

THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME THEMES AND
IMAGES IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

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ABSTRACT

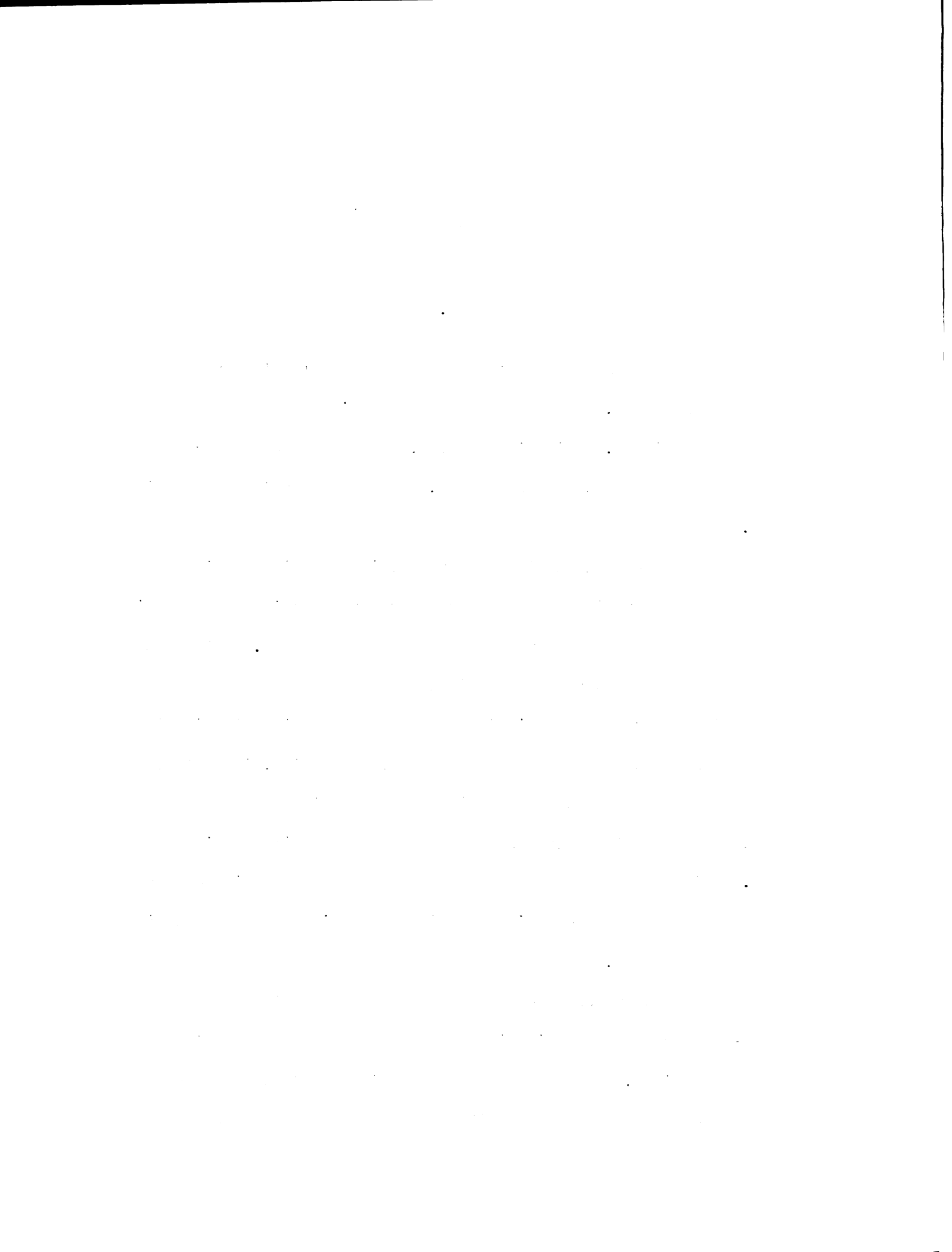
THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME: THEMES AND IMAGES IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

by George A. Wolff

Although individual poems of Theodore Roethke's have been analyzed in detail, no sustained reading of his work as a whole has yet been published. This dissertation, through a close study of the poet's handling of themes and images, traces the development of his work.

The concept that gives order to this study is described by the phrase "the productions of time," which refers to objects and conditions that characterize life in the flux of mortal existence. Critics and scholars have emphasized the mystical and otherworldly elements in Roethke's poetry without pointing out the cause, which lies in his fear and loathing of his "fleshly clothes," sexuality, isolation, and death. A more important shortcoming in the criticism is the failure to stress Roethke's continual attempts to conquer his loathing and fear. This dissertation follows the changing relationship between otherworldliness and worldliness as it appears in the themes and images of Roethke's poems.

The discussion of Open House focuses on the imagery of the inner-outer dichotomy, which is usually related to the conflict between flesh and spirit. Several themes present in this first book and later to be developed more fully are (1) the concept of the life-force as an



irritant, (2) inherited mental (or spiritual) illness, and (3) the creative process. I discuss the "Greenhouse Poems" both in terms of its imagery which distorts spatial and temporal relationships and of a theme which I call "the implied human presence." I also examine in some detail here and in my discussion of the later poems Roethke's use of metaphors which blur the distinctions between the animate and inanimate and between plants and animals. My treatment of the "Greenhouse Poems" follows the generally accepted interpretation of the growing plants as symbols for the maturing human identity. In the very complex imagery of the fourteen long narratives, I find certain recurring clusters, an especially important one being an extensive group of container images, which tend to group themselves around the poles represented by grave and nest. The important themes here are (1) the conflicting views of idealism and materialism, (2) evolution, and (3) reincarnation, each of which participates in the protagonist's struggle with his awareness of sexuality, isolation, and death. The poems of the 1950's introduce no important new themes, though they do, in a mechanical way, develop the somewhat over-used images of dancing and burning. These poems clearly fail to carry Roethke forward in his struggle "to embrace the world."

The poems of The Far Field, certainly the best that Roethke wrote, bring the basic conflict in his work to its highest pitch. Returning to many of his earlier themes, Roethke clothes them in new images and invests them with a startling energy. The "North American Sequence" employs beautifully handled landscape images to symbolize

the moment of change between two quite different psychic states and to depict the theme of the desire to embrace the extremes of experience. The "Love Poems," the weakest of the book, return to the theme of isolation. In the "Mixed Sequence," Roethke explores the "theme of victimization," the relationship between victor and victim, where death is the apparent universal victor and all living things the victim. Finally, the "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" is, as Roethke called it, "a drive toward God," but it is also a corrosive vision of the way in which the speaker's fear of death alters his perceptions and perhaps even creates his God.

Despite the evidence in Roethke's work that he was out of love with the world, the overall development is toward an affirmation of "The productions of time."

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CHAPTER I

ROETHKE AND THE REVIEWERS

Thus far the criticism on Theodore Roethke has succeeded in defining a number of problems which require extended analysis. For instance, does his ability increase with time, or does compulsive experimentation lead him into obscurity? When imitating other poets, does he master their effects or echo them hollowly? How does his highly conscious handling of meter, line length, and sound patterns contribute to his poems? And so on. But certainly the most pressing problem is that many poems still have not been given long and hard readings. For that reason, this dissertation offers relatively detailed explications of most of the poems that Roethke thought of as part of his canon. Since he, like Yeats, felt that the order in which his poems stood was important, I have followed his arrangement throughout.

I have tried to maintain a balance between treating each poem as an autonomous unit and treating each as a step in Roethke's overall development. When I erred, it is in the direction of the former. For the most part, I limit my discussions to matters of imagery and theme, taking imagery to include metaphors and symbols, and theme to mean any paraphrasable expository statement. When discussing either of these, I will generally move from the details of a particular poem to a higher level of abstraction, where the similarities between a number of poems can be noted. Indeed, if we look at Roethke's apparently diverse images on a high level of abstraction (e.g., regard grave and nest as containers),

we shall see that they are not so diverse after all. Stanley Kunitz observes this same truth when he writes: "Roethke belongs to that superior order of poets who will not let us rest in any one of their poems, who keep driving us back through the whole body of their work to that live cluster of images, ideas, memories, and obsessions that constitutes the individuating source of the creative personality, the nib of art, the very selfhood of the imagination."¹ This statement, of course, verges on the fallacy of reducing the work of art to a set of data about the artist's personality. But, as the following pages will show, with Roethke this fallacy is especially tempting, for not only do his images "cluster" tightly, his themes almost without exception originate in that "do-it-yourself" branch of psychology, introspection.

Although the critics and reviewers have not yet read Roethke's poetry as closely as it deserves, they have praised it. He felt, as he expressed it in the last year of his life, that he had received unexpected ". . . intensity and love from [his] contemporaries."² From the time of his earliest publications, he was awarded encouragement and applause, being given the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 for The Waking and the National Book Award in 1958 and again in 1964 (posthumously) for Words for the Wind and The Far Field. When he was twenty-seven years

¹The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, Eight Symposia, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), p. 41. Hereafter cited as Ostroff. Babette Deutsch, John Crowe Ranson, Stanley Kunitz and Roethke took part in a symposium on Roethke's "In a Dark Time."

²Ostroff, p. 49. At this same time he said that he felt he had also received ". . . close, acute, . . . and devoted reading . . ." from the others, but his reply to their readings qualifies this almost out of existence.

old, six years before the publication of his first book, Miss Louise Bogan paid him an important critical recognition. She selected seven of his poems to include in an anthology of new verse and wrote several pages introducing the young poet. Miss Bogan outlined three tests for recognizing "a young writer who will write," and asserted that Roethke passed every one: "One immediately feels [she continues], ... the strength of his determination to yield in no way to the poorer tricks of style. His effects, for the most part, are purely prosodic: they depend on the shape of his sentences and on their order throughout the poem. We can say that he has a gift for form."¹ Miss Bogan also refers to Roethke's gift for epithet and his keen powers of perception.

Roethke's first book, Open House, published in 1941, earned him some very important praise. W. H. Auden gave it a penetrating and highly favorable review, one passage of which runs as follows: "Many people have the experience of feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life; some quickly put it out of their mind, others gloat narcissistically on its unimportant details; but both to remember and to transform the humiliation into something beautiful, as Mr. Roethke does, is rare. Every one of the lyrics in the book, whether serious or light, shares the same kind of ordered sensibility: Open House is completely successful."²

¹"Stitched on Bone," Trial Balances, ed. Ann Winslow, a pseudonym for Verna Elizabeth Grubbs. (New York, 1935), pp. 138-39.

²"Verse and the Times," SatRL, XXIII (April 5, 1941), 31.

Although more insightful than most, Auden's review is typical in that it attempts to provide the key to a number of poems with one critical utterance, usually this key being simply part of the reviewer's definition of poetry if he likes the works being reviewed and not much help at all in reading any particular poem.

Lewis Foster, Jr., who also reviewed Open House quite favorably, praised Roethke for his "simplicity of approach," his "natural and distinct" language, and, repeating Miss Bogan's words, his "exactness of epithet."¹ Like Auden, Mr. Foster was fortunate enough to make a comment that would apply not only to Open House but to all the subsequent poetry that Roethke was to write: "...Roethke ... has a mysticism of his own, of the senses rather than the spirit. He finds poetry in Yeats' "things uncomely and broken"--a bat, weeds, the "antic grace" of a heron. He is, in the best sense, a realist."² Foster censured Roethke for only one thing: "...his technical range is rather limited." But he lightened this judgment by adding that "One trusts that his future technique will show greater boldness."³ This stricture was repeated by two other reviewers. Rolfe Humphries declares that: "What saves Roethke from producing sentimental, ordinary or painful results . . . is the blunt and obdurate honesty of statement, even at the cost of

¹"A Lyric Realist," Poetry, LVIII (July 1941), 223.

²Foster, 223.

³Foster, 224.

flexibility of technique" ¹ And Stephen Baldanza, who apparently also feels the poet lacks flexibility of a sort, locates the trouble in a deeper source: ". . . Despite the promise of the introductory poem, his revelation [of himself] is not complete; it embodies a caution which is at the core of his poetic impulse." ² When Baldanza points out the road to improvement, he introduces a question that several critics are to respond to later: "That Roethke is blessed with a noble gift there can be no doubt; but one is certain that the poet has tapped only a vein of his talents. Once he shows more willingness to expose his true self more courageously in form and content he will attain a great stature." ³ More than twenty years later Professor Louis Martz similarly defines the nature of Roethke's "poetic impulse": "The celebration of the naked bone, the bare spirit, and the sealed core is not the central mode of Roethke; it is indeed the very opposite of his true motion, which is to unseal, to let flow forth, to nourish into growth. . . ." ⁴ I shall return to this question later; right now it is sufficient to point out that both Baldanza and Martz fail to relate their discussions to such highly relevant poems as "The Adamant" and "After Disaster."

¹"Inside Story," The New Republic, CV (July 14, 1941), 62.

²"Poetry," Commonweal, XXXIV (June 13, 1941), 188.

³Baldanza, 188.

⁴"A Greenhouse Eden," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1965), p. 20. Hereafter cited as Stein.

The Lost Son and Other Poems, published in 1948, was boldly experimental, particularly in the poems of two of its four sections, those later to be called the "Greenhouse Poems" and the four long narratives. These surprising and difficult poems were immediately praised. Miss Bogan continued to champion Roethke, comparing him favorably with Randall Jarrell: "Where Jarrell frequently only describes, Roethke relives. The Lost Son is written with complete conscious control....Throughout, true emotion gives the chosen style coloration and shape."¹

A frequent question in reviews of the "Greenhouse Poems" is whether they are simply poems of natural description or are symbolic. Eugene Davidson, for instance, maintains that Roethke uses "flowers, wind, water, etc." symbolically: "These serve him as images often presented with the clear sharp colors of the objects and then are transformed into symbols of human struggle or contemplation."² Another review, by Hugh Gibb, illustrates in relation to this question the way in which a perceptive critic can "fix" a group of poems with a "formulated phrase" (which rapidly becomes a cliché) without ever having to support his pronouncements with details of the poems: "But the poems never remain just brilliant descriptions. Effortlessly they assume a wider significance. The nudging shoot, the rapacious weeds and the proud tulip

¹"Verse," NY, XXIV (May 15, 1948), 118.

²"Poet's Shelf," YR, n.s. XXXVII (Summer 1948), 747.

heads dramatize the eternal processes of nature to which all life conforms, including the spiritual life of man."¹ When discussing the "Greenhouse Poems," I deal with the question of how the reader knows that they are in fact "symbols of growth."

It is surprising that more charges of obscurity weren't leveled against the long poems. Peter Viereck was the only critic to make this objection and even he quickly backed off from his position: "Roethke's The Lost Son...is too obscure (it is time for a frontal assault on obscurity as inartistic...). But Roethke's original imagery and stark emotion-charged vocabulary outweigh all objections."²

In Stanley Kunitz's mind, there were no objections to be outweighed. He begins his review by saying: "With The Lost Son, Theodore Roethke confirms what some of us have long suspected: that he stands among the original and powerful contemporary poets."³ And he concludes by comparing Roethke's second book with his first: "Roethke's first volume, Open House (1941), was praised, deservedly, for its lyric resourcefulness,⁴ its technical proficiency, its ordered sensibility. The present collection, by virtue of its indomitable creativeness and audacity, includes much more chaos in its cosmos; it is

¹"Symbols of Spiritual Growth," The New York Times Book Review, 1 August 1948, p. 14.

²"Five Good Poets in a Bad Year," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXII (November 1948), 95.

³"News of the Root," Poetry, LXXIII (January 1949), 222.

⁴Most of the reviews which touched this point chided Roethke for lacking flexibility of technique.

it is difficult, heroic, moving, and profoundly disquieting."¹

Certainly the battles fought in the 1920's over the works of Eliot and Joyce made possible this ready reception of poems as difficult as

"The Lost Son."

In 1950 Kenneth Burke gave an additional impetus to Roethke's career by publishing a forty-page study, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke." Although Burke was more concerned with interpretation than evaluation, he did imply that he thought more highly of the "Greenhouse Poems" than of the long narratives. Like Davidson, he considers the greenhouse poems symbolic: "Clearly the imagistic figuring of a human situation...."² Speaking of perhaps the best of the "Greenhouse Poems," "Big Wind," he says: "It reveals most clearly how Roethke can endow his brief lyrics with intensity of action....No matter how brief the poems are, they progress from stage to stage."³ After analyzing the poem in detail, he concludes: "...though you'd never look to Roethke for the rationalistic, the expository steps are here ticked off as strictly as the successive steps of a well-formed argument. And thanks to the developmental structure of such poems, one never thinks of them sheerly as descriptive: they have the vigor, and the poetic morality, of action, of form unfolding."⁴

¹"News of the Root," 225.

²SR, LVIII (January 1950), 68.

³Burke, 69.

⁴Burke, 70-71.

In contrast to these commendatory words for the "Greenhouse Poems," Burke offers the following somewhat disapproving remarks on the narratives: "The long poems are...engrossed with problems of welfare (Salus), though of a kind attainable rather by persistent dreamlike yielding than by moralistic "guidance of the will."...The infantile motif serves here, perhaps, like the persuasive gestures of sorrow or helplessness, as appeal to childless girls vaguely disposed toward nursing. The lost son's bid for a return to the womb may thus become transformed into a doting on the erotic imagery of the 'sheath-wet' and its 'slip-ooze.'"¹ But even this mild censure is considerably tempered when Burke goes on to spend thirty pages discussing the long poems.

Roethke's third book, Praise to the End!, published in 1951, contained the four narratives from The Lost Son and added to them ten similar poems. Again, the reception was overwhelmingly favorable. Peter Viereck repeats his earlier two-sided judgment: Roethke is "...obscure but felicitous...."² Two other critics also straddle the fence. Seldon Rodman introduces the matter of "sense," which appears in many discussions of these poems, but he feels that: "Roethke at his best does not make 'sense'--he isn't trying to. He is trying, and succeeding as well as any poet can to write a poetry of pure intuition."³

¹Burke, 81-82.

²"Technique and Inspiration, a Year of Poetry," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIX (January 1952), 81.

³"Intuitive Poet," The New York Herald Tribune Book Week, 2 December 1951, p. 32.

Rodman displays his anti-intellectualism -- one cause of cursory reading-- again later in the review: "In its present form, at least, Roethke's verse communicates nothing except to the reader who is willing to surrender himself to the music of suggestive incantation and join the poet on his somnambulistic return to the nursery."¹ As with Burke's comments, one perhaps feels that a slight condemnation is implied. On the other hand, Rodman compares the poems with the flower poems of D. H. Lawrence and calls them "...wholly original and mysteriously beautiful evocation[s] of the sexual awakening of an unhappy child."²

Rolfe Humphries once more has something to say both for and against the new book. Roethke, he says, "...is more convincing," than most poets who attempt to "plumb the depths of...[their] own unconscious...."³ But he also finds that one difficulty, "...which the terminology of the unconscious offers, [is] its censorship, its disguise through vagueness...."⁴ This difficulty he feels Roethke has "removed." But there remains another danger that he feels Roethke has not guarded against, that is "the danger...that the rhythms themselves will seem a little obsessed, and they are also astonishingly easy to imitate...."⁵

¹Rodman, 32.

²Rodman, 32.

³"Verse Chronicle," The Nation, CLXXIV (March 22, 1952), 284.

⁴Humphries, 284.

⁵Humphries, 284.

Both Rodman and Humphries express or imply reservations about the "sense" of these poems. One of the men who find these the peak of Roethke's achievement states the issue quite clearly. W. D. Snodgrass, writing about thirteen years after the book's publication, calls it "...a plunge into the wildest and most experimental poetry of the whole period."¹ Then as he comes to the matter of "sense," he falters and takes two paths at once: "Even after the wildest surrealists, that voice [in "Give Way, Ye Gates"] sounds new and astonishing; it could be no one but Roethke. It is an achieved style, carrying much meaning, and touching only tangentially other voices we have heard in poetry."² That is path number one; we come to path number two after Snodgrass has quoted ten lines of "The Shape of the Fire": "Even now, more than twelve years since those poems appeared, I do not feel that I really understand them, or feel certain how ultimately successful they are."³ Snodgrass feels that the poems "carry much meaning," but he also feels that he does not "really understand them." During his life Roethke was fortunate enough to be admired if not understood. As I shall show in a later discussion, these poems are not "pure intuitions." They can be understood.

¹"'That Anguish of Concreteness'--Theodore Roethke's Carrer," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1965), p. 80. Hereafter cited as Stein.

²Stein, p. 80.

³Stein, p. 81.

Let me return for one moment to Snodgrass's interesting essay. Immediately after the contradiction displayed above he reaches the main point of his argument: "Yet that [that the poems are difficult or impossible to understand] is not the point. The point, I think, is that Roethke had opened out before himself an incredible landscape. He had regressed into areas of the psyche where the powerful thoughts and feelings of the child--the raw materials and driving power of our later lives--remain under the layers of rational and of civilized purpose. The explorations made possible by this book alone could have engaged a lifetime. Yet Roethke never seriously entered the area again."¹ Snodgrass feels that the poetry following Praise to the End! is a falling off. He is practically alone in this opinion.

The Waking, Roethke's fourth book, won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize. It was a selection made up almost entirely of poems published in the first three books. Roethke added one poem, "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz," to the greenhouse sequence, and introduced six new poems, written between 1951 and 1953. Many of the reviewers of this book look back at the earlier books and re-evaluate them quite casually. Howard Nemerov, for instance, writes: "Roethke recognizes his own territory quite early, in his first volume, as 'My narrow vegetable realm,' but does not take it over fully until the second and third, where, through a disorganization and formlessness which are in some sense superficial, a precondition and a clearing-away, the narrow vegetable realm is seen to be quite inclusive after all, and not without adept arrangement in its riotousness...."²

¹Stein, p. 81. Snodgrass here approaches a point of disagreement among critics: had Roethke read Freud and Jung when he wrote these poems? See my discussion of the poems in the following pages.

²"Three in One," KR, XVI (Winter 1954), 148.

Hayden Carruth provides a similar sweeping reappraisal: "He [Roethke] has turned, after a long apprenticeship in the techniques of standard English verse, to a personal idiom and a compressed, exclamatory line. He does not always avoid the pitfall of obscurity, but his writing is certainly more interesting and more provocative than any other current poetry."¹

The only two men to comment on the new poems make diametrically opposed judgments. Nemerov, who finds them inferior to the narratives, writes: "It is a little disturbing to find this poet, in some of his new poems, such as the 'Four For Sir John Davies,' returning to the 'world,' to a conventional stanza and syntax, a more conventional kind of statement."² On the other side we have the judgment made by Hilton Kramer, not in a review but in an article, "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," where he points out weaknesses in most of Roethke's earlier verse. His main criticism (he does not specify which poems he is referring to) is that in Roethke's "pre-historical" poetry, the language is "...the loose diction of a point of view which has not yet learned to recognize human moral history as anything separate from life as a primordial whole."³ He explains this limitation by asserting that: "Pre-history is a single episode in the human drama; whereas history, however motley or schematic its content, is a spectacle of great variety."⁴

¹"The Idiom Is Personal," The New York Times Book Review, 13 September 1953, p. 14.

²Nemerov, 152.

³Western Review, XVIII (Winter 1954), 132.

⁴Kramer, 132.

Later Kramer charges Roethke with "abstraction" and "primitivism," both of which "...suppress history, and thereby suppress the human image in which our values subsist."¹ But then Kramer goes on to maintain that Roethke "...abandons some of his tendency toward abstraction....": "...in his latest poems Roethke affirms the human image by means which are largely denied in Praise to the End!--alyricism of adult emotions, and a humor which is nothing if not social."² Kramer is not alone in finding fault with Roethke for writing asocial poetry. John Wain writes: "What is wrong with Roethke's poetry is not that it doesn't mention the New Deal, Pearl Harbor, Little Rock, and socialized medicine, but that it doesn't enter the ordinary human world where these things have their effect."³ Wain explains this by saying that there are "areas": "--of memory, of history, of personal relationships, of opinion, of custom-- which we ordinarily inhabit, and which Roethke's poetry does not allow us, while we are under its sway, to revisit."⁴ I find it difficult to agree or disagree on this point. The criticism, however, does sound as if Kramer and Wain were asking, "Why wasn't Roethke, Yeats?" Perhaps, as an antidote to the stricture, we should return to Kramer's high valuation of the new poems in The Waking and cite in support James G. Southworth: "The new poems in The Waking (1954) are among the most

¹Kramer, 146.

²Kramer, 146.

³"The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," in Stein, p. 75.

⁴Stein, p. 75.

sensitive and beautiful poems that Roethke has written, and among the most sensitive of contemporary poetry."¹

Roethke's next book, Words for the Wind, has the subtitle The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke, and was published in England in 1957 and in this country in 1958, where it won the National Book Award for that year. It is divided into two parts, the first being The Waking in its entirety (the "New Poems" become "Shorter Poems, 1951-1953"), and the second comprising thirty-nine new poems, in five groups. As with The Waking, many of the reviews pass judgment on all of Roethke's favor, there is a growing body of adverse opinions. At this point, we come to the problem of Roethke's emulation of Yeats, which is perhaps the point most sharply contested among those who have published comments on Roethke. In my opinion, Roethke's echoing of Yeats does damage his poetry, and I believe that on this point the balance of opinion is against Roethke.

Babett Deutsch, one of the first to comment on this matter, defends him; in fact, she entitles her review "Roethke's Clear Signature": "Evidence of his devotion to Yeats is not limited to the pages written in his memory ["The Dying Man, In Memoriam: W. B. Yeats"], but there is no subservience here."² John Berryman, in a review full of high praise, sets apart the work from 1951 on: "Since 1951 his jokes have become less sinister and desolate; and although he has written delightful poems,

¹"The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," CE, XXI, (March 1960), 329.

²The New York Herald Tribune Book Week, 7 December 1958, p. 3.

one has a sense of a marking of time in relation to the giant steps earlier. Surprisingly, much of his work has become "literary"; he has submitted gleefully to the influences--mostly disastrous--of Yeats, even Eliot, and others."¹ Thom Gunn, more censorious than Berryman, writes that: "Somewhere around the end of the 'forties the verse turns more rational, but at the same time it starts showing the influence of Yeats. . . . It is, quite simply, pernicious. In the later poems of the collection, it is the ghost of Yeats speaking, or the ghost of Roethke, or a merging of the two ghosts--it is anything but the living Roethke."² W. D. Snodgrass, who like Berryman considered the "New Poems" of The Waking a marking time, is as decided in his condemnation of the "New Poems" of Words for the Wind as Gunn. He writes: "In Words for the Wind, Roethke's collected poems, the new direction appeared. It was a shock. There had been hints that Roethke was interested in Yeats's voice, hints that he might follow the general shift in twentieth-century verse by following wild experimentation with a new formalism. No one could have expected that Words for the Wind would contain a series of sixteen "Love Poems" and a sequence, "The Dying Man," all in a voice almost indistinguishable from Yeats's."³ Snodgrass believes that after this Roethke never again found his own voice. In

¹"From the Middle and Senior Generations," ASch, XXVIII (Summer 1959), 384.

²"Poets English and American," YR, n.s. XLVIII (June 1959), 624.

³Stein, p. 82.

speaking of Roethke's last book, he says that the "...language has become strangely decayed....,"¹ owing to Roethke's acceptance of a religious orthodoxy. Snodgrass writes that: "The desire to lose one's own form has taken on a religious rationale to support itself. Where Roethke's earlier free-verse poems were nearly always pure explorations, his most ambitious free-verse poems now try more and more to incorporate a fixed and predetermined religious and irrational certainty."² His explanation of this statement--which at last returns us to Roethke's use of Yeats and Eliot--appears two pages later, couched in scientific, especially psychoanalytic, terms: "Eliot's ideas and Yeat's cadences rushed in to fill the vacuum of the father-model which could have made this world bearable, yet which Roethke either could not find or could not accept."³ Although these quotations, taken from widely separated parts of Snodgrass's argument, may appear somewhat unrelated, they are in fact, the high-points of a cogent line of reasoning. I do not share Snodgrass's preference of the long narratives to the last poems, nor do I accept his "diagnosis" of Roethke's problems; I do, however, think that his argument is interesting, ingenious and often insightful.

Many others, among them W. T. Scott, Stephen Spender, Edwin Muir and Delmore Schwartz, reviewed Words for the Wind, lining up on one side or the other in the argument about Roethke's growth or decline. The argument, of course, continues. After Words for the Wind, Roethke

¹Stein, p. 91.

²Stein, p. 89.

³Stein, p. 91.

published, in 1961, a book entitled I Am! Says the Lamb, containing the "Greenhouse Poems" and twenty-two "Nonsense Poems," five of which had appeared as "New Poems" in Words for the Wind. It was reviewed in only two places, The New Yorker and Poetry. Both reviews were favorable. On August 1, 1963, Roethke died, several weeks after completing preparations for his next volume, The Far Field.¹ If the "New Poems" in Words for the Wind evoked more adverse criticism than the earlier work, The Far Field restored the balance.

I share the opinion of the majority of the reviewers that it is Roethke's best book. Stanley Kunitz, for instance, regards it as: "...unquestionably one of the landmarks of the American imagination...."² X. J. Kennedy writes in his review of The Far Field: "At times, reading his collection Praise to the End! (1951), I have suspected him of saving up his lucky phrases in notebooks, then yoking them with Roman numerals into a continuity. I feel this about none of these beautiful poems. And the shade of Yeats that haunted his work a few years ago, while still visible in the finely chiseled poems, has been absorbed successfully." William Jay Smith also finds these poems the peak of

¹The only evidence that Roethke did make these preparations is a statement by Stanley Kunitz: "A few weeks before his death Roethke completed his arrangement of some fifty new poems, published last July under the title, The Far Field. "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," The New Republic, CLII (January 23, 1965), 26. Kunitz does not indicate the source of his information.

²"Roethke: Poet of Transformations," 26.

³"Joys, Grievs and 'All Things Innocent, Hapless, Forsaken'," The New York Times Book Review, 23 August 1964, p. 5.

Roethke's achievement: "Never...has his musical sense seemed more apparent than in these last poems....Nor his technical mastery seemed surer."¹ Certainly the most extreme praise given Roethke at this time comes from James Dickey (who is not, incidentally, commenting on The Far Field): "Theodore Roethke seems to me the finest poet now writing in English. I reiterate this with a certain fierceness, knowing that I have put him up against Eliot, Pound, Graves, and a good many others of deservedly high rank.... The best of Roethke's poems are very nearly as frightening and necessary as 'darkness was upon the face of the deep,' and as simple and awesome as 'let there be light.'"² In a review of Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical, a section of The Far Field published separately, Dickey does not repeat the judgment just quoted, but does refer to "Roethke's marvelous sensuous apprehension of the natural world--finer in its way than Rilke's because more immediate, less withdrawn and contemplative...."³ This is high praise, indeed.

On the other hand, several reviewers join Snodgrass in seeing the last poems as something less than Roethke's best work. Hayden Carruth gives a detailed statement: "Some of these poems, perhaps fifteen of the whole forty-eight, seem to be unfinished work. At least they contain errors in composition that Roethke almost certainly would have corrected, though since we aren't told how or by whom the book was assembled, conjecture is useless. It is best to disregard these poems. Ten or twelve of the rest are very good Roethke indeed, the equal, or nearly,

¹"Verse: Two Posthumous Volumes," Harpers, CCXXIX (October 1964), 134.

²The Suspect in Poetry (Madison, Minnesota, 1964), p. 58.

³"Theodore Roethke," Poetry, CV (November 1964), 120.

of anything in his previous work. On every page one finds, as expected, something quite brilliant, even if only a line or a word."¹ Carruth goes on to say of the book as a whole that "These poems fail."² And he attributes this failure to Roethke's fear of dying, which "deepens into a terrible malady."³ William Meredith makes a similar judgment, which he buttresses by recalling a conversation that he had had with the late R. P. Blackmur, who was to have reviewed The Far Field: "When I talked with him [Blackmur] about the book he expresses misgivings (which I share) about some of the poems and particularly about the six longer poems gathered at the front...under the title "North American Sequence." ... The sure voice and images of some of Roethke's earlier poems in the free form are undercut here by occasional diffuseness and mannerism. ... I think Blackmur meant simply that he usually wrote better." In my opinion, the poems of the "North American Sequence" are not diffuse. They appear to be prose-like natural descriptions, but in actuality they are highly organized and concise poems. They seem to me to be freer of mannerisms than most of Roethke's other poetry.

By way of concluding this survey of the critical reception of Roethke's verse, we may look at the one full-length volume so far published on Roethke, Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, edited by Arnold Stein and published in 1965. In addition to an introduction by

¹"Requiem for God's Gardener," The Nation, CLXXXIX (September 28, 1964), 168.

²Carruth, 169.

³Carruth, 169.

⁴"Cogitating with his Finger Tips," The New York Herald Tribune Book Week, 18 July 1965, p. 4.

the editor, it contains nine essays by men of established reputation. We find here the same diversity of judgments that was noticeable throughout the preceding survey. I shall simply quote a sampling.

Stephen Spender, for instance, writes that: "There is this Yeats-obsessed side of Roethke..., one is impressed by this; but what one loves is the poet of Beatrix Potter details, not the rhapsodic bard."¹ Louis L. Martz agrees with this view. He writes of the "Greenhouse Poems": "The sequence is one of the permanent achievements of modern poetry: its poems deserve to cling to future anthologies like Marvell's "Garden" or Wordsworth's poems about daffodils."² Later Martz states that "Roethke never surpasses the achievement of The Lost Son, though many of his later poems are filled to the same brim."³ Opposed to this we have John Wain's statement that "...there is a stylistic development that goes onward from the beginning of his career to the end."⁴ On the matter of Roethke's use of other poets, Wain writes: "...his emergence into the foreground of an individual utterance is habitually in the shadows of one or other of his grand masters. This disadvantage, which made Roethke so easy a target for the disapproval of reviewers... almost to the end. But not quite to the end. His last, posthumous collection, The Far Field, brings in the harvest of those years of

¹"The Objective Ego," Stein, p. 6.

²"A Greenhouse Eden," Stein, p. 27.

³Stein, p. 35.

⁴"The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," Stein, p. 69.

single-minded dedication to poetry."¹ Finally, let me quote from Ralph J. Mills, Jr., who more than anyone else has concerned himself with explicating Roethke's poetry: "Theodore Roethke, it seems to me, is one of our great American poets; and in 'North American Sequence' and 'Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical' he has left us not only some of his finest work but a number of the most astonishing mystical poems in the language."²

Although, as we have seen, the reviewers praised Roethke highly throughout his career, these same reviewers disagree among themselves about which portion of his work is the best. It is, of course, difficult to prophesy intelligently about the resolution of this disagreement. If I were to attempt to do so, however, I should say that eventually Roethke's reputation will benefit from the disagreement. We shall come to feel that we are not forced to choose between the "Greenhouse Poems" and the "North American Sequence." The notion that the style is the man and that a "sincere" writer should perfect only one style is patently romantic. It is a notion that even the writings of James Joyce have not been able to overcome. But I feel that slowly this concept of literature is changing. Thom Gunn believes that, "Words for the Wind... is a disconcerting book, for it is written in several completely different styles, which appear to derive from several completely different attitudes toward poetry." If I am right, in the long we will praise

¹ Stein, p. 71.

²"In the Way of Becoming, Roethke's Last Poems," Stein, p. 135.

Roethke for his versatility rather than condemn him for hypocrisy or inconsistency.

The preceding survey covers only statements of an evaluative nature made by the reviewers. The remainder of this dissertation will in a sense survey the interpretative statements made by the same writers. Most of the explications that are at all detailed (and few of them are) approach the poetry in terms of psychoanalytic criticism, especially Jungian, or Western mysticism. This dissertation follows neither of these paths, though one cannot deny their usefulness. The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate that despite the different styles with which Roethke experimented, throughout his career he expressed only a few themes in terms of remarkably few clusters of images. In other words, the apparent multiplicity of both themes and images can be traced to only two or three main roots.

The title of this dissertation refers to what I consider one of the most important roots of Roethke's poetry. It alludes to one of the "Proverbs of Hell" in Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "Eternity is in love with the productions of time."¹ More than anything else, Roethke's poetry is a vivid presentation of reasons for both loving and despising "the productions of time." He moved, throughout his life, between idealism and materialism, and between renunciation and sensualism, usually not attaining the extremes. One

¹
The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman with commentary by Harold Bloom (New York, 1965), p. 35.

of the main sources of difficulty in understanding his poetry (as is true also of Yeats' work) is his lack of a clearly defined idea of what he considers to be the alternative to life in time. In other words, he did not adhere to a philosophical or religious orthodoxy, as did Eliot and Stevens. He attempted, though, to understand why he loved what he did and why he loathed and feared what he did, and in large part, the strength of his poetry lies in the honesty and perspicacity of his attempt. In the following chapters, I shall employ the term "the productions of time" in discussing groups of Roethke's poems. The term's meaning will change slightly when applied to different groups, though its basic denotation will remain constant. Fundamentally, it refers to whatever in the world of time and space excites the love or loathing of the speaker of the poems. This will usually be something tangible, but not always: the human personality and death, for instance, though intangible, are "productions of time." A few of the changes in the term's meaning are as follows: in Open House it refers to the personality and the body; in the "Greenhouse Poems" it refers to the environment as it affects the plants' growth; in the long narratives, to the parents' effect on a child and to the origins and evolution of life; in the poems of the early 1950's, to sexual desire and death; and in The Far Field it refers to the abstractions "human experience" and death.

CHAPTER II

SENTIENT TO SHOCK

Throughout his poetry Roethke employs the ancient, widely accepted idea that reality is dualistic, that everything can be subsumed under the terms "mind" and "matter." For Roethke the dualism appears in a form with a slightly different focus, for the words he most frequently uses to express it are "flesh" and "spirit." Many of his images, especially in Open House, are traditional symbols for one or both parts of this dichotomy. He speaks, for instance, of the flesh as a "house," a "garment," and a "cage," and of the spirit as "marrow," a "core," and a "heart." He does, however, depart from the usual treatment of these terms by at times giving them meanings associated with certain concepts of modern psychology: the spirit becomes the individual personality (perhaps, more narrowly, the id), and the flesh becomes the acquired customs by which the individual adapts himself to society (resembling the super-ego; the voice of the speaker mediates between the two, playing the role of the ego).

Frequently in Open House, the speaker accepts the traditional attitudes that regard the spirit as good and the body as evil. In a number of poems, however, the speaker declares that his spirit is diseased or is wild (resembling the id). He explores various means of curing or taming his spirit, of achieving peace, but on the whole the book presents no particular therapy. The theme of the diseased spirit takes on wider

significance in many poems through being transformed into the conception that all life is a "disease" of inanimate matter. It is this emphasis on the painfulness of being alive (and of being conscious) that gives me the title for this chapter.

