
> flushed from well-hidden cover,
> before the blade creaks over.
> Across the meadow comes
> The hum of middle summer:
> Wheel-sound and bird-song stop.

I suggest middle as less conventional than early, and more accurate, and also as giving you better music with meadow in the line before. Then the poem can stop with the stop, and no bothersome preposition-conjunctions on either side. What do you think?[2]

Observe the delicate manner in which Humphries suggests changes. He merely offers his opinion, never forcing ideas on the younger man, who obviously admired his older friend and teacher greatly. It is extremely interesting to hear Humphries speaking of Roethke to the anthologist Ann Winslow in response to her request for a few paragraphs of comment on his young friend. In this unpublished letter of 1935 Humphries comments:

> ...As to Roethke in particular, I think what he writes is usually sensitive, delicate, tentative, rather shy stuff. I could not, at this point, utter 300-500 profitable words about this writing unless I were to criticize his poems in the item rather than in the mass, and I am not sure that this is legitimate here. I should think it obvious from his verse that Roethke is nobody's damn fool; what is less obvious is his capacity for more full-toned and robust expression. That metaphysical-personal-Elizabethan vein can not yield ore inexhaustively. Technically, Roethke has a good deal to learn, and I suppose he knows it. If I am allowed to take down his pants in public, I might say, for one thing, that he should try to get along without adjectives for a while; for another,- this only seems to contradict the first - that it wouldn't hurt, for practice, to play up the sensuous at the expense of the intellectual, and to show more concern with sound and less with image. And there is a trick of sustaining the energy of a poem; he hasn't quite got this, always; sometimes condensation is needed, sometimes expansion.[3]

The approach of another older poet, Louise Bogan, is much less formal; her efforts to encourage young Roethke were sometimes maternal, but there is

no lack of specific criticism in her letters. In an early letter of 3 March 1936, Miss Bogan tells Roethke to allow more of himself into his poetry: an important piece of advice, which the younger poet would follow to great advantage -

> ...I liked your pieces, but I wish you had loosened up in them a little more: been more Theodore in them. Loosen them up somewhat, if you haven't already sent them off. Forget the necessity of pure prose and let go.[4]

She also warned the beginning writer away from the deadly trap of abstractions, the downfall of nearly all poets in the very early stages of learning to write. The following extract comes from a letter of 14 December 1937, and the Edmund referred to is probably the critic Edmund Wilson:

> The lastest poem was what Edmund always calls 'very well written', but it was too full of abstractions, and the form is too full of Yeats. And that long form, with short lines, needs some actual objects in it, to come off.[5]

There is always the danger of mistaken advice, of course, especially when the young apprentice has too many doubts about his own worth. Roethke's protracted apprenticeship was in part due to his hesitancy, his lack of confidence as an artist. In the following extract from a letter of 3 August 1937, Miss Bogan praises Roethke for eliminating some abstractions; she suggests to him that he write not out of his own 'gizzard' but more objectively. This may well have been mistaken advice, for Roethke's true <u>metier</u> was autobiographical verse. In the latter part of the extract, the older poet calls attention to matters of sound and silence; certainly Roethke learned a great deal about technical details from such advice:

> ...As for your poems, my pet: certainly the non-abstract words tightened and bettered the whole tone. I don't like <u>Wisdom of the Bold</u> for a title, however. And I wish you'd do some more realistic pieces, outside of your own gizzard - the automobile one was so good. <u>Against Disaster</u> I should shorten. If it were mine (and, of course, it isn't), I'd omit the last stanza and transpose the third and fourth, and leave it at that. In

> that way, there's room left for reverberation: the idea isn't beaten out flat, and you can hear it all better, in the silence made by the abrupt close.[6]

The Thirties was, of course, a time of political activism on the part of many leading younger artists and intellectuals. The names of Auden, Spender, Isherwood and Orwell stand out. It was natural for Roethke, who admired these writers enormously, to attempt a kind of engagé writing. But this was never his mode. With great wisdom, Miss Bogan wrote to Roethke on 23 June 1939 to warn him off political verse-writing. She comments on his "Ballad of the Clairvoyant Widow" which later appeared in Open House (1941):