Open House contains thirty-five poems, divided into five roughly equivalent groups. The principle governing the grouping is the relationship between the speaker and the themes. In Section I the speaker feels threatened by the matter at hand. He is discussing the failure of a direct assault of reason or consciousness on the deeper parts of his psyche; the tone often suggests that he is almost overwhelmed by fear and despair. He is, in fact, very close to being the "spiritual coward" "whose guard was lowered" in "Prognosis" (OH, p. 7). The poems of Section II may be seen as an extreme form of withdrawal from the pains discussed in the preceding group. Almost none of these poems of natural description mentions anything that pertains directly to human existence. When they do refer to mankind, it is with ironic mockery:

A man's head is an eminence upon
A field of barley spread beneath the sun.
("In Praise of Prairie," OH, p. 23.)

And,

...something is amiss or out of place
When mice with wings can wear a human face.
("The Bat," OH, p. 29.)

These poems, in their studied avoidance of human reference and of abstractions, take their place as forerunners of the "Greenhouse Poems." In Section III the speaker returns to the themes of Section I, but replaces the direct assault with the indirection of humor and bravado. Rather than being overwhelmed, he now has the strength to assert himself,

even while recognizing his own limitations:

The rough, the wicked, and the wild
That keep the spirit undefiled.
With these I match my little wit
And earn the right to stand or sit....
("Long Live the Weeds," OH, p. 35)

The "spiritual coward" of Section I has now grown brave enough to say:

This flat land has become a pit
Wherein I am beset by harm,
The heart must rally to my wit
And rout the specter of alarm.
("Against Disaster," OH, p. 38.)

Section IV also contains poems whose themes could become painful for the speaker, but here he takes the offensive and turns his humor against other people, as in "Academic":

The stethoscope tells what everyone fears:
You're likely to go on living for years,
With a nurse-mide waddle and a shop-girl simper,
And the style of your prose growing limper and limper.
(OH, p. 45)

The "you" in this poem does not mean "one," that is, does not include the speaker as part of the reference. On the contrary, the speaker, throughout Section IV, is forming the boundary line of his identity by ridiculing (separating himself from) people who are similar to him in certain respects. He has placed himself in the genus "intellectual," or, perhaps, "author" or "poet," and in these poems he emphasizes the differentiae that distinguish him from other members of the class. In Section V the speaker attains his greatest success in delivering himself, to use his words (OH, p. 49), "from all / Activity centripetal."

These poems treat subjects that are of interest not to the speaker personally, but to another person, to society, or to mankind at large. Rolfe Humphries observes that "Toward the end of the book, the 'Lull,'

for instance, or 'Highway: Michigan,' [both in Section V] the consciousness is social as well as personal...."¹ The two poems of Section V in which the "I" is present, "The Reminder" and "Night Journey," both establish the speaker's detachment.²

I do not maintain that the preceding definitions of the five sections are so accurate that they account for the placing of every poem. They do, however, fairly well describe the differences between the various groups, and, more importantly, they draw attention to Roethke's experimentation with theme, point of view, and tone. Anyone who follows the preceding discussion while at the same time examining the poems will also acknowledge the truth of Miss Louise Bogan's statement that "One immediately feels.... . the strength of . . . [Roethke's] determination to yield in no way to the poorer tricks of style."³

The title of this chapter is a variation upon a line from one of the poems in Section I, "Death Piece":

His thought is tied, the curving prow
Of motion moored to rock;
And minutes burst upon a brow
Insentient to shock.

(OH, p. 6.)

These lines touch on three concerns that are important throughout Roethke's poetry, the landscape of the mind, time, and the "shocks" to which the flesh and spirit are heir. The third of these informs most of

¹"Inside Story," The New Republic, CV (July 14, 1941), 62.

²The application of this statement to "Night Journey" will be explained in the discussion of that poem to follow.

³"Stitched on Bone," Trial Balances (New York, 1935), p. 138.

the poems in this volume, working primarily through the imagery of flesh and spirit, through the pervasive theme of the diseased spirit, and through explorations of various ways of finding peace. Before discussing particular poems, I should say that I do not generally distinguish between an image and a metaphor or simile. Wellek and Warren in The Theory of Literature do not find it necessary to make such a distinction: "Is there any important sense [they write] in which 'symbol' differs from 'image' and 'metaphor'? Primarily, we think, in the recurrence and persistence of the 'symbol.'" And 'image' may be invoked once as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, may even become part of a symbolic (or mythic) system."¹ Most of the images in this book are, in fact, metaphors, and if we ignore certain individuating details in various occurrences (i.e., if we abstract them), we can justifiably call them "symbols."

The poems in Open House as a group contain more abstractions than any other group of poems that Roethke was to write. Only the pieces in Sections II and V are descriptive to any considerable degree. Most of the poems do not contain fully sketched pictures or other detailed sensory descriptions, but however do contain a large number of metaphors (again, more than any other poems by Roethke). Let us look at the metaphors in the title poem, "Open House." They are as follows: "secrets cry," "heart keeps open house," "doors are widely swung," "love [is] an epic of the eyes," "love [has] no disguise," "naked to the bone," "nakedness [is] my shield," "myself is what I wear," "the spirit [is] spare [meaning 'lean']," "the deed will speak," "stop the lying mouth,"

¹(New York), 1956, p. 178.

"rage warps my ... cry," and "witless agony," (OH, p. 3; my italics).

From the figures dealing with the house, disguise, nakedness and the shield, one can gather that the poem employs a distinction between something inner and true and something outer and concealing or protective.

Roethke has commented on this poem at some length:

The human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible. But how? "Am I but nothing, leaning toward a thing?" I think of what I wrote and felt nearly thirty years ago in a period of ill-health and economic terror--the first poem of my first book. [Here Roethke quotes the second and third stanzas.] All of this has been said before, in Thoreau, in Rilke.

I was going through, though I didn't realize it at the time, a stage that all contemplative men must go through. This poem is a clumsy, innocent, desperate asseveration. I am not speaking of the empirical self, the flesh-bound ego; it's a single word: myself, the aggregate of the several selves, if you will. The spirit or soul--should we say the self, once perceived becomes the soul?--this I was keeping "spare" in my desire for the essential. But the spirit need not be spare: it can grow gracefully and beautifully like¹ a tendril, like a flower. I did not know this at the time.

In this prose statement--written thirty years after the poem--Roethke changes his point of emphasis (perhaps in a way designed to protect himself). The poem tells us that the speaker's spirit is not living in its "house" in the dignified manner expected of it. Rather it has wrested control from some other agency and is now making a spectacle of itself: that which it should hide for its own protection, it is proclaiming aloud. If one includes evidence from other poems in the book, one can say that the spirit is troubled or even diseased and is seeking peace through a Whitmanesque laying-bare. Perhaps this is what Roethke

¹"On 'Identity,'" in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1965), pp. 20-21. Hereafter cited as Poet and Craft.

means when he calls the poem "a clumsy, innocent, desperate asseveration." On the other hand, when he maintains that the poem is about the schooling of the spirit, he believes this early attempt at a straightforward statement of his spiritual pain.

It would be impossible to deny the presence of such a statement in "Feud" (OH, pp. 4-5), the second stanza of which runs:

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

Although the imagery employs the distinction between inner and outer, it seriously confuses the two. The "disaster" climbing the vein surely represents inherited mental or spiritual illness, and as such should be inner, which it is in the lines of stanza three:

There's a canker at the root, your seed
Denies the blessing of the sun. . .

But in stanzas four and five the illness is separated from the spirit. The uncontaminated spirit is represented as the defender of a walled city, and the illness is embodied in the image of the attackers. The poem describes the attackers as being in the city and as having been let in by "spies." These last two stanzas perhaps dramatize the speaker's effort to believe that his disease can be amputated, that it is not part of the spirit's identity. The confusion between inner and outer reflects the difficulty the speaker has in believing this. These last two stanzas read:

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

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

The dead, of course, represent the past, or more specifically the ancestors who have passed on the illness to the speaker. As in "Open House" the spirit's "secrets" are being revealed. The defense of the inner from the outer breaks down: the individual's psychological defenses fail and he is betrayed to others, to "the amorphous swarms." This poem indicates that the complete openness, treated as something of a virtue in the preceding poem, is actually an enforced suffering.

The poem in Open House that most fully employs the dualistic imagery of flesh and spirit is "Epidermal Macabre" (OH, p. 37). Although the speaker makes it perfectly clear that he loathes his own physicality, he does not make it clear whether his spirit is healthy or ill. The implications are that the spirit is troubled, but troubled because it is in the flesh, and that it could find peace if it could "dispense / With [the] false accoutrements of sense." Since virtually every image in the poem pertains to the inner-outer dichotomy, I shall quote the poem in full:

Indelicate is he who loathes
 The aspect of his fleshly clothes--
 The flying fabric stitched on bone,
 The vesture of the skeleton.
 The garment neither fur nor air,
 The cloak of evil and despair,
 The veil long violated by
 Caresses of the hand and eye.
 Yet such is my unseemliness:
 I hate my epidermal dress,
 The savage blood's obscenity,
 The rags of my anatomy,
 And willingly would I dispense
 With false accoutrements of sense,
 To sleep immodestly, a most
 Incarnadine and carnal ghost.

When the speaker calls his body "the cloak of evil and despair," he may be saying that it conceals and protects an evil and desperate soul. Of course, he might also be saying again in this line that the cloak is evil, but I think not. In any case, the poem is certainly an expression of the theme that life is painful. And if we emphasize the references to sentences and to the unconsciousness of sleep, we can say further that consciousness is an irritant, perhaps a disease, in nature. If this reading is accurate, and I believe that it is, then there is a very deep-seated ambivalence in Roethke's poetry. On the one hand, he expresses the traditional Platonic and Judao-Christian belief that the spirit is good and is, during mortal life, entangled in the evil world of physical existence. On the other hand, he sometimes expresses the belief that the life-force itself, especially that extreme development of it that we call "consciousness," is an irritation in inanimate nature. The escape from the pain of life and consciousness is insentience or oblivion, as described in the last two lines of "Epidermal Macabre" and in "Death Piece" (OH, p. 6). The ambivalence is essentially a vacillating between philosophical idealism and materialism. As the poems in this first book show, Roethke found many reasons to loathe and fear life amid the "productions of time," but the overall direction that his work takes is toward an acceptance of physicality and death; not, it must be added, at the expense of his idealism but through a change and intensification of it. He comes to see, as Blake and Whitman saw, that "All finite things reveal infinitude."¹

¹
 "The Far Field," The Far Field (New York, 1964), p. 28.

The clearest statement in Open House of many of the seminal ideas of Roethke's poetry can be found in "Genesis" (OH, p. 36). The poem describes man as an outgrowth of inanimate nature, as a victim of "wisdom," probably awareness of his own mortality, and as the creator of a protective covering of "meaning," which may be the comforting illusions of art:

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

This wisdom floods the mind,
Invades quiescent blood;
A seed that swells the rind
To burst the fruit of good.

A pearl within the brain,
Secretion of the sense;
Around a central grain
New meaning grows immense.

The wisdom seems to be the knowledge that man (or all life) arose out of inanimate nature and shall return to it; in other words, it is knowledge of mortality. The imagery of inner and outer appears in the last two lines of stanza two and in stanza three. The lines in stanza two do not follow the pattern of the flesh-spirit dichotomy as they at first may appear to do. The "seed" is not the spirit or the life-force, but the awareness of one's genesis and one's end. This awareness may on a higher level of abstraction stand for all consciousness, and the swelling of the rind and the bursting of the fruit may represent the cycle that moves from insentience to awareness, to oblivion. In the last stanza the image of a piece of fruit is replaced by the image of a pearl. We no longer have a seed as the initiator of development but an adventitious irritant. The image curiously resembles Freud's

description in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" of the origin of an internalized seat of consciousness. Since some of his remarks clarify many of Roethke's poems, I will quote at length:

Let us picture a living organism in its most simplified possible form as an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation. Then the surface turned towards the external world will from its very situation be differentiated and will serve as an organ for receiving stimuli. Indeed embryology, in its capacity as a recapitulation of developmental history, actually shows us that the central nervous system originates from the ectoderm; the grey matter of the cortex remains a derivative of the primitive superficial layer of the organism and may have inherited some of its essential properties. It would be easy to suppose, then, that as a result of the ceaseless impact of external stimuli on the surface of the vesicle, its substance to a certain depth may have permanently modified, so that excitatory processes run a different course in it from what they run in the deeper layers. A crust would thus be formed which would at least have been so thoroughly "baked through" by stimulation that it would present the most favorable possible condition for the reception of stimuli and become incapable of any further modification. [In other words, sense organs would be formed. Freud continues in the next paragraph:

But we have more to say of the living vesicle with its receptive cortical layer. This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli. It acquires the shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. . . . By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate In highly developed organisms the receptive cortical layer of the former vesicle has long been withdrawn into the depths of the interior of the body, though portions of it have been left behind on the surface immediately beneath the general shield against stimuli. These are the sense organs. . . .¹

Although Freud describes a sensitive layer that withdraws to the organism's interior and protects itself with a "shield" and Roethke

¹The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. Vol. XVIII (London, 1955), pp. 27-28.

describes a "grain" that surrounds itself with a "secretion of the sense," there is a great similarity between the two statements. Freud's account is based on the philosophical doctrine of materialism, which Roethke explores in many poems. "Genesis" can be read as a depiction from the point of view of materialism of the origins of life and consciousness. Also, both Freud and Roethke picture the consciousness as the home of pain, as something in need of protection and concealment.

Roethke's conception of the spirit bears a resemblance not only to Freud's description of the brain and sense organs but also to his model of the psyche: the deeper into the mind you delve, the farther into the past you go. The second and third stanzas of "The Unextinguished" (OH, p. 34) use fire to symbolize the consciousness or perhaps psychic energy, an image which conveys the previously discussed association of awareness and pain:

The fire of heaven dies; a fire unseen
Wanes to the febrile smoldering of sleep;
Deep-hidden embers, smothered by the screen
Of flesh, burn backward to a blackened heap.

But morning light comes tapping at the lid,
Breaks up the crust of cinders that remain,
And pokes the crumbled coal the ashes hid,
Until thought crackles white across the brain.

The word "unseen" suggests the intangible and spiritual nature of the "fire." The "screen of flesh" is not so much a shield as a prison, within which the ebbing vital energy regresses to earlier and earlier forms of existence. Roethke apparently pictures the glowing heat as burying itself deeper and deeper in the substance and uses this action to symbolize the penetration of awareness into the unconscious mind during sleep, a return to early experiences, perhaps to the origin.

The last stanza brings us to the progressive part of the cycle and the painful crackling of thought, which accompanies awakening and the turning of awareness to external reality.

"The Unextinguished" is the earliest occurrence in Roethke's poetry of an exploration below the surface of the psyche. Writing an introduction to his poetry to accompany a group of poems in Mr. John Ciardi's Mid-Century American Poets (1950), Roethke defines this important element of his work:

I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward; but there is some "progress." Are not some experiences so powerful and so profound (I am not speaking of the merely compulsive) 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? We go, as Yeats said, from exhaustion to exhaustion. To begin from the depths and come out--that is difficult; for few know where the depths are or can recognize them; or, if they do, are afraid.¹

Although the device of the allegorical journey does not come into full use until The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948), at least one other poem in Open House reveals it in germinal form. The explicit treatment of the journey may appear to carry no psychological significance in the poem "Night Journey" (OH, pp. 69-70), but if one examines the poem's metaphors such significance becomes apparent. I quote the poem in full and italicize the metaphors and puns:

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.
Bridges of iron lace,
A suddenness of trees,

¹"Open Letter," reprinted in Poet and Craft, pp. 39-40.

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A lap of mountain mist
 All cross my line of sight,
 Then a bleak wasted place,
 And a lake below my knees.
 Full on my neck I feel
 The straining at a curve;
 My muscles move with steel,
 I wake in every nerve.
 I watch a beacon swing
 From dark to blazing bright;
 We thunder through ravines
 And gullies washed with light.
 Beyond the mountain pass
 Mist deepens on the pane;
 We rush into a rain
 That rattles double glass.
 Wheels shake the roadbed stone,
 The pistons jerk and shove,
 I stay up half the night
 To see the land I love.

The facility with which Roethke invests the natural description in this poem with unobtrusive symbolic values makes it the best poem in the volume, and fortunately Roethke was learning his craft well enough that he was able to follow this performance with a whole series of works of equal merit. The metaphors of "Night Journey," with the exception of "thunder," refer to the realm of womanhood and are particularly suggestive of care for an infant. Several puns reinforce this metaphorical reference. The word "bears" in line one carries in light of the rest of the poem overtones of the meaning "give birth." "Pullman berth" is actually two puns, "berth" suggesting "birth" and "Pullman" suggesting an obstetrician. The presence of these covert meanings also may rest on the associations in traditional symbolism between mountains and night with woman.

But what is the significance of these buried references? It is, to return to Roethke's statement of 1950, to describe one of those ". . . experiences so powerful and so profound . . . that they repeat

themselves. . ., each time bringing us closer to our own most particular (and thus most universal reality."¹ The experience described is birth. The poem's development is from repose into harshness. The repose begins to end with the description of a strain that may well resemble in part the strain an infant feels during birth:

Full on my neck I feel
The straining at a curve;
My muscles move with steel,
I wake in every nerve.

"Wake," an important word in Roethke's poetry, in later poems carries the meaning of birth. Immediately following these lines, in the burst of light and the sudden thunder, the imagery depicts a flood of sensory impressions, such as impinge on the senses of a baby at birth. Then the poem moves on into suggestions of having passed through something, of an increased harshness (compared to the initial state), and of slightly subdued sensory experience now that the first rush is past. These last lines also seem to convey a sense that something has been left behind forever and that one has entered a new and relatively lasting state:

Beyond the mountain pass
Mist deepens on the pane;²
We rush into a rain
That rattles double glass.
Wheels shake the roadbed stone,
The pistons jerk and shove,
I stay up half the night
To see the land I love.

¹ Poet and Craft, p. 39.

² Possibly the mist deepening on the pane (pain) represents the gradual lessening of the intensity of sensory experience after the initial trauma.

One sees the subtle craftsmanship of which Roethke was capable by comparing two lines, a regular iambic trimeter, describing the repose, and an irregular four-beat line, describing the harshness:

Its rhythm rocks the earth,
and,

Wheels shake the roadbed stone.

The last two lines, in their expression of curiosity and love, and in the ambivalence that must be in them since the love follows immediately upon the pain, are fitting emotions for a poem describing the impressions of a new-born child.

If "Night Journey" dramatizes the mental traveler's attainment of one of the psyche's most deeply buried memories, "The Gentle" (OH, p. 60) presents the sprititual coward who has declined the trip:

The son of misfortune long, long has been waiting
The visit of vision, luck years overdue,
His laughter reduced to the sing-song of prating,
A hutch by the EXIT his room with a view.

The "depths" that Roethke spoke of in his "Open Letter" of 1950 are the symbolic container that is the womb, the nest (home) and the grave. The gentle is one of those people who are too terrified to move, and who consequently cannot make the return trip, the homecoming, which Roethke regards as spiritual progress.

What does Roethke think is gained by making this journey?

Open House does not give us the answer, but it does introduce some ideas that are relevant to the answer. It tells us that reason is a worse than useless faculty, and that peace is an imaginable but probably unattainable ideal. "Prognosis" (OH, p. 7), employing some obvious imagery of the inner-outer dichotomy, pictures reason as a helpless cow, victimized by the forces of the unconscious mind:

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Flesh behind steel and glass is unprotected
 From enemies that whisper to the blood;
 The scratch forgotten is the scratch infected;
 The ruminant, reason, chews a poisoned cud.

The last two lines of this poem recall the image of psychic energy
 burning within a coat of ashes during sleep ("The Unextinguished"):

Chill depths of the spirit are flushed to a fever,
 The nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost.

Again the spirit is pictured as something to be journeyed into, and
 here the fever, which is psychic energy or the life-force, in the
 "depths" is responsible for a rebirth.

In "The Adamant" (OH, p. 16) we see a fuller description of the
 failure of reason. I quote the entire poem:

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

The teeth of knitted gears
 Turn slowly through the night,
 But the true substance bears
 The hammer's weight.

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

The first line of the poem is distractingly ambiguous. It could mean
 that thought cannot be crushed or pulverized, but it does not. It means,
 rather, that thought--which is reason or consciousness--fails to
 discover truth. (The "gears" turning "through the night" make "awareness"
 a better gloss for "thought" than "reason" is.) Because the poem repre-
 sents "truth" as the "core" of a boulder, we can equate it with the
 "depths" of the spirit. In a sense, the poem dramatizes the strain of
 a false or misguided attempt to journey to the depths.

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I said earlier that the goal of the journey might be to achieve peace, an idea made especially plausible by the fact that Roethke denies that rational understanding, one of the few possible incentives, is a worthy goal. One method of obtaining this peace is explored in Open House, but not unequivocally accepted. We see it in abbreviated form in "The Adamant":

Compression cannot break
A center so congealed....

"Compression" here equals thought, "the great sledge." If the direct, brutal force of "compression" doesn't uncover the truth, the implication may be that something indirect and subtle will. But the last two lines tell us that this is not the correct implication:

The tool can chip no flake;
The core lies sealed.

Let alone crack the boulder in two, this tool cannot even chip a flake. The only implication possible is that the "congealed" center, which does not react to "compression," may of its own accord expand or fly outward.

How is this dispersal related to a journey inward? The answer is a paradox similar to Heraclitus' "The way up and the way down is one and the same."¹ The dispersal that is at the same time an inward exploration is artistic creation, at least by some romantic definitions of that term. (This conception also resembles Freud's definition of artistic creation, in which the artist, like the neurotic, indulges his fantasy-life, but unlike the neurotic gives it outward expression.)

¹Kirk and Raven, p. 189.

"Open House," we will remember, describes the speaker's disorderly spirit doing everything but lying sealed in the core.

Several details are overt references to the realm of art:

An epic of the eyes
My love, with no disguise.

And,

The deed will speak the truth
In language strict and pure.

Contrary to "The Adamant," this poem pictures the inner exploding into the outer, and if the "tool" in that poem partakes of the will, here the revelation is almost entirely unwilled. The last line of "Prognosis" presents a similar revelation in terms of a recovery or rebirth:

"The nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost" (OH, p. 7).

The entire poem "Prayer Before Study" (OH, p. 49), which needs no gloss, bears on this theme:

Constricted by my tortured thought,
I am too centered on this spot.

So caged and cadged, so close within
A coat of unessential skin,

I would put off myself and flee
My inaccessibility.

A fool can play at being solemn
Revolving on his spinal column.

Deliver me, O Lord, from all
Activity centripetal.

But I have said that Roethke, at the time of Open House, was ambivalent about this self-revelation. I have shown that in "Feud" (OH, pp. 405) he likened the exposure, which was compulsive, not willed, to the betrayal of "old secrets to amorphous swarms." In

"Reply to Censure" (OH, p. 39), the spirit is not pictured as the obsessed victim of hereditary illness, and consequently is not in need of the peace sought in other poems. Instead of advocating the open-door policy, this poem implies that that is a symptom of spiritual cowardice:

The brave keep undelfiled
A wisdom of their own.

The bold wear toughened skin
That keeps sufficient store
Of dignity within,
And quite at the core.

Immediately following this poem is one, "Against Disaster" (OH, p. 38), that employs the imagery of dispersal to illustrate an extreme, self-destructive anxiety:

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

All random, wasted, and dispersed,
The particles of being lie;
My special heaven is reversed,
I move beneath an evil sky,

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

I regret quoting the whole of this poem, which I consider one of Roethke's worst, but it does clarify some of the better ones. For instance, the imagery of dispersal corroborates my reading of the last stanza of "The Adamant." The heaven's being "reversed" and the land's becoming "a pit" return us to the concept of the depths as a form of symbolic container, and what we are being told here is that the womb (unreversed sky) has become a grave.

Finally, in one poem the speaker declares the exact converse of the statement made in "Open House." His spirit is not dignified and quiet as was that of the brave man in "Reply to Censure." It is, rather, the diseased spirit of so many of these poems, but it firmly resists the dispersal of the inner into the outer, the activity centrifugal. The poem describes at length the diseased spirit, so I quote it in full:

There is a noise within the brow
 That pulses undiminished now
 In accents measured by the blood.
 It breaks upon my solitude--
 A hammer on the crystal walls
 Of sense at rapid intervals.
 It is the unmelodic ring
 Before the breaking of a string,
 The wheels of circumstance that grind
 So terribly within the mind,
 The spirit crying in a cage
 To build a complement to rage,
 Confusion's core set deep within
 A furious, dissembling din.

If I should ever seek relief
 From that monotony of grief,
 The tight nerves leading to the throat
 Would not release one riven note:
 What shakes my skull to disrepair
 Shall never touch another ear.

This poem, like "Feud" (OH, pp. 4-5), separates the disease from the speaker's identity. It is within, yet it "breaks upon . . . [his] solitude." This poem uses the same images of mechanical strain that we saw in "The Adamant" (OH, p. 16), but here, in contrast, the "core" is chaotic. And last, the "I," in a strangely clinical manner, maintains that he is imprisoned with his rampaging disease and that, through no will of his own, the secret of this disease will never be divulged.

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In my opinion the poems in Open House are appreciably poorer than those in Roethke's other volumes, but are none the less important in understanding the later works. They reveal highly conscious experimentation in point of view, tone, imagery, and rhyme and meter. The images and themes are for the most part traditional, the handling of them being sometimes prosaic and trite, and at other times original. Of the forty-five poems in the book, Roethke chose not to reprint twenty-eight. I agree with his selection, excepting only "To My Sister" (OH, p. 8), which I would also exclude. Most of the poems in this volume deal with the nature of the spirit, especially as it interacts with the body and with the external world. Roethke begins here a questioning that is to last throughout his life: does the spirit have an existence independent of the body? In Open House we learn no more than that reason cannot help discover the truth and that perhaps artistic creation can. The next book continues the examination of this problem.

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CHAPTER THREE
THE SPROUTS OF IDENTITY

I. Greenhouse Poems: Description or Symbol?

The "Greenhouse Poems" are not merely natural description. They continue from Open House the idea that life and more especially consciousness are an irritant, but whereas in the earlier book the connotations of this idea were negative, here they are ambivalent. Stanley Kunitz in 1949 pointed out this ambivalence when he wrote: "The sub-human is given tongue; and the tongue proclaims the agony of coming alive, the painful miracle of growth."¹ In 1965 Kunitz more clearly refers to the speaker's ambivalence: "The boy of the poems is both fascinated and repelled by the avidity of the life-principle . . ."² I will return to this notion of ambivalence in the speaker when I discuss the individual poems.

One of the most striking things about these poems is the subtle way in which they avoid being merely descriptive. It is very easy for one to say that a given description is an analogue to something else, usually to something spiritual. Most of the reviewers of The Lost Son and Other Poems did not hesitate to make this assertion.

¹"News of the Root," Poetry, LXXIII (January 1949), 225.

²"Roethke: Poet of Transformations," The New Republic, 23 January 1965, p. 23.

For instance, Eugene Davidson wrote of Roethke's images' being
 ". . . transformed into symbols of human struggle or contemplation."¹

And Hugh Gibb explained more elaborately: ". . . the poems never remain just brilliant descriptions. Effortlessly they assume a wider significance. The nudging shoots, the rapacious weeds and the proud tulip heads dramatize the eternal process of nature to which all life conforms, including the spiritual life of man."² But these reviewers do not tell their readers that finding the proper ground in the poems for this analogical leap is a most difficult and interesting matter.

One suggestion for moving from literal description into symbolic meanings is found in John Middleton Murray's The Problem of Style, where he defines "the discovery of the symbol" as: ". . . the discovery of some analogy or similitude for the writer's emotion or thought which would exercise a kind of compulsion upon the mind of the reader, so that, given an ordinary sensibility, he must share the emotion or the experience that the writer intended him to share."³ In developing this idea, he introduces the term "crystallization": "The crystallization is, as it were, automatically accomplished; for the only way he [the poet] can communicate his emotion is by describing the objects which aroused it. If his emotion was a true one, the vividness and particularity of his description will carry over to us."⁴

¹YR (Summer 1948), p. 747.

²The New York Times Book Review, 1 August 1948, p. 14.

³(London: Oxford Paperbacks, 1960), pp. 86-87. Hereafter cited as Murray.

⁴Murray, p. 89.

Most readers who have published their impressions of the "Greenhouse Poems" have maintained that the poems are extremely accurate descriptions and are emotionally moving. According to Murray's views, they would then merit the term "symbolic." As an example of this type of poetry, Murray quotes the following lines from a poet much admired by Roethke:

To note on hedgerow baulks in moisture sprent
The jetty snail creep from the mossy thorn
With earnest heed and tremulous intend.
Frail brother of the morn,
That from the tiny bents and misted leaves
Withdraws his timid horn
And fearful vision weaves.

This is the second stanza of John Clare's "Summer Images," and it clearly resembles Roethke's "Greenhouse Poems." Murray's comment on these lines is that "Only a man who loved the snail could possibly have such a delicate knowledge of it. Thus, quite simply, the cause of the emotion becomes the symbol."¹ James Reeves, who has edited Clare's poems, makes two statements that parallel those of Murray and that serve to reveal the similarity between the two poets. He writes: "One might read pages and pages of Clare's poems and suppose them to be 'merely descriptive.' If that happens, one is deceived."² Then he restates the connection Murray has seen between "true emotional reaction to objects

¹Murray, p. 90.

²"Introduction" to Selected Poems of John Clare, ed. James Reeves (New York, 1957), p. xiii. The introduction was written in 1953.

of the external world" and "keen sensous perception":¹ "Clare's minute observation, his lingering over the details of a country scene, his intense interest in the plainest and most homely manifestations of life on the land, could arise only from a disinterested and self-forgetful love."²

Although Roethke does not make the connection for us between his "lovely dimunitives" and his precise descriptions, he does fifteen years after the publication of these poems, speak of his love for the lowest forms of life: "He [God] is . . . accessible . . . in the lowest forms of life. . . . Nobody has killed off the snails. Is this a new thought? Hardly. But it needs some practicing in Western society. Could Reinhold Niebuhr love a worm? I doubt it. But I--we--can."³ If Professor Murry is correct, such an emotion is sufficient to raise the poems above the level of simple nature poetry. So far I have mentioned two possible grounds for regarding the poems as something other than pure natural description, the theme of life and consciousness as irritant, and Murray's connection between symbolized emotion and description. I want to mention one more ground that has been suggested by commentators and then define three that have not been.

¹ Murray, p. 90.

² Reeves, p. xiv. Another statement of Reeves's denies that Clare's emotion was "self-forgetful," but not that it was love: "When Clare writes from his sympathy with small and helpless creatures, he is really thinking of himself," p. xx.

³ "On 'Identity,'" a statement made at a Northwestern University panel on "Identity" in February, 1963, printed in Poet and Craft, p. 27.

James G. Southworth, in an article on Roethke's entire output prior to 1960, makes the following statement, which seems to apply to the "Greenhouse Poems," though he does not specify the application of his remark: ". . . he [Roethke] has looked so steadily and perceptively at the minutiae of nature that his symbol-free early descriptions in the light of his later work assume a symbolic quality."¹ However, like the reviewers, Southworth does not back up his word "symbolic" by relating to the details of the poems. He begins his discussion of the poems with one paragraph on Open House and then turns to the "Greenhouse Poems," immediately stating that they are ". . . a conscious attempt of the poet to examine his early life . . . and the purgative effect achieved by such an investigation. The struggle is a painful one, symbolized in the opening lines of 'Cuttings' (late version)." Southworth then quotes the following lines to prove that the poems are symbolic:

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?

His comment is: "In the earlier version [of 'Cuttings'] there is no sense of the poet's association of his personal problem with that of the cuttings."² In other words, a description is symbolic if it convinces

¹"The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," XXI (March 1960), 327. Hereafter cited as Southworth.

²Southworth, 327.

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This is essentially a restatement of Murray's argument. Unfortunately, Southworth does not amplify his own idea that the later poems transform earlier descriptions into symbols.

The three characteristics of the "Greenhouse Poems" that I wish to bring out are: (1) the implied human presence, (2) the temporal and spatial distortions, and (3) the syntactic distortions. All three, I feel, represent conscious design in the poems and lift them to the level of symbolic significance.

Roethke's concern for the differences between writing in the first, second, or third person can be seen in Open House, where he attempts all three. In fact, as I have pointed out, the grouping of poems in that volume depends on the relation between the speaker and the subject. In this series of poems, only five of the original thirteen contain a first person pronoun, and these five themselves reveal the "I's" presence only grudgingly. Southworth's contrast between the earlier and later versions of "Cuttings" turns on this point. The explicit presence or absence of the "I" is, however, only one aspect of what I have called "the implied human presence."

The other two characteristics, distortion of spatial and temporal relations, and syntactic distortion, are perhaps in a means-end relationship, the second being a means of showing the first. But I have separated them because the spatial-temporal distortions are at times presented thematically, rather than grammatically. Usually, though, the effect of the syntactic distortions is a blurring or a transformation of space-time relationships. An interesting and unnoticed

fact about the "Greenhouse Poems" is that they are arranged in an order paralleling the growth of a plant, beginning with the abrupt and brutal creation of a new plant (a cutting), and continuing with its taking root, passing through a period of intense growth, of cultivation by the "weed puller," of blossoming, of reproduction and maturity, and finally of its coming to the "flower-dump" and the intimations of "the weather of eternity." My discussion follows this arrangement of the poems.

II. A Reading of the "Greenhouse Poems"

I mentioned that the "I" in "Cuttings (later)" (LS, p. 10) is an explicit statement of human presence; however, the title of "Cuttings" itself (LS, p. 9) implies that presence, since "cuttings" are made by men. As I hope to show in my subsequent treatment of this idea, the "human presence" has the significance to the speaker of parental care for a child. The plants themselves are frequently associated with or identified with (I will not say symbolic of) the child. The word "slip" in the line,

But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water,
is a common metaphor for a slim boy (usually "a slip of a boy").¹ Other metaphors in the poem reinforce this reading by describing the child's world as well as the plants: "sugary loam," "coazing," and perhaps "nudge" and "horn." "Sugar" and "coazing" work together very effectively to suggest the plant-child analogy.

¹ The two meanings of "slip" are also joined in "scion." See The Concise Oxford Dictionary.

"Cuttings (later)" differs from the preceding poem in that it makes an explicit comparison between plant and man, and by introducing the "I." The linking of the "resurrection" of the cuttings with the martyrdom of a saint is a superb figure. Moreover, the connotations of cruelty and pain that are involved in beginning the series of poems with "cuttings" rather than bulbs or seeds possibly hark back to "Night Journey" and the theme of life-force as irritant, which was seen throughout Open House.

Is the "I" of the poem a boy, or a man recalling his early life? The question cannot be answered with certainty because of what I have called "syntactic and temporal distortion." "Cuttings" is written as a declarative sentence, comprising six independent clauses, all in the present tense. The syntactic distortion begins in the first section of "Cuttings (later)" with an anacoluthon:

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?

Not only is there a syntactic break at the end of the second line, but there is also an apparent shift in tense. "Struggling" is a present participle, but "strained" and "rose" are finite verbs in the preterite. The second section continues this refusal to locate the experience in time. The tense-marking verbs here are in the present, but they are the historical present and the present of general truth. The use of the word "beginnings" contributes to this "temporal distortion," by renaming part of the plant in such a way as to focus attention on its place in a temporal scheme.

What is the significance of this type of distortion? Conceivably, the grammatical details that I have mentioned parallel or even reveal the theme of the miraculous "temporal distortion" of a saint's resurrection to a new life. There is a further significance, which at this point may be only tentatively advanced, and that is that the use of the historical present or the present of general truth blurs the distinction between the individual and the species. For instance, the lines,

When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet,

do not describe a unique experience but a recurring one. One may easily see this device as an incipient form of the search-for-identity theme, the principal theme of The Lost Son.

In "Cuttings (later)" the "I" feels some sense of human guilt for forcing the plants to reproduce in a painful way. This is shown by the reversal of two faded metaphors, once taken from the realm of plants and applied to men, "lopped " and "limb," but now reversed in order to describe the sufferings of the "cuttings." It is also shown by the speaker's assertion that,

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it. . . .

"Root Cellar" (LS, p. 11) continues this sense of human guilt, but here again the human presence is only implied. The primary aim of the poem is to create the picture of an environment that is at once a goad to life and a stifling enclosure. This ambiguity is found in the title, where "cellar" brings to mind "cell," the basic unit of living sub-

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stances, and the meaning "underground room." More importantly, it is revealed in the envelop-type structure of the poem, two declarative sentences with an exclamatory sentence between them. The poet draws attention to this structure by making the first clauses of the declarative sentences nearly identical:

Nothing would sleep in that cellar . . .

and,

Nothing would give up live. . . .

The first of these lines achieves additional force in establishing the aims of the poem by rhythmically and thematically echoing the first sentence of a famous poem with a similar intention: "That is no country for old men," from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." While this first clause is saying that everything in the cellar that had¹ potential to live and grow was forced by the environment to do so, it is also implying human presence (and ultimately guilt) through such words as "cellar," "ditch," "boxes" and "crates." Notice that all of these man-made objects are forms of enclosure. This first sentence also conveys a picture of sinister sexuality, through implicit and explicit means (principally, of course, through the words "lolling obscenely").

The exclamatory sentence has no verb, and its main purpose seems to be to introduce the noun "stinks." This word gives a special force to the last sentence:

Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

¹In discussing the poem, I shall remove the ambiguity created by the main verbs being either past or future and treat the action as if it were in the past. "Would sleep," although called "future conditional," can describe either an habitual past action or a future action.

"Breath" here naturally suggests the old meaning of spirit, and, as in Open House, the spirit is suffering almost as if in hell. A tenuous reading might identify the speaker (in his boyhood?) with the plant life, and the (negligent?) greenhouse owner with a parent. Such a reading would be an example of Southworth's previously cited theory that the later poems transform the earlier ones from description into symbol.

I said, in discussing "Root Cellar," that everything with the potential for life and growth was forced by the environment to live and grow. But the last line of the poem confuses the living things and the environment. Dirt is not living, but even it "kept breathing a small breath." The strategy of the next poem, "Forcing House," (LS, p. 12) is to create the effect of an intensification of life through this confusion of organisms and environment. The title relates the poem to my reading of "Root Cellar," but whereas in that poem the human presence is essentially one of negligence, here it is a "forceful" domination. The beginning of the blending (or confusion of organisms and environment) comes with the picture of all the plants, which are catalogued in lines one through four, pulsing "with the knocking pipes." It is advanced with the two parallel participial phrases:

Swelling the roots with steam and stench,
Shooting up lime and dung and ground bones. . . .

To say that the "knocking pipes" swell the roots and shoot up lime, etc., is to abridge a complex, causal sequence. Although that the pipes cause the roots to do such and such may be the principal meaning of the lines, the moment of hesitation caused by the difficult abridgement allows the reader time to suspect that the pipes are inside the plants, in other words, are the capillaries of the plants.

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And it is the capillaries of the plants rather than the heating pipes that are likely to carry "lime and dung and ground bones." The last line of the poem adds to this impression:

As the live heat billows from pipes and pots.

Here, the metaphoric use of "live" explicitly fuses the two realms, as does the linking of "pipes" and "pots." This fusion creates a sense of the life processes being intensified many times over, although this poem lacks an accompanying sense of loathing that one sees in "Root Cellar." Possibly, this lack is related to the care of the florist that is manifested in the "live heat" as opposed to the negligence implied in the preceding poem.

"Forcing Hsuse" not only employs a confusion of organism and environment but also one of space and time. The distortion here is indicated thematically, not grammatically:

Fifty summers in motion at once. . . .

This line is set in apposition to the participial phrases, "Swelling the roots . . ." and "Shooting up lime . . .," so that the accelerated growth is equated with a compression of time. Of course, the notion of "compressing" time treats time as a spatial quantity. Furthermore, "summer" is a noun, but is the name of a duration of time. It is difficult to conceive of a duration of time "in motion": to do so treats time as an object in a spatial framework. The normal distinctions between space and time are further blurred by the fact that one summer cannot occur simultaneously with another, and here we are given fifty at once.

"Weed Puller" (LS, p. 13) uses syntactic distortion to avoid locating the experience in time. Since there is not a finite verb in the entire poem, the action could have been completed in the past, be continual, or be occurring in the present. Corresponding to this blurring is the oblique treatment of human presence. Although the title names a human agent, that agent does not act as the subject of any of the verbals in the poem. We are given a series of participles whose subject we infer to be the weed puller. His presence is mentioned in only two lines:

With everything blooming above me,
and

Me down in that fetor of weeds. . . .

Since the intention of the poem seems to be to create a sense of this speaker's identification with, and perhaps over-reaction to, the plants, these lines are crucial. We gain some notion of the speaker's very different but equally strong identifications with the weeds and the flowers through some evaluative words and through the use of names. Three lines of the poem have honorific connotations, those describing the flowers above the benches:

With everything blooming, above me,
Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,
Whole fields lovely and inviolate. . . .

The word "inviolate" indicates that the speaker does not associate these flowers with their own "black hairy roots,"

Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes. . . .

On the other hand, he feels himself somehow sullied by his job of

Tugging all day at perverse life:
The indignity of it!

If the flowers, which are specifically named, retain their identities, "inviolate," the weed puller himself is in danger of losing his, for the weeds do not have the individuality that the flowers do. Instead of being named, they are referred to as merely "fern-shapes," or as "weeds," or "perverse life." The threat to the speaker's identity is seen in the lack of a grammatical subject for the verbals, and seen thematically in his animal-like posture and his similarity to the living-dead:

Crawling on all fours,
Alive in a slippery grave.

By calling himself a "weed puller" rather than a gardener or a young florist, the speaker also suggests that he feels his identity is un-established, associated with the nameless weeds.

"Orchids" (LS, p. 14) extends this theme of identity, focusing on the orchids alone. They differ from the lilies, cyclamen and roses, which seem to represent normally established identities. The orchids are over-developed identities or else pampered ones that consider themselves "necessary angels." Whereas the other flowers sit on concrete benches, these hang in "mossy cradles." They are feared rather than admired. The theme of human care is suggested by the references to the heat, the whitewashed glass, and the "mossy cradles." But the effect of this care is pictured in the line:

So many devouring infants!

An excess of care has turned them into monsters:

Adder-mouthed,
 Swaying close to the face,
 Coming out, soft and deceptive,

 Lips neither dead nor alive,
 Loose ghostly mouths
 Breathing.

After "Orchids" we come to perhaps the weakest poem of the sequence, "Moss-Gathering" (LS, p. 15) which rewords the theme of man's guilt acquired through his "desecration" of "the whole scheme of life." Unlike "Root Cellar" and "Cuttings (later)," where the speaker's guilt was presented more or less dramatically, "Moss-Gathering" simply declares:

. . . Something always went out of me when I
 dug loose those carpets,

and

. . . afterwards I always felt mean. . . .

I cannot see how this piece differs from expository prose.

"Big Wind" (LS, pp. 16-17) I feel is the best poem in the series. Its principal aim is to create a sense of ideal human care, an aim it achieves by employing subtle handling of the human presence and the distortion of the spatial and temporal relationships.

Although the human presence in the poem is very important, it is only made explicit twice:

So we drained the manure-machine . . . ,

and

We stayed all night. . . .

In the poem, human care preserves the flowers during a bad storm.

This care exhibits three remarkable qualities: ingeniousness,

endurance, and selflessness. The first describes the idea and action of running liquid manure through the steam pipes when the water was cut off by a storm. The second is seen in the workers' staying all night,

Stuffing the holes with burlap. . . .

And the third is illustrated by the emphasis that the speaker places on the rose-house itself rather than on her human caretakers:

But she rode it out,
That old rose-house. . . .

This emphasis runs through the last thirteen lines of the poem.

Kenneth Burke has pointed out that the poem moves in four rhetorical steps: definition of the situation (lines 1-5), description of an appropriate action (lines 6-20), restatement of the action in figurative terms (lines 21-31), and a "gesture of assertion" (lines 32-33).¹ Steps one, three, and four each employ several metaphors, but step two employs only one, "live heat". The effect of the metaphors is a spatial and temporal distortion, such as we have already seen in "Cuttings (later)" and "Forcing House." How does it work here?

The poem describes (or narrates), primarily in spatial terms, an ordeal that was endured (all the finite verbs are preterite) over a period of time. It begins by asking,

Where were the greenhouses going . . . ?

The question gives a stationary object spatial motion. The motion of the buildings is described as a "Lunging into the lashing Wind. . . ."

¹
"The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," SR, LVIII
(January 1950), 70.

During the literal narration of the human action (Burke's step 2), attention shifts from the greenhouses to one rose-house. Steps 3 and 4 are an extended trope ". . . that likens the hothouse [rose-house] to a ship riding a gale."¹ But Burke moves too fast. He does not point out the striking fact that the "ship" actively battles the storm rather than passively rides it out. The emphasis is on the motion of the "ship," when in reality the men on such a vessel would try to prevent its moving. Literally it is the storm that moves--not the rose-house or the ship. The final lines of the poem beautifully blur the distinctions between spatial and temporal frameworks:

She sailed into the calm morning,²
Carrying her full cargo of roses.

These lines cap a poem which has given a stationary object motion in order to describe that object enduring something over a period of time; here the attributed motion carries the unmoving building into a period of time. In "Cuttings (later)" and "Forcing House," where space and time are also translated one in terms of another, the effect created is one of a miraculous intensification of life. In "Big Wind," it is the man-made environment, not living things, that is the central concern.

Here, as in "Cuttings (later)," the poet reapplies terms of plant life that were once borrowed from that realm to be used as

¹ Burke, 70.

² A printer's error that escaped the proofreader in I Am! Says the Lamb suggests the unconventionality of this type of distortion. There the line reads: "She sailed until the calm morning. . . ." (I Am!, p. 59.)

metaphoric descriptions of other things. In "Cuttings (later)," he made "lopped" and "limbs" describe both saints being martyred and slips being cut from plants. In "Big Wind," the "ship" (metaphor for rose-house) and the storm (literal) are described in plant and animal metaphors. The storm is said to have "teeth," a "core," and "pith." The "wind-waves," a term that is a meeting point for the literal and figurative elements, are "flailing" and "wearing themselves out." The metaphoric ship is "ploughing" and "bucking," and roses are spoken of as the "cargo." I have compared this poem with "Cuttings (later)," but it can also be compared with "Forcing House," for, as in that poem, there is a blurring of the distinction between organism and environment, between the living and the non-living.

"Old Florist" (LS, p. 18) develops the comment made on human presence in "Big Wind." It also recalls "Root Cellar" in that it is the first poem after that one to avoid making any declarative statement. The significance of this is increased when one notices that the four following poems, which conclude the "Greenhouse Poems," do not contain a single declarative sentence. The principal function of this refusal to write in conventionally grammatical sentences, what I have called "syntactic distortion," is to present the special nature of the temporal and spatial relations already indicated. Sometimes the special nature of these relations is a translation of one into the other, of spatial into temporal or vice versa. At other times, the purpose seems to be to make location of the experience in time impossible. This, in turn, lends the described experience an air of universality, of timelessness, and also blurs the distinction between the individual and

the species.

"Old Florist" may be considered wither a series of parallel absolute constructions or an exclamatory sentence of many clauses, all built around the core:

How he could flick and pick
Rotten leaves or yellow petals. . . .

In either case, there is only one indication of tense, that is, one marker of the location of the experience in time, the verb "could" in the lines just quoted. The poem admiringly states that there exists a human whose attributes are those depicted in "Big Wind": inventiveness, endurance, and selflessness. The selflessness is seen in the speaker's refusal to describe the man himself, or to name him. His only characteristics are the actions he performs in caring for the plants. (Possibly, he is related to the identityless speaker of "Weed Puller." Like the weeds, he is not named but referred to by his shape: "That hump of a man. . . .") His inventiveness is almost miraculous in its power over life and death:

He could drown a bug in one spit of tobacco juice,
Or fan life into wilted sweet-peas with his hat. . . .

And, as in "Big Wind," his endurance is shown by his caring for the plants throughout a difficult night:

He could stand all night watering roses, his feet
blue in rubber boots.

A poem that sheds some light on "Old Florist" is "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz," which Roethke added to the sequence when it was published in The Waking.¹ Although it is not non-

¹The Waking, (New York, 1953), pp. 43-44.

declarative like the last five poems in the original sequence, it presents as they do the spatial-temporal distortion in thematic terms. The poem comprises three main parts, perhaps corresponding to the names in the title, a reminiscence of the women caring for the plants, a description of one of the women playing with the speaker when he was young, and a comment on the presence of the women in the present life of the speaker. These women are themselves described much more fully than the implied figures in the other poems, more fully than the old florist, and more fully than the speaker himself. They, too, however, are mainly characterized by the actions they perform in caring for the plants and the boy. Here, certain sexual undertones, which may also be present in "Old Florist," add an interesting aspect to the description.

What are the important qualities of the three women? One is that they represent a kind of order for the speaker. The description of their work makes it sound as if they are imposing a grind on something structureless. They wind the growing tendrils and stems around guide strings, so that the growth does not follow the accidents of the non-human environment. They straighten, tie, and tuck. The last line of the first part of the poem summarizes it and makes the symbolic nature of the description explicit:

They trellised the sun; they plotted for more
than themselves.

A trellis is essentially a grid, a means of imposing order, and to trellis the sun suggests the imposing of a temporal order. The word "plotted" has several possible meanings here. The most literal is a statement about the selflessness of the three: they worked and planned

("plotted" in an almost conspiratorial way) in greenhouses that they did not own. This word, like the phrase "trellised the sun," fuses the temporal and spatial, for its other possible meanings are that they planned what the future would bring and that they dug a plot for the florist. The following less literal meanings should also be noted: a grave "plot" and to "plot" graph. The speaker's reaction to this ordering (perhaps related to the German name "Bauman"--builder)¹ is ambivalent. On one hand, he speaks of the women as,

These nurses of nobody else . . . ,

and describes their work as,

Keeping creation at east. . . .

On the other hand, he likens them to witches, and the description of their bringing of order might recall the line in "Prognosis":

The ruminant, reason, chews a poisoned cud. . . .

This ambivalence is even clearer when one looks at the sexual undertones in this poem. These begin in the first line where the speaker refers to the "ancient ladies." It continues in his description of their tying and tucking the stiff, jointed stems, like nurses. He says

They stood astride pipes,
Their skirts billowing out wide into tents. . . .

And then the fine line, with the rich undertones of "teased" and "seed":

¹"Bau," in German, means 1) "building, erection, construction; edifice structure; 2) build, frame, form; 3) burrow and den; cultivation, culture, agriculture." These meanings are similar to those of the English word "plot."

They teased out the seed that the cold kept asleep. . . .

The speaker's memory of the women's treatment of him obviously links him with the plants:

I remember how they picked me up, a spindly kid,
Pinching and poking my thin ribs
Till I lay in their laps, laughing,
Weak as a whiffet. . . .

And then the concluding six lines, in which the sexual undertones are especially noticeable:

Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,
They still hover over me,
These ancient leathery crones,
With their bandannas stiffened with sweat,
And their thorn-bitten wrists,
And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly
over me in my first sleep.

Throughout the poem, one is constantly forced to think of the three women as women, but at the same time reminded that they cannot be objects of desire. The terms "nurse" and "witch" both give the women the air of mysterious attractive power combined with a negative charge. The significance of these women for the speaker is best seen by comparing this poem with "Weed Puller." In that piece, the speaker's "violable" identity was likened to the nameless weeds, and contrasted to that of the specifically named flowers. In this poem, the women's personal names are given, so we may assume that they in some way represent one or several established identities, possibly the three fates. Their effect on the speaker has been profound and outside of his control. The description of the boy lying in their laps, "laughing / Weak as a whiffet," unites the two strands mentioned earlier: his pleasure and lack of control. The last six lines continue the notion of his lack

of control. The last six lines continue the notion of his lack of control, but do not continue the pleasurable portrait of the "crones." The tone of these lines is ambivalent and possibly even negative. In a sense, the women or fates have violated his identity. This is the meaning of their ordering, their plotting, and their trellising the sun, and it is also one meaning of the temporal distortion: the speaker's present cannot be severed from his past. The women shape his present existence and identity just as they shaped the growth of the plants that they "sewed" to the guide strings.

The last four poems of the series only once employ a finite verb. Their most obvious grammatical technique is the use of paratactic chains of absolute constructions, the effect of which is to place the events outside of time. The absolute constructions could be converted into independent clauses by adding was, is or will be before the participles (which are all present participles).

"Transplanting" (LS, p. 19) is in two sections, the first describing human action, the second, the growth of the plants, the first being a cause or condition of the second. The human action is presented entirely in favorable terms, though not the ones distinguished in "Big Wind." Here the qualities emphasized are delicacy and speed. Attention is focused on the action, which is as thoroughly as possible separated from the performer. Possibly this separation is meant to indicate the selflessness of the human character and the universal quality of the action performed. The first line is ambiguous, so that the relation between the speaker of the poem and the person transplanting is indefinable:

Watching hands transplanting. . . .

The speaker may be watching another person, or "watching" may be an attributive adjective modifying "hands." "Hands" then becomes the subject for the nine present participles in the first section. The last two lines, however, turn attention to the plant itself,¹ and it is here that the single finite verb in these four poems occurs:

Into the flat-box it goes,
Ready for the long days under the
sloped glass. . . .

This poem works with the same contrast between freedom and enclosure that "Root Cellar" does. The action of part one, though performed with delicacy and speed, is still one of burying, tamping, shaking down, and putting in boxes "for the long days under the sloped glass." In contrast, part two describes the plants' growth as release:

. . . the smallest buds
Breaking into nakedness,
The blossoms extending
Out into the sweet air,
The whole flower extending outward,
Stretching and reaching.

In "Root Cellar," the humanly created environment is cramped and dark, but it is conducive to the growth of obscene roots. In "Transplanting," the humanly created environment is light and open, and the sexual undertones (as in "nakedness") are innocent rather than obscene.

"Child on Top of a Greenhouse" (LS, p. 20) is more interesting when read in the light of the preceding poems than when read alone. By itself, it is too sketchy to bring out the full significance of its own lines. It is primarily about the human presence in the greenhouse

¹ Possibly the vacillation between describing one plant and several symbolizes the blurring of the distinction between individual and species, obviously contributing to the development of the identity theme.

1

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world, but it contrasts the actions of the speaker, a child, with those of adults described in other poems. Unlike the "selfless" workers, the child is showing-off.¹ He is not enduring a difficult time but indulging in a momentary burst of playfulness. The relation, however, between his "performance" and the inventiveness, delicacy, and swiftness of the adults is not one of mere contrast, but a subtle commentary of each on the other. Perhaps this poem and "The Gentle" in Open House are portraits of the artist as a child, suggesting that the ingeniousness of the artist appears childish and useless to certain kinds of adult eyes.

This reading accounts for two other elements of the poem. Here, as in "Moss-Gathering," the speaker presents himself as a child and acknowledges his own guilt before "the natural order of things":

The half-grown chrysanthemums staring
up like accusers. . . .

(One is reminded of the sense of guilt Hawthorne mentions in the Preface to The House of Seven Gables, where he imagines not the natural order but his own ancestors disapproving of his being an artist.)

The second element is the peculiar nature of the actions mentioned in this poem, which are considerably more violent than those of any other poem in the group, with the exception of "Big Wind." In that poem the violent actions were ascribed to the rose-house and the storm, the two figurative combatants in purposeful relationship with each other. In

¹ He may be related to the orchids, though he is certainly not as sinister.

"Child on Top of a Greenhouse" each agitation has a different actor, and there is no purposeful accord or opposition among them. The main intention of the poem is to create a sense of the speaker's ability to draw to himself a certain amount of attention from the welter of undirected agitation:

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,
The half-grown crysanthemums staring up like accusers,
Up through the streaked glass, flashing 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!

"Flower Dump" (LS, p. 21) returns to the mode of implying human presence. The title itself names a man-made thing, and at the same time begins to set up a tension between the living and the dead. The human presence is implied by four words. The first is "slag," which of course might refer to volcanic scoria rather than the man-made dross from the smelting process, but in both instances its connotations are coldness, uselessness, and death. "Pile" also does not necessarily indicate human action, though in the line,

Whole beds of bloom pitched on a pile,

it certainly does. "Twined," in the lines,

With bleached veins
Twined like fine hair,

does not literally name the result of a human action, but figuratively it does. Only human beings twine hair. The last word, "pot," in the line,

Each clump in the shape of a pot,

is the clearest of the four, naming as it does an artifact, a product of human workmanship. But what is the significance of this implied human presence? The main intention of the poem answers this question. In the plant world, man, in godlike manner, controls life and death. The adage, "Man proposes; God disposes," provides an interesting insight here. Substitute the "plang," "growth," or "organic processes" for "man," and "man" for "God," and the meaning of the human presence becomes clearer. Also the word "disposes," when the rewritten adage is applied to this poem, becomes an illuminating pun. But this relationship between man and plant reverberates even more, if it is read as a parallel to the adult-child relationship. The godlike human being (or adult) carelessly disposes of things that are of life-and-death importance in the plant world (or child's world). The last lines of the poem assert some sort of triumph of life over death, of individual identity over obliteration, and perhaps of the child over the adult:

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

The last line explicitly describes the jumbling together--the failure to treat with distinction--the living and the dead. The "swaggering" tulip on top resembles the child on top of the greenhouse, and consequently suggests the artist as opposed to the careless, conventional adult. It is impossible and harmful to limit the significance of the poem to any one of these meanings: they are all present. And it is equally impossible and harmful to resolve the "contradiction" in the speaker's (child's) attitudes toward adults. Every important relationship between human beings, when examined honestly, reveals deep

ambivalences within each individual concerned. The speaker in these poems both admires the adults who work in the greenhouses and hates them, fearing their power over his own potential identity.

"Carnations" (LS, p. 22), the last poem in the greenhouse sequence, develops a new kind of grammatical distortion and thematically presents a temporal distortion. The first two lines may be read as two paratactic independent clauses in the preterite or as two absolute constructions:

Pale blossoms, each balanced on a single jointed stem,
The leaves curled back in elaborate Corinthian scrolls. . . .

Nothing indicates whether "balanced" and "curled" are finite verbs or participles. The remaining five lines do not remove the ambiguity, and the poem stands as a temporal illusion. Looked at one way, it is a description of past action; looked at another, it is present.

And the air cool, as if drifting down from wet hemlocks,
Or rising out of ferns not far from water,
A crisp hyacinthine coolness,
Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,
The windless perpetual morning above a September cloud.

The last two lines thematically present the temporal distortion, which of course corresponds to the grammatical one. Speaking of the "weather of eternity" is a slight distortion, since weather is usually changeable, and, as defined by The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1951), is firmly rooted in time and space:

"Atmospheric conditions prevailing at a place and time." The word "autumnal" deepens this distortion, for change is the essence of seasons and is usually excluded from the conception of unchanging eternity.

"Windless perpetual morning" is another of Roethke's beautiful temporal

paradoxes, recalling "Fifty summers in motion at once" and "Sailed into morning."

The "Greenhouse Poems," then, continue development of the identity theme that began in Open House. Earlier facets, such as the diseased spirit and the journey inward, disappear to be replaced by new ones, such as the effects of human (parental) care and of the environment on a growing personality. Exploring new imagistic devices, subtle effects of point of view, and the uses of lightly stressed but unclouded rhythms, these poems justifiably advanced Roethke's reputation. If they have a flaw, it lies in their working too effectively as natural description and in not providing clear enough signs of their symbolic intent.

III. Other Short Poems

Sections II and III of The Lost Son and Other Poems demonstrates further Roethke's handling of the human presence. The seven poems in Section II deal with human characters, actions, and situations; the five poems in Section III avoid human references almost entirely, allowing only a few hints of the speaker's humanity. Other, less important, differences between the two groups are as follows: Section II is more sombre, abstract, and remote (that is, the speaker is a detached observer, though this is not true of "The Return"). Section III celebrates non-human nature and the speaker's sense of union with the "not-me."

"My Papa's Waltz" (LS, p. 25) again presents the speaker as a child and emphasizes his ambivalent feelings toward his father.

The lines,

But I hung on like death,

and,

Still clinging to your shirt,

show the relationship between the two. In spite of his father's drunkenness, the noise, the smell, and the pain, the boy hangs on. Reducing this poem to the baldest paraphrase, I would say its point is that one's identity is rooted in one's family and that unpleasantness must be accepted. One cannot strike out alone too early, but must receive the support offered, almost regardless of pain and entanglements. The poem recalls the family poems of Open House, especially "The Gentle," and "Weed Puller," "Root Cellar" and "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" of the greenhouse series.

"Pickle Belt" (LS, p. 26) explores the possibilities of a shifting point of view. The first stanza looks from a remote point at some unidentified factory workers:

The fruit rolled by all day.
They prayed the cogs would creep;
They thought about Saturday pay,
And Sunday sleep.

The second stanza narrows to an individual worker and enters his mind; the speaker is inside a boy, looking out:

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

The boy apparently feels a contrast between his own vivid sensations and the vapid praying and thinking of the other workers. The third line suggests his adolescent over-dramatization. Then the third stanza suddenly places the speaker at a very remote vantage point, from which he sees the boy not as an individual but as an expendable tool used for the moment by nature for the propagation of the species. He has no identity other than his prickling lust:

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

"Dolour" (LS, p. 27) presents a picture of the tedium of a life devoid of emotion and imagination, and consequently it comments on the theme of identity. Thoreau exclaims in *Walden*: "How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under. . . [the] load [for material possessions]!"¹ and ". . . Men have become the tools of their tools."² Roethke's poem repeats this same observation, referring to the

Endless duplication of lives and objects,
and,

. . . the duplicate grey standard faces.

Roethke, himself, commented on the poems in a talk "On 'Identity'" delivered in 1963. Speaking of Americans' failure of desire for "purity, a final innocence," he said: "Yet we [Americans] continue to

¹
I, 10-11. Walden: Or, Life in the Woods, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston, 1897),

²
Thoreau, I, 61.

spoke of "a real hunger for a reality more than the immediate: a desire not only for a finality, for a consciousness beyond the mundane, but a desire for quietude, a desire for joy."¹ Again Roethke is very close to Thoreau.

"The Return" (LS, p. 29) introduces the figure of "all haunted and harried men,"² which is to occupy Roethke's mind throughout the poems of the late 1940's and early 1950's. This figure is foreshadowed in earlier poems, such as "Feud" and "Prognosis," and in "Greenhouse Poems," such as "Root Cellar," "Weed Puller" and "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze." In this poem the speaker likens himself to a beast being hunted down that has returned to its lair, knowing it will be found. Two interesting qualities of the poem are the subtle balance between the human and bestial characteristics of the speaker, and, secondly, the way in which the poem strongly but indirectly suggests the question, why has he returned to this unpleasant place?

I circled on leather paws
In the darkening corridor,
Crouched closer to the floor,
Then bristled like a dog.

As I turned for a backward look,
The muscles in one thigh
Sagged like a frightened lip.

A cold key let me in
That self-infected lair;
And I lay down with my life,
With the rags and rotting clothes,
With a stump of scraggy fang
Bared for a hunter's boot.

¹
Poet and Craft, p. 19.

²
Poet and Craft, p. 10.

The balance of human and bestial needs no explanation other than the drawing of attention to the speaker's self-disgust. The poem implies that he is being hunted down by dogs following his scent, and he pictures himself as a furtive and cowardly animal, not as a noble stag or lion.

Why has he returned to this "self-infected lair"? Not because it protects or hides him, for he expects the "hunter's boot" at any moment. The answer lies in the child's ambivalent attitude toward its parents and its home. The speaker's returning to his "lair" resembles the boy's clinging "like death" to his father's shirt in "My Father's Waltz." More abstractly, this represents the difficulty of an individual's finding or making his identity. Regardless of the unpleasantness of one's early environment (even if it was a "root cellar") and of the faults of one's parents, if one is to develop an individual identity it must be rooted in these. When he wrote these lines, Roethke may have been remembering another poem about animals, in which the poet accepts the unpleasantness that reality forces on him, Yeats' "The Circus Animals' Desertion":

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.¹

The next poem, "Last Words" (LS, p. 30), returns to the contrast between excitement and tedium dealt with in "Double Feature" and "Dolour." The first six lines convey the sense both of being encumbered

¹ The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1957), p. 336. Professor Roy Harvey Pearce instructs us ". . . to use. . . [Roethke's poem] as a means of defining our own return to the mental hospitals--if such are meant here--which we perforce make out of our lives," "The Power of Sympathy," Stein, p. 171. I believe this reading is possible and fruitful.

by objects and of the adolescent vagueness and self-consciousness
of the speaker's longing for something beyond

That fine fuming stink of particular kettles. . . .

The speaker's self-mockery grows sharper in the absurd exclamations:

0 worm of duty! 0 spiral knowledge!

The second section continues in this vein:

Kiss me, kiss me quick, mistress of lost wisdom,
Come out of a cloud, angel with several faces,
Bring me my hat, my umbrella and rubbers,
Enshroud me in Light! O Whirling! O Terrible Love!

The strange invocation begins with a scrap of child's verse and moves into a parody of Blake, but the last line fails to sustain this parody, and in my opinion the poem is unsuccessful.

The last poem of section II, "Judge Not" (LS, p. 31), also fails either through inconsistency or obscurity. The speaker assumes the role, previously assigned to the greenhouse workers and adults, of arbiter of life and death; however, his bases of judgment are not clear. Perhaps, as the title suggests, one human being is never clear sighted enough to pass such judgments on other human beings. In the first section, the speaker is "haunted by images," which means he is not confronting others directly. This detached observer (or dreamer) calls down "the blessings of life":

Faces greying faster than loam-crumbs
on a harrow;
Children, their bellies swollen like
blown-up paper bags,
Their eyes, rich as plumbs, staring from
newsprint,--
These images haunted me noon and midnight.

I imagined the unborn, starving in wombs, curling;
I asked: May the blessings of life, O Lord, descend
descend on the living.

But in the second section, he is not "haunted by images," not looking at newspaper photographs, not "imagining the unborn," but seeing human degradation and suffering at first-hand:

Yet when I heard the drunkards howling,
Smelled the carrion at the entrances,
Saw women, their eyelids like little rags,
I said: On all these, Death, with gentleness,
come down.

One explanation of this last line is that the speaker has seen the destruction of human identities and feels the vulnerability of his own, and therefore calls down Death on the "lost souls."

The five poems of Section III, in contrast to the preceding ones, do not deal with human figures other than the speaker. The first of these poems, "Night Crow" (LS, p. 35), in a sense presents a spatial distortion. An experience that takes place in the external spatial world is translated into an "inner" event that conveys a sense of a great spatial capacity in the speaker's mind. This duality of inner and outer resembles the traditional mystic doctrine of correspondence.

When I saw that clumsy crow
Flap from a wasted tree,
A shape in the mind rose up:
Over the gulfs of dream
Flew a tremendous bird
Further and further away
Into a moonless black,
Deep in the brain, far back.

This poem achieves its effect through its own inexplicableness much the same way Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" does. Not much in the poem offers grounds for explanation, beyond the fact that the "clumsy" and familiar crow in the external world evokes or corresponds to a terrifying image in the mind.

"River Incident" (LS, p. 36) similarly treats the subject of the bonds between the speaker-observer and non-human nature.

A shall arched under my toes,
 Stirred up a whirl of silt
 That riffled around my knees.
 Whatever I owed to time
 Sowed in my human form;
 Sea water stood in my veins,
 The elements I kept warm
 Crumbled and floated away,
 And I knew I had been there before,
 In that cold, granitic slime,
 In the dark, in the rolling water.

The ambiguity of "arched" is an example of spatial distortion.

Ordinarily, that word would describe the shape of a shell, not the shell's motion; but here an arching motion is meant, since it is this movement that stirs up "a whirl of silt." The speaker then feels the similarity between his own life in time and the slowing of the silt's movement and its settling after the agitation subsides. This perception itself translates the spatial into the temporal. And again this translation accompanies a breaking down of the distinction between the individual and the species, or, more accurately, between an individual man and the life process itself. The speaker feels that he has evolved out of the silt and that he retains his bond with it. Clearly implying metempsychosis, the last lines provide an early statement of what is to become a major theme in Roethke's work, one I shall call the theme of "reincarnation."

"The Minimal" (LS, p. 37) works with the same correspondence between the human and non-human worlds, but in a subtler and more suggestive way than the preceding two poems. It, too, emphasizes the speaker's role as observer, the foundation of the poem being the

single independent clause: "I study the lives. . . , the sleepers, etc. . . ." The correspondence is stated in terms of the two worlds the speaker studies, first the fauna living in a bog, secondly, bacteria in wounds on human beings. The correspondences between a bog and a wound, and between both of these and the human unconscious, become important in "The Lost Son" and the poems that follow it. I quote the poem in full:

I study the lives on a leaf: the little
Sleepers, numb nudgers in cold dimensions,
Beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes,
Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds,
Squirmers in bogs,
And bacterial creepers
Wriggling through wounds
Like elvers in ponds,
Their wan mouths kissing the warm sutures,
Cleaning and caressing,
Creeping and healing.

The bog and the wound are not merely identical, of course. The one is cold and supports life forms that are somehow trapped ("in caves" and "tethered") or deadened ("sleepers," "numb" and "stone-deaf"). The other is warm and conducive to benevolent life forms ("kissing," "cleaning," "caressing" and "healing"). The significance of these differences seems to be that the bog forces life to struggle and evolve, (resembling "Forcing House"), and consequently gives rise to greater and greater degrees of individuality. Life in the human wound, like life for the foetus in the womb, is a deceptive repose, one that lulls life away from the painful struggle toward individuality and consciousness. Taken alone, this poem cannot perhaps support such a reading, but read in light of "The Lost Son" it can. Even if the bacteria are "cleaning and healing," the connotations of "wan" and of the

picture of them as young eels are decidedly pejorative.

"The Cycle" (LS, p. 38) describes the water cycle in terms that suggest it represents the life cycle or, as in traditional neoplatonic symbolism, the journey of an immortal soul into, through, and out of, the mortal state. The salient details are:

The fine rain coiled in a cloud,
which brings to mind the serpent in the Garden of Eden, symbolizing the immediate cause of the fall into mortal existence. The climax of the poem is reached in the line:

The air grew loose and loud,
conceivably suggesting the wrath of God. And, finally, the weighted word "lapsing" in the line:

Tunnelled with lapsing sound. . . .

The Fall of man is called the "lapse." Such details, though, are meagre evidence for this reading, and the poem must be charged with the same fault of many of Roethke's early pieces--insufficient development, lack of symbolic depth.

The last poem in section III, "The Waking" (LS, pp. 39-40), is quite clear in itself and is an appropriate introduction to "The Lost Son." It, too, presents the speaker as observer of non-human nature and records his awareness of his relationships with it. The main intention of the poem is to convey the speaker's ecstasy in discovering that he is not isolated, not shut out from the non-human world:

I wan't alone
In a grove of apples.

The last four lines touch on the reincarnation theme already noted in "River Incident":¹

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

Mr. Burke justly describes the poem when he says that it "risks a simple post--Wordsworthian account of pure joy."²

The short lyrics in Sections I through III maintain an objective form, being organized logically, chronologically, or spatially. With the poems of Section IV, Roethke begins a series of pieces exhibiting radical experiments in form, ones that were to incur the frequently repeated charge of "fallacy of imitative form." He published four poems of this group in The Lost Son, then expanded it to fourteen in Praise to the End! (1951). Although these poems deal with themes introduced in the earlier works, they explore them much more fully. At this point in his career, what Roethke needed to do most was to write long poems that would allow him to develop at length themes and patterns of images. Fortunately, that is just what he did.

¹ Here a more accurate term for the theme would be "pantheism," but as I show in the next chapter the two themes are closely allied.

² Burke, p. 86.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SHAME OF CIRCULARITY

The series of long narratives published under the title Praise to the End! begins with an attitude prevalent in Roethke's earlier work--life in time is painful. By the end of the sequence, however, the protagonist has conquered his weltschmerz and learned to make certain affirmations, albeit sometimes in a shrill voice. Most important to his spiritual progress is facing down the specter of death, and the discovery that enables him to do this is a combination of doctrines: pantheism, Darwinian evolution, transmigration of the soul, and mysticism. A passage in Yvor Winters's essay "The Experimental School in American Poetry," although not dealing with Roethke, brings together several of the important themes in these poems and relates them to another, the journey inward or introspection:

The Emersonian and allied doctrines differ in their moral implications very little from any form of Quietism or even from the more respectable and Catholic forms of mysticism. If we add to the doctrine the belief in pantheism--that is, the belief that the Over-Soul is the Universe, that body and soul are one--we have the basis for the more or less Freudian mysticism of the surrealists . . .; we have also--probably--a rough notion of Hart Crane's mysticism. . . . The pantheistic mystic . . . is more interested in the promptings of the "subconscious" mind than of the conscious, in the half-grasped intention, in the fleeting relationship, than in that which is wholly understood. He is interested in getting just as far off in the direction of the uncoltrolled, the meaningless, as he can possibly get and still have the pleasure of talking about it. He is frequently more interested in the psychology of sleeping than in the psychology of waking; he would if he could devote himself to exploring that realm of experience which he shares with sea-anemones, cabbages, and onions, in preference to exploring the realm shared specifically with men.¹

¹In Defense of Reason (New York, 1947), pp. 55-56.

This may stand as a more than adequate though brief summary of the ideas underlying these poems. Although Winters neglects to explain the relation between pantheism and receptivity to subconscious stirrings, both are certainly relevant to these narratives. More important than pantheism, however, is the theme of reincarnation or metempsychosis. The title of this chapter, in fact, alludes to an occurrence of this theme in "I Cry, Love! Love!," where the protagonist asks:

Is circularity such a shame?

"Circularity" refers to the doctrine that souls return to earth until they have perfected themselves.

If Roethke, as it appears, accepted this doctrine in order to allay an unbearable fear of death, he (or his protagonist) closely resembles Whitman. Leslie Fiedler, without referring to metempsychosis, observes this similarity: "He [Roethke] can never cease to travel the road to Woodlawn, for him the archetypal cemetery, but thinking of it he asserts his ego with special passion. . . . Nowhere else does he remind us so strongly of Whitman, of 'Song of Myself.'"¹ Frederick William Conner has pointed out that Whitman's attitude toward (he does not say "fear of") death led him to a belief in evolution and transmigration of the soul.² Beyond Whitman, one cannot locate with certainty the other sources for these ideas in Roethke's poems. Conner rapidly sketches what might be a geneology of Roethke's themes, beginning with the

¹Waiting for the End (New York, 1964), p. 228.

²Cosmic Optimism (Gainesville, Florida, 1949), pp. 111-116.

evolutionary form of reincarnation seen in the Pythagorean ". . . idea of the cyclical transmigration of soul. . . ." He then leaps over Plato and Plotinus to the English poet James Thomson and his ". . . conception of the ascent of the soul through a rising series of incarnations, [which] foreshadowed an interpretation of evolution that was to have great appeal for several of our poets. Readers of Emerson and Whitman will be aware that Emerson's 'worm striving to be man' mounted through all the spires of form, and that Whitman described evolution as the 'long journey' of his own soul."² And, we may add, Theodore Roethke saw his father's face "deep in the belly of a thing to be" (WW, p. 107) and affirmed that: "By snails, by leaps of frog, I came here, spirit," (WW, p. 101).

Returning to the Winters passage, we see that it comments not only on several themes but also on what Winters considers an objectionable mode of composition. In a statement on Roethke's poetic technique, Leslie Fiedler provides an illuminating counterbalance to Winters's declamation against surrealism:

Particularly strong in his [Roethke's] work are evidences or surrealism, which elsewhere our tradition so strongly resists. [Fiedler continues in the next paragraph:] Eliot and Pound themselves . . . as well as Crane and Cummings (and Poe before them all), have been finally too involved with culture to make the final plunge into the abyss of the unconscious; their madhouses are inhabited by the ghosts of books rather than those of unconfessed or unfulfilled desires. Roethke, on the other hand, has been willing, in his flight from the platitude of meaning, not only to work on the very edge of psychic disaster, but also to seek in the absolute privacy of his own dreams, rather than in the decaying culture, his ultimate images and myths.³

¹Conner, p. 9.

²Conner, p. 10

³Fiedler, pp. 226-227.

The crucial difference between the Fiedler and the Winters passages, in so far as the both comment on the artistic employment of the unconscious, is that Winters regards a verbal "raid of the inarticulate" as a betrayal of the intelligence to nonsense, whereas Fiedler regards it as a rejuvenation of language. Since several of Roethke's early poems reveal a marked distrust of reason, he obviously would not share Winters's judgment.