> The Clairvoyant Widow is good, too. One of the lenses of the telescope is on the Auden side, but not too much so. And I wish the Widow - who is a really evocative and strange conception - didn't go Simplified Left in the end. After two years of studying the proletariat at first hand, I should say that they don't resemble those New Masses pictures of Everyone Holding Chained Hands Up Toward the Heights, in the least. They are all different, like any class. - Don't get too simplified. Life isn't like that. Don't let the Zeitgeist get you...[7]

Roethke eventually became such an accomplished poet that comments about these matters diminish in Miss Bogan's letters; but she maintains the persona of teacher with Roethke to the end. Now she turned moral advisor, as one extract from a letter (undated) of 1942 demonstrates:

> Auden respects and likes you thoroughly, I should say. He wrote that review, you must realize, against all his decisions not to review contemporaries. He thinks you a good poet, a good teacher, and a fine person generally; but we agreed that you should GROW UP, and stop pretending that your childish side is melancholy, WHICH IT ISN'T. Now, worry over that one![8]

Still, the most important criticism seems to have come from Stanley Kunitz, who was only a little older than Roethke in actual fact. Some unpublished criticism from Kunitz has already been quoted in the body of my study, but the full range of his abilities are manifest in additional extracts which I have gathered from his letters to Roethke. His attention to specific

problems, his broad sympathy with the poet as a person, and his own peculiar resoluteness are obvious in the following from a letter of 30 October 1935 sent from New Hope, Pennsylvania:

> "My secrets cry aloud" is all of a piece, and a good piece too. The change in the next-to-the-last line is for the better. I think, however, that in your second stanza you've caught an echo from one of the poems in my last Poetry group. I don't mind in the least - but since you or some reviewer may - I'll take the chance now of offending you. Don't bother discussing this business, unless you feel I'm mistaken.
>
> "Old passions haunt the brain" is probably your most mature and emotionally complex poem to date. I doubt that you've written a finer stanza than the last. On the other hand, lines 3 - 4 are over-written and inclined towards mawkishness; the whole second stanza seems to me to bear the stamp of a verbal pattern - an inch of surface writing - rather than of something plucked out of the heart of experience. The third stanza is fine, except for 'perverted pandering', and of the fourth stanza I've already uttered praise.
>
> I commend your rage. The angry poets are best.[9]

The suggestion that Roethke had caught an echo from his older poet-friend upset him, and he readily disowned the poem. Kunitz, wisely, wrote back to reassure him; he offers some wonderful insights into the nature of literary influence into the bargain; the letter, again from New Hope, is dated November, 1935:

> Don't be a damned fool. <u>The poem is your own</u>. Nobody else wrote it or could have written it. Furthermore, it's a good poem - the best one I've read in months, I think. I do want you to publish it and to forget about this nonsensical 'fake business'. Now I curse myself for having mentioned the matter at all. I did it, believe me, in no accusing spirit and wholly without malice, as one might dissect a moth to find, among its pulp and sap, the buried engine of its tropic life.
>
> As for the passage in question, I believe I got the idea and some of the phraseology from a paragraph in Thoreau. Rilke expressed the same sentiment, variously, at least a dozen times. I could not, therefore, lay claim to either the substance or the expression. All of us take what we can from the mother speech, who is a bitch.

> You persecute yourself too much. The poet's only fidelity is to the poem. One must know what one is doing, but one must not use that knowledge against oneself! That is the death of the will.[10]

Such a letter, full of wisdom and sympathy, can only have bolstered the apprentice-poet's confidence. The idea that the poem is all that matters figures largely in Roethke's development; he came to realize that the poet himself is only an element, albeit the essential one, in the artistic process. All great writing springs from a strong consciousness of the traditional and an appreciation of the conventions which underlie any original work, what Kunitz terms 'the mother speech'.