Roethke, of course, may be allowed to speak for himself on the matter of his technique and philosophy of composition. Writing admiringly of the work of Louise Bogan, he furnishes some insight into his own conception of the creative process: "One definition of a serious lyric--it may come from Stanley Kunitz--would call it a revelation of a tragic personality. [And, then, more of our immediate point:] Behind the Bogan poems is a woman . . . who never writes a serious poem until there is a genuine 'up-welling' from the unconscious; who shapes emotion into an inevitable-seeming, an endurable, form."¹ Of course, writing out of such an "up-welling" when it is consciously understood and shaped is not practising surrealism. And, indeed, in his "Open Letter," where he explains more fully what he is about, Roethke does not sound like a surrealist. The first comment I quote picks up the idea of tragedy which we just saw as part of the definition of a serious lyric: "To keep the rhythms, the language 'right,' i.e., consistent with what a child would say or at least to create the 'as if'

¹Poet and Craft, p. 140.

of the child's world, was very difficult technically. I don't believe anyone else has been foolish enough to attempt a tragedy in this particular way."¹ In other words, Roethke apparently feels there is a "tragic personality" standing beyond these poems. Whether it is his own or the protagonist's, it is one that has known a beautiful and innocent world and seen that world invaded by death, sexuality, and self-loathing. But to return to the problem of technique, Roethke writes a length:

A word or two about the habits of mind or technical effects peculiar to this sequence. ("Peculiar" is not used in the sense of odd, for they are traditional poems. Their ancestors: German and English folk literature, particularly Mother Goose; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, especially the songs and rants; the Bible; Blake and Traherne; Durer.) Much of the action is implied or, particularly in the case of erotic experience, rendered obliquely. The revelation of the identity of the speaker may itself be a part of the drama; or, in some instances, in a dream sequence, his identity may merge with someone else's, or be deliberately blurred.

Rhythmically, it's the spring and rush of the child I'm after--Gammer Gurton's concision: mutterkin's wisdom. . . . I believe that, in this kind of poem, the poet, in order to be true to what is most universal in himself, should not rely on allusion; should not comment or 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. . . . 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. . . . 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 dramatic revelation, an excitement. The clues will be scattered richly--as life scatters them; the symbols ² will mean that they usually mean--and sometimes something more.

¹ Poet and Craft, pp. 41-42.

² Poet and Craft, pp. 41-42.

Where Knock Is Open Wide (PE, pp. 15-18)

The title of the first poem of the sequence, "Where Knock Is Open Wide," is taken from Christopher Smart's "Song to David," and the poem itself also has, as Mills points out, resemblances to Dylan Thomas's "Before I Knocked."¹ Mills says of the poem that it "seems to use the line from Smart to imply birth and entry into the world."² Professor Roy Harvey Pearce, commenting on the poem and title, agrees: ". . . This is an entrance-into-the-world poem. For the child, cause and effect are not 'rationally' related--thus it is the knock, not the door, which opens wide on this experience. . . ."³

Contrary to these opinions, it seems to me that the poem treats experiences that occur several months after the birth of the protagonist. The title well describes what Doctor Sandor Ferenczi has called the "period of magical-hallucinatory omnipotence." Doctor Ferenczi describes the infant's wish to return to the ". . . untroubled existence in the warm, tranquil body of the mother," and then adds that normal care for the child fulfils these wishes as soon as they form. He continues: "Since the child certainly has no knowledge of the real concatenation of cause and effect, or of the nurse's existence and activity, he must feel himself in the possession of a magical capacity that can actually realize all his wishes by simply imagining the satisfaction of them."⁴

¹Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 18.

²Mills, p. 18.

³Stein, p. 181.

⁴"Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality," Sex in Psychoanalysis, trans, Ernest Jones (Dover Publications, Inc; New York, 1956), pp. 188-89.

This passage resembles the comment by Professor Pearce, but I would say that the poem itself treats the gradual departure from this "period of magical-hallucinatory omnipotence" rather than the entrance into it. Hilton Kramer rightly says ". . . the 'events' of the poems are perceptions and memories in which parental love and the security of home are jeopardized or in some moment of crisis."¹

Of the five numbered sections, of the poem, the first three are similar in tone and reproduce the thought processes of a very young child. Section IV presents the remembered experience of a fishing trip that the protagonist, perhaps at age four or five, took with his father. The last section shows us the child's mind shortly after his father's death. Mills describes accurately the development in this poem and the technique used throughout the two sequences of long poems:

Since our point of observation is located within the protagonist's mind, though not at the level of reason or calculation, certain external facts such as his changing age are not always easily determined. We gather, however, that the poems extend over a period from early childhood into late adolescence. . . . The present poem ranges from the first years of life with their scraps of nonsense verse and nursery songs, through a brief section touching on the small boy's religious emotions, then his fishing trip, and ending with the initial signs of anxiety and guilt which accompany the feeling of desolation caused by the father's death. The narrative progression of the poems, if we may thus speak of it, depends upon Roethke's concern for the advances and setbacks of the evolving spirit.²

The most important structural principle of the poem is that Sections IV and V repeat the action that informs the first three

¹"The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Western Review, XVIII (Winter 1954), 135. Hereafter cited as Kramer.

²Theodore Roethke, pp. 19-20.

sections. In both instances the action is implied, not narrated explicitly.¹ This action is that of being lifted up, especially that of being lifted out of confinement or danger into protection. In the first three sections, the infant is playing alone in his crib until he is lifted up by an adult; in Section IV, the boy falls into the water while fishing and is lifted out by his father. The main movement of the poem is away from the early sense of omnipotence into the realization that he will never again be lifted from above.

There are what might be called two main sources of action in the poem, the protagonist's definition of his identity and the "disappearance" of objects and beings. The speaker defines his identity by recognizing, identifying with, and eventually pitying, other entities. He is also dimly aware that eating and giving birth (or being the offspring of another person) influence the individual's identity. The action of "disappearance" occurs in three constellations of images, two of which are varieties of containment, one of these threatening, the other protecting, and the third is a group of repetitive, unreasoned actions. The protective strand, expressed in the line "Fish me out," might be called the "save" group,² for it includes all manner of saving: release from harm, escape from threat, recognition (saving in the mind). These are disappearances in the sense that something (perhaps just a memory image, as in the case of recognition) is taken from one state to be preserved in another, and

¹Roethke says of the poems discussed in "Open Letter": "Much of the action is implied or, particularly in the case of erotic experience, rendered obliquely," Poet and Craft, p. 41.

²I use verbs as names for these image-clusters because all the clusters picture action or change of state or condition.

they emphasize the speaker's awareness of mutability. The threatening constellation of disappearances may be called the "lose" group, for it includes all forms of ending, dying, falling, injuring, capturing, departing, sleeping, and imprisoning, each of which in a way represents disappearance. The third constellation may be called the "repeat" group, and includes sleeping, playing, singing, not caring, and pitying--all forms of the protagonist's reaction to loss. These three constellations are not mutually exclusive. For example, recognition is both a way in which the speaker defines his identity and a form of "saving." Sleep is both a disappearance (especially when someone other than the protagonist sleeps) and a reaction to loss (when the speaker does it himself). But let me turn to the I¹ poem itself.

The opening lines read:

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

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

These lines do more than merely picture innocence, as Denis Donoghue believes.² They tell us that papa, mamma, and the kitten are potential sources of pain. The speaker's reaction to this knowledge is withdrawal, but even his hiding place, "under the rocker," is not a safe one, though he has not yet learned that. The transforming of "until the cows all

¹Where my explication is fairly lengthy, I shall number the sections of my commentary to correspond to the numbered sections of the poem under discussion.

²"Roethke's Broken Music," Stein, p. 147.

come home" does not simply tell us, as Donoghue says, that during play, time passes swiftly.¹ Rather, it indicates that in his quest for identity, the protagonist wishes to ignore the important link between parents and offspring. His feelings toward "Papa and Mama" are highly ambivalent.

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

The first of these lines, whatever it refers to, is an expression of the protagonist's sense of being rejected. As in the preceding quatrains, his reaction is withdrawal, this time into sleep rather than play. Song, sleep, and play thus group themselves into a cluster of withdrawal. The third line suggests that the child is still in a protected state, that the "pains" that he is suffering now as he awakens from his "period of magical-hallucinatory omnipotence" are only the slightest hints of the pains in store for him.

Once upon a tree
I came across a time,
It wasn't ever as
A ghoulie in a dream.

These lines perhaps echo Dylan Thomas's variation upon the same formula, "And once below a time. . . ," in "Fern Hill." The first line may allude to the crucifixion, a notion reinforced by "a-cross." In the last lines of Thomas's "Before I Knocked," the body of Christ refers to the godhood of Christ as He

¹Stein, p. 147.

²In Totem and Tabu Freud speaks of the child's desire to sever the ancestral linkage.

Who took my flesh and bone for armour
And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

Roethke's protagonist perhaps feels that he has been doublecrossed by his mother's womb. In any case, this quatrain tells of his discovery of time. The last two lines say that at this point of time, the devourer, had not yet taken on his ghoulish aspect. The "hurts" were "soft," and time meant nothing more unpleasant than bedtime.

There was a mooly man
Who had a rubber hat
And funnier than that,--
He kept it in a can.

The "mooly man" is associated with the "ghoulie" by sound and by the fact that both are relatively non-threatening foreshadowings of later terrors. What is the significance of the mooly man's keeping his hat in a can? We see here the beginning of the separation between the two kinds of containment, the womb (or heaven) and the grave (or hell). The hat is a protective container, which, since it is rubber, can swell like the womb. "I Need, I Need," a later poem in this sequence, tells us that "A hat is a house," and the last lines of "Where Knock Is Open Wide" are:

Maybe God has a house.
But not here.

In other words, God's house is not here (It is lost) because it is imprisoned (contained) in the grave, the mooly man's can. This is a direct contradiction of one of Plotinus's definitions of God: "The Source, having no prior, cannot be contained by any other form of being; It is orb'd around all; possessing, but not possessed, holding all, Itself nowhere held." Later, continuing the imagery of container and

contained, Plotinus defines his position regarding the competing doctrines of materialism and idealism, the struggle between which forms the thematic core of Roethke's narratives: "Soul is not in the universe, on the contrary, the universe is in Soul; bodily substance is not a place to Soul; Soul is contained in Divine Mind and is the container of body."¹ Roethke's lines, then, are the child's sugar-coated perception that the grave devours the womb, foreshadowing the child's later fall into the knowledge that he is just a highly evolved piece of matter.

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

In light of the undercurrent of meaning in the preceding quatrains, the first of these three lines is an aggressive taunting. The child seems to be mockingly taking the role of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, speaking with the wisdom of babes and telling his father that there is a time for birth and a time for death, as if he has already "fallen" into knowledge and can now speak with the sophisticated ennui of Solomon. The second line is a variation on: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. . . ."²

¹The Essence of Plotinus, ed. Grace H. Turnbull (New York, 1948), p. 166, Ennead v.v.9. I have chosen to use this edition because it is much clearer than the standard edition, by Stephen MacKenna, on which it is based. B.S. Page, who published a revised edition of MacKenna's Plotinus, says in his bibliography that Miss Turnbull "often departs in detail from MacKenna and sometimes with a gain in accuracy" (Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna, 2nd ed. [New York, 1956], p. 627). Hereafter cited as Plotinus.

²Ecclesiastes II:9.

One easily sees here the crack in the pessimism through which the protagonist will escape into his belief in reincarnation. The last line of the three quoted from Roethke returns to the child's feeling of rejection; his father is a cold fish, one who fertilizes the egg without feeling for mate or offspring. Suggestions of the theme of evolutionary transmigration also lurk in this line.

II

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.

These two quatrains, the beginning of Section II, are an important foreshadowing of the events in Sections III and IV. The child's uncle, a father-figure, has apparently died, but the reaction to loss here is more mature than in Section I. Although the singing still represents a withdrawal, it is coupled not with sleep but with a self-assertive pretense to lack of concern. We can see in "He's gone for always" a continuation of his discovery of time. "Who's got him" is probably the mooly man. The jumping on his belly goes back to the imprisoned womb image of the rubber hat kept in a can.

I know her noise.
Her neck has kittens.
I'll make a hole for her.
In the fire.

These lines continue the aggressive tone and suggest attack rather than withdrawal. The woman seems to be a noisy one whom the child associates with pain, the kitten who bites with his feet, perhaps his mother. The "hole" he plans to make resembles the mooly man's can, a grave image. The fire is probably hellfire or eternal pain. In any case, he is going to make her disappear.

Winkie will yellow I sang.
Her eyes went kissing away
It was and it wasn't her there
I sang I sang all day.

After blithely condemning the woman to the fire, he continues his song of not-caring, which she had interrupted. He smugly notes her demonstration of affection, but also notes her departure (which he would see as a rejection). He then indicates his ambivalent feelings for her by making her a duplicitous creature of his own phantasy.

III

I know it's an owl. He's making it darker.
Eat where you're at. I'm not a mouse.
Some stones are still warm.
I like soft paws.
Maybe I'm lost,
Or asleep.

If Section II ends with the protagonist crooning to himself in a lilt that hides his deeper feelings of pain, Section III begins with a breakdown of this defense. The short, disconnected sentences convey anxiety and distraction, while the accumulating images suggest that the child is in bed, playing under the covers: it is dark; he denies he is a mouse, even though he has gone into his hole; it is warm; he is aware of the presence of his own body; and he has "disappeared," being either lost or asleep. He does not know whether his present "disappearance"

is comfortable or frightening.

A worm has a mouth.
Who keeps me last?
Fish me out.
Please.

He seems to decide that his "disappearance" is of the threatening kind, in other words, that he is buried. The worm reminds one of the "ghoulie," who in Section I was associated with burial. The word "keeps" harks back to the mooly man, who keeps his hat in a can. The child wonders whether the worm's mouth will "keep" him last or whether someone will fish him out, resurrect him. Both "worm" and "fish" foreshadow the events of Section IV. The last line is a simple prayer.

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

In these lines there is a quickening to a climax. The prayer continues. The protagonist, imagining his burial, hears flowers growing above him. When he is actually buried he will not be able to whistle to himself in the dark, that is, comfort himself as he now does with singing, playing, and sleeping. "I know! I know!" seems to be an "O Altitude!" He affirms his faith. The last line returns suddenly to the child in the crib; someone has come to lift him up.

The first three sections treat not only protective and threatening containment and the protagonist's reactions to these, but also his attempts to define his identity. These attempts take the forms of statements of fact, recognitions, and story-making, and are related to his brief role as a pseudo-Solomon. Much of the material

material in Section I represents knowledge that the child has acquired (and slight distortions of this). He has heard bedtime songs and in Section II he begins singing them for himself. The lines,

Once upon a tree
I came across a time . . .

and,

My father is a fish,

and perhaps even the mooly-man quatrain, are his attempts at story-making. He closely resembles Stephen Dedalus at the opening of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, who also tries his hand at early singing:

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

His father told him that stoty: his father looked at him
through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where
Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.

O, the wild rose blossoms
On the little green place.

He sang that song. That was his song.

O, the green wothe botheth.

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His
mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell.¹

The development from listening to songs to singing them parallels the child's changing reaction to loss (or pain). In Section I he hides,

¹
(New York, 1964), p. 7.

asks for a song, plays, and sleeps, but in II he sings, flaunts his "don't-care" attitude, and, at least in his mind, takes action against the noisy woman.

IV

In Section IV the protagonist is a boy of four or five, going on a fishing trip with his father. The action is related in the past tense, apparently looking back from a point in time after the father's death.¹ The first verse paragraph describes a frog escaping from a bird's beak. The boy then describes his pity for a fish that they have caught and his prevailing upon his father to throw the fish back. This action marks a significant step in the definition of his identity. He no longer hides or turns to phantasy when he encounters pain, but acts purposively. He identifies himself with the gasping fish; both of them are "trying to talk." Two early Greek statements relating to Pythagoras's life and teachings are relevant here. The first is in the writings of Diogenes Laertius, who recounts a story from Xenophanes: "ONce they say that he [Pythagoras] was passing by when a puppy was being shipped, and he took pity and said: 'Stop, do not beat it; for it is the soul of a friend that I recognized when I heard it giving tongue.'"² Interestingly enough, the notion that Pythagoras taught the doctrine of the transmigration of souls rests mainly on the anecdote.

¹ Leslie Fiedler writes: "In Roethke's verse. . . father and mother are dead before the poetry begins; and it is against the looming threat of annihilation, the prescience of the death that cut him off just as he was attaining full recognition, that he asserts the frail 'I' which the cult of objectivity would have him disavow," Waiting for the End, p. 228.

²The Presocratic Philosophers, ed. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven (Cambridge, England, 1957), p. 22.

But, another statement, by Porphyrius, is also especially relevant when we recall the protagonist's earlier words, "My father is a fish." Porphyrius summarized Pythagoras's teachings as follows: "None the less the following became universally known: first, that he maintains that the soul is immortal; next, that it changes into other kinds of living things; also that events recur in certain cycles, and that nothing is ever absolutely new; and finally, that all living things should be regarded as akin. Pythagoras seems to have been the first to bring these beliefs into Greece."¹ Whether or not Roethke found his ideas in the presocratics,² every one mentioned by Porphyrius appears in these poems.

In the present context, the protagonist continues to associate his father with a fish:

Bullheads have whiskers.
And they bite.

Here is a momentary hostility to the father, who, we will remember, also "bites." But immediately the other side of his ambivalence asserts itself and he recalls his father's gentleness:

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

The significance of these lines is obvious, the last line hinting at the approach of death. An abrupt change of tone follows:

¹Kirk and Raven, p. 223.

²In "The Pure Fury" (WW, p. 158) he mentions Parmenides.

That was before. I fell! I fell!
 The worm has moved away.
 My tears are tired.

Nowhere is out. I saw the cold.
 Went to visit the wind. Where the birds die.
 How high is have?

Keeping the background action of the fishing trip in mind, we may say that these lines tell of the boy falling into the water. He cries and struggles. He feels that "Nowhere is out" of the water; he is overwhelmed.¹ Then, after he is lifted out, he feels the cold wind. "How high is have" perhaps refers to this being lifted. This literal meaning is distorted by the symbolic weight that the speaker himself feels as he recalls the events. The symbolic action is the confrontation of death, the fall into experience, where "experience" essentially means knowledge of death.

I'll be a bite. You be a wink.
 Sing the snake to sleep.

These lines, revealing the child's self-assertion in the face of something he does not fully understand, are a variation upon: "I'll be the cops; you be the robbers." In a sense, they are a regression to the period of magical-hallucinatory omnipotence, especially if he believes that this game will

Sing the snake to sleep.

V.

Section V amplifies the meaning of the protagonist's fall: he falls from childhood's innocence when his father dies and he also falls

¹ Either Blake, a certain ancestor of this poem, or Heraclitus, Plato, or Plotinus could suggest to Roethke water as a symbol for materiality and a fall into water as a symbol for the descent of the soul into the body, a type of death.

from faith. The first two lines tell the father to return and they also inform the father that affection returns (like bread cast upon the waters):

Kisses come back,
I said to Papa. . . .

The third quatrain relates the fall to the child's definition of his identity:

I'm somebody else now.
Don't tell my hands.
Have I come to always? Not yet.
One father is enough.

The father's death changes the speaker's place in the family, the second line indicating that he is unready to take on the new responsibilities. He realizes that he has not suddenly reached a place beyond which there is no change, a heaven. The last line seems to be a denial of God's existence, perhaps growing out of the boy's bitterness. The poem ends with two lines that bring together his fall, the contrast between protective and imprisoning containment, and loss:

Maybe God has a house.
But not here.

I Need, I Need (PE, pp. 21-23)

If "Where Knock Is Open Wide" develops the contrast between benevolent and hostile containment, "I Need, I Need" focuses attention on the opening of the container (or the gate between two conditions or places), and on the movements into and out of that opening. Like the preceding poem, this one reveals the speaker's ambivalence, here

especially seen in actions of expulsion and intromission. He both needs and rejects his shadowy companion. This poem transforms the loss theme of "Where Knock Is Open Wide" by stating it in an aggressive imperative: "Get lost!" But like the preceding poem, "I Need, I Need" depicts a maturing of the speaker, so that by the end of the poem his aggression has harmonized with his love.

When Roethke read this poem over the BBC network in July of 1953, he introduced it with this comment: ". . . 'I Need, I Need' opens with very oral imagery, the child's world of sucking and licking. Then there is a shift to a passage in which two children are jumping rope. The reader isn't told the children are jumping rope: he simply hears the two reciting, alternatively, jingles to each other; then this mingled longing and aggressiveness changes, in the next passage, to a vaguely felt, but definite, feeling of love in one of the children."¹ If Roethke had extended his remarks, he might have mentioned some other "oral images" that contrast with sucking and licking, such as sneezing and spitting, and he might have related this contrast to the difference between emotional need (love) and rejection (hatred).

Section I shows the protagonist, "a little boy who is very sad,"² wandering listlessly and thinking about his absent mother. She is associated in his mind with various receptacles, such as "a deep dish," a mouth, a spoon, a cellar, a hat, and a house. The connotations of

¹"An American Poet Introduces Himself and his Poems," Poet and Craft, p. 10.

²Roethke, "Some Remarks on Rhythm," Poet and Craft, p. 75.

tend to be favorable and protective, but threatening undertones are evoked by notions of devouring, especially in the lines:

Do the dead bite?
Mama, she's a sad fat.

The implication here is that the boy sees his mother as an intended victim of the dead; he foresees her death.

The concept of taking in (intromission or introjection) is mainly benevolent and associated with the mother; the action of expelling is for the most part hostile and associated with phallic images. The following lines present these two clusters:

Hoo. I know the spoon.
Sit in my mouth.

A sneeze can't sleep.

Sneezing is an act of expulsion, though here it is not associated with a phallic image (except perhaps the spoon).

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

Assuming the faucet is a phallic image, one can see in these lines the boy's feeling that he has been rejected by the father who has died.

Scratched the wind with a stick.
The leaves liked it.

This image, like a later one, "A pick likes to hit ice," says that the active agent (not the passive) is the one that feels the pleasure.

The aggressiveness that is to appear in Section II is foreshadowed in the word "begonia," which might be a pun on "Be gone, you!" This is, of course, the "Get lost!" theme.

In Section II the boy is no longer alone, but, as Roethke describes it, exchanging rather hostile rope-skipping jingles with a companion. The songs are obliquely concerned with the theme of identity, particularly as identity is related to knowledge (experience) and to the need / rejection complex. I believe the first voice (the unindented lines) is that of the companion, the more aggressive of the two. The line,

I haven't time for sugar,

suggests no time for kindness and alludes to the biting-devouring actions. The next two lines,

Put your finger in your face,
And there will be a booger,

combine phallic and receptacle images and the actions of intromission and expulsion, although this last action is merely implied. If there were hints of sexual curiosity in "Where Knock Is Open Wide," then these lines may represent a sort of covert bragging about his knowledge on the part of the companion.

The jingle sung by the voice that I assume to be the protagonist's lacks hostility:

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

The playing on numbers here not only implies the rope-skipping action, but also goes back to the notion of compulsive repetition that was introduced in the line,

Everything has happened twice,

in "Where Knock Is Open Wide." This may be a symptom of the boy's

lack of will and aggressiveness.¹ The second line maintains that he knows the companion's identity. The companion replies by defining the protagonist's identity in terms of his own:

I know you are my nemesis
So bibble where the pebble is.²
The trouble is with No and Yes
As you can see I guess I guess.

But these lines are less aggressive than his first ones and also suggest the difficulties of decisive action. The protagonist then sings of his wishes for an identity. The companion, perhaps with an impulse of friendliness, says that both of them are lowly and not very knowledgeable, but an undercurrent of meaning in his words reminds the protagonist that he is a "lost son." He responds with a burst of hostility:

Not you I need.
Go play with your nose.
Stay in the sun,
Snake-eyes.

The first line explicitly states one of the poem's major themes, and the second echoes the companion's earlier words. The protagonist has learned from his "friend" to express hatred.

In Section III, the protagonist once more admits his emotional need, perhaps with the tenderness of self-pity. As at the end of the second section, he is aware of his lostness, of his separation from the father ("a beard in a cloud"). Perhaps he even knows that if he is to

¹Or, it may allude to the Pythagorean idea of recurrence.

²In "The Pbre Fury" (WW, p. 158), we find the line: "Great Boehme rooted all in Yes and No."

be reunited with his father he must die:

The ground cried my name. . . .

But in these lines he is saddened, not angered, by his feeling of being lost.

The protagonist's search for his identity appears in Section III in the lines:

Can I have my heart back?

and,

The ground cried my name.

Section IV shows the boy trying to construct an identity by copying the memory of his dead father. He is planting and cultivating. The imagery is phallic and aggressive, but interestingly the boy overtly denies that he is following his father:

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

And,

My hoe eats like a goat.

The lines picture both expulsion (rejection) and intromission (need), and in a sense ambivalently present an intermingling of creative and destructive acts.¹ An undercurrent of meaning, which comes to the surface in,

It's a dear life I can touch,

conveys the fact that the boy does not fear or hate things that are present. The source of his pain is the feeling that he has been rejected by his dead father, who must be seen in contrast with "a dear life I can touch."

¹And as such, they possibly represent coitus.

Following this, a brief, concluding passage seems to show the protagonist years later, leading a girl through a gate and into a field. The significance of these lines is that he is entering another condition, probably the realm of romantic love. The devouring theme is present here, carrying suggestion of the devourer becoming one substance with the devoured. The implication is that the protagonist is about to be consumed by love.

Bring the Day! (PE, pp. 27-28)

Both "Where Knock Is Open Wide" and "I Need, I Need" treated the theme of identity in terms of the protagonist's acquiring knowledge and of his ability to act with purpose (saving the fish and cultivating plants). "Bring the Day!" focuses attention on the problem of purposive action. The opposing poles of the poem may be termed "to begin" and "not to begin." The implied action is a conversation between the protagonist and a woman, taking place at sunrise. They are outdoors, possibly in the field that was entered at the end of "I Need, I Need." The change that we see the protagonist undergo in this poem is from dislike for the coming of day to celebration of daybreak.

Section I reveals the protagonist's tense concern with permission and with his own capability. The bees and lilies of the opening lines suggest the male and female lovers, respectively.

Bees and lilies there were,
 Bees and lilies there were,
 Either to other,--
 Which would you rather?
 Bees and lilies there were.

These lines introduce the speaker's indecisiveness and his desire for consent. The second verse paragraph shows that both the lovers want the consent of nature. The oddly worded lines,

She asked her skin
To let me in,

emphasize this need for consent.

The third verse paragraph marks a decided turn in the development. In psychological terms, one could say it presents the extreme tension between the conscience, the ambition to behave in an ideal manner, and the lawless impulses that the mind refuses to recognize in itself. We can imagine the woman reminding her lover that there should be a spiritual commitment:

Forever is easy, she said.

And he replies that "forever" might be easy for angels, but

How many angels do you know?--

He then recalls that his ancestry can be traced back to the primordial slime, to algae:

And over by Algy's
Something came by me,
It wasn't a goose,
It wasn't a poodle.

The stagnant pond (Algy's) not only symbolizes the origin of life, but also the unconscious mind. The "something" not recognized or named represents either a repressed wish or self-disgust. Whatever it is, it is not tame and attractive like a goose or a poodle.

The remaining two verse paragraphs continue this sense of self-disgust and give it more apparent sexual implications. The sun

is rising and the speaker is in a state of heightened sensitivity. He feels the closeness of things, the quiet preceding the dawn, and his own incapacity. The line,

I can't marry the dirt,

perhaps means that he feels the force of the woman's words; he knows that he must "struggle out of the slime."¹ But the beauty of the woman or of the sunrise "melts" him, which suggests a loss of identity. The "white weather" is the daylight, and it "hates" him in that it reveals him to himself and he is filled with self-disgust.

Why is how I like it.

He prefers speculating about the "why" of things to acting, to defining himself.

Rallying himself out of the despondency that he has just approached, the speaker reappraises his relationship to the rest of nature. Perhaps his own sense of his inadequacy drives him to a curious examination of all nature's processes. The first verse paragraph of Section II shows the speaker questioning what appears to be the breeding of the herrings. It also shows his curiosity about the relation between the animate and the inanimate. Since the inanimate wind makes the inanimate grass speak, perhaps the whispers and singing in the waves, between the herrings, is just another voice of the inanimate. In other words, perhaps life is just a complex development of the inanimate and nothing more; perhaps everything that exists lies between the water

¹Poet and Craft, p. 37.

and the rock. In the second verse paragraph, the speaker identifies himself with a tree, and then immediately expresses his need for affection, a need which may be seen as the thing that sets him apart from the tree. But then he goes on to point out that various forms of life need, in a sense, the care of the inanimate, and that they in turn love it:

When I stand, I'm almost a tree.
 Leaves, do you like me any?
 A swan needs a pond.
 The worm and the rose
 Both love
 Rain.

Ralph Mills makes a sensitive comment on the third section of this poem when he says that it ". . . shows the emergent self in the image of a tiny bird waking to existence, feeling a little its own possibilities, and facing a life that has cast off its ties with the past and only looks forward."¹ The analogous situation, as Mills correctly sees, is the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. In psychological germs, the point described is that between adolescence and adulthood. These lines of celebration for the "spirit's progress" are not without a note of resignation and wistfulness, but the poem ends on a clearly affirmative note:

It's time to begin!
 To begin!

Give Way, O Ye Gates (PE, pp. 31-33)

This poem expands upon the line,

When I stand, I'm almost a tree,

¹Theodore Roethke, p. 23.

from the preceding poem. Here the speaker is a tree and the implied actions are things experienced by the tree. The title suggests that the protagonist considers himself as a sort of battering ram, attempting to break through into a higher realm of life. The notion of reincarnation that one finds in this poem and the explanation for the speaker's being a tree are, again, possibly supplied by the writings of Plotinus, an especially relevant passage being: "Those that have lived wholly to sense become animals; according to the particular temper of life, ferocious or gluttonous animals. Those who in their pleasures have not even lived by sensation, but have gone their way in a torpid grossness, become mere growing things, for this lethargy is the entire act of the vegetative, and such men have been busy betreeing themselves."¹ The term "torpid grossness" might well describe the particular self-disgust felt by the protagonist at various points in the preceding poems.

Although the protagonist likens himself to a tree, he asserts himself more frequently than in earlier poems, and the sense of inadequacy seen in "Bring the day!" is replaced by confidence, expressed in lines scattered throughout the poem:

Believe me . . .

 I could love a duck.

 Bring me a finger.

 I could melt down a stone. . . .

 Make me a bird or a bear!

¹ Plotinus, p. 89, Ennead III.iv.2.

These are only a few of the commands and **assertions** that reveal the protagonist's state of mind. But unlike the preceding poems, this one develops from an affirmative position to a negative one; the speaker's soul is drawn deeper into the world of the body, possibly to be seen as a reaffirmation of Roethke's early condemnation of the faculty of human volition.

Section I shows the protagonist to be confident of where he is and of where he is going. He knows the facts of his situation: he, himself, is a theater for life and he is an observer in this theater, not a performer. He hints that he has been seduced into his present infaturation with the life of his body:

Such music in a skin!
A bird sings in the bush of your bones.

And, "You . . ."

Twiced me nicely,--
In the green of my sleep,
In the **green**.

In this section the speaker seems to be addressing a cat that is climbing through his branches. (The cat, a predator, a carnivore, later becomes a symbol for the body.)

The speaker addresses first the sun ("Mother of blue and the many changes of hay") and then another tree. Both verse paragraphs reveal assertiveness and confidence, though also suggesting a further sinking into the life of the body. Bravado is mingled with a small boy's sexual curiosity:

I could melt down a stone,--
How is it with the long birds?
May I look too, loved eye?

The first of these lines shows the speaker assuming for himself the powers of the being he is addressing, the sun. The second and third, I take as suggestions of sexual curiosity.

The address to the other tree sounds strangely apocalyptic:

We'll swinge the instant!--
 With jots and jogs and cinders on the floor.
 The sea will be there, the great squashy shadows,
 Biting themselves perhaps;
 The shrillest frogs;
 And the ghost of some great howl
 Dead in a wall.

The speaker's confidence even protects him from fearing this time of tribulation, for he thinks that he will remain just an onlooker. Perhaps there is an allusion here to the book of Revelation: "And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads," (ix.4).

The "shrillest frogs" might allude to the verse: "And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet," (Rev xvi.13).

After describing the time of tribulation the speaker describes a time of joy:

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.

Despite his being a tree, the speaker's words carry clear erotic undertones. The last lines promise self-discovery and perhaps suggest procreation and the circularity of transmigration.

Section III clearly introduces the theme of reincarnation:

You child with a beast's heart,
Make me a bird or a bear!

He is not ready for human responsibility, but he does wish to be more than a tree.

But now the instant ages,
And my thought hurts another body.
I'm sad with the little owls.

The protagonist is sad because he is dissatisfied with himself, with his lot. Baudelaire's poem "Les Hiboux" clarifies these lines. Its last two stanzas read:

Leur attitude au sage enseigne
Qu'il faut on ce monde qu'il craigne
Le tumulte et le mouvement;

L'homme ivre d'une ombre qui passe
Porte toujours le chatiment
D'avoir voulu changer de place.¹

The protagonist may be sad with the owls, but he is not as content as they are.

Baudelaire's owls are creatures of the night that do not chase shadows, but the protagonist in Roethke's poem has been deluded by a phantasy. The imagery of Section IV reminds one of Plato's Myth of the Cave. The speaker's unrealistic picture of the joys of bestial life

¹ Oeuvres Completes de Charles Baudelaire, ed. Jacques Crepet, Vol. I (Paris, 1930), p. 132.

gives way to a painful awareness of what it means to be alive in the world of particulars, in the world of flux:

Touch and arouse. Suck and sob. Curse and mourn.
It's a cold scrape in a low place.
The dead crow dries on a pole.
Shapes in the shade
Watch.

In "I Cry, Love! Love!" Roethke calls this awareness the "anguish of concreteness." The "cold scrape in a low place" certainly suggests the interior of a cave, and the three following lines remind one of the "shapes" who carry objects before a fire so that these objects will cast shadows on the wall in front of the imprisoned men.¹

The three concluding verse paragraphs continue to draw upon platonic and neoplatonic imagery:

These wings are from the wrong nest.
Who stands in a hole
Never spills.

I hear the clap of an old wind.
The cold knows when to come.
What beats in me
I still bear.

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

The significance of these lines becomes clear when one compares them with the following passage from The Enneads:

"In the Intellectual [realm] they [the forms] remain with the soul entire and are immune from care and trouble; but there comes a stage at which they descend from the universal to become partial and self-centered. This state long maintained, the soul is a deserter from the All; it is a partial thing, isolated, weakened, full of

¹None of the commentators has mentioned what seems to me a surprisingly profound influence of Plato on Roethke. I am aware of only one explicit reference to the philosopher, in "The Pure Fury" (WW, p. 158): "At times my darling squeaks in pure Plato."

care, intent upon the fragment; severed from the whole, it nestles in one form of being, caring only for the one, for a thing buffeted about by the world full of things. With this comes what is known as the casting of the wings, the enchaining in body. . . . It has fallen, it operates through sense,¹ it is a captive. This is the burial, the encavement of the soul.¹

The "nestling" mentioned by Plotinus may explain the gnomic lines:

Who stands in a hole
Never spills.

Beneath their apparent absurdity, these lines express the attitude of a "careful" creature who has intently fixed his mind upon one thing, who has forsaken everything in order to preserve one fragment. The lines,

What beats in me
I still bear,

call to mind the Phaedrus, where Socrates is explaining the growth of the soul's wing, ". . . which being shut up within company with the emotion [desire], throbbing as with the pulsations of an artery, pricks the aperture which is nearest, until at length the entire soul is pierced and maddened and pained, and at the recollection of beauty is again delighted."²

The last verse paragraph attempts to accept the flux and to relate it to the dimly remembered life in the realm of intellectual forms, the word "provides" suggesting physical sustenance and glimpses of the eternal forms:

¹Plotinus, pp. 148-49, Ennead IV.viii.4.

²The Dialogues of Plato, trans. B. Jowett, 3rd ed., Vol. I (London, 1892), p. 255. Hereafter cited as Plato.

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

Sensibility! O La! (PE, pp. 37-38)

This poem explores further the relationship between the spiritual and the physical, the word "sensibility" referring to both realms. The immaterial world is represented in the poem by the wind and sun, along with references to ghosts and witches. The physical is represented by woods, grass, and the moon. The protagonist confronts a woman and speaks of the effect her beauty has on him. Instead of inducing him to remember his former life in the world of forms, it reminds him of the necessity of his own and his beloved's death.¹ He struggles to become more conscious, to see the unchanging world, but the "progress" is painful and he feels the pull of the particular. In the end he gives up the effort and assumes the mixed attitude of one who loudly affirms his belief in "higher things" while at the same time saying "O la!"

The poem is strongly influenced by the writings of Heraclitus. The first line,

I'm the serpent of somebody else,
 is a variation on that philosopher's statement: "Gods are mortals, men are immortals, each living the others' death and dying in the others' life."² This is an idea that Yeats made much of in his work. Roethke's

¹ The protagonist in a sense reacts identically with a person described in the Phaedrus: "Now he who is not newly initiated or who has become corrupted, does not easily rise out of this world to the sight of true beauty in the other; he looks only at her earthly namesake, and instead of being awed at the sight of her, he is given over to pleasure, and like a brutish beast he rushes on to enjoy and beget; he consorts with wantonness, and is not ashamed or afraid of pursuing pleasure in violation of nature," (Plato, p. 255).

² Selections from Early Greek Philosophy, ed. Milton C. Nahm

speaker refers to a woman who reponses like a lake. His desire to "seize" her betrays his acquisitiveness (what Plato calls the "brutish" reaction to beauty), his enslavement to things:

See, she's sleeping like a lake.
Glory to seize, I say.

Singing the praises of the woman's beauty, the protagonist, in the second verse paragraph, blames her for his fall. He pictures her much the way Botticelli does Venus in The Birth of Venus, except that her birth is considerably lower. In fact, if we may see this "goddess" as a symbol for spirituality, the protagonist seems to be telling her that she has sprung out of the material realm, returning us to the themes of idealism and materialism:

In the fair night of some dim brain,
Thou wert marmorean-born.
I name thee: wench of things,
A true zephyr-haunted woodie.
The sea's unequal lengths announced thy birth
From a shell harder than horn.
Thy soft albino gaze
Spoke to my spirit.

Perhaps she is a newly created goodess, Sensibility, and is born in the physical brain, not the mind. The marble, shell; and horn stress her tangibility. Her "soft gaze" seduces the speaker and he enters her world of "things." The woods is "haunted" by a "zephyr," obviously a line meant to recall the ancient association of breath and wind with the soul. The section ends with the protagonist's predictions of things to come, similar to those in Section II of the preceding poem. His foresight this time intimates mortality.

(New York, 1947), p. 92. Fragment no. 67. This fragment does not appear in Kirk and Raven.

Section II is as disjointed as it is brief. The protagonist continues in the exhibitionistic tone with which the preceding part concluded, the essential function of the lines being to tie together imagistically the speaker's pre-emptory attitude toward the woman, his attachment to "thing-hood"¹ and his awareness of mortality. This section is linked to the preceding by several lines that treat the paradox that what is in flux is boring and what is permanent (the forms) is truly interesting:

Some rare new tedium's taking shape. . . .

And, in Section II:

A shape comes to stay:
The long flesh.

The phallic image, "the long flesh," would seem permanent only to one thoroughly deluded by the shadows in the cave.

The final section develops this concern with distinguishing what "abides" from what flows. As the protagonist's consciousness of death grows, he more earnestly desires to affirm the existence of the spiritual world. The "zephyr" is transformed:

You all-of-a-sudden gods,
There's a ghost loose in the long grass!

He then mentions some movements that, if he wished, he could attribute to purely physical causes. After this he briefly explores the significance of an ill-smelling wind as a symbol for the fusion of

¹Roethke used this term in a statement titled "On 'Identity'" made in 1963: "Yet we continue to make a fetish of 'thing-hood,' we surround ourselves with junk, ugly objects endlessly repeated in an economy dedicated to waste," (Poet and Craft, pp. 19-20).

spirituality and mortality, a symbol foreshadowed in part one by the line, "I smell the jumps ahead." He speaks to the "prince of stinks" about his exaltation, his belief in an afterlife, the prince of stinks being either death or Satan, the Prince of the Air. But he does not know exactly how to enter that other world, how to leave the world of materiality; once more he is the lost son:

It's a long way to somewhere else.

This acknowledgement is followed by the only honest thinking that the protagonist does in this poem, and he approaches a breakthrough, but in the last three lines his effort fails. The passage runs as follows:

The shade says: love the sun.
I have.
La, la,
The light turns.
The moon still abides.
I hear you, alien of the moon.
Is the sun under my arm?
My sleep deceives me.
Has the dark a door?
I'm somewhere else,--
I insist!
I am.

The sun symbolizes the unchanging world of forms or spirituality, the moon, the ever-changing physical world. The protagonist is saying that he loves the light because he fears the darkness. He then adopts the position of Heraclitus: change is the only thing that abides (fragment 83). Perhaps all lovers of the sun are nothing more than "aliens of the moon." Thinking this, he imagines briefly that he has completely understood the mysteries of spirituality, perpetuating in this way the mood of "seizing" with which the poem opened. But actually he is in a state of hallucination, and only in that state has he traveled the "long way to somewhere else," remaining all the while

imprisoned in the cave.

O Lull Me, Lull Me (PE, pp. 41-42)

In this poem the protagonist considers his own thinking processes, which we have seen attempting to work in "Sensibility! O La!" Developing a contrast between the pain of thinking and the pleasure of dreaming, he again moves into an affirmation, but one that is more honest than that concluding the preceding poem. "O Lull Me, Lull Me" particularly examines the nature of dreaming, setting in opposition torpor and dreamlike images of love-making.

Section I contrasts motionless dreaming ("Blessed be torpor") with thinking ("Tell me, great lords of sting, / Is it time to think?"), the protagonist clearly preferring the first.

Section II begins with a celebration of the dream world, a land of cockaigne where " . . . the air provides" and where

Light fattens the rock.

But this song ends as the speaker becomes aware that to fulfill one wish, that of "seizing" the woman, he must exert himself:

I'm crazed and graceless,
A winter-leaping frog.

A "winter-leaping frog," of course, does not exist; a frog passes the winter in a state of torpor.

Overcoming his need to be "soothed" and his excuses for his torpor ("I'm still waiting for a foot"), the protagonist promises the woman that for her he will move:

. . . I can't go leaping alone.
 For you, my pond,
 Rocking with small fish,
 I'm an otter with only one nose. . . .

This is an image of love-making. The line,

I'm more than when I was born,--

indicates that the protagonist does not wish to consider sexuality a fall, a degradation. The line, in fact, reverses the idea of Plotinus's on which Wordsworth wrote his famous ode. Roethke's speaker sides rather with the speaker of Dylan Thomas's poem, "Before I Knocked", who says:

I who was rich was made the richer
 By sipping at the wine of days.¹

Roethke's poem ends on this note of affirmation of the world of materiality and procreation.

The Lost Son (PE, pp. 47-53)

"The Lost Son," the best of the fourteen narratives, begins with the protagonist at a point of spiritual low-ebb. After mentioning another such "relapse" in these narratives, Roethke explained that ". . . the method is cyclic. . . . There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward. . . ." ² Owing to this "slipping-back," a number of the poems have roughly the same structure, a fact noted by many of the commentators. Professor Louis Martz, for instance, describes this

¹ The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas, Augmented Edition (New York, 1957), p. 9.

² Poet and Craft, p. 39.

common line of development as follows:

. . . Each poem opens with a flight from ordinary "reality" into the irrational, the animal, the realm of the fish, the rat, the mouse, the cat, the eel, the otter, the mole; there are many implications of a return to the womb: "I feel the slime of a wet nest." These primitive images are given in a mode of flickering, sometimes ranting, incoherence, simulating the breakup of established modes of consciousness. Then, out of all this apparent disarray of being, there arises the strict, clear, calm imagery of that greenhouse Eden: warmth, power, growth, movement toward the light. . . .¹

Most of those who have written on the narratives do not go any further into detail than does Professor Martz, but even in his sketchy outline I believe there are several inaccuracies.

In the "Open Letter," which he wrote for John Ciardi's Mid-Century American Poets in 1950, Roethke commented at length on the development in "The Lost Son." Since there is some disagreement about the action of the poem, and since understanding the action depends upon understanding the first section of the poem, let me begin by quoting Roethke's remarks on Section I, "The Flight":

["The Lost Son"]. . . is the "easiest" of the longer ones [the narratives], I think, because it follows a narrative line indicated by the titles of the first four sections: "The Flight," "The Pit," "The Gibber," "The Return." "The Flight" is just what it says it is: a terrified running away--with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting (the voices, etc.); the protagonist so geared-up, so over-alive that he is hunting, like a primitive, for some anamistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the sub-human. These he sees and yet does not see: they are almost tail-flicks, from another world, seen out of the corner of the eye.

¹"A Greenhouse Eden," Stein, pp. 31-32. For similar descriptions of this line of development see: Louis Bogan, "Verse," The New Yorker, 15 May 1948) p. 118. Babett Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time (New York, 1965), p. 197. Hilton Kramer, "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Western Review, XVIII (Winter, 1954), 134-135. Carroll Arnett, "Minimal to Maximal: Theodore Roethke's Dialectic," CE, XVIII (May, 1957), 414-415. M. L. Rosenthal, "Closing in on the Self," The Nation, 21 March 1959, p. 259. R. J. Mills, Jr., "Theodore Roethke: the Lyric of the Self," Poets in Progress, ed. Edward Hungerford (Evanston, 1962), pp. 12-13. Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," LVIII (January 1950), 86.

In a sense he goes in and out of rationality; he hangs in the balance between the human and the animal.¹

This is a very helpful gloss, but it leaves many difficult questions unanswered. Perhaps the most important of these are: "What is the protagonist fleeing, and where is he going?" Carroll Arnett and M. L. Rosenthal give two quite different answers to each of these. Arnett writes of "The Flight" that it ". . . is a nightmarish waiting for birth, an ambivalent invocation ('Snail, snail, glister me forward, / Bird, soft-sigh me home') and an avoidance of consciousness ('You will find no comfort here, / In the kingdom of bang and blab')." ² After discussing "The Lost Son," Arnett generalizes about the themes and the usual line of development found in Roethke's first three volumes: "His themes are the struggle which the spirit makes to release itself from the terrors, as well as the psychic salvation, of the unconscious world of slime and womb, so that it may enter into the understanding and moral responsibility which the conscious 'kingdom of bang and blab' requires as prerequisites to any truly creative growth in the world of history."³ I agree that Roethke is concerned with the spirit's attempts to ". . . release itself from . . . terrors, . . ." especially the terror of death. And I agree that he associates the unconscious mind with "slime and [the] womb." But I believe that Arnett is trying to make Roethke over into a more socially conscious poet than he actually is. The result of this distortion is a neglect of the metaphysical questioning

¹Poet and Craft, p. 38.

²"Minimal to Maximal: Theodore Roethke's Dialectic," CE, XVIII, 415.

³Arnett, 415.

that so importantly informs most of Roethke's poetry. Rosenthal, on the other hand, charges Roethke with the very irresponsibility from which Arnett was so anxious to exonerate him. After quoting from "Open Letter," Rosenthal writes:

So be it--this panicky hunt for the pre-intellectual sources of the sense of being truly alive is without doubt one of the real, if uneasy, enterprises of the modern mind. But the poet is not ruthless enough to carry the hunt through--any more than he was able to remain true to the realizations at the beginning of "The Shape of the Fire." He finds another clue to salvation, an easier one, than the frenzied beginning would imply possible. It is the "lost son's" psychological re-entry into the world of the most vivid childhood memories--the world of the "long greenhouse" which he has called "my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth."

Re-entry into this paradisaical womb, one gathers, is the necessary preliminary for a rebirth of the Self. The true "coming-through" into mature, calm reconciliation has not yet occurred, but faith is expressed that it will do so--

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

The promise is too pat and wishful--of a Freudian romance with a happy ending. As in most of Roethke's longer work, the denouement does not live up to the poem's initial demands.¹

Rosenthal considers the ". . . re-entry into . . . [the] womb . . ." a regression necessary to spiritual advancement, but for an unexplained reason considers it an "easy" way. In saying, this, he touches upon a difficult aspect of the poem--the cause of the protagonist's eventual progress. Although Rosenthal recognizes the metaphysical level of the poem, he misreads, in my opinion, the return to the greenhouse.

Ralph Milss correctly sees the importance of the setting in the poem, but misses the metaphysical significance of it by sticking too closely to the literal level: ". . . This initial section . . . treats the confused and often tormented condition of the child-protagonist as he

¹"Closing in on the Self," The Nation (1959), p. 259.

tries to learn the direction he must take to escape those forces working solely for his anguish or destruction."¹ The protagonist is not in immediate danger of "destruction," and is fleeing rather the awareness of his own inevitable death than a present threat itself. William Meredith comes close to making this point when he writes: "It is not an easy poem, yet the obscurity is that of a lucid dream, where only the causes and connections, not the facts or events, are in doubt. The causes seem to be the death of parents, the speaker's recognition of his aloneness, sealed off in his link of the chain of human life, and the loss of childhood and its illusion of order."² One can make a fairly good case for saying that in part the child's flight is caused by the death of one or both of his parents. But the case must necessarily rest on details in other poems in the series, especially ones in "Where Knock is Open Wide," not on those in "The Lost Son" alone. To understand properly both the cause of the protagonist's flight and the meaning of his return to the greenhouse, one must not be misled by a desire to peer into the child's mind, but must examine the imagery and the changes of scene.

I feel that the key to this poem lies in the images of containment or enclosure, both threatening and protective, and in the change from threatening containment to protective. The scene changes from Woodlawn Cemetery, with such images of imprisonment as crypts and wells, to a pit, to a frost-covered greenhouse in the night, to the transparent

¹Theodore Roethke ("University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers," No. 30 [Minneapolis, 1963]), p. 24. Hereafter cited as Theodore Roethke.

²"A Steady Storm of Correspondences, Theodore Roethke's Long Journey Out of the Self," Stein, p. 42.

greenhouse in the warm sunlight, to an open field. Most of the images in this poem belong to this cluster, which I shall call "the grave-nest cluster," borrowing from two lines in one of the later narratives, "Unfold! Unfold!":

What the grave says,
The nest denies.

(PE, p. 83)

A second important group of images in the poem are those pertaining to motion and stasis. These occur as images of motion, images of stasis, and as images of motion-in-rest, combining the two. The fusion of the two is usually described as a "swaying" and relates to the imagery of dancing, which becomes important in Roethke's later poems. In those poems the dance symbolizes an ideal attitude toward life, one that achieves a mean between rejection and enslavement. In the present poem, however, I do not think the imagery of motion-in-rest has reached that point of development.

Roethke has said that "The Flight" is ". . . a terrified running away--with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting (the voices, etc.)" ¹ He refers in these words to the uncombined and perverted forms of motion and stasis, which, instead of fusing, producing an equilibrium, as they do in Section V, replace each other violently and ineffectively. The waiting is associated with images of threatening containment and stagnation. One sees images of imprisonment in the opening lines:

At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
A slow drip over stones,
Toads brooding in wells.

¹

Poet and Craft, p. 38.

The ". . . slamming of iron . . ." describes the closing of a crypt, and the "well" similarly belongs to the grave-nest cluster. (I shall say more of this mage later.) In the second verse paragraph occurs one of the most important grave-nest images, that of the stagnant pond:¹

Fished in an old wound,
The soft pond of repose;
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even the minnows came.

Roethke had made this imagistic connection between a wound and a pond earlier in The Lost Son:

Squirmers in bogs,
And bacterial creepers
Wriggling through wounds
Like elvers in ponds. . . .
("The Minimal," LS, p. 37.)

Both in "The Minimal" and in "The Lost Son" the pond-wound symbolizes the unconscious mind² and a place where the line between animate and inanimate becomes indistinct. That the image symbolizes the unconscious is partly suggested by the juxtaposition of "The Minimal" and "Night Crow" (on consecutive pages in The Lost Son), since "Night Crow" explicitly transforms an external event into a mental one. This symbolization is further substantiated by a statement that Roethke makes in "Open Letter" while describing the act of writing a poem:

¹W. W. Skeat's Etymological Dictionary states that "ME pond [is] a variant of pound, an enclosure; it means a pool formed by damming up water. . . ."

²Stanley Kunitz, in reviewing The Lost Son, writes: "Suddenly we are under ground, under water, in a grave, in a womb, in the deep ponds of the subconscious. . .," ("News of the Root" Poetry, LXXIII [January 1949], 223).

". . . Let's say you fish, patiently, in that dark pond, the unconscious, or dive in, with or without pants on, to come up festooned with dead cats, weeds, tin cans, and other fascinating debris. . . ." ¹

If the pond in the poem resembles the unconscious in which the poet fishes, the boy in the poem resembles the poet in that both wish to escape something painful or threatening. In "Open Letter" Roethke speaks of the ". . . miseries and agitations which one has been permitted to escape by the act of creation itself." But the boy does not fish "patiently," as the poet does. He is ". . . geared-up . . . and over-alive. . . ." He ". . . sees and yet does not see. . . ." ³ This description of the boy differs at almost every point from Roethke's description in the "Open Letter" of the ideal reader (who one may assume closely resembles the patient poet-fisherman): ". . . You will have no trouble if you approach these poems as a child would, naively, with your whole being awake, your faculties loose and alert." ⁴ The five consecutive four-line stanzas with end-stopped lines, the suppression of the grammatical subject (e.g., "Fished in an old wound"), the shift from indicative to imperative voice, the rhythms, and the abrupt changes in setting--all indicate that the protagonist is in a state of anxiety.

¹Poet and Craft, p. 37.

²Poet and Craft, p. 36.

³Poet and Craft, p. 38.

⁴Poet and Craft, p. 37.

The inefficacy of the speaker's hallucinatory waiting grows clear in the lines:

Sat in an empty house
Watching shadows crawl,
Scratching.
There was one fly.

The "empty house" is the last clear grave-nest image in Section I. Following this the speaker expands upon the pond-wound image, but adds no new ones to the cluster. In the speaker's invocation to "the voices" (part of the "hallucinatory waiting"), one finds a variation of the image of the crawling shadows. That image and the variation serve to introduce later descriptions of motion:

Voice, come out of the silence.
Say something.
Appear in the form of a spider
Or a moth beating the curtain.

The speaker's willingness to accept a spider or moth as a sign, as an aid in his flight, implies anxiety. Two passages treat "the voices" and other assistance that the speaker attempts to acquire. In the first verse paragraph, he turns to several of the lower forms of life:

I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
Saying,
Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home.
Worm, be with me.

The verbs in the requests addressed to the snail and bird express the speaker's readiness to move as they do. In a sense, he is seeking to learn something by identifying himself with other creatures. Later in Section I, when he turns to inanimate nature for aid, something similar occurs:

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

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

The first of these verse paragraphs refers to the container imagery (the "empty house") and says that the speaker wishes to escape imprisonment. The second records the answers that he receives from inanimate nature. Each of the three entities gives an answer that in some way is a reflection of the respondent, meaning that the inanimate realm provides no clue to the solution of the speaker's problem. Carroll Arnett mistakenly associates "the kingdom of bang and blab" with the adult world, when he says that the spirit struggles ". . . so that it may enter into the understanding and moral responsibility which the conscious 'kingdom of bang and blab' requires as prerequisites to any truly creative growth in the world of history."¹ "Bang" and "blab" are both echoic words and as such continue the mirror images of the preceding lines. The "kingdom" is the realm of inanimate matter, which cannot aid the individual human being in his attempt to understand the mysteries of death and identity.

The invocation of the bird, snail, and worm introduced images of motion, and the last six verse paragraphs of "The Flight" develop them

¹"Minimal to Maximal," CE (1957), 415. Arnett's statement provides another example of the failure to recognize the metaphysical level of Roethke's poetry.

fully. The first of the six pictures the boy running over ground that seems to be soft with graves and cluttered with gravestones:

Running lightly over spongy ground,
Past the pasture of flat stones,
The three elms,
The sheep strewn on a field. . . .

Lack of details makes it impossible to tell whether the sheep are animate or inanimate. The second of these paragraphs reintroduces the pond-wound image, now clearly described as a stagnant pond (as was implied by the earlier words, "soft pond of repose"):

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

In this image two important meanings are present. First, the pond symbolizes the speaker's unconscious mind, and second it represents the merging point between the living and dead, and between the animate and inanimate. In other words, it represents the place where one might seek answers to questions about the origins of life. The protagonist is making this search because he has been confronted by death. To put it in the simplest terms: an obsession is driving him to discover whether he was once dust and will return to dust, or whether something in him is immortal. This search (or flight) is, in other terms, the search for identity, of which Mills and Kunitz have made so much.¹

¹Mills writes: ['The Lost Son'] . . . drops us into the midst of the child's pursuit of freedom and singular identity . . ." ("The Lyric of the Self," p. 13.) Kunitz writes of the fourteen narratives: "The protagonist, who recurrently undertakes the dark journey into his own underworld, is engaging in a quest for spiritual identity. The quest is simultaneously a flight, for he is being pursued by the man he has become, implacable, lost, soiled, confused. In order to find himself he must lose himself by re-experiencing all the stages of his growth, by reenacting all the transformations of his being from seed-time to maturity." ("Roethke: Poet of Transformations," The New Republic, CLII [1965], 24.) Another way of saying

II

The title of Section II, "The Pit," is a grave-nest image. Mills makes this point in other terms when he writes: ". . . The pit, which needs partially to be viewed as a female symbol, signifies the place of origins but now becomes a sign of defeat, even in death."¹ As a female symbol, the pit is both the female genitals and the womb; as a "sign" of death it is, of course, the grave. Like the stagnant pond, it is a place where the animate and inanimate, the living and the dead, merge. The speaker's earlier invocations of various lower forms of life now give way to questions, behind which lies the assumption that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. To define his own identity and to understand what death means, he must understand where life came from and what it is. The speaker is compelled to raise the questions that he does by the necessity referred to in Kunitz's statement: "In order to find himself he must lose himself by reexperiencing all the stages of his growth, by reenacting all the transmutations of his being from seed-time to maturity."² The "stages of growth" and "transmutations" are all the changes through which life has passed in the evolution of Homo sapiens and all those through which the human embryo passes in the womb.

that the protagonist is ". . . pursued by the man he has become . . ." is to say that he is granted a vision of his own unconsciousness. The ". . . reexperiencing of all the stages of . . . growth . . ." is the motivating principle behind the speaker's questions in Section II and describes the theme of evolutionary transmigration.

¹"The Lyric of the Self," p. 14.

²"Poet of Transformations," p. 24.

"The Pit" begins with the line:

Where do the roots go?
Look down under the leaves.

The question and answer obliquely treat the matter of how the animate-living draws sustenance from the dead and from the inanimate. The roots go under the leaves in search of that which will sustain their lives. The leaves, once living but now dead, feed and protect the roots. Growing bolder, the boy asks a more ambitious question, one requesting the identification of some being:

Who put the moss there?
These stones have been here too long.

If the roots are sustained by dead organic matter, the boy reasons, then is the moss growing on stones sustained by the inanimate? The answer, more indirect than the first, suggests that the moss is merely a "production of time," like dust that may have settled on the rocks. The respondent seems to be saying, "The moss is only green dust. You are nothing more yourself. There is, in fact, no real difference between animate and inanimate."

Perhaps with a mounting sense of desperation, the protagonist continues to press his inquiry:

Who stunned the dirt into noise?
Ask the mole, he knows.

The question foreshadows the figure of the florist in Section IV, who is referred to as "Papa," and who resembles God the Creator, described in Genesis as stunning the dirt into noise. Not presuming to answer this question (which is tantamount to asking, "Is there a God?") the respondent tells the boy to ask elsewhere. However, his answer vaguely implies that it is only the mole who "stunned the dirt into noise."

Tenaciously, the boy maintains that he knows something of his origin:

I feel the slime of a wet nest.
Beware Mother Mildew.

This remembered origin, unfortunately, does not illuminate anything, but simply unites in itself stagnation and spawning. The voice replies as before: "Perhaps you are just a product of spontaneous generation, appearing out of nowhere, like mildew, having no parents and no home to which to return." In the last line, the protagonist addresses himself, as if testing his possible acceptance of the voice's point of view, a point of view that would make him nothing more than one of the children of Jack Burden's "Great God Twitch," in All the King's Men:

Nibble again, fish nerves.

He is saying to himself, as he touches an electrode to severed frog's leg: "Kick again, frog's leg!"

III

In Section II the speaker relies on his faculty of reason and makes little progress, appears, in fact, to be forced nearer to the view of himself that means death to him. Section III shows him reduced to unreasoning gibberish by his fear and self-loathing. Roethke writes of this section in "Open Letter": "In 'The Gibber' these obsessions [symbolized by the mole, nest, and fish] begin to take hold; again there is a frenetic activity, then a lapsing back into serenity. . . . The next rising agitation is rendered in terms of balked sexual experience, with an accompanying 'rant,' almost in the manner of the Elizabethans, and a subsequent near blackout."¹ This section is the turning point in

¹Poet and Craft, p. 38.

the poem's development, for in the next the boy has returned home. The only cause that I can see for the reversal, for the boy's turning from despair toward happiness, is that his reason and will cease to guide him when he reaches the depths of despair. It is as if he has been strangling himself, but before the strangulation becomes fatal he loses consciousness and relaxes his grip, unwillingly saving himself. Roethke says this when he writes in "Open Letter": "We go, as Yeats said, from exhaustion to exhaustion. To begin from the depths and come out—that is difficult."¹

"The Gibber" advances the poem's development in several important ways. In this section sexuality becomes a predominant concern, and it becomes clear that the boy is "lost" because his parents have rejected him or have died (which amount to the same thing). The many images of orifices (mouths, doors, and windows) suggest that the speaker is about to pass from one spiritual state into another. The section begins with responses that he receives to his questions addressed to inanimate nature and to the lower forms of life. The responses, no longer oracular like those in Section II, are clear and threatening. He is dust and he will return to dust:

The sun was against me,
The moon would not have me.

The cows and briars
Said to me: Die.

In what Roethke has called the "crooning" passage, the operations of the protagonist's reason are replaced by sheer sensation:

¹
Poet and Craft, pp. 39-40.

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 boy's fear of death is at one with his conviction, on rational grounds, that materialism offers the truest picture of reality. Speaking out of this conviction, he treats his mother and father as inanimate substance and calls his father "Father Fear."

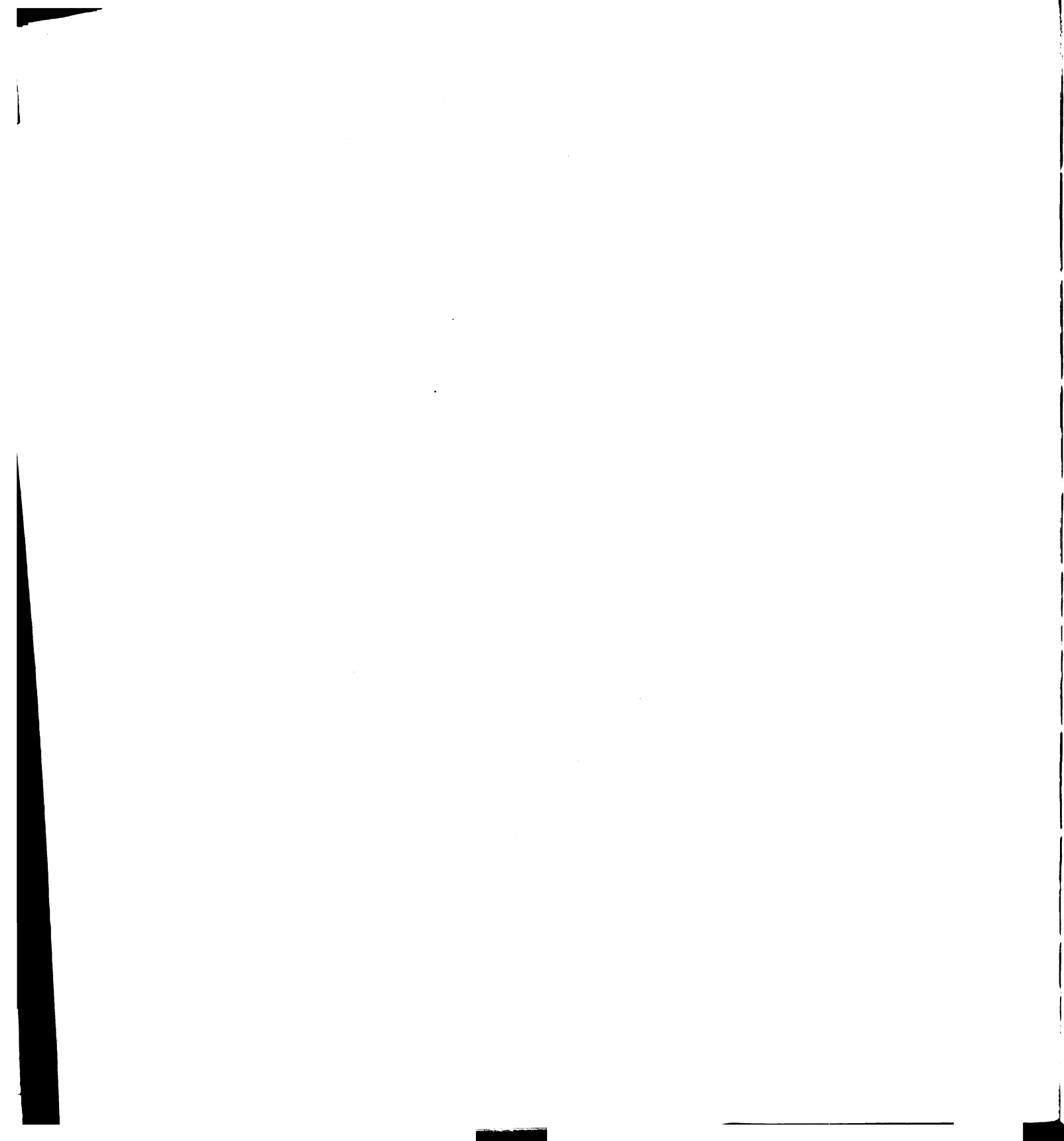
The next three verse paragraphs are possibly a surrealistic picture of creation as it exists in the boy's mind (i.e., straining between idealism and materialism):

What gliding shape
Beckoning through 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.

These lines combine a shadowy figure who might be a ghostly creator, suggestions of an oceanic womb, and a picture of substance mysteriously appearing out of a jug like a genie. The last lines prepare the way for the flood of auto-erotic images that come in the next verse paragraph, the poem's climax:



If 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 **dd** 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!
Good-bye, good-bye, old stones, the time-order is going,
I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,
I run, I run to the whistle of money.

After the surrealistic vision of creation, the speaker's mind leaps to this vision of the apocalypse. The details here that particularly suggest the apocalypse are: "Where are the tears of the world"; "Our doom is already decided"; and "The time-order is going." Although this passage and the remainder of "The Gibber" mark the turning point of the poem, the speaker is still plunging into the depths of the pit, not moving out. The ground stuns itself into noise; there is no florist-father. Throughout these lines the protagonist describes himself in images of self-enclosed sexuality, images of denial of the capability to procreate:

My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast
out their fire?
Is the seed leaving the old bed? . . .
.
I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!
.
I have married my hands to perpetual agitation.

The fire, the seed, and the "primordial milk" (perhaps even the "tears of the world") all represent sperm, which here does not act as a carrier of life but as a means to an onanistic ecstasy. The speaker, as he falls into the pit, reminds one of the "toads brooding in wells," in "The Flight," which in turn reminds one of Othello's "cistern for foul toads to knot and gender in": both symbols of a creative source that has become polluted, of a nest that has become a grave. With the mention of the

butcher,¹ the speaker's inturnd sexual frenzy acquires connotations of death and destruction of identity. The last line of the passage continues this motion of the destruction of identity. Running to the "whistle of money" symbolizes this destruction in the same way that Thoreau's marching to the drummer of the crowd does.

Following this passage, there is a dudden break in the tension that has been building up in the boy and a brief glimpse of a sunlit world:

Money money money
Water water water

How cool the grass is.
Has the bird left?
The stalk still sways.
Has the worm a shadow?
What do the clouds say?

But this is only a "sweep of light," lost as soon as seen. The last verse paragraph of the section employs two more images of onanism and self-enclosed sexuality:²

¹The lines: "Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher's palm; / Let the gestures freeze; our doom is already decided," resemble the first stanza of Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream." Both poems treat simultaneously death and heavy-handed sexuality.

²Roethke's statement about "Praise to the End!" applies equally well to the "balked sexual experience" here: "Equationally, the poem can be represented: onanism equals death. . . ." ("Open Letter," Poet and Craft, p. 40.) I believe that the "veins of a tree" represent self-enclosed sexuality because in the reproductive process of trees the circulatory systems of parent and offspring are never linked, as they are in the reproduction of mammals.

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.

Mills sees in these lines a "gesture of exultation": " . . . The protagonist passes through the "storm's heart" and glides beyond it into a state of calm, another level of existence. The spirit, having survived the threats to its growth, leaps forth in a gesture of exultation at the sheer pleasure of being."¹ But I believe that the protagonist's direction has not yet changed: he is still falling into the depths. In fact, at this point he reminds one of Doctor Faustus in the last scene of Marlowe's play. Roethke's line "Look, look, the ditch is running white!" may even be an echo of Faustus's cry:

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

The action of falling in Roethke's poem symbolizes the cessation of the protagonist's will.

In "The Gibber," motion and stasis still fail to unite and harmonize. The movements possess the hallucinatory quality of the fluttering moth in Section I, but are more violent. I refer here to the running of the "Whistle of money" and the "perpetual agitation of hands." Another hallucinatory event, one foreshadowing both the boy's fall into the "swirl" and the unification of motion and stasis that comes in Sections IV and V, occurs in the lines:

What gliding shape
 Beckoning through halls
 Stood poised on the stair,
 Fell freely down?

¹
 "The Lyric of the Self," pp. 14-15.

The few images of stasis in this section are as shadowy as those of motion:

. . . All the caves are ice. Only the snow's here.

And:

Let the gestures freeze. . . .

In addition to the "gliding shape," which stands "poised" and also falls, there is one image that combines motion and stasis:

The stalk still sways.

Swaying is motion in place, an early form of Roethke's dance image.

In Sections IV and V there are many examples of this type of imagery.

IV

Probably no reader of "The Lost Son" will deny that in the last two sections the protagonist achieves some kind of spiritual goal, or in Mills's words, a ". . . slow ascent from the abyss of inner tensions."¹ The specific "inner tensions," I believe, are those created by the futile exertions of reason and will. In "The Return" (Section IV), two groups of images indicate a relaxing or cessation of these faculties: those of motion-in-rest and those that blur the distinctions between animate and inanimate and between plants and animals.

Only two or three metaphors that speak of plants as animals occur before that turning point of the poem, and these function differently from the "blurring" images just mentioned. "All the leaves stuck out their

¹
Theodore Roethke, p. 27.

tongues" and "I shook the softening chalk of my bones" (both in Section I) present pictorially the boy's "lostness," his sense of rejection and his fear of death. Another, "These buds are live as birds" (Section III), represents the intensification of tactile sensation during the "balked sexual experience." That the similar images following the turning point serve to obliterate the lines intellect draws upon nature becomes clear when these images are brought together. In Section IV we have:

[The roses] . . . had many mouths to breathe with;
 . . . The weeds slept;
 . . . The fireman pulled out roses,
 The big roses, the big bloody clinkers;
Scurry of warmth over small plants;

and possibly:

. . . The hushed forms. . . .

In Section V we have:

The bones of weeds . . . ;
 . . . The dry seed-crowns,
 The beautiful surviving bones;
 [an appositive]

and possibly:

Light traveled over the field. . . .¹

The third image taken from "The Return" treats the inanimate (clinkers) as animate (roses), and plant life (roses) as animal (bloody). More importantly, these lines symbolically answer the questions raised by the

¹
 I have italicized the metaphors throughout.

boy in "The Pit," in that they reveal to him the mystery of birth. We are given a clue to this when the speaker refers to the "boiler" as the "fire-pit," making it a member of the grave-nest cluster. The act of pulling "bloody clinkers" out of the furnace resembles pulling a child from the womb. Additional suggestions that the boiler symbolizes the goal of the protagonist's quest come when we are told "the way to the boiler was dark" and that the boiler is the only source of heat and light throughout the dark hours. Because of the heat and brightness of the fire, the fire-pit not only symbolizes the source of life, but symbolizes one invulnerable to the reason and will.

Before commenting on the images of Section V, I want to call attention to an important development in "The Return." If the preceding sections have shown the protagonist struggling against his fall into the pit, against the hostile containment of the grave, Section IV shows the grave being transformed into a womb. Roethke writes in his "Open Letter" that the greenhouse is his " . . . symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth."¹ In order to appreciate this gloss, one must visualize the setting. At the opening of "The Return" the speaker is inside of a frost-covered greenhouse at night, with only " . . . a single light / Swinging by the fire-pit. . . ." As morning comes and the darkness disappears, the heat comes up, melting the frost on the panes. The boy cries out:

¹
Poet and Craft, p. 39.

Ordnung! Ordnung!
Papa is coming!

The coming of "papa," of warmth and light, the increasing transparency of the greenhouse--all embody a sense of expansion and security. The boy has been granted a vision of the mystery of birth, has returned to an earlier state in which he knew that he had not simply evolved from the slime.

V

If the boy's mind were still functioning as it was earlier, Section V would take the next logical step after Section IV. It does, in fact, move from concern with the origin of life to the problem of death and whether there is a birth beyond death, which is a step, though not a logical one, nearer the boy's true concern. The expansion experienced in "The Return" carries the boy's awareness beyond the protective panes of the greenhouse, and outside he does not see roses, chrysanthemums, and "yellowy weeds," but "bones of weeds" and "dry seed-crowns." In other words, he sees the emblems of death, and his immediate interest is in the question of the weeds' survival, or perhaps revival. To this, the poem does not provide an answer, but rather, establishes in this last section, an equilibrium, an air of expectancy. Images of motion and stasis are fused, as already mentioned. The only hint at an affirmation, though, lies in the shift from wind to light imagery. Does the swaying (or swinging--both symbolize the motion of life) have a material cause (the wind) or a spiritual cause (the light)?¹ In the first two verse paragraphs, it is the wind only that stirs the "bones of weeds," but in the third something joins the wind:

¹Eliot, in "The Wasteland," symbolizes a world devoid of a spiritual prime mover with similar images:

'What is that noise?'

The wind under the door.

Light traveled over the field;
 Stayed.
 The weeds stopped swinging.
 The mind moved, not alone,
 Through the clear air, in the silence.

The first two lines establish a kind of equilibrium. Although we are not told what the wind is doing, the weeds apparently stop swinging because the light "stays." By mentioning the "mind," the speaker forces us to seek out psychical correspondences for these various details of the poem. In the last two stanzas, the speaker approaches as nearly as possible affirming the existence of an immaterial cause:

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

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

Certainly in these lines Roethke echoes The Four Quartets, but just as certainly he is not making the same affirmations that Eliot makes. In fact, if we remember Eliot's line "The poetry does not matter" and remember Roethke's descriptions of the patient fisherman (symbolizing poet and ideal reader), we can say that Roethke's words contradict Eliot's, for these concluding lines stress not the nature of the spirit or even the truth of its existence, but the impatient and receptive waiting. Moreover, for Roethke, this waiting was inseparable from the writing of poetry.

'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
 Nothing again nothing.

(Collected Poems, 1909-1962 [New York, 1963], p. 57.) And:

. . . Bones cast in a little low dry garret,
 Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.

(p. 60).

The Long Alley (PE, pp. 57-60)

I

This is a poem of ascension. The protagonist, perhaps as a representative of humanity, belongs neither to the world of sub-human nature nor to the world of spirit. In this poem he haltingly but definitely moves upward, through the long alley toward the intelligible world.

The first section opens with "sinuous river imagery: an ambivalent brooding by the edge of the city,"¹ as Roethke described it. The imagery acts as an index to the operations of the protagonist's mind, at this point lubricous and self-involved. The style is unctuous:

Loo, loo, said the sulphurous water,
There's no filth on a plateau of cinders.
This smoke's from the glory of God.

Although the section describes many types of flowing, none of them indicates life. In fact, the only signs of life that the protagonist observes are the effects of man-made pollution. Moreover, he realizes the waste and pollution are always by-products of the existence of animate nature. He broods "ambivalently," because on the one hand he sees the "glory" of life (even of industrial manufacturing), but on the other hand sees its ugliness.

The last verse paragraph of Section I continues the earlier use of imagery of actions that are symptomatic of life, such as naming,

¹Poet and Craft, p. 39.

hurrying, and burying. The abruptness of the sentences (e.g., "Can you name it? I can't name it") indicates that the speaker is now struggling out of his facile state of mind.

II

Section II, which Roethke describes as beginning "a new phase"¹ after the relapse of the preceding section, shows the protagonist being pulled between the spiritual and the bestial. Fittingly enough, the contest takes the form of a debate between body and soul, the main tenor of which is that each sees itself as the cause of the other's existence. The soul begins boldly:

The fiend's away. Lord, what do you require?

The body reminds the soul that it is no prince:

The soul resides in the horse barn.

Refusing to be humiliated, the soul denies that physical substance can exist apart from a spiritual cause:

Believe me, there's no one else, kitten-limp sister.

The body rudely reminds the soul that life is maintained by physical sustenance:

Kiss the trough, swine-on-Friday.

"Swine-on-Friday" is a nasty joke aimed at Jewish and Christian food rituals, saying that even the most devout believer must eat undeniably tangible food.

¹Poet and Craft, p. 39.

To this, the soul retorts with a challenge, saying in effect "How can physical food reach or affect a non-physical entity?"¹

Come to me milk-nose, I need the loan of the quick.

Body replies that mental states depend on physical ones:

There's no joy in soft bones.

Soul then tries a new tack:

For whom were you made, sweetness I cannot touch?