The strong influence of Kunitz over Roethke continued until the publication of Open House, although by this time the younger poet was extremely competent as a poetic craftsman. Nevertheless, as late as 1940 Kunitz was offering Roethke technical advice of the first order. For example, on 30 June 1940 Roethke sent his friend the following unpublished poem for criticism:

> Even the simple and insentient are unhappy:
> Horn-honkers find their neighbors unresponsive;
> Mechanical sheep stop bleating at the curbstone:
> Hands yank the shade before an unlighted window;
> A child bursts into tears before the hard-kneed
> stranger,
> The pure in heart cherish obscene ambition.
>
> Research returns to the file; lyric ardor
> Chills in the cool of the academy shadow;
> On the vague eye of the suburban husband
> The sexual image wavers like water.
> An era of waiting: household traitors
> Make the usual capitulation to appearance.
>
> Some are mild-eyed people, forlorn in freedom,
> Their loves a mimic of grandiose passion,
> Familiars to contempt, the cough, the studied
> laughter,
> Mumblers and fumblers, true to a hazy vision,
> Believe compromise the necessary method of wisdom,
> Give up at the tree's base: a rabbit surrender.
>
> Not enough feet have passed in this country,
> Stones are still stones, and the eye keeps nothing,
> The usurious pay in full with the coin of the gentle,
> Follies return on the heads of innocent children,
> The evil and silly remain too long in tenure,
> And the young, mimetic, fall into the old confusion.

Some travel by train to the fourth largest city,
Holy of holies for all who live by objects.
Those with the wire-like antennae of purpose
Are the magnificent and sterile makers.
With them it is useless to put the question,
"What else do you do with your time? Are you ever
lonely?"

Worst are the aging rich, the red-eyed complainers
For whom a change in menu is cause for excitement;
But money is not enough, and power is empty:
The pot-bellied banker deserts the dining table,
A great-grand uncle drops his Christmas package,
And the habit of gossip becomes an illness.

Insistent as cicadas the noise of their sorrow,
Yet most spend their lives in pretence of contentment;
The blood loops lazily on its alarming mission
And the quaint town sleeps in the arm of an ominous
shadow.
O what can rouse them from the coma of indifference,
What frenzy relax the muscles of pride and smugness?

Though the geography of despair had no limits,
To each was allotted some corner of comfort
Where, secure as a seed, he could sit out confusions.
But this is another regime: the preposterous bailiff
Beats on the door with his impossible summons
And the mad mayor holds nightly sessions of error.[11]

A few weeks later, on 18 July 1940, Kunitz responded with the following:

I like "Suburban Lament" very much. A grand battery of imagery, and no mistaking your plain-saying. Perhaps your order of stanzas has made the pattern seem more static than it needs to be. Would it be any improvement, do you think, if you moved all your capitulation stanzas to the end in a sequence of mounting excitement? Here's a possible order that might turn the trick: 1,2,3,6,5,4,7,8. (The numbers refer to stanzas, of course.) Maybe that's a wrong steer, but I pass it on anyway. A couple of minor points. I think 'an era of waiting' in stanza 2 takes the edge off 'but this is another regime' in the last stanza; in stanza 7 I question frenzy relaxing muscles - quite the contrary. And one thing more, in the 7th. line (stanza 2), how about substituting 'the poet's ardour' for 'lyric ardour', so as not to block the rhythm? This sounds fussy, but even if you don't change a thing I'm sure you've rung the bell with this.[12]

Apparently Roethke did not agree with his teacher this time, and so the poem was never published. But it should be noticed that Kunitz was tireless as a friendly and sensitive advisor to the developing poet.

It is a testimony to Humphries, Bogan, and Kunitz that their mutual

apprentice should eventually become far more expert at the craft than his teachers. Yet it should be obvious by now that Roethke's later sureness of technique was the result of the painstaking critical attention he received in the early years of his development. The comparison that comes to mind is with the art studios of the Italian Renaissance, where young aspiring painters could come under the experienced tutelage of the older masters; the best of them would in time outstrip their teachers and evolve an unmistakable style of their own. This is just what Roethke did in The Lost Son (1948).