Body answers by pointing to the joyful, procreative birds:

Look what the larks do.

Their lives are ends in themselves, not excuses for producing more "horse barns" for souls to reside in. The soul turns to the question of immortality, implying that the body will not be resurrected:

Luminous one, shall we meet on the bosom of God?

But the incorrigible body even has an answer for this. The soul's "God" is just its own image projected outward and worshiped narcissistically:

Return the gaze of a pond.

III

If the protagonist's concerns thus far in the poem have seemed unlikely ones, we simply need to recall Thoreau's interest in the same matters. Recalling Thoreau, we shall also be preparing ourselves for an unexpected turn in Section III, an examination of the "cost" of

¹One is reminded of Milton's "Christian materialism" and Raphael's conversation with Adam about the sustenance of angels.

living. By this phrase I mean an ethical weighing of the actions that a being must take in order to preserve his life. The problem is raised in the first line:

. . . Must I kill something else?

The obverse, "Must something else kill me?" is presented immediately afterwards:

Can feathers eat me?

Together these questions represent the protagonist's concern with what might be called the "power structure" of the situation in which he finds himself. He is unfamiliar with that structure because he has entered unknown territory as he "struggles out of the slime." At this point, the protagonist seems to be both the individual soul, moving between bestiality and spirituality, and life itself, and its evolution from microorganism to man. The speaker's anxiety then expresses itself in a song that restates the problem and at the same time denies its existence.

The statement of the problem develops as follows. After announcing his concern with killing and being killed, the speaker says:

. . . Have mercy, gristle. . . .

This implies that some part of the speaker resists the painful development, which is symbolized by the hardening and growth of the embryonic bone structure, which possibly is forcing him upright. The psychological counterpart of this growth is increasing consciousness, especially consciousness of mortality. The song begins:

A waiting ghost warms up the dead
Until they creak their knees. . . .

In these and following lines, the protagonist echoes both the body and the soul in Andrew Marvell's "A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body," where each maintains that it is forced painfully upright by the other. The soul speaks of itself as,

A soul hung up, as 'twere, in Chains
Of Nerves, and Arteries, and Veins.¹

And the body speaks of "this Tyrannic Soul,"

Which, stretch upright, impales me so,
That mine own Precipice I go;
And warms and moves this needless Frame;
(A Fever could but do the same.)²

But an even closer similarity between Roethke's poem and Marvell's lies in the body's (or the speaker's) condemnation of the soul for forcing it to endure life and--in full awareness--to meet death. In Marvell's poem the body says of the soul:

And, wanting where its spight to try,
Has made me live to let me dye.
A Body that could never rest,
Since this ill spirit it possest.³

Throughout Section III of Roethke's poem, the protagonist continues to question the need of life's feeding on life. Many lines describe his resistance to carnivorousness:

The hay hops in the horse's mouth,
The chin jumps to the nose.

and,

Rich me cherries a fondling's kiss. . . .

¹The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, Vol. I, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1952), p. 20.

²Marvell, p. 21.

³Marvell, p. 21.

This last line may mean that ripe fruit offers itself as food just as lovers, while fondling, offer each other kisses. A few lines later, the hen and the goose, which represent feathered victims to be devoured, refuse to let the speaker's beloved (his carnivorism?) out of the silo (a fitting prison). In the concluding verse paragraph of the section, the speaker makes a pseudo-philosophical investigation of the problem.

The denial of the problem, especially of the speaker's awareness of his own mortality ("Can feathers eat me?"), appears in the tone and in possible readings of some of the lines.

So up and away and what do we do
But barley-break and squeeze.

These lines bring up the anti-carnivorism theme, but they also may be read as part of the speaker's last waltz with an old "itch" and a refusal to take his problems seriously, an attempt to escape from his growing consciousness into alcoholic or sexual euphoria. His escape grows more apparent in the next lines:

Tricksy comes and tricksy goes
Bold in fear therefore. . . .

The frivolous tone continues through the section, which concludes, as I have said, in a mock philosophical inquiry.

IV

Section IV depicts a transcendentalist's ecstasy. In the first verse paragraph, we see the speaker relinquishing his will, which is partly his carnivorous appetite, and submitting himself to what he feels to be forces in his immediate environment that unify flesh and spirit:

That was a close knock. See what the will wants.
 This air could flesh a dead stick. Sweet Jesus, make me sweat.
 Are the flowers here? The birds are.
 Shall I call the flowers?

He hears a summons, which he believes comes from an externalized will. He acknowledges the mysterious creative forces moving about him. He requests and he invokes, actions which mark his spiritual advance out of the tangle of the preceding section. The verse paragraph describing the small, tender plants clarifies the speaker's vision of ideal life, of life at its furthest remove from aggressiveness, killing, and devouring. In the last three lines of the section, his love for life as it is manifested in the "small breathers, creepers and winders" reaches its culmination:

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

The speaker has achieved union with the ideal forms of life.

V

The poem's last section descends from the clarity and lyrical grace of Section IV. Assuming the role of the preacher (as does Whitman after the vision in "Song of Myself"), the protagonist now describes his utopia and prays that it may be realized on earth. His utopia, like Thoreau's, consists in man's living in harmony with nature and in reducing acquisitiveness and trade to the barest minimums. The protagonist, once frightened and confused, now exhibits the self-reliance of a Prometheus:

Give me my hands:
I'll take the fire.

A field of Light (PE, pp. 63-65)

"A Field of Light" grows out of "The Long Alley," primarily by extending and partly undermining the valued actions that the protagonist has discovered. The relaxing or relinquishing of will, which led to the spiritual peak in the fourth section of the preceding poem, here becomes a static condition, approaching stagnation. The love for non-aggressive forms of life seems to transform itself into a love of dirt. But the speaker quickly overcomes these distortions that threaten his new-born spiritual strength, and he once more attains felicity and union with nature.

The two major opposing clusters of images and actions are introduced in the title. The field, which symbolizes corporeality or love for the inanimate, is associated with images of a field, standing water, sand, blackened leaves, deep grass, dust, stones, etc. The images of this cluster are not tied to verbs of motion. Light, which symbolizes spiritual force, is associated with the sun, morning, clouds, bees, and birds. Contrary to the field images, these always exhibit motion.

The first section pictures negatively the utopia that the speaker envisioned at the end of "The Long Alley." There he had prayed:

Send down a rush of air, O torrential,
Make the sea flash in the dust.

Here the "torrential" appears to have more than answered his prayer, for the protagonist seems to be contemplating the results of a spring flood, while the relinquishing of will has become catatonia:

A long weed floated upward;
An eye tilted.

The movements that do occur are strangely accidental and inexplicable. When the speaker reaches for a grape, it does not leap into his hand, as the peaches and cherries were to do in the utopia, but instead:

Reached for a grape
And the leaves changed. . . .

And everything here is seen through the gauze of the past tense.

As in the preceding poem, Section II begins with an address to some spiritual power:

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

These lines recall the last section of "Sensibility! O La!," where the protagonist hypocritically insists that he has "loved the sun." The "angel within" answers his present question by mentioning what appear to be five instances of his cursing the sun:

Under, under the sheaves,
Under the blackened leaves,
Behind the green viscid trellis,
In the deep grass at the edge of a field,
Along the low ground dry only in August. . . .

These images of the field-cluster exemplify what Roethke spoke of as " . . . the muck and welter, the dark, the dreck of these poems"¹

¹
Poet and Craft, p. 40.

(Roethke's italics). Not only are these images rendered static by being presented without verbs, but they are made to convey a sense of furtiveness through the use of certain prepositions. After hearing this indictment, the speaker seems to admit to having performed some unspecified actions, but considers them innocent:

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came far.
Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.

Even if he is glorying in the "dreck," he is at least moving.

Section III carries the movement to its climax. The protagonist begins to separate himself from his physical environment:

The dirt left my hand, visitor.

Imagination and hints of further rapid and powerful movements sprout:

I could feel the mare's nose.
A path went walking.
The sun glittered on a small rapids.

In a lovely, lyrical invocation, addressed to harmless forms of life, the speaker transforms the dirt that he has been guilty of loving into "something rich and strange." It becomes a substance warmed by life and, in turn, giving support to life:

I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,
.....
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.

The poem's concluding verse paragraph amplifies this transformation and reveals that it is a sign of the speaker's harmony, perhaps union, with nature. The harmony embraces the creatures of the field as well as the creatures of the light:

The worms were delighted as wrens.
And I walked, I walked through the light air;
I moved with the morning.

The Shape of the Fire (PE, pp. 69-72)

The title, "The Shape of the Fire," brings to mind the myth of the cave, which Socrates expounds in Book VII of The Republic. Both works concern the difficulties of perception, although for Plato that means seeing the abstract rather than the particular, and for Roethke, seeing a world that harmonizes with one's own identity. Despite the differences between these two ideal modes of perception, the philosopher's theory does illuminate the poem.

Section I reveals the protagonist lost in a world where the inanimate is about to extinguish the life of the animate. The lost son perceives this hostile situation in terms of a mother's rejecting, or refusing to feed, her offspring:

What's this? a dish for fat lips.

This may describe the earth or a woman's breast. Immediately following this image comes an aggressive undercutting:

Who says? A nameless stranger.

The speaker's questioning of the mother-offspring relationship continues:

Will the sea give the wind suck?

No, of course not. The inanimate will "give suck" to nothing.

The she-bear mopes under the hill.

Mother, mother, stir from your cave of sorrow.

These lines picture creaturely love and compassion being smothered under the inanimate, or perhaps one should say the spiritual bond between mother and offspring being smothered under corporeality. In any case, the protagonist wants to escape:

Mother me out of here.

He thinks of escape in terms of adaptation. If life is to survive, it must grow fierce; the mother becomes a witch and a fury:

These flowers are all fangs. Comfort me, fury.
Wake me, witch, we'll do the dance of rotten sticks.

The section ends with the animate being suckled by the inanimate, the dave becoming an arbor, and the speaker moving on:

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

Section II begins with a nursery rhyme about the speaker's fragmented identity, indicating that he is still a prisoner in the cave ("Where's the eye? / The eye's in the sty") and not ready to escape ("There was only one shoe / For the waltz of To / The pinch of Where"). Following this, in prose rhythms, the speaker mocks a man who has come to instruct him, a figure resembling the philosopher who returns to the cave from the world of forms in order to free his fellows:

Time for the flat-headed man. I recognize that listener,
Him with the platitudes and rubber doughnuts. . . .¹

And,

Have you come to unhinge my shadow?

This verse paragraph ends with a further suggestion that the protagonist is moving, but the erotic undertones are so pronounced that it is clear that he is not entering Plato's realm of Ideas:

Up over a viaduct I came, to the snakes and sticks of another
winter,
A two-legged dog hunting a new horizon of howls.

¹
The mock-serious figure of the pedagogue ("the flat-headed man") may recall the pseudo-Solomon if "Where Knock Is Open Wide."

The first "howl" he hears is the following song:

Pleasure on ground
Has no sound,
Easily maddens
The uneasy man.

Who, careless, slips
In coiling ooze
Is trapped to the lips,
Leaves more than shoes;

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

The burden of this song is that one is better off staying hidden in the protective cave than wandering about in unfamiliar territory where one is liable to lose one's dignity. The man described in the song resembles the philosopher who has emerged from the cave into the sunlight of the intelligible world, and such a description would serve a prisoner as justification for staying put. But the "voice" does not convince the protagonist, who realizes that such an attitude is self-destructive:

My meat eats me. Who waits at the gate?
Mother of quartz, your words writhe into my ear.
Renew the light, lewd whisper.

He is now prepared for the ascent. The gate, of course, suggests the cave mouth or any entrance into another realm. He is finally being "mothered out of here" into the light.

Section III is a brief period of unanxious waiting. One line explicitly states the nature of the "journey" that the protagonist is about to begin:

The journey out of the flesh is longest.
A rose sways least.
The redeemer comes a dark way.

The redeemer, previously considered a "flat-headed man," is now recognized for what he is.

Sections IV and V are the illumination, the first, a return to childhood, before knowledge of death and sexuality, the second, a description of a visionary state, unlimited by time. The following lines partly describe the early innocence:

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.

The first two lines tell us that at this time the boy was not aware of death or sexuality. The cave was sweet, not yet a prison of delusions or a smothering corporeality. It was a state of narcissistic and non-aggressive beauty, without any fear that flowers needed to be fangs if they were to survive. The last line indicates that Roethke's sunlit world is an emotional state rather than one of abstract forms, such as Plato's is.

Section V describes a state of light and peace, where there is no willed movement, only the motions of growth and the miraculous coming of light:

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.

The vase is perhaps a variation on the cave image. Here the inanimate is "giving suck" to the animate, but of course it is the inanimate reshaped by art, the "container" made ideal. As in "The Lost Son" the development is essentially the metamorphosis of a grave into a womb, and it is the symbolic or metaphysical meaning of this--not merely the psychoanalytical--that is most important.

Praise to the End! (PE, pp. 75-78)

"Praise to the End" begins with the speaker in a depressed state, lost and wondering why he has struggled:

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker,
For whom have I swelled like a seed?

Although he feels himself to be insignificant, he is not tormented by a sense of inferiority:

Ooh, ooh, I'm a duke of eels.

The relaxed tone of this section contrasts with the artificial assertion of not-caring, which we have seen in many other poems, such as in the third section of "The Long Alley." Only a few lines of this opening part indicate that it is the knowledge of his own mortality that is depressing the speaker:

. . . I'm down to my skin at last.
. . . I'm dead at both ends.

And,

I'll feed the ghost alone.

The section ends on a note of philosophic acceptance:

All risings
Fall.

Section II begins with a more tense sort of frivolity, but this moderates quickly and in such a way that one feels the speaker has been permanently strengthened by the vision of his own early innocence, as described in Section IV of the preceding poem.

Where are you now, my bonny beating gristle,
My blue original dandy, numb with sugar?
Once I fished from the banks, leaf-light and happy. . . .

The signs of the speaker's awareness that "Now the water's low, / The weeds exceed me" continue, but his sense of competence also continues:

Rock me to sleep, the weather's wrong.
 Speak to me, frosty beard.
 Sing to me, sweet.

A voice, apparently his mother's, then sings a song about the child's growth. In Section I he had exclaimed, "What a bone ache I have," and commanded, "Arch my back, pretty-bones, I', dead at both ends." These lines express the pains of growth, or, in a psychological term, of ascent. The mother's song describes certain minor acts of cruelty that the child did not witness and ends with a request that he grow large and strong. (The request is couched in obviously phallic images.) The refrain, line four of each stanza, links the motion of the child's growth with the imagery of the dangerous ascent, during which a slip is fatal:

Be large as an owl, be slick as a frog,
 Be good as a goose, be big as a dog,
 Be sleek as a heifer, be long as a hog,--
 What footie will do will be final.

The section ends with a verse paragraph in which the speaker expresses his restlessness and his intention of doing something about it:

I conclude! I conclude!
 My dearest dust, I can't stay here.

Both lines ambiguously assert the speaker's decision to improve his present psychic state and refer to the central cause of his distress, his mortality.

In Section III the speaker moves away from the "dark woods" in which he has been. The first three quatrains of this part describe the change, the "crossing-over," one which resembles a similar incident in the second part of "The Shape of the Fire." The movement is beneficial:

The sun came out;
The lake turned green. . . .

The speaker then presents a clear statement of his deepest concern, his own mortality:

I dreamt I was all bones;
The dead slept in my sleeve. . . .

And this is immediately followed by an explanation of his calmness:

Sweet Jesus tossed me back:
I wore the sun with ease.

Not only does a "redeemer" help the protagonist face his own mortality, but the comforting concept of reincarnation stands in the background. The section ends with the protagonist convinced that at least some part of him is in some sense immortal:

Skin's the least of me. Kiss this.
Is the eternal near, fondling?

And then the expectancy:

Ghost, come closer.

The final section, as in so many of these poems, shows the protagonist ascending into a state of illumination. Here the ascent is particularly Whitmanesque, relying on either the concept of reincarnation or on a pantheistic oneness of all life. The dreaming expectancy of Section III is burst and the speaker sings of his own ecstasy:

Arch of air, my hear's original knock,
 I'm awake all over:
 I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog.

This replaces the "knock" about which he worried in his earlier musings on death:

This grave has an ear.
 It's still enough for the knock of a worm.

His present alertness transcends the worries of sexuality, spanning the range between saint and dog.¹ He is reconciled to change and to his own flesh:

I bask in the bower of change. . . .

"Change" here means not only mutability, but also the "change" of the soul's habitation, whether that be a senseless stone or a nameless creature:

Many astounds before, I lost my identity to a pebble;
 The minnows love me, and the humped and spitting creatures.

¹Roethke's comment on this passage and the poem in general must be quoted, although, since I do not understand his comment, I cannot be certain whether it supports my reading or not:

"I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog." Except for the saint, everything else is dog, fish, minnow, bird, etc., and the euphoric ride resolves itself into a death-wish. Equationally, the poem can be represented: onanism equals death, and even the early testament moralists can march out happily. (Is the protagonist "happy" in his death-wish? Is he a mindless euphoric jigger who goes blithering into oblivion? No. In terms of the whole sequence, he survives: this is a dead-end explored. His self-consciousness, his very will to live saves him from the annihilation of the ecstasy. (Poet and Craft, pp. 40-41).

His early cantankerous "I conclude! I conclude!" gives way to "I believe' I believe!" What he believes is that all life is one, and that he has lived before and will live again in another body:

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

In the final verse paragraph, the speaker asks the rest of creation to overwhelm him. He declares that he has seen death and yet is gay. The light, which in "Sensibility! O La!" he thought he would carry under his arm, has now deigned to come to him:

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

Roethke took the title of this poem from the first book of Wordsworth's Prelude, where the phrase expresses the poet's thankfulness that all the "terrors, pains and early miseries" that he experienced were necessary steps to his present calm. That thankfulness is identical with the joy expressed in the conclusion of Roethke's poem.

Unfold! Unfold! (PE, 81-83).

The title "Unfold! Unfold!" reveals two important facets of the poem: first, that the protagonist feels himself in a position to issue commands; second, that he demands explanation or instruction. Possibly the unusual nature of this demand may be explained by one's viewing the speaker as a prisoner who has escaped Plato's cave and who now returns. In other words, he, himself, now plays the role of "the flat-headed man," or at least sees himself in that role.

Unlike many other poems in these sequences, "Unfold! Unfold!" does not begin with the protagonist in a state of depression and develop as he moves into elation. This poem, rather, opens with him expressing dissatisfaction with his present predicament, but confident that he will soon be out of it, much the same tone as that which concluded Section II of "Praise to the End!" His hasty mixing together of explanations of why he is where he is, mystifying questions, denials of ability, and expressions of his wishes makes him appear officious and distracted:

By snails, by leaps of frog, I cam here, spirit.
 Tell me, body without skin, does a fish sweat?
 I can't crawl back through those veins,
 I ache for another choice.

The most important thing that we learn from the opening lines is that the speaker has lost contact with his childhood innocence; he cannot go romping "down the summery streets of...[his] veins," as he recalls doing in Section II of "Praise to the End!" In relation to the theme of transmigration, these lines speak of the protagonist's understanding that he must accept the burdens of human consciousness, that the easier lives lower on the evolutionary scale are no longer for him. The remaining lines in the section suggest that he has returned (or been returned) from eternity to the world of time, and that he now (again like Whitman) waits expectantly to decipher messages from that other world:

The cliffs! The cliffs! They fling me back.
 Eternity howls in the last crags,
 The field is no longer simple:
 It's a soul's crossing time.
 The dead speak noise.

Being flung back by the cliffs must be equivalent to the notion of reincarnation as it was expressed in Section III of "Praise to the End!":

Sweet Jesus tossed me back. . . .

The last three lines, I believe, indicate that the speaker's preparing to take on the role of interpreter-instructor.

Section II is a mockery of conversation or discussion, with the overtones of a vaudeville comedy routine and sly allusions to inebriation. At the same time, the lines may be read as an oracular statement about the coming of the tongue of fire:

It's time you stood up and asked
 --Or sat down and did.
 A tongue without song
 --Can still whistle in a jug.
 You're blistered all over
 --Who cares? The old owl?
 When you find the wind
 --Look for the white fire.

The first exchange and the mention of "the old owl" touch on the notion of the roles of instructor and student. The jug, "blistered," and the "white fire"--all may allude to alcohol and inebriation, which in turn may be a mocking description of the coming of ecstasy. One may easily enough, of course, associate the song, the whistling, the wind, and the fire with the spirit.

Section III explicitly introduces a figure who resembles the "flat-headed man . . . with the platitudes," one who is adept at reading oracles:

What a whelm of proverbs, Mr. Pinch!
 Are the entrails clear, immaculate cabbage?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

The speaker, who is a colleague of Mr. Pinch's, calls him an "immaculate cabbage" just as earlier he called the spirit a "body without skin."

"Immaculate" here means spirit without flesh, and a cabbage is something to be unfolded. Mr. Pinch, himself, then, is the "message" or oracle from the spiritual world that the speaker is about to unfold. The hierophant immediately launches into a boastful description of his qualifications and of his past performances of certain rituals:

The last time I nearly whispered myself away.
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.
I was privy to oily fungus and the algae of standing waters;
Honored, on my return, by the ancient fellowship of
rotten stems.

.
 I met a collector of string, a shepherd of slow forms.
 My mission became the salvation of minnows.

 Later, I did and I danced in the simple wood.
 A mouse taught me how. I was a happy asker.

The protagonist has survived dangers, and not because of cowardliness. The line about fishing recalls "Sweet Jesus tossed me back" and also recalls the ancient symbol for eternity, a snake with its tail in its mouth. The "sleep-daze" is the mystic trance, and the "billboards" are signs that the spiritual leader is reading, the modern omens from which oracles are read. "Privy," as used here, reverberates quite fully, suggesting the secrecy of the priestly cult, the self-importance felt by a counselor, and even the privacy of the water closet. "Honored," "ancient fellowships," "shepherd," "mission," and "salvation"--all contribute to the description of the protagonist in his role as priest and prophet. But why is his mission "the salvation of minnows," mice,

and plants? The answer may lie in the many references here to reincarnation, for in light of that doctrine it is certainly true that

The field is no longer simple.

An apparently empty meadow teems with immortal souls, each undergoing trials roughly similar to the speaker's. His feeling of compassion for these lower forms goes back to his "salvation" of the fish in Section IV of "Where Knock Is Open Wide."

Section IV of this poem acts as a brief indication that the speaker's boastful self-explanation has concluded and that a revelation is at hand:

Easy the life of the mouth. What a lust for ripeness!
All openings praise us, even oily holes.
The bulb unravels. Who's floating? Not me.
The eye perishes in the small vision.
What else has the vine loosened?
I hear a dead tongue halloo.

The first sentence is a remarkable admission (of his volubility) for the priest to make, and it is also a preparation for further unfoldings of the truth. The section goes on to describe the protagonist's manner of teaching. He strives to express the idea that is "ripe" at the moment; he seeks "openings" as the train of ideas "unravels" organically. He seems to be carried away, but keeps his feet on the ground. He takes care not to become bogged down in details (in "the small vision"). He remains receptive to clues from the outside, and the "dead tongue" perhaps speaks from the pages of a book. The voice

from the dead is, of course, also the voice from eternity.¹

In Section V that voice speaks. The first two verse paragraphs acknowledge a mysterious presence and invoke it:

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

A light comes from the leaves.
A slow sigh says yes. And light sighs;
A low voice, summer-sad.
Is it you, cold father? Father,
For whom the minnows sang?

The protagonist, like Whitman, sees all forms of life as symbols of God. He refers to God as "cold father" because of the creator's distance, his prolonged absences. The "summer-sad" voice speaks:

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

The last two lines of this passage restate the converse of Wordsworth's "Ode" as it was given in the conclusion of "O Lull Me, Lull Me":

I'm more than when I was born.

In this world, one is not inexorably swept away from his early innocence; in fact, one can overcome the disorders of childhood, one can learn to see through the particular and fleeting visible shapes.

The final two verse paragraphs show that the previously boisterous speaker has been touched by the mood of the "summer-sad" voice:

¹I readily admit that this reading of these difficult lines is far-fetched, but at present I cannot see what other construction to put on them. By way of extrinsic support: Roethke was an extremely successful and conscientious teacher. See R. B. Heilman in Shenandoah, XVI (1964), 55-64. Also, three pieces in Poet and Craft ("The Teaching Poet," "A Word to the Instructor," and "Last Class") deal explicitly with teaching.

This fat can't laugh.
 Only my salt has a chance.
 I'll seek my own meekness.

The "fat" is his body, his visible part, which cannot perform the dance that the spirit needs. But his tears have a chance of making his spirit visible. He will train himself in humility:

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

"Lost," as used here, means of this world, not a pure spirit. The "lost son" then heartens himself by remembering that after death he can look forward to another birth. The poem ends with an affirmation of the bonds between souls in the process of living and those in the other world:

In their harsh thickets
 The dead thrash.
 They help.

Essentially, in these last two verse paragraphs, the protagonist has returned to the situations he faced in the first section of "The Lost Son," but this time he overcomes the threats uttered by the material world ("bang and blab") and the fears inspired by Woodlawn's dead.

I Cry, Love! Love! (PE, pp. 87-89)

"I Cry, Love! Love!" is a meditation on birth, on the various bodily forms that the soul enters. The tone, the protagonist's state of mind, develops from officious confidence into a serene contemplation of the harmony that is possible between the physical and the spiritual. The title is from Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," where it occurs in a song praising the freedom of selfless love. The last line of this song also bears on Roethke's poem:

Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!¹

Such a compassion for all forms of life usually accompanies a belief in reincarnation, a belief that Blake and Roethke, at times at least, share.

In the first section, the protagonist expresses mild dissatisfaction with the "fall" into time, with birth:

Went weeping, little bones. But where?
Wasps come when I ask for pigeons.
The sister sands, they slipper soft away.
What else can befall?

He then addresses a spirit who seems to control the form that the soul will take in its new birth. We may recall a similar address in the third part of "Give Way, Ye Gates":

You child will a beast's heart,
Make me a bird or a bear!

The protagonist asks the spirit for an obscure mission, indicating that he is not ambitious to leave the "states of probation" and return to the realm of true being:²

¹The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, p. 50.

²See the Phaedrus in The Dialogues of Plato, I, 252-253.

Delight me otherly, white spirit,--
 Some errands, obscure as the wind's circuit,
 A secret to jerk from the lips of a fish.
 Is circularity such a shame?
 A cat goes wider.

The line, "Is circularity such a shame?," one of the most important questions in Roethke's poetry, essentially asks "Should an immortal soul love or scorn 'the productions of time'?" The last verse paragraph of the section shows the protagonist trying on an unfamiliar and unidentified shape. he seems pleased:

What's a thick? Two-by-two's a shape.
 This toad could waltz on a drum:
 I hear a most lovely huzza:
 I'm king of the boops!

The second section is a celebration of existence in non-human forms, as if the protagonist were defending his lack of ambition. For Plato, of course, spiritual progress depended on the enlightenment of reason, on freeing that faculty from the "forgetting" that attends its birth in the mortal, human form. Roethke's protagonist, like Blake, considers love the mainspring of spiritual growth and reason an inhibiting force:

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.

He recalls earlier existences in which he has expressed the same love that he now feels and he blesses the "mazes" of earthly life:

I've traced these words in sand with a vestigial tail;
 Now the gills are beginning to cry.
 Such a sweet noise: I can't sleep for it.
 Bless me and the maze I'm in!
 Hello, thingy spirit.

The "thingy spirit," of course, is the world of objects in time and space, a "spirit" that would not be blessed by Plato.

The next verse paragraph shows the protagonist at the highest pitch of emotion that he reaches in this poem, praising the physical world:

That anguish of concreteness!--
 The sun playing on loam,
 And the first dust of spring listing over backlots,--
 I proclaim once more a condition of joy.
 Walk into the rain, willie!

"Anguish" here does not mean pain unmixed with pleasure. The line exclaims about the intensity of the bond that can tie an immortal soul to the particularities of a time and a place. The last two lines of the passage are an unqualified acceptance of this world.

The concluding verse paragraph of the section explains the speaker's attitude toward ecstasy and love. It is another statement of Roethke's anti-Wordsworthian theory of education. Here, once more employing images from Heraclitus, he says that "I am more than when I was born," and points out that he is more because he has learned to experience ecstasy and love:

In a sodden place, all raps and knocks approve.
 A dry cry comes from my own desert;
 The bones are lonely.
 Beginnings start without shade,
 Thinner than minnows.

Heraclitus believed that moisture taken into the body dampened the fire of wisdom, and he associated this dampening with ecstasy and drunkenness: "It is a delight to souls to become wet. Whenever a man gets drunk, he is led about by a beardless boy, stumbling, not knowing whither he goes, for his soul is wet. The dry soul is wisest and best."

And, "Where the earth is dry, the soul is wisest and best."¹ The "raps and knocks" in Roethke's lines may be signals from spirits, and the lack of shade at the beginning certainly means a lack of moisture, a lack of drunkenness of the soul. The section ends with an assertion that in time every form, even the most reluctant, learns to love:

Behold, in the lout's eye,
Love.

The poem's concluding section delicately describes the serene interaction of animate and inanimate, or of spirit and body. The third verse paragraph, without mentioning anything living, employs an animating metaphor and another descriptive term that returns to the original concern with birth:

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

(My italics.)

The last five lines are slightly enigmatic, but become clear when we recall the questioning of the inanimate-animate relationship in terms of the mother-child relationship in Section I of "The Shape of the Fire." There we saw lines such as,

Mother me out of here. . . .
Will the sea give the wind suck? . . .

. . . Small birds pass over water

And,

Mother, mother, stir from your cave of sorrow.

¹

Nahm, pp. 92-93. Fragments 72, 73, 74, and 76 cited in that order.

In the present poem, too, small birds are seen "Dipping and veering close to the motionless water," and in the last lines the concern with birth grows into a remembering of the mother:

Who united the tree? I remember now.
We met in a nest. Before I lived.
The dark hair sighed.
We never enter
Alone.

These lines also reveal on the part of the speaker a beautifully covert recognition of the sexual union of the parents that precedes the birth of an offspring.

O, Thou Opening, O¹

The final narrative, "O, Thou Opening, O," is printed in italics and is the most consistently excited of the fourteen pieces. The speaker's mood never strays far from ecstatic delight with the world of time and space. Throughout, however, he acknowledges the danger of his becoming "lost":

I'll make it; but it may take me.
The rat's my phase.
My left side's tender.
Read me the stream.

He only slightly tempers his confidence here. His ability to survive equals the rat's. The "stream" is Heraclitus's well-known image for the flux, and in asking that it be read the protagonist appears to confront it with his intelligence, perhaps his reason. The notion that he is somehow struggling with the flux continues:

¹This poem does not appear in PE, but is added to the sequence in The Waking (1953).

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

The "dazzle" becomes "Jesus-shimmer" in Section II, but we cannot be certain whether it is Jesus or Socrates who is the "dizzy aphorist." The second pair of lines is a paradox, one of Heraclitus's favorite devices. The first suggests that the soul has gone to sleep next to the body and that the body is inactive (a "stick"). The next, however, has the soul "lost" in the flux, in thinghood.

A voice hurls him two "precepts," the first resembling some of Heraclitus's paradoxes of strife:

The Depth calls to the Height
 --Neither knows it.
 Those close to the Ground
 --Only stay out of the Wind.

Two of the fragments throw light on these lines: "Men do not understand how that which draws apart agrees with itself; harmony lies in the bending-back, as for instance of the bow and of the lyre." And: "Opposition unites. From what draws apart results the most beautiful harmony. All things take place by strife."¹ The depth and the height call each other into being, just as do life and death. But the speaker is concerned with the amount of tension between the two poles. Forms of life "close to the ground," those that do not attain a high degree of consciousness, are not aware of the wind of mortality. The remaining two stanzas of the section show the speaker attempting to

¹Nahn, p. 91. Fragments 45 and 46, respectively.



decrease the tension that he, himself, feels between life and death.

In one of the fragments, Heraclitus likens the "strife" in a bow to life and death: "The name of the bow is life, but its work is death."¹

The first line of the next stanza echoes the plucking of a bow or harp and speaks of diminished tension:

Thrum-thrum, who can equal the ease?
I've seen my father's face before
Deep in the belly of a thing to be.
The Devil isn't dead; he's just away.

The other three lines explain the lessening of strife. The opposition between life and death is diminished by the "circularity" of re-incarnation, and that between good and evil, by a temporary absence of the Devil. The last quatrain of the section describes the inconsistency of the flux and the soul's attempt to adapt to it:

A true mole wanders like a worm.

Section II is a discourse against too great an "easing" of the tension. The first prose paragraph decries the "pellucidous Jesus-shimmer" that transforms physicality and animality into "a ghostly going of tame bears," that changes a physical wound, such as the one in Christ's side, into something painless and "spiritual." The second prose paragraph continues the tirade against a childish and facile mystification, a too easy denial of death and the body. Concluding the section, a verse paragraph asserts the value of being aware of the tension and the flux:

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

¹Nahm, p. 92. Fragment 66,

The significance of the first four lines, in Heraclitean terms, should be obvious, and the third and fourth closely echo the most famous fragment: "In the same rivers we do and we do not step; we are and we are not."¹ The last five lines affirm the value of awareness, of not being a "pleased rock" except on days when there is no weather, in other words, never.

The final section (Section III) praises intensity of awareness. It begins with an increased sense of freedom on the part of the protagonist. He feels his capability of living in the flux:

Oh, what a webby wonder I am!

He continues:

I sing the green, and things to come,
I'm king of another condition,
So alive I could die!

He berates the "enemies of skin," an invective in which neither Heraclitus nor Plato would accompany him. Several lines later, he mentions a harp whose song he associates with waking:

See what the sweet harp says.
Should a song break a sleep?

And,

I'm a tune dying
On harsh stone.

In other words, his waking brings his own death, an idea that Roethke later expresses in the refrain line of "The Waking":

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

¹
Nahm, p. 93. Fragment 81.

His immersion in the flux makes him more than when he was born:

Going is knowing.
I see; I seek;
I'm near.
Be true,
Skin.

He commends his soul to the stream with a brief, final prayer.

We may say, then, that during the course of these fourteen poems the protagonist moves from shock and withdrawal, caused by his confrontation with materiality and death, to a qualified love for the productions of time. Although such otherworldly thinkers as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Plato, and Plotinus assist in this adjustment (to use a loaded word), Ralph Mills and others mistakenly overemphasize the spiritual and mystical element in these poems. Principally, the break between the poet and these philosophers comes in his elevation of love for particular objects and creatures over the faculties of reason and will. Like the thinkers mentioned, Roethke believes in the soul's continual return to earth, in various forms, until it achieves perfection, but unlike them this perfection is a matter of love not understanding. As the poems of the 1950's and The Far Field show, Roethke approaches nearer and nearer to the worldly transcendentalism of Whitman, Blake, and Yeats.

CHAPTER V
THE ANGEL IN THE VOID

At the end of "The Dying Man," which is subtitled "In Memorium: W. B. Yeats" (WW, pp. 185-190), Roethke writes in what is for him an unusual note of defiance:

. . . he dares to live
Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings
Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things.
(WW, p. 190)

This epigram recalls Matthew Arnold's description of Shelley as " . . . a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."¹ We may much more easily see Shelley in this role of futile, cosmic rebellion than Roethke, but nevertheless it was a role that Roethke continually strove to play in his poetry during the early 1950's. The poems written between 1951 and 1959, which are the subject of this chapter, fall between two distinct phases, the long narratives and the landscape poems of the "North American Sequence." Only the last poem, "Meditations of an Old Woman" (WW, pp. 191-212), which belongs with the works of The Far Field, violates the consistency uniting these poems. That consistency, as I see it, lies in the images and themes employed in presenting the attitude expressed in the closing lines of "The Dying Man."

¹Essays in Criticism, Second Series (London, 1888), p. 252.

One of the ways in which Roethke demonstrates his resistance to the "emptiness of things" is by exploring again the relationship between flesh and spirit. In Open House the spirit is usually represented as being diseased and the flesh as being loathsome. Throughout the poems under discussion, on the other hand, the spirit is usually pictured as an angelic singer and the flesh as the incarnation of beauty. The celebration of the flesh first occurs in an "Old Lady's Winter Words" (WW, pp. 117-119), where the speaker remembers her youth:

Once I was sweet with the light of myself,
A self-delighting creature,
Leaning over a rock,
My hair between me and the sun,
The waves rippling near me.

The hair and the rock signify physicality, and the sun and the stream signify the passage of time. A poem such as "I Knew a Woman" (WW, p. 151) is an almost pure form of this celebration: the speaker seems to forsake eternity for time spent in the woman's presence:

But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

"The Sententious Man" (WW, pp. 155-157), also appears to elevate flesh above the spirit in the lines:

Pride in fine lineaments precedes a fall;
True lechers love the flesh, and that is all.

But then the speaker begins to qualify this statement:

We did not fly the flesh. Who does, when young?
.....
Some rages save us. Did I rage too long?
The spirit knows the flesh it must consume.

In the next section the spirit has attained dominance:

I stay alive, both in and out of time,
By listening to the spirit's smallest cry. . . .

Two passages in "Her Becoming," one of the series of poems entitled "Meditations of an Old Woman" (WW, pp. 191-212), portray the speaker's delight in her body:

My shape a levity--Yes!--
A mad hen in a far corner of the dark,
Still taking delight in nakedness,
In the sun, busy at a young body,
In the rain, slackening on a summer field;
In the back of my mind, running with the rolling water,
My breast wild as the waves.

(P. 201)

And remembering earlier days, she says:

I stepped carefully, like a new-shod horse,
A raw tumultuous girl
Making my way over wet stones.

(P. 202)

Here, as in "Old Lady's Winter Words," the love is narcissistic; the speaker is "self-delighting." Often, when the love is turned outward, the distinction between flesh and spirit ceases to exist; or this outward-directed love no longer serves as a sign of exuberant life, as it does, say, in "I Knew a Woman." In "Words for the Wind" (WW, pp. 147-150), the beloved does not evaporate into pure spirit but does become an emblem of all the victims of death:

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

The speaker then compliments the lady by calling her a "lovely substance" and says that "light fell"

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

(P. 147)

I shall return to this poem, which contains so many of Roethke's seminal themes and images, but now I wish to call attention to two other poems that can be said to celebrate the flesh. "A Walk in Late Summer" (WW, pp. 178-180) contains a stanza that praises the beauty of objects at the foot of the Neoplatonic ladder:

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.
The dove's elaborate way of coming near
Reminds me I am dying with the year.

The rose traditionally symbolizes the meeting point between the realms of flesh and spirit. This image and the reference to "earthly lovers" and the dove's approach--all represent the world of tangible things. "Snake" (WW, p. 181) is another poem in which the beauty of a creature raises the speaker's perceptions to the infinite. The description of the snake first presents it without motion, as if timeless, and then in motion. On seeing it the speaker says:

I felt my slow blood warm.
I longed to be that thing,
The pure, sensuous form.

And I may, some time.

The snake is clearly a tangible embodiment of something abstract.

Thus far I have mentioned only passages that express a favorable attitude toward the physical, but many of these poems repeat the condemnations made in Open House. "The Sensualists" (WW, p. 162) is the most vigorous of these, describing as it does the feelings of two lovers after violent copulation. One can read the poem as a description of the soul entangled in, and bruised by, the flesh:

"There is no place to turn," she said,
 "You have me pinned so close;
 My hair's all tangled on your head,
 My back is just one bruise;
 I feel we're breathing with the dead;
 O angel, let me loose!"

The word "angel" here is not as casual as it appears, but reminds one of the spirit that is wallowing in "this sensual pen." In "The Renewal" (WW, pp. 160-161), the speaker struggles to resign himself to time and death, and in stanza three describes his sense of the unpleasantness of life in the body:

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.

These lines say that the speaker immerses himself in physical existence, hoping that through this acceptance he will achieve something higher. Another poem describes the speaker as a "madman," pawing the dark, struggling to accept his life, and to see beyond it:

Though it reject dry borders of the seen,
 What sensual eye can keep an image pure,
 Leaning across a sill to greet the dawn?
 A slow growth is a hard thing to endure.
 When figures out of obscure shadow rave,
 All sensual love's but dancing on a grave.

The wall has entered: I must love the wall,
 A madman staring at perpetual night,
 A spirit raging at the visible.
 I breathe alone until my dark is bright.
 Dawn's where the white is. Who would know the dawn
 Where there's a dazzling dark behind the sun?

("The Dying Man," pp. 188-189)

Apparently, the world of objects, "the visible," forms a wall between the speaker and what Plotinus called the "intelligible" world or what mystics call the state of "illumination." The speaker is saying that he must and will love the visible, as difficult as that may be, until he can see beyond it.

That some indications of the loathing of the flesh exist in these poems cannot be denied, but the loathing differs considerably from that in Open House. In the present poems, the speaker appears unable to consider the flesh without also thinking of time, death, and the intelligible world. In other words, the loathing has become complicated, a fact that I shall return to when discussing other themes.

Right now I wish to conclude this part of the discussion by examining the speaker's attitude toward physicality in "Four for Sir John Davies" (WW, pp. 120-123). Professor Frederick J. Hoffman writes of the poem, which comprises four independent pieces, "The importance of the sequence depends primarily on its full commitment to sexual

involvement."¹ To me this statement seems an oversimplification. Part II, "The Partner," for instance, shows that "embracing" the partner is equivalent to embracing one's "body of fate," which connotes death (though in Yeats's A Vision, from which the term is borrowed, it means something else).

Who can embrace the body of his fate?
 Light altered light along the living ground.
 She kissed me close, and then did something else.
 My marrow beat as wildly as my pulse.

The speaker may hesitate to embrace his fate, but, as fate is here represented by the woman, it does not hesitate to embrace him. And the result of this embrace is a burning up of the speaker's life. The linking of the partner (who is a love-object) with death, and the speaker's ambivalence toward this composite figure appears again in the lines:

The living all assemble! What's the cue?--
 Do what the clumsy partner wants to do!

This ambivalence must be seen as qualifying Professor Hoffman's belief that "Roethke sees the sexual act as both a move away from the simplicities of childish 'aloneness' and 'an harmonious' recovery of life."²

Professor Hoffman, in failing to recognize the speaker's highly ambivalent "commitment to sexual involvement," apparently falls into a

¹"The Poetic Shape of Death," Stein, p. 104.

²Stein, p. 104.

contradiction. After speaking of Roethke's "full commitment," he says in the next paragraph: "Having chosen 'desire' as a device for extending the range of self-definition, he must now define the word and overcome his doubts concerning its value."¹ And after maintaining that "Roethke sees the sexual act . . . as . . . 'an harmonious' recovery of life," he writes one page later: "Beyond the dissolution of the two [lovers] lies death; the danger of annihilation is already genuinely present, even in the most pleasant conditions."² If I understand the poem, death does not "lie beyond" the lovers, but in them; and in the act of loving they become more aware of its immediacy. As I pointed out while discussing the long narratives, the awareness of death tends to drive the protagonists of Roethke's poems into shock. They retreat from its presence into insentience. The principal struggle that Roethke's poetry dramatizes is that of overcoming this withdrawal--it is a struggle to turn back to the world anyway. "Four for Sir John Davies" describes one man in the act of embracing his "body of fate," refusing to shrink from awareness. If I am right in saying that Roethke affirms the value of awareness, then Professor Hoffman's definition of love as a narcotic is incorrect. He writes: "Love assists in our fight to postpone death; it is also a testimony of Godhead. As a form of dying, love at least momentarily pushes the threat of dying out of mind."³ I do not believe that this interpretation is borne out by the details of the poem.

¹Stein, p. 104.

²Stein, p. 105.

³Stein, p. 105.

The third and fourth poems, "The Wraith" and "The Vigil," practically thrust the protagonist's ambivalence at the reader. "The Wraith," as the title indicates, pictures the beloved as an apparition appearing shortly before her death, and "The Vigil" is the thoughts of the protagonist after her death. The first affirms the beauty of physical love, maintaining that

The flesh can make the spirit visible. . . .

The last stanza describes the apparition of the woman and indicates the imminence of her death:

It was and was not she, a shape alone,
Impaled on light, and whirling slowly down.

In "The Vigil" the speaker compares himself with Dante, whose beloved also died. Dante had been forced to embrace his "body of fate"; he

Shook with a mighty power beyond his will. . . .

And then he went on to write a masterpiece about the very thing in which Roethke's protagonist would like to believe--life after death. But on this point Roethke's lines are noncommittal:

All lovers live by longing, and endure:
Summon a vision and declare it pure.

Does the vision have any reality apart from the seer? Or does it merely appear because the "longing" of the lover is powerful enough to project it on the "immense immeasurable emptiness of things"?

A direct answer to this question does not appear in "Four for Sir John Davies." The reply, which turns aside the question, is one that Roethke makes again and again, in various forms, in these poems of the early 1950's. In oversimplified form, the reply is that a complexly ambivalent reaction to "the productions of time" is the truest mode of

human living. The protagonist, in the next-to-last stanza of "The Vigil," asserts the converse of what he had said in "The Wraith," and then makes a brief Platonic statement about the relation between man and objects. The "dance" symbolizes the mode of life that the protagonist would consider nearest the ideal. The last stanza summarizes the entire poem (or four poems) and states that it is neither the possession nor the loss of objects and creatures in time but a cycle of both that constitutes life:

The visible obscures. But who knows when?
 Things have their thought: they are the shards of me;
 I thought that once, and thought comes round again;
 Rapt, we leaned forth with what we could not see.
 We danced to shining; mocked before the black
 And shapeless night that made no answer back.

The world is for the living. Who are they?
 We dared the dark to reach the white and warm.
 She was the wind when wind was in my way;
 Alive at noon, I perished in her form.
 Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
 The word outleaps the world, and light is all.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall discuss several themes that bear on the central point of Roethke's conception of the relationship between flesh and spirit.

Part of the ambiguity that I have been discussing results, as I have said, from the protagonist's inability to see the object that he is contemplating steadily and whole. This inability reflects the speaker's desire to believe in the spirit's existence independent of the flesh. One manifestation of his "double vision" lies in his seeing the universal in the particular. The last stanza of "The Reversal" (WW, pp. 160-161), for instance, resembles and clarifies the conclusion of "The Vigil":

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 had split apart
 And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
 I find that love, and I am everywhere.

The "dry bones," of course, make one think of the possibility of "renewal," but they, and the "rubblestones," also symbolize tangible objects. As when the protagonist declares of "things," "they are the shards of me," here he feels that he exists everywhere that "things" exist.

Another example of this identification of a being with all the matter in the universe occurs in Section IV of "Words for the Wind" (WW, pp. 147-150):

The breath of a long root,
 The shy perimeter
 Of the unfolding rose,
 The green, the altered leaf,
 The oyster's weeping foot,
 And the incipient star--
 Are part of what she is.
 She wakes the ends of life.

Carrying this identification process one step further, the speaker concludes by saying:

[I] . . . see and suffer myself
 In another being, at last.

In "The Other" (WW, p. 154), the protagonist appears to have ascended the Neoplatonic ladder¹ to the point where he sees his beloved's beauty in many objects and creatures:

¹Baldassare Castiglione, in The Book of the Courtier (trans. Sir Thomas Hoby [London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1928], p. 319), writes: "For like as through the particular beautie of one bodie hee [love] guideth her [the soul] to the universal beautie of all bodies. Even so in the least degree of perfection through particular understanding hee guideth her to the universal understanding."

Is she what I become?
 Is this my final Face?
 I find her everyplace;
 She happens, time on time--

Again he identifies with his beloved, while seeing her "every place."

The poem "The Sententious Man" (WW, pp. 155-157), perhaps in keeping with its title, makes the perception of the universal in the particular a general phenomenon:

I know the motion of the deepest stone.
 Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone.

The second line seems to limit the range of the "particulars" to human beings, but the first line, through the stone as a symbol of all tangible objects, indicates the true scope of the idea.

Another form that this manifestation of the universal in the particular sometimes takes in Roethke's poetry is a mixture of pantheism and the doctrine of reincarnation. This form is relatively rare in the poems of the early 1950's, but it does occur. In "A Walk in Late Summer" (WW, pp. 179-80), for instance, the speaker declares:

Gos's in that stone, or I am not a man!

The poem "Snake" (WW, p. 181) assumes the possibility of reincarnation, when the speaker says after seeing the snake:

I longed to be that thing,
 The pure, sensuous form.

And I may, some time.

The emphasis on the word "time" suggests that the protagonist is imagining his return to mortal existence in another form, not a return to the intelligible world. "The Dying Man" (WW, pp. 187-190) contains a number of lines bearing on the concepts of pantheism and reincarnation.

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In stanza one the speaker explicitly doubts the immortality of the soul:

I heard the sying man
 Say to his gathered kin,
 My soul's hung out to dry,
 Like a fresh-salted skin;
 I doubt I'll use it again.

But the next two stanzas qualify this by saying that what he doubts is the existence of a remote spiritual home, somehow cut off from earth. This doubt he shares with one of the voices in Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," who asserts:

There is not any haunt of prophecy,
 Nor any dd chimera of the grave,
 Neither the golden underground, nor isle
 Melodious, where spirits get them home,
 Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
 Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
 As April's green endures. . . .¹

The speaker of Roethke's poem relies more heavily on abstractions, but says essentially the same thing:

What's done is yet to come;

 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.

The first of these lines faintly suggests the notion of riencarnation, which is to be developed in the next section of the poem. "Eternity is Now" exemplifies once more the concept of the presence of the

¹The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 68.

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universal in the particular. When the speaker says "My heart sways with the world," he employs a dance image, which I have already mentioned as a symbol of combined possession and loss. The act of singing symbolizes the same attitude and is appropriate for the dying man. As I said earlier, the protagonists in Roethke's poems, when faced with death, react by withdrawing, by seeking to escape from all awareness and all sentience. They seem to envision a protective, eternal sleep¹ that is not death.

But Roethke's poetry continually stresses the necessity of resistance to this desire for a state of suspended animation, that is, stresses the value of a painful awareness of what it means to live with "the productions of time"; it stresses the idea that the truest mode of human living is maintaining a balance between the two extremes, possession and loss. Each extreme represents a form of narcotizing, an "easy out," a type of suspended animation, in which one focuses his attention on either accumulating possessions or on refusing to become "encumbered."

The concept of reincarnation, which provides Roethke with a wide range of images, perhaps expresses this balance of which I have been speaking. One dies and returns; one loses one form and acquires another. Section II of "The Dying Man" is based on these concepts:

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The last lines of "Epidermal Macabre," (WW, p. 28), provide an example, as does Section I of "The Lost Son" (WW, p. 79).

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Caught in the dying light,
 I thought myself reborn.
 My hands turn into hooves.
 I wear the leaden weight
 Of what I did not do.

Places great with their dead,
 The mire, the sodden wood,
 Remind me to stay alive.
 I am the clumsy man
 The instand ages on.

I burned the flesh away,
 In love, in lively May.
 I turn my look upon
 Another shape than hers
 Now, as the casement blurs.

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

The remainder of the poem employs few images related to pantheism or reincarnation, but does continue the theme of death's intensification of life. Section III contains the lines:

A ghost comes out of the unconscious mind
 To grope my sill: It moans to be reborn!

These lines, however, do not speak of the cycle of possession and loss or the intensification of life. The last two sections, although they contain no clear examples of reincarnation imagery, develop the theme of heightened life:

I love the world; I want more than the world,
 Or after-image of the inner eye.

If one reads the statement "I want more than the world" as meaning not that the speaker desires to possess the world and possess more things than the world contains, but as meaning that he desires to possess the intelligible world as well as the physical world, then one sees these

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lines as a statement of the balance previously defined. Development of the theme continues in the lines:

I die into this life, along yet not alone.

Fish feed on fish, according to their need:
My enemies renew me, and my blood
Beats slower in my careless solitude.
.....
By dying daily, I have come to be.
A breath is but a breath: I have the earth;
I shall undo all dying by my death.

The principal means by which these lines develop the balance is by stating an antithesis or what Yeats called "antinomies." Neither part of the antithesis could exist without the other, but still they are in opposition, one gaining at the other's expense.¹ The last section contains a stanza that clarifies the relation between solitude, which is mentioned in the lines just quoted, and the themes of pantheism and reincarnation:

I've the lark's word for it, she sings alone:
What's seen recedes; Forever's what we know!--
Eternity defined, and strewn with straw,
The fury of the slug beneath the stone.
The vision moves, and yet remains the same.
In heaven's praise, I dread the thing I am.

These lines somewhat obscurely state the ideas that "Eternity is Now" and that all things pass away. The dying man's "body of fate" is not unique: he is not alone but is accompanied by all "the productions of time." It is the immanence of the "sensuous form" in the dying individual that the speaker refers to when he speaks of "eternity defined." The

¹We are reminded of Heraclitus again.

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"fury of the slug" is shared by all living things because they all must die.

The perception of the universal in the particular and of beauty and his beloved are not the only incidents that transform the speaker's experiences of this world. A similar transformation occurs when he encounters one of "the small." This is the term that Roethke uses to refer to all creatures that are harmless and unprotected. When discussing a group of the poems in The Far Field, I shall define the theme of "victimization." Although the theme reaches its fullest development in that book, it appears in many of Roethke's earlier poems. One of its clearest early statements is in Section IV of "Where Knock Is Open Wide" (WW, pp. 63-66). There, the protagonist, a child, asks his father to free a fish that they had caught. In the present group of poems, in a sequence called "Voices and Creatures," we find one entitled "The Small" (WW, p. 178). The last stanza describes the speaker's reaction to some unnamed creatures:

The small shapes drowse: I live
To woo the fearful small;
What moves in grass I love--
The dead will not lie still,
And things throw light on things,
And all the stones have wings.

The speaker, in the preceding three stanzas, recounts his sitting alone outdoors through a September night. A sound frightens him for an instant by releasing from the depths of his mind unknown forms. In the stanza quoted he thinks of the harmless sleeping animals and of death. He pities them and himself. This compassion is the cause of his love. The last three lines broaden his feeling to encompass the dead and the

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inanimate as well as the sleeping animals. The "small" perhaps symbolizes all living things, because whether literally small or not all creatures are unprotected from death.

"A Walk in Late Summer" (WW, pp. 179-180), another poem about death's intensification of life, begins with an apostrophe to the small:

A gull rides on the ripples of a dream,
 White upon white, slow-settling on a stone;
 Across my lawn the soft-backed creatures come;
 In the weak light they wander, each alone.
 Bring me the meek, for I would know their ways;
 I am a connoisseur of midnight eyes.
 The small! The small! I hear them singing clear
 On the long banks, in the soft summer air.

Most of the symbols in the poem are conventional. The "late summer," the "weak light," and the "midnight eyes" all carry connotations of approaching death. The "soft singing" I shall discuss shortly. A few lines in the second of the "Meditations of an Old Woman," entitled "I'm Here" (WW, pp. 197-200), also mention "the small." Section IV begins with the lines:

My geranium is dying, for all I can do.
 Still leaning toward the last place the sun was.

The geranium is one of "the small." There is a poem in The Far Field, entitled "The Geranium" (FF, p. 63), that develops the theme of victimization, the speaker's negligence causing the plant's death.

Section IV of "I'm Here" ends with the lines:

I prefer the still joy:
 The wasp drinking at the edge of my cup;
 A snake lifting its head;
 A snail's music.

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That these creatures represent "the small" may not be clear, until one sees that the old woman herself is about to become one of death's victims. The poem moves toward her acceptance of this fact, which comes in the last lines:

If the wind means me,
I'm here!
Here.

Although images of "the small" and themes of self-pity compassion, and victimization play only a minor part in the poems of the early 1950's, their presence is significant, especially as a foreshadowing of the central concerns in The Far Field.

If the poems of this period reveal an altered attitude toward the relationship between the flesh and spirit, they also reveal more than mere vestiges of the predominant attitudes found in Roethke's earlier works. I have already mentioned that one finds in these poems, in spite of their general celebrations of the flesh, instances of the same loathing expressed in "Epidermal Macabre" and other early pieces. In addition, one sees an awareness of the evanescence of "the productions of time," of their frequent inanity, and of death's imminence. The awareness of these qualities, inherent in the flesh (in the widest sense of that word: "all tangible entities"), of course, impels the "I" of the poems towards--not to--an otherworldly attitude, a contempt for the world.

A beautiful passage, which clearly anticipates the techniques of The Far Field, combines the protagonist's comments on mutability, the inanity of things, and approaching death; this is the last verse

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paragraph of "Old Lady's Winter Words" (WW, pp. 117-119):

The shadows are empty, the sliding externals.
 The wind wanders around the house
 On its way to the back pasture.
 The cindery snow ticks over stubble.
 My dust longs for the invisible.
 I'm reminded to stay alive
 By the dry rasp of the recurring inane,
 The fine soot sifting through my south windows.
 It is hard to care about corners,
 And the sound of paper tearing.
 I fall, more and more,
 Into my own silences.
 In the cold air,
 The spirit
 Hardens.

The first several images (the "shadows," the "wind," and the "snow") symbolize the unreality and transitoriness of tangible things. The speaker associates herself with these by referring to herself as "dust," but says that she longs for the world of spirit. The next images, of the "soot sifting through the windows," of the neglected "corners," and of the "sound of paper tearing," are original and effective. The soot symbolizes death or the breakdown of the body, slowly advancing, accumulating in the "corners." The tearing paper, literally a window shade or the wall paper, also symbolizes the slow advance of disorder. The "cold air" is another conventional symbol for the proximity of death.

Several occurrences of the theme of approaching death in these poems resemble treatment of that theme in the long narratives. The resemblance lies in the association of the theme with the protagonist's father. I shall mention two examples in the present poems that in part present the theme in terms of images of "the sliding externals." One is found in "The Renewal" (WW, pp. 160-161):

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The night wind rises. Does my father live?
 Dark hangs upon the waters of the soul;
 My flesh is breathing slower than a wall.
 Love alters all. Unblood my instinct, love.
 These waters drowse me into sleep so kind
 I walk as if my face would kiss the wind.

The answer to the question in the first line is probably "No." The "instinct" that the speaker prays will be "unblooded" is most likely the death-wish. Seeing the effects of time's passage, the speaker wishes to die. But as I have said earlier, Roethke always counters this wish with an affirmation of mortal life, here symbolized by the speaker's kissing the wind. A very similar passage occurs in Section IV of "The Dying Man" (WW, p. 189):

Was it a god his suffering renewed?--
 I asw my father shrinking in his skin;
 He turned his face: there was nother man,
 Walking the edge, loquacious, unafraid.
 He quivered like a bird in birdless air,
 Yet dared to fix his vision anywhere.

Since this section of "The Dying Man" is entitled "The Exulting," we must find an explicit expression of the complaint against the world that I have been discussing. By implication, however, there is bitterness in the question asked in line one. The imagery here of the "sliding externals" is the metamorphosis in the protagonist's father. Another implied complaint is lodged in the last line of the section, a lone that paradoxically agrees to the fulfillment of the speaker's death-wish:

I shall undo all dying by my death.

Before discussing that "inanity" that the speakers in several of these poems find in the "sliding externals," I wish to quote the entire first section of the "First Meditation" (WW, p. 173) of "The Meditations of an Old Woman." This section, like the one quoted from "Old Lady's Winter

Words," foreshadows the techniques of The Far Field. It employs many landscape images to convey the theme of mutability and approaching death:

On love's worst ugly day,
The weeds hiss at the edge of the field,
The small winds make their chilly indictments,
Elsewhere, in houses, even pails can be sad;
While stones loosen on the obscure hillside,
And a tree tilts from its roots,
Toppling down an embankment.

The spirit moves, but not always upward,
While animals eat to the north,
And the shale slides an inch in the talus,
The bleak wind eats at the weak plateau,
And the sun brings joy to some.
But the rind, often, hates the life within.

How can I rest in the days of my slowness?
I've become a strange piece of flesh,
Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,
With a cheek soft as a hound's ear.
What's left is light as a seed;
I need an old crone's knowing.

The first lines do not directly state the theme of change, but approach it indirectly through intimations of a threat, the "hiss" of weeds and the "chilly indictments." I fail to understand the line about the sadness of a container (pail) within a container (house); but it seems to be related to the images of change that follow: the stones loosening and the tree toppling. In the second stanza the old woman describes life in Heraclitean images of one thing devouring another. These images explain why the "rind" (flesh) often "hates the life within" (the spirit). The last line of stanza two reminds one of the line in "The Sententious Man" (WW, p. 155):

The spirit knows the flesh it must consume.

This notion of the "life within" consuming the "rind" equates the spirit with a seed, which lives on the surrounding fruit. The third stanza describes the woman's body, now almost wholly consumed; she is practically nothing but a seed. In The Far Field there is a poem that also describes the spirit's consuming of the body; it is entitled "Infirmity" (FF, pp. 86-87), and it concludes with the lines:

When opposites come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
How body from spirit slowly does unwind
Until we are pure spirit at the end.

This is exactly what the old woman means when she says "What's left is light as a seed. . . ."

In addition to bodily decay and death, to the "sliding externals," and to the sexually inspired loathing of the flesh, these poems of the early 1950's contain one other theme pertaining to the speaker's inclination to feel contempt for the world. This theme is the inanity of the "productions of time." In "Old Lady's Winter Words" (WW, p. 118) the inane resembles slightly the sound of a clock and is associated with the symbol of advancing death:

I'm reminded to stay alive
By the dry rasp of the recurring inane,
The fine soot sifting through my south windows.

I am not certain why the "dry rasp" reminds the woman to "stay alive." Apparently her world of sensory experience no longer extends to much else beyond this noise, and she may be saying that without this recurring rasp she would not be aware of anything. In her seemingly anesthetized state she resembles the speaker of "The Pure Fury" (WW, p. 158), who has suffered an attack of anomie but has recovered:

Stupor of knowledge lacking inwardness--
 What book, O learned man, will set me right?
 Once I read nothing through a fearful night,
 For every meaning had grown meaningless.
 Morning, I saw the world with second sight,
 As if all things had died, and rose again,
 I touched the stones, and they had my own skin.

Here, the loss of meaning results from a failure to perceive the universal in the particular and to sense the correspondences between physical things and the spirit. The old lady will not recover from the "hardening of her spirit," because the tangible world has almost ceased to exist for her and soon it will cease entirely.

In "A Walk in Late Summer" (WW, p. 179) one finds the same sequence of ideas as in the stanza from "The Pure Fury," a loss of meaning, a failure to see the correspondences, a moment of change, and a realization that "God's in that stone":

What is there for the soul to understand?
 The slack face of the dismal pure inane?
 The wind dies down; my will dies with the wind,
 God's in that stone, or I am not a man!

For a moment the soul mistakenly thinks that the external world is simply a void not worth understanding. The "slack face" symbolizes the tangible world, the flesh. The will, as one learns in Open House, is associated with the faculty of reason, and both fail to arrive at truth or peace. When they cease functioning the spirit sees the correspondences. Of course this does not mean that Roethke denies that the void is real. In "The Swan" (WW, p. 167) he speaks of the correspondences as existing against the background of nothingness; some of the relevant lines are:

I study out a dark similitude:
 Her image fades, yet does not disappear--
 Must I stay tangled in that lively hair?
 Is there no way out of that coursing blood?
 A dry soul's wisest. O, I am not dry!¹

The speaker is apparently the soul (symbolized by the swan?) and the beloved (Leda?) is the body. In the last stanza he says

Sing of that nothingness of which all is made.²

The lines in "The Dying Man" (WW, p. 170) to which the title of this chapter alludes also affirm the reality of the void, while at the same time celebrating the spirit's struggle not to be overwhelmed by the endless inane:

The edges of the summit still appal
 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.

As I have said, these lines state the balance that is one of the most fundamental points in Roethke's work. The imagination, which sees analogies and which empathizes, may fall short of absolute truth, just as reason does. But even beyond this admitted limit of the imagination's power (where one "stops being a bird"), Roethke has his speaker make an affirmation: the angel is necessary.

¹"A dry soul's wisest" is a direct quotation of Heraclitus, a certain indication of that philosopher's importance in Roethke's work.

²This may allude to Heidegger or Rilke, who say that Being can only be comprehended against the backdrop of Non-Being.

"Meditations of an Old Woman" provides some clarification of this crucial point. In Section IV of the "First Meditation" (WW, pp. 195-196), the woman describes her own knowledge of the inane:

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

At this point in the poem she knows only the "Stupor of knowledge lacking inwardness," to borrow a phrase from "The Pure Fury." (WW, p. 158) Following this passage is a series of images of pleasant sensations, and then the poem ends with the line:

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

But the entire poem is what Roethke elsewhere has called "a drive toward God."¹ The third meditation, entitled "I'm Here," provides a further comment on the inane. Now the woman separates it from herself and sits in judgment upon it:

Is there a wisdom in objects? Few objects praise the Lord.
 The bulks cannot hide us, or the bleak sheds of our own desolation.
 I know the cold fleshless kiss of contraries,
 The nerveless constriction of surfaces--
 Machines, machines, loveless, temporal;
 Mutilated souls in cold morgues of obligation.
 (WW, p. 202)

The question in line one repeats that already quoted from "A Walk in Late Summer" (WW, p. 179): "What is there for the soul to understand?" But the old woman, unlike the speaker in the other poem, does not condemn all tangible things, only those that Thoreau referred to when

¹Ostroff, p. 49.

he spoke of "Our inventions [that] are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things."¹

In the "Fourth Meditation" the woman describes the inane when it has become embodied in the lives of men who have not ". . . known, once, the soul's authentic hunger":

I think of the self-involved:
The ritualists of the mirror, the lonely drinkers,
The minions of benzedrine and paraldehyde,
And those who submerge themselves deliberately in trivia,
Women who become their possessions,
Shapes stiffening out into metal,
Match-makers, arrangers of picnics. . . .
(WW, p. 206)

Here the concept of the inane descends a bit from the metaphysical heights and becomes more closely associated with plain boredom caused by dull people. Of course, it is not acting in this passage as a force that impels the speaker toward a contempt of the world. In fact, the woman prays that these people will "wake up to the world":

How I wish them awake!
May the high flower of the hay climb into their hearts;
May they lean into light and live;
May they sleep in robes of green, among the ancient ferns;
May their eyes gleam with the first dawn;
May the sun gild them a worm;
May they be taken by the true burning;
May they flame into being!--
(WW, pp. 206-207)

These images (especially the sixth line) definitely stress the beauty of the "productions of time," although they also suggest the possibility of seeing through these into the intelligible world.

It would be improper to end this chapter with a discussion of the inane, for to do so would belie the affirmation that most of the poems make. More than in any of Roethke's earlier poems, in these the

¹Walden: Or, Life in the Woods, ed. Bradford Torrey, Vol. I (Boston, 1897), p. 84.

"dry rasp of the recurring inane" is drowned out by song. Song, like dancing, symbolizes an ideal attitude, an acceptance of the world that maintains an equilibrium between slavish worship and ascetic rejection.

"A Light Breather" (WW, p. 115), for instance, describes the movement of the spirit as

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

But in singing, too, one sees the ambivalence, often resembling that in the concluding lines of "The Dying Man":

. . . he dares to live
Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings. . . .
(WW, p. 190)

The singing is a reaction not so much to beauty as to "the emptiness of things." In "The Renewal" (WW, p. 160), the speaker says:

I teach my sighs to lengthen into songs,
Yet, like a tree, endure the shift of things.

The speaker of "The Dying Man" (WW, p. 187) associates singing with embracing the world and his own death:

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.

The last section of this poem is entitled "They Sing, They Sing," (WW, p. 190), and it echoes the lines just quoted from "The Renewal":

I'll scare myself with sighing, or I'll sing. . . .

But this conception of song, which treats it as a form of therapy or anesthesia, gives way to a more positive one in the lines immediately following the one just quoted:

Descend, O gentlest light, descend, descend,
O sweet field far ahead, I hear your birds,
They sing, they sing, but still in minor thirds.

The singing now becomes a welcome sung from the intelligible world. Finally, in the last of the "Meditations of an Old Woman," song is identified with a state beyond the mortal:

O to be delivered from the rational into the realm
of pure song. . . .
(WW, p. 211)

In Roethke's next and last book he writes of the songs heard in the "sweet field far ahead."

CHAPTER VI
IN THE FACE OF DEATH

I

"NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE"

Hugh B. Staples, in a useful article on the "North American Sequence," makes the following introductory comments: "The poems in 'North American Sequence' are, in a sense, an extension of Roethke's ceaseless preoccupation with the problem of self and with the conflict between body and spirit."¹ A few pages later he writes: "In its broadest outlines and in its deepest meaning, 'North American Sequence' is a search for form, and for its implications at all levels of human experience, individual and collective."² One may easily reconcile these statements: for instance, the spirit is form and the body is substance or formlessness. My argument with Staples is not that he contradicts himself, but that the second statement above is misleading. The protagonist of these poems searches no more for form than he does for formlessness, just as in the earlier poems he affirmed the soul's value no more than he did the body's. His real desire is to embrace both

¹"The Rose in the Sea-Wind: A Reading of Theodore Roethke's 'North American Sequence,'" AL, XXXVI (May 1964), 189.

²Staples, p. 191.

extremes, so that we must see him as Whitman's comrade when that poet writes:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own
funeral drest in his shroud. . . .¹

In the "North American Sequence," then, the protagonist translates his earlier struggles with self-loathing and fear of death into a contest between body and soul and even into the terms of traditional mysticism. Although one may see the conflict between body and soul in Roethke's earliest poems, those terms do not achieve a particularly full significance until the poetry of The Far Field. But when they achieve that significance, it is not an expression favoring soul above body. It is, rather, as Ralph Mills says of the stanza culminating the sequence, "A balance between earthly and superior reality . . ."² between body and soul, and even between chaos and form.

Mills characterizes the "North American Sequence" and the "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" as "an arduous but successful quest for mystical illumination."³ He then distinguishes between the former's use of images from nature to symbolize "the poet's states of consciousness"

¹"Song of Myself," Sec. 48, in The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel, Vol. I (New York, 1902), p. 105. Hereafter cited as Whitman.

²"In the Way of Becoming, Roethke's Last Poems," in Stein, p. 126. Hereafter cited as "Becoming."

3
"Becoming," p. 115.

and the latter's more advanced "visionary experience," in which
 ". . . the focus of activity is almost entirely inward or spiritual."¹
 One frequently finds distinctions of this sort in the writings of
 mystics. Miss Evelyn Underhill states it as follows: "But whilst the
 contemplation of Nature entails an outgoing towards somewhat indubitably
 external to us, and has as its material the world of sensible ex-
 perience: the contemplation of Spirit, as it seems to those who practice
 it, requires a deliberate refusal of the messages of the senses, an
 ingoing or 'intorversion' of our faculties, a 'journey toward the
 centre.' . . . He [the mystic] must call in his scattered faculties
 by a deliberate exercise of the will, empty his mind of its swarm of
 images, its riot of thought."²

I cannot agree with Mills that the "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical"
 marks a spiritual advance beyond the "North American Sequence," although
 it does contain some poems that are more abstract than any in the latter.
 The poems in "North American Sequence" remain consistently concrete
 and descriptive. Reading the poems of this group with Miss Underhill's
 words in mind, we may, however, see that they move toward and away
 from a focal image. In other words, in places the imagery is purely
 descriptive, simply creating a setting or tone; in others, it falls
 into catalogues or into obvious clusters; finally, one or two images,

¹"Becoming," pp. 116-117.

²Mysticism, 17th ed. (London, 1949), pp. 302-303.

relatively stripped of surrounding descriptive details, sometimes claim the focus of attention. These of course, are symbols. Only in an extremely rough way may the sequence as a whole be said to move from a "swarm of images" toward a focus.

Since both Mills and Staples have discussed each of the poems in its place in the "North American Sequence," I will follow a different tack. In general, their comments upon the protagonist's spiritual progress are accurate and helpful, although, as I shall show, Staples contradicts himself several times. Neither of these men, however, gives the poems a detailed reading, and occasionally one feels that they impose their own preconceptions on the text. I wish to point out the operation of two important themes in the poems and show their relationships to the descriptive details and to the movement of the poems. The first theme is that transcendence is an embracing, and the second is that the moment of change is crucial.

As one recognizes immediately, the first theme proclaims Roethke's similarity to Whitman. Both poets felt a strong need to accept, to embrace, the whole of existence. At the same time, however, both were morbidly concerned with death and, at moments, with physical self-disgust. Just as the protagonist in "Song of Myself" moves through continual embracings of experience, especially of physical disgust, pain, and death, into a transcendent vision, so the protagonist in "North American Sequence" moves.

The first poem, "The Longing," deals with the speaker's desire to be changed and uplifted by his experience. Like Whitman, he wishes to range far:

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

(FF, p. 15)

That he alludes to Eliot's "Easy Coker" here simply confirms the spiritual nature of the longing. For Roethke's protagonist, though, this longing begins with the most uncerebral sensory perception of "an eyeless starrer." At a slightly more advanced stage, the perceiver's alertness increases. Whitman writes:

Mine is no callous shell,
 I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
 They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.¹

One also remembers that Whitman's perceiver read messages in all things. Roethke expresses these ideas in the lines:

The light cries out, and I am there to hear--
 I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon,
 Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm.¹

(FF, p. 14)

Staples misreads the second section of this poem. He writes: "Revolting against the meretricious influences portrayed in the preceding section, the psyche is now impelled to flee from reality into 'a dark dream' 'beyond the moon.' This flight proves to be only one of many blind alleys and circuitous detours in the journey out of self."² Staples condemns "detours" more readily than does the receptive protagonist, a failing that leads the critic to a more serious misreading when he comes to the following lines:

¹ Mills is essentially right in saying: "The absolute character of Roethke's quest is demonstrated by his desire to 'be beyond the moon' that is, beyond the recurrence of spiritual death and rebirth. . . ." "Becoming," Stein, p. 121.

² Staples, 193-194.

I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form;
I would be a stream, winding between great striated rocks
in late summer;
A leaf, I would love the leaves, delighting in the redolent
disorder of this mortal life. . . .
(FF, p. 14)

Staples considers the first line in this passage a statement of the principle motive in the entire sequence. "The 'longing' of the overture . . ." he writes, "is for 'the imperishable quiet at the heart of form. . . .'"¹ But the speaker asserts with equal firmness that he wishes to delight "in the redolent disorder of this mortal life." (The word "redolent" suggests that the "kingdom of stinks and sighs" of Part I is not Hell, as Staples says, p. 193, but an Inferno, not totally devoid of value.)

Roethke's protagonist has a profound self-love, which lies, of course, behind his fascination with death. But running counter to this narcissism is the desire to be modified by the widest possible range of experience, a desire which Roethke shares with many American authors. Philip Rahv even contends that "It is this search for experience, conducted on diverse and often conflicting levels of consciousness, which has been the dominant, quintessential theme of the characteristic American literary productions--from *Leaves of Grass* to *Wineburg, Ohio* and

1 Staples, 193. W. D. Snodgrass advances an interesting interpretation of Roethke's work that exactly reverses Staples's reading. He believes that in his last book Roethke desired "to escape form and shape, to lose all awareness of otherness. . . ." "The Last Poems of Theodore Roethke," The New York Review of Books, 8 October 1964, p. 6. Although Snodgrass's reading brings out some latent suggestions in the poems, it ignores the intention at work within the poems and focuses on the psychological make-up of the author. On the whole, it is invalid.

beyond. . . ."¹ Roethke employs many images to express this need, the most frequent being a stream or a body of water. "Meditation at Oyster River" shows the protagonist adapting to (being changed by) his experience:

I dabble my toes in the brackish foam sliding forward,
Then retire to a rock higher up on the cliff-side.
(FF, p. 16)

Following these lines, the speaker identifies himself with water, and his desire to embrace all experience is revealed in the imagery of the water's being "altered" by forces above and below its surface. "I would be":

. . . with the water: the waves coming forward, without cessation,²
The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp, miscellaneous driftwood,
Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous undercurrents,
The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of stone,
The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.
(FF, p. 17)

Staples contradicts himself in his remarks on the use of water imagery in these poems. After saying that "In its broadest outlines and in its deepest meaning, 'North American Sequence is a search for form. . . .,'" he goes on to say that water is "the symbol of process and formlessness."² Then, four pages later he writes: "The associations of Earth for Roethke are largely pejorative. . . . Water, on the other hand, has the

¹"The Cult of Experience in American Writing," Literary Opinion in America, ed. Morton D. Zabel (New York, 1951), p. 551.

²The phrase "without cessation" is prompted by the speaker's desire to escape the necessity of death. Perhaps then the quest for the widest possible range of experiences is a variation on the theme of reincarnation.

³Staples, 191.

opposite associations--goals (represented by the flowing of the river), flux (process, growth and metamorphosis), and life (physical abundance; esthetic delight)."¹ If the protagonist is searching for form, a symbol of formlessness would almost certainly have pejorative connotations. At least, in such a poem a symbol of formlessness could not also represent "goals."

In "The Long Waters" the protagonist speaks of his desire for knowledge of the world of time and space in the following images:

And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,
My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists
Changing with every twist of wind,
The unsinging fields where no lungs breathe,
Where light is stone.²

(FF, p. 22)

The "peaks" and "ravines" represent the extremities of experience, and the "mist" represents its evanescence. The concluding lines of the poem clearly state the theme:

I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world.

(FF, p. 24)

However, it is in the last poem of the sequence, "The Rose," that

¹ Staples, 195.

² Staples believes that the protagonist's "foolishness with God" is an "ominous illusion of eternity," which is described in Section Three of "Journey to the Interior." The antidote for this is a "return to actuality," but at the beginning of "The Long Waters" the protagonist, says Staples, is mistakenly rejecting "the world of the dog." In the course of the poem, Staples sees the protagonist returning to a healthy, Whitmanesque embracing of the world. (Staples, 199-200). I prefer another reading of the opening lines, which run:

Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say,
But the hind part of the worm wiggles the most,
.....
Therefore I reject the world of the dog

this theme finds its embodiment in the most striking imagery. Again, Staples, and even Mills, oversimplifies the poem, this time by overlooking the very important contrast established between the "rose in the sea-wind" and the "elaborate hybrids" cultivated in the greenhouses of the speaker's father. The relevant lines of the poem are the following:

But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind
Stays,
Stays in its true place,
Flowering out of the dark,
Widening at high-noon, face upward,
A single wild rose, struggling out of the white embrace of
the morning-glory,
Out of the briary hedge, the tangle of matted underbrush. . . .
(FF, p. 30)

Mills says that these lines contain "Stillness and movement, the journey and its goal...."¹ But they do more than that: they stress the rigors of the environment and the openness of the rose's exposure. The place where this rose grows differs considerably from another place that the speaker recalls:

Though he hear a note higher than C. . . .

(FF, p. 22)

The speaker is reflecting on the fact that we cannot enter the mind of another creature, but can only observe events in time and space. The protagonist is dedicating himself to his own perceptions, regardless of their limitations. He wants to taste fully his own experiences.

¹"Becoming," Stein, p. 125.

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.
(FF, p. 30)

As a child, the speaker identified with the protected hybrids, but as an adult he feels closer to the other flower, growing in an unprotected place:

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,
Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of myself,
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,
And I stood outside myself,
Beyond becoming and perishing,
A something wholly other,
As if I swayed out of the wildest wave alive,
And yet was still.

The transformation that the protagonist describes here grows out of his openness to experience. Mills ignores this fact when he glosses this passage with the following statement: "Roethke nears 'the Unitive Life,' to borrow from Everlyn Underhill another time, a life symbolically represented by the unchanging rose, whose shape and petals might also remind us in a more Jungian fashion of individuation and self-fulfillment in the mandala figure. . . ." ¹ Staples rather obscurely comments: "The central image is, of course, the rose in the sea-wind, the apprehension of whose beauty reconciles all tensions. The rose releases him [the protagonist] from the sense of physical inadequacy and from

¹"Becoming," Stein, p. 126.

spiritual despair."¹ The statements of both men, I believe, neglect important details of the poem.

I said earlier that Roethke's protagonist in these poems resembles the Whitman of "Song of Myself" in his desire to "embrace the world" and also in his concern with death. The following passages reveal his attempt to accept that extreme of experience that is represented by death and dissolution of the body, by formlessness:

. . . Death's face rises afresh,
Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
.
With these I would be.

(FF, p. 17)

And,

I rehearse myself for this:²
The stand at the stretch in the face of death,
Delighting in surface change. . . .

(FF, p. 21)

And finally, in a full acceptance of the world of time and space:

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.

(FF, p. 27)

In light of these passages, it is a serious distortion of the poems to emphasize the mystical otherworldliness of Roethke's protagonist.

The second theme that I wish to trace through these poems is an interest or concern of the protagonist's rather than an assertion.

¹ Staples, 202.

² There is, perhaps, a grim pun in the word "rehearse."

change. . . ." The change itself comes in the concluding verse paragraph:

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,
 I know this change:
 On one side of silence there is no smile;
 But when I breathe with the birds,
 The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,
 And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep.
 (FF, p. 21)

Here, as in the sequence as a whole, the change is for the better, transforming wrath into beatitude, silence into song, and perhaps death into life. Notice, also, that whereas the expectancy is presented in terms of external sensory data ("the drop forms"), the change itself is internalized. We are supposed to feel that the blind man knows it is morning by intuition, not by cues.

"The Long Waters" introduces another facet of this theme, the surrender of self-will, which is pictured in terms of mutually cancelling forces:

I remember a stone breaking the eddying current,
 Neither white nor red, in the dead middle way,
 Where impulse no longer dictates, nor the darkening shadow,
 A vulnerable place,
 Surrounded by sand, broken shells, the wreckage of water.
 (FF, p. 24)

In earlier lines of the poem, the protagonist had prayed to Mnetha, Mother of Har, a figure from Blake's Tiriel, to protect him from the "dubious sea-change" (FF, p. 22). But the concluding lines describe the speaker as if he has undergone this change, a painful disintegration and reintegration of his psyche:

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

(FF, p. 24)

"The Far Field" presents another description of the place "where impulse no longer dictates":

I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
 A point outside the glittering current;
 My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
 At the irregular stones, irridescent sandgrains,
 My mind moves in more than one place,
 In a country half-land, half-water.¹

(FF, p. 27)

This precedes the line in which the speaker says, "I am renewed by death. . . ." The concluding section of the poem begins:

The lost self changes,
 Turning toward the sea,
 A sea-shape turning around. . . .

(FF, p. 27)

It goes on to indicate that in this place, far from the protective greenhouses of his childhood, here where the adult is dressed in "robes of green, in garments of adieu," he must create a heaven, must see that

All finite things reveal infinitude. . . .

(FF, p. 28)

The final poem, "The Rose," touches on imagery of the "dead middle" by referring to "this place, where sea and fresh water meet . . .," (FF, p. 29). But it shifts to the terms of song and silence and of light and dark. These, as we saw earlier, are associated with the

¹Roethke echoes Eliot in these lines, but whereas Eliot is interested in the "intersection of time and the timeless" Roethke is here depicting a shift between two mental states.

change that takes place when

The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing. . . .
(FF, p. 21)

The moment before the change is described again:

I return to the twittering of swallows above water,
And that sound, that single sound,
When the wind remembers all,
And gently the light enters the sleeping soul,
A sound so thin it could woo a bird. . . .

And:

. . . a drop of rain water hangs at the tip of a leaf
Shifting in the wakening sunlight
Like the eye of a new-caught fish.
(FF, p. 31)

The climax of the poem and of the sequence fuses the themes of self-transcendence and change. The speaker is at last able to find the "true ease" of himself because he accepts the inevitability of his own changes. He embraces what is perhaps most difficult to embrace, his own instability:

And I rejoiced in being what I was:
In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,
In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
With all the air to greet him as he flies,
The dolphin rising from the darkening waves. . . .
(FF, p. 32)

But he also rejoices in the rose itself, which, like him, lives in a hostile place and embraces the extremes:

And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
Gathering to itself sound and silence--
Mine and the sea-wind's.
(FF, p. 32)

This sequence of poems offers the reader rewards that have not been mentioned in Staple's pages, in Mills's, or in mine. But I believe that in bringing out the presence of the two themes discussed here I

have added something to their commentaries. The protagonist certainly evolves spiritually, and this comes about chiefly through his acceptance of the unprotected world of adult experience, through his acceptance of repeated dyings of the self, and finally through his acceptance of his own inherent changeableness.

II

"LOVE POEMS"

The second section of The Far Field comprises thirteen love poems, which are all brief, short-lined lyrics. For the most part, they develop themes not found in the "North American Sequence." I shall discuss them in terms of the following two concerns of the protagonist: the dread of isolation and the contrast between victor and victim.

The speaker of the love poems, as that of the preceding sequence, can never move his mind far from the thoughts of death. For this reason, these poems are less often ecstatic praises of his beloved or of love than they are musings on the approaching end. W. D. Snodgrass sees here a failure of love that produces what he considers to be a longing for death, which destroys the poetic effectiveness of Roethke's last poems: "Here [Light Listened]" and elsewhere-- e.g., 'The Long Waters' and 'The Sequel'--there seems to be a farewell to that ecstasy, a turning away, or turning inward from the discovery that this could not satisfy the hunger. I do not suggest that any specific love had turned sour or grown cold, but rather that love had perhaps been asked to perform a transformation, to appease a hunger, which no love possibly could satisfy."¹ Whatever the cause, the speakers of these poems, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, are haunted by imminent isolation. Isolation or loneliness worries the speakers much more than the loss of the loved one does in itself.

¹"'That Anguish of Concreteness'--Theodore Roethke's Career," Stein, p. 87.

"The Apparition" (FF, p. 37) fails to commit itself on the question of whether it is loneliness or the loss of the lover that causes the speaker's pain. Its last stanza runs:

I twist, and I turn,
 My breath but a sigh.
 Dare I grieve? Dare I mourn?
 He walks by. He walks by.

The next three poems continue the woman's address to an absent lover, each of them drawing attention to her loneliness:

If I could send him only
 One sleeve with my hand in it,
 Disembodied, unbloody. . . .
 ("Her Reticence," FF, p. 38)

And,

I dive with the black hag, the cormorant,
 Or walk the pebbly shore with the humpbacked heron. . . .
 ("Her Longing," FF, p. 39)

And finally,

When everything--birds, men, dogs--
 Runs to cover:
 I'm one to follow,
 To follow.
 ("Her Time," FF, p. 40)

The pain of the inevitable isolation deepens in three poems spoken by a male voice. After three stanzas celebrating the joys of love, "Light Listened" concludes with these lines:

We met to leave again
 The time we broke from time;
 A cold air brought its rain,
 The singing of a stem.
 She sang a final song;
 Light listened when she sang.
 (FF, p. 42)

The poem "His Forboding" deals exclusively with the man's profound loneliness:

I

The shoal rocks with the sea.
I, living, still abide
The incommensurate dread
Of, being, being away
From one comely head.

II

Thought upon thought can be
A burden to the soul.
Who knows the end of it all?
When I pause to talk to a stone,
The dew draws near.

III

I sing the wind around
And hear myself return
To nothingness, alone.
The loneliest thing I know
Is my own mind at play.

IV

Is she the all of light?
I sniff the darkening air
And listen to my own feet.
A storm's increasing where
The winds and waters meet.

(FF, p. 45)

These lines do not demand much explanation, since they clearly set forth a picture of a man locked within himself. The final poem of the section, "Wish for a Young Wife," works a variation upon this theme. The man now imagines the woman's life after his death and utters the wish that she may live "Without hate, without grief" (FF, p. 48). His words suggest that he feels an undercurrent of envy for her continuing life:

May your limbs never wither,
 May the eyes in your face
 Survive the green ice
 Of envy's mean gaze. . . .

And he certainly ends his wish with a twist of self-pity:

When I am undone,
 When I am no one.
 (FF, p. 48)

This self-pity is a symptom of the speaker's narcissism and his horror inspired by his own approaching death.

The second theme that I will discuss grows out of this fear of death and returns us to one of the principal concerns of the protagonist in the long narratives. Perhaps the best way to state this theme is to say that a victor is somehow repulsive though slightly admirable, and a victim is an object of compassion though slightly contemptible. Other concerns that serve to develop this theme are danger and protection and activity in contrast to passivity.

"Her Longing" sets up a contrast between two periods in the life of the female speaker, a time of innocence and passivity followed by one of aggressive activity:

Before this longing,
 I lived serene as a fish,
 At one with the plants in the pond

 Open like a pool . . .

 A thing quiescent!

One could say with some justification that in these lines she approaches the role of the victim. The second verse paragraph, on the other hand, shows her decidedly in the role of the victor:

1. The first part of the
 2. second part of the
 3. third part of the
 4. fourth part of the

5. The first part of the

6. The first part of the
 7. second part of the

8. The first part of the

9. The first part of the

10. The first part of the

11. The first part of the

12. The first part of the

13. The first part of the

14. The first part of the

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 23. The first part of the
 24. The first part of the
 25. The first part of the
 26. The first part of the
 27. The first part of the
 28. The first part of the
 29. The first part of the
 30. The first part of the

31. The first part of the

32. The first part of the

33. The first part of the

But now--

The wild stream, the sea itself cannot contain me:
I dive with the black hag, the cormorant

.

Or rise with the gar-eagle, the great-winged condor. . . .

However, she does not prey upon weaker forms of life but protects what she loves:

Perpetually rising out of myself,
My wings hovering over the shorebirds,
Or beating against the black clouds of the storm,
Protecting the sea-cliffs.

(FF, p. 39)

Here she strikes a pose similar to that described in "Her Time":

The long surf of the storm booms
Down on the near shore,
When everything--birds, men, dogs--
Runs to cover:
I'm one to follow,
To follow.

(FF, p. 40)

The "shorebirds" in "Her Longing" and the descriptions of the woman facing the storm in both poems recall these lines from "Meditation at Oyster River":

. . . the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds--
How graceful the small before danger!

(FF, p. 18)

The theme of victor and victim, which is present only covertly in the lines that I have been quoting, reaches its full expression in the next group, the "Mixed Sequence." One other love poem employs the elements of danger, protection, victimization and isolation, again in muted form. "The Shy Man," spoken by the man himself, first describes his isolation:

As I moped by the high sea-wall.

Then it proceeds to the moment of expectancy, which occurs when he walks with a girl beside the "high sea-wall" and realizes that he loves her. The third and final stanza somewhat unconvincingly denies that the man is now lonely:

The full moon has fallen, the night wind is down
And I lie here thinking in bleak Bofin town
I lie here and thinking, 'I am not alone.'

(FF, p. 46)

Besides this explicit statement of the idea of isolation, two other details of the poem relate it to the preceding discussion. The "high sea-wall" symbolizes protection, either from isolation or from oblivion; at any rate, it holds off all the destructive forces that would inundate the lovers. The second detail is the title, which bears no immediately obvious relation to the poem. Why is he the "shy" man? We find an answer, one which associates the speaker with the themes of victimization and death, in the following lines of "Meditation at Oyster River":

Death's face rises afresh,
Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across
the highway. . . .

(FF, p. 17)

I do not believe that a reader can feel the full force of the title "The Shy Man" or of the poem itself unless he has the above lines in mind.

In these poems, to be "shy" or to be "small" is to be a non-predator, to be a victim.

III

"Mixed Sequence"

The third group of poems in The Far Field, "Mixed Sequence," develops at length the theme of victimization, as well as introduces the theme of knowledge. The latter is not entirely new to Roehltke's work, since it actually represents another treatment of the fall into experience, which we have seen as part of the long narratives. One might also consider this theme a facet of the protagonist's awareness of death, but I believe that equating the two would be unnecessarily reductive.

While discussing Section IV of "The Abyss," the first poem of the "Mixed Sequence," Ralph Mills makes this comment: "We find, too, the flowing waters of the Way of Becoming, and then two stanzas about the poet's "knowing" and "not-knowing" with regard to this spiritual process in which he is so completely absorbed. "Not-knowing" is related to the unbidden spiritual impulse bringing him to visionary knowledge; reason gives no answers about this generating force. . . ."1 In my opinion, this poem is not a Bacchic or even mystic song in praise of non-reason. It is, rather, a statement of the protagonist's painful knowledge of life's beauties and of the inevitability of death. Instead of saying that the protagonist gains a "visionary knowledge," I would prefer to say that he momentarily overcomes his preoccupation with death. The basic principle of the poem's development is stated in Section II:

1"Becoming," Stein, pp. 127-28.

For I have moved closer to death, lived with death;
 Like a nurse he sat with me for weeks, a sly surly attendant,
 Watching my hands, wary.
 Who sent him away?

(FF, p. 52)

The third section answers the question, "Who sent him away?" I quote it in full:

Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit;
 Too close immediacy an exhaustion:
 As when the door swings open in a florist's storeroom-
 The rush of smells strikes like a cold fire, the throat freezes,
 And we turn back to the heat of August,
 Chastened.

So the abyss-
 The slippery cold heights,
 After the blinding misery,
 The climbing, the endless turning,
 Strike like a fire,
 A terrible violence of creation,
 A flash into the burning heart of the abominable;
 Yet if we wait, unafraid, beyond the fearful instant,
 The burning lake turns into a forest pool,
 The fire subsides into rings of water,
 A sunlit silence.

(FF, pp. 52-53)

The first line echoes Eliot's variation on one of the Heraclitus's fragments: ". . . human kind/Cannot bear very much reality."¹

Although looking into the abyss, that is, into the heart of things as they really are, terrifies the speaker, he is also fascinated and drawn to the edge. Perhaps, as Snodgrass says, ". . . Roethke accurately predicts his own death, clearly longing for it."² If this is true, then this poem resembles Baudlaire's "Le Gouffre," a celebration of the power of the death-wish:

¹"Burnt Norton," in THE COMPLETE POEMS . . . , p. 176.

²"Anguish," Stein, p. 85.

Et mon esprit, toujours du vertige haute,
 Jalouse du neant l'insensibilite.¹

The chastening air of the florist's storeroom is, of course, both funereal and pleasant: Roethke's protagonist is drawn to death and also repelled by it. His drawing back takes the form of a love for all of death's victims, a response similar to that in "Where Knock Is Open Wide". He realizes that this love grows out of his awareness of death. He resembles the woman who speaks and muses in Wallace Steven's "Sunday Morning":

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
 The need of some imperishable bliss."
 Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
 Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
 And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
 Of sure obliteration on our paths,
 She makes the willow shiver in the sun. . . .²

In a statement made at a panel discussion on "Identity," in the year of his death, Roethke spoke of what he considered to be a widespread desire: ". . . one could sense a real hunger for a reality more than the immediate: a desire not only for a finality, for a consciousness beyond the mundane, but a desire for quietude, a desire for joy. Now this desire is what the drunkard, the saint, the mystic hankers for in varying ways: -- a purity, a final innocence--the phrase is Mr. Spender's."³ As we have seen in the long narratives, Roethke's protagonist closely associates the fall into experience with the awareness of death. Here

¹Oeuvres Completes. . . , ed. Jacques Crepet (Paris, 1930), I, 132.

²THE COLLECTED POEMS . . . , pp. 68-69.

³POET AND CRAFT, p. 19.

he attempts to struggle beyond the stage of experience, into a new innocence.

Roethke, while speaking on "Identity" in 1963, indicated that one of the forces working against the attainment of "a final innocence" is a love of objects, the acquisitiveness that Thoreau decried. Continuing the remarks quoted above, Roethke said: "I think we Americans are very wistful about it. Yet we continue to make a fetish of "thing-hood," we surround ourselves with junk, ugly objects endlessly repeated in an economy dedicated to waste."¹ In "The Abyss" one finds the following relevant lines:

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.

(FF, p. 52)

The protagonist does not turn away from life, but, like Whitman and Blake, attempts by force of empathy and imagination to make it transparent, to see that "All finite things reveal infinitude" (FF, p. 28). This attempt especially means feeling a painful compassion for death's victims rather than diverting oneself by accumulating things. The poem ends with the line:

Being, not doing, is my first joy.

(FF, p. 54)

Several of the other "Love Poems" deal with the theme of painful knowledge. In "The Meadow Mouse," the speaker, who has protected and fed a baby field mouse, thinks of the dangers and of the inevitable

¹POET AND CRAFT, pp. 19-20.

death that await the mouse, now escaped:

To run under the hawk's wing,
Under the eye of the great owl watching from the elm-tree,
To live by courtesy of the shrike, the snake, the tom-cat.

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, forsakes.

(FF, pp. 60-61)

The last two poems of the series state more abstractly the theme of painful knowledge. Stanza five of "The Tranced" tells us that the nature of this knowledge is love and that it is an overcoming of the horrible fascination with death:

Our small souls hid from their agonies
Yet it's the nature of all love to rise:
Being, we came to be
Part of eternity,
And what died with us was the will to die.

(FF, p. 74)

"The Moment" concludes the group by tying together the view from the edge of the abyss, love, mortality and the possible triumph over death:

We passed the ice of pain,
And came to a dark ravine,
And there we sang with the sea:
The wide, the bleak abyss
Shifted with our slow kiss.

Then skipping one verse paragraph, we come to:

All flowed: without, within;
Body and body, we
Created what's to be.

What else to say?
We end in joy.

(FF, p. 75)

As one can see from the preceding discussion, the theme of knowledge touches at several points on the theme of victimization.

This second concern, however, receives much fuller development in the "Mixed Sequence" than does the first, particularly in the poems about individual human beings, animals and a geranium--all of which have affected the speaker. Exactly how these beings have affected him is difficult to determine. In discussing "Where Knock Is Open Wide," I said that there might be an element of self-pity in the speaker's compassion for the caught fish. W. D. Snodgrass makes that same judgment of the occurrences of the victimization theme in the "Mixed Sequence," although he also interprets this identification as a regression to prenatal bliss, which ultimately is a form of the death-wish. Snodgrass writes: "If, in these last poems, Roethke identifies with an animal, that is only as it tends to represent the child, the baby or fetus." He mentions the meadow mouse, which the protagonist "...keeps and treats as, by sympathetic magic, he would be treated...."¹ One must accept this judgment to a degree, but must also guard against overemphasizing it. Although the "shy man" who loves the "small," the victims, does pity himself for the necessity of his own dying, this self-pity should not be seen as an out-and-out debasement of his compassion.

Immediately following "The Abyss" are three poems praising human companions that the speaker has known earlier in his life. One supposes that he is defining himself, a shy man, by rehearsing the characters of these people so different from himself. Each of them offers a clear contrast to what we know of him. His Aunt Tilly lacked his speculative scruples:

Between the spirit and the flesh,--what war?
She never knew. . . .

¹"Anguish," Stein, pp. 88-89.

Unlike his passive, meditative struggle with death, hers was aggressive:

Terror of cops, bill collectors, betrayers of the poor,--
 I see you in some celestial supermarket,
 Moving serenely among the leeks and cabbages,
 Probing the squash,
 Bearing down, with two steady eyes,
 On the quaking butcher.

("Elegy, "FF, p. 55)

Her opponents all symbolize death. The next poem, "Otto," describes the protagonist's father, who was greatly admired by the boy. Like Aunt Tilly, he is a figure who fights actively for what he values:

A Prussian who learned early to be rude
 To fools and frauds. . . .

And:

And yet still violent men, whose stacked-up guns
 Killed every cat that neared their pheasant runs. . . .

One line, though, reveals a similarity between the father and son:

Who loves the small can be both saint and boor. . . .
 (FF, pp. 56-57)

To love the small is a characteristic of the "shy man," and, as we have seen, is related to his self-pity. In "Otto," though, the compassion grows in a firmer soil. The third of these poems, "The Chums," also describes "violent" but admired friends:

They taught me not to be too nice
 The way I tipped my hat.

And when I slipped upon the ice,
 They saw that I fell more than twice.
 I'm grateful for that.
 (FF, p. 58)

These three similar pieces act as a foil to the ones that follow.

After the three poems just discussed, the reader of the "Mixed Sequence" finds four poems that clearly present the theme of victimization. In all of these, the speaker identifies with the victim. I have already

quoted the concluding lines of "The Meadow Mouse," where the speakers says that his mouse has escaped

To run under the hawk's wing. . . .

And, then, says, "I thinks of . . ."

All things innocent, hapless, forsaken.
(FF, pp. 60-61)

"The Geranium" treats the speaker's vacillation between the roles of persecutor and protector of the victim. The first verse paragraph shows him rescuing the plant after neglecting it badly:

When I put her out once, by the garbage pail,
She looked so limp and bedraggled,
So foolish and trusting, like a sick poodle,
Or a wizened aster in late September,
I brought her back in again
For a new routine--
Vitamins, water, and whatever
Sustenance seemed sensible
At the time: she'd lived
So long on gin, bobbie pins, half-smoked cigars, dead
beer. . . .
(FF, p. 63)

We are not told whether the "new routine" was ever instituted, but the speaker's compassion for the plant and his guilt become so painful that he finally lets her be destroyed:

Near the end, she seemed almost to hear me--
And that was scary --
So when that snuffing cretin of a maid
Threw her, pot and all, into the trash-can,
I said nothing.

But I sacked the presumptuous hag the next week,
I was that lonely.
(FF, p. 63)

The poem maintains the speaker's ambivalence: his fondness for the plant and his dislike for it. (He hates it because it continually reminds him that he is responsible for its death.) It is psychologically

valid for him then to fire the maid who has removed the loved and hated object.

"The Thing" and "The Pike" most clearly present the theme of victimization, perhaps too clearly. The first opens with a description of pursuit:

Suddenly they came flying, like a long scarf of smoke,
Trailing a thing--what was it?--small as a lark. . . .

And it quickly reaches the kill:

Then the first bird
Struck;
Then another, another,
Until there was nothing left,
Not even feathers from so far away.

After watching the spectacle, the speaker, apparently unaware of his similarity to the "implacable swift pursuers," says,

And we turned to our picnic
Of veal soaked in marsala and little larks arranged on a
long platter.
(FF, p. 67)

"The Pike," a more interesting poem, begins by describing a world so peaceful that it seems to resemble the womb:

The river turns,
Leaving a place for the eye to rest,
A furred, a rocky pool,
A bottom of water.

The crabs tilt and eat, leisurely,
And the small fish lie, without shadow, motionless,
Or drift lazily in and out of the weeds

But a world of such peace is a phantasy,

A scene for the self to abjure!

We very quickly see that the phantasy is a lethal delusion:

. . . I lean, almost into the water,
My eye always beyond the surface reflection;

I lean, and love these manifold shapes,
 Until, out from a dark cove,
 From beyond the end of a mossy log,
 With one sinuous ripple, then a rush,
 A thrashing-up of the whole pool,
 A pike strikes.

(FF, p. 68)

The wording and structure of this poem avoid revealing the speaker's compassion for the "small fish," but nevertheless this compassion is implied. To return to Snodgrass's point, quoted earlier, I would say that Roethke's protagonist may to some degree be moved to compassion for "All things innocent, hapless, forsaken" because of his self-pity. But not also to admit that the intention of many poems, such as "The Pike," is to show a non-self-centered sympathy with all things that must die would be to read the poems *perversely*.

IV

"SEQUENCE, SOMETIMES METHAPHYSICAL"

1. Metaphysics, Meditation, or Mysticism?

The last twelve poems of THE FAR FIELD, grouped under the title "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" raise many unanswerable questions. One of the less important of these questions is whether, in these poems, Roethke predicted his own death. A surprisingly large percentage of the people who published statements at the time of Roethke's death, in August of 1963, asserted that he did. Allen Tate, for instance, speaks of one of these poems, "The Marrow," as a "great lyric...in which he foresees his death."¹ One year later, Louis Martz writes of THE FAR FIELD, "It is a book filled with the presence of death: Roethke is clearly aware that he is writing his own long elegy...."² W.D. Snodgrass goes even further when he writes, "Here [in "North American Sequence"], as elsewhere in the book, Roethke accurately predicts his own death, clearly longing for it."³ Such statements, of course, provide little insight into the poems, although they do tell us one obvious truth: the poems in THE FAR FIELD, and especially in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," treat the difficulty of facing death.

This point introduces unanswerable questions of greater significance than the one of whether or not Roethke foresaw his own death. These questions concern the intentions of the poems: do they operate as records of mystical ecstasies, religious meditations,

¹"In Memoriam--Theodore Roethke 1908-1963," ENCOUNTER, XXI (October, 1963), 68.

²"Recent Poetry: the Elegaic Mode," YR. LIV (December, 1964), 294.

³"Anguish," Stein, p. 85.

metaphysical lyrics, or just what?

One of the causes of our inability to answer questions about the intentions of these poems is that many of the terms that we call to our aid "Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place," to quote Eliot's "East Coker." This imprecision particularly infects the terminology of mysticism, at least as it is employed by laymen. Statements made by Hoffman and Mills illustrate the damage resulting from this carelessness. Hoffman, writing of The Far Field, says: "These poems, or some of them, . . . testify to the agony of moving toward the threshold of death. I do not mean to say that the thought of death was constantly with . . . [Roethke] , but only that he suffered a type of 'dark night' and that it was partly caused by his being unable to will a transcendence that he could also will to believe in."¹ Admitting the poem's concern with facing death, we may go on to ask whether Roethke was a mystic, whether he was advanced far enough to experience a dark night of the soul,² whether any mystic "wills" his "transcendences," and, finally, whether one may separate a "transcendent" state of mind from "belief in" that state of mind. Roethke apparently considered himself a type of mystic. In a symposium on "In a Dark Time," the first poem of this last Sequence, he laid claim to divine inspiration: "It [the poem] is the first of a sequence, part of a hunt, a drive toward God: an effort to break through the barrier of rational experience; an intention not unmixed with pride. . . . This was a dictated poem. . . .

¹"The Poetic Shape of Death," Stein, p. 109

²I should also point out that according to Evelyn Underhill, modern writers on mysticism frequently fail to discriminate between the several meanings of "Darkness" and the "Dark Night." See Mysticism p. 354n.

I was granted an insight beyond the usual, let us say. To speak of it further is a betrayal of the experience." And then skipping a paragraph: "There are those who believe the true artist impelled by forces outside himself. It is possible that he who risks this dark, the dark night of the soul, is doubly driven."¹

From the fact that Roethke contradicts himself here and from the agitated and defensive nature of these statements, we might gather that the poet was not, in this poem and in the sequence, serenely celebrating his union with God. The contradiction lies in the differences between a "granted insight" and a "hunt" or "effort," as this confusion between will and lack of will indicates, Roethke was too unsettled to write mystical poetry. He conceived of God not as a being or condition that a mortal man could encounter, but as a direction in which one could travel without ever reaching an end. Such an image--an image of an abyss--equates God with the unknown and in a sense does not even commit one to a belief in His "existence." For mystics occupied in the "dark contemplation," where an abyss often appears as the symbol of God, the "darkness" is the extinction of intellect and sensory experience, but it is not terrifying or threatening. The concluding stanza of Henry Vaughan's "The Night" beautifully describes this comforting dark:

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear;

¹Roethke's response to Ransom, Deutsch, and Kunitz, who commented on "In a Dark Time," in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, Eight Symposia, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), pp. 49-50.

O for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.¹

Roethke's last poems, however, record anxious explorations, not the discovery of a peace such as Vaughan's.

If we cannot call Roethke's poems mystical, can we call them meditative or metaphysical? Louis Martz points out that the poetry of meditation must not be confused with mystical writings.² Speaking of the seventeenth-century English poets who wrote meditative verse, Martz says: "Whereas the mystic's ultimate goal is union with God, the goal of the poets who practised the discipline of devotion was 'conformity with the will of God.'³ To some degree we can justifiably consider Roethke's last poems attempts at a "conquest of the self," such as Martz finds in the Spiritual Combat, attributed to Lorenzo Scupoli.⁴ One of the methods of discipline described in Spiritual Combat instructs the student to focus his attention on one vice of which he would rid himself. Martz writes: "It is clear that Donne and Herbert, for instance, are adept at singling out their dominant temptations, and that their poetry is in part a record of their attempts to "exercise" themselves in defense against these temptations. In his religious poetry Donne deals with two dominant vices: the 'sinne of feare' which he was still combating in one of his last hymns, and the sin of intellectual pride. . . ."⁵

¹The Works of Henry Vaughan, ed. Leonard Cyril Martin (Oxford, 1914), I, 523. See also Mysticism, pp. 346-355.

²The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven, 1954), p. 20. Hereafter cited as Meditation.

³Meditation, p. 132.

⁴Meditation, pp. 125-135.

⁵Meditation, p. 132.

Whether or not he regarded it is a sin, Roethke, like Donne, certainly tried to master his fear of death. A further resemblance between Roethke's last poems and the poetry of meditation lies in the form. Six of the twelve poems in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" employ the six-line stanza, with a rhyme scheme of either ababcc or abbacc, a form that was a favorite of poets such as Southwell and Herbert. Another poem, "The Sequel," uses the eight-line stanza found in one section of Yeat's meditation, "The Tower," though the rhyme schemes of the two poems are different. We may say, then, that Roethke's poems in this last section of The Far Field are better viewed as poems of meditation than as celebrations of mystical union.

The preceding comments, however, do not mean that Roethke's poems are meditations in the strictest sense of that word, which Martz defines as follows: "Without expecting any hard and fast divisions, . . . we should expect to find a formal meditation falling into three distinguishable portions, corresponding to the acts of memory, understanding, and will--portions which we might call composition, analysis, and colloquy."¹ Of the three "acts," only understanding finds its way into Roethke's "meditations." In place of willful action in a more or less social context, the speaker of these poems is an isolated figure struggling to calm himself as he faces death. Where the seventeenth-century meditative poems opened with a "composition," that is, with the focusing of the mind's eye on an image or scene related to the life of Christ or to the life of one of the Christian saints, Roethke's poems do not begin with a clearly defined center of attention.² Martz,

¹Meditation, p. 38.

²See Meditation, pp. 30-31.

quoting Luis de Granada's Of Prayer, and Meditation, writes: "The effect [of "composition"] is an intense, deliberate focusing of the 'mind and thought. . .within the bounds, and limits of the subject. . . either by imaginative representation, if the matter may be subject to the senses; or by a simple proposing and conceit of it, if it be a matter above sense;' or, for those following St. Ignatius, some concrete similitude dramatizing even spiritual matters," (p. 30). Martz then continues: "The point toward which I am working is perhaps already evident: that such practices of "composition" or "proposing" lie behind the vividly dramatized, firmly established, graphically imaged openings that are characteristic of the poets we are considering," (p. 31). Despite the similarities between Roethke's last poems and the works of Southwell, Herbert, and others, Roethke usually begins his poems by circling about his subject and by making abrupt shifts in direction, not by focusing attention on one point immediately and penetrating into that point, as did the earlier poets. Notice the evasiveness of these openings from poems in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical":

A dark theme keeps me here,
Though summer blazes in the vireo's eye.
Who would be half possessed
By his own nakedness?

("In Evening Air," FF, p. 80)

And:

In purest song one plays the constant fool
As changes shimmer in the inner eye.
I stare and stare into a deepening pool
And tell myself my image cannot die.

("Infirmary," FF, p. 86)

And, from the piece that most closely resembles a seventeenth-century meditative poem:

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
 I hear my echo in the echoing wood--
 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.

("In a Dark Time," FF, p. 79)

If we compare these groups of initial lines with the examples of "composition" that Martz draws from Donne's "Holy Sonnets," we see that the similarities in subject matter, diction and tone cannot hide the difference in manner of development:

Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned
 By sicknesse, deaths herald, and champion;
 Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
 Treason, and durst not turne to whence hee is fled,
 Or like a thiefe. . . .

And:

This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint
 My pilgrimages last mile; and my race
 Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace,
 My spans last inch, my minutes latest point. . . .¹

Donne's lines do illustrate--as Martz maintains--the principles of "composition" defined earlier, but Roethke's lines do not.

The third term that is pertinent to these poems, "metaphysical," Roethke, himself, supplies in the title of the sequence. After even a cursory reading, one sees that there is no need to become embroiled in the conflicting definitions of this term. Whatever else may or may not characterize it, seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry relies heavily on metaphor and simile. Roethke's poems do not. The sequence title apparently refers to the abstract nature of many of these poems, something very rare in Roethke's previous work. The sequence is only

¹Quoted in Meditation, p. 31.

"sometimes" metaphysical, because some poems are almost entirely imagistic and others almost entirely abstract.

2. Themes of Death and Divine Madness

Turning to the poems themselves, I wish to discuss them in terms of death and the celebration of divine madness. The first, by far the most fully developed, appears in the first poem of the sequence, "In a Dark Time." I have already quoted several statements made by Roethke during a symposium on this poem, in which John Crowe Ransom, Babette Deutsch and Stanley Kunitz participated. This symposium, for the most part, strikes me as being an illustration of the way in which ingenious and learned minds can be distracted from the poem before them by their inordinate need to find literary analogues. Ransom's comments, for instance, take up ten pages, but very few of his remarks pertain directly to the poem. In my opinion, his best insight comes in his brief discussion of the theme of death and of "how much is added to life by the premonition of death."¹ Deutsch limited herself almost entirely to pointing out possible literary analogues and echoes, to which Roethke replied: "I must disagree with Deutsch, who would have me more aware of my elders than I really am."² Although Kunitz also shows a readiness to find a source for any difficult image or line, he reads the poem much more carefully than do the others. Kunitz does not speak in terms of the "acceptance of death" that I have mentioned, but one could easily construe his words as meaning something

¹Reprinted in Ostroff, p. 30.

²Ostroff, p. 51.

very similar. In his words, "... the archetypal journey of the poem is from darkness into light, from blindness into vision, from death into life."¹ Kunitz, quoting Dr. Rollo May, describes the "darkness" as the "anxiety[that] is the experience of imminent non-being."² The "light" . . . is the recognition and confession that he is 'a fallen man,' whose quintessential taste is that of being lost. To embrace this knowledge is to overcome the dread of non-being, is to be redeemed or, so to speak, reborn."³ This amounts to saying that the speaker struggles with and overcomes his fear of death. While discussing the movement from dark to light, Kunitz employs terms that recall our earlier discussion of the poetry of meditation: "If I read Roethke aright, he is differentiating between the spiritual life, which is achievable through discipline, prayer and revelation, and 'the life within,' which is the soul locked inside the cabinet of flesh, the cave, and not locked in alone but with the central devouring worm."⁴

Rather than quoting the whole of "In a Dark Time," I will limit myself here to lines that directly treat the theme of the acceptance of death. The poem's second line runs:

I meet my shadow in the deepening shade. . . .

(FF, p. 79)

¹Ostroff, p. 42.

²Ostroff, p. 42.

³Ostroff, p. 47.

⁴Ostroff, pp. 44-45

Although this is clear, we may as well have Roethke's gloss on it:

"I meet my shadow, my double, my Other, usually tied to me, my reminder that I am going to die. . . ." ¹ In the second stanza, we find the line:

My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.

Perhaps the wall symbolizes death, an experience beyond which we cannot see. Immediately after this point in the poem, the speaker begins seeing clues or messages that possibly tell him what is beyond the wall. He sees

A steady storm of correspondences!

And

All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

The last stanza presents the speaker's fear in terms of self-disgust and then in terms of fear of punishment by God. As soon as the speaker shows the strength to be able to resist despair, to climb out of his fear, he gains a miraculous insight. He sees that the God whom he feared, God the creator, is Himself the creation of the One (or of the Godhead). He sees further that he, himself, is "one with the One," and that together they are "buffeted by their own creation."² The stanza runs:

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
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.

My paraphrase preceding the stanza restates the condenses Roethke's

¹Ostroff, p. 50.

²Ostroff, p. 53.

own comments. I will quote some of these now and point out what seems to me a contradiction. The stanza begins by saying that perhaps the "natural self . . . should die in the blaze of the supernatural."¹ The speaker's ". . . desires are 'dark,' unfathomable, sense-ridden." He sees himself as a fly and asks: "Am I this many eyed, mad, filthy thing, or am I human?" But his disgust does not overwhelm him; he overcomes it: ". . . I return to the human task of climbing out of the pits of fear--and this is not an ambiguous word: fear, unlike anxiety, has a definite object; I am afraid of God until--and here the transition is very swift--'The mind enters itself.' The mind has been outside itself, beyond itself, and now returns home to the domain of love." It is at this point that Roethke seems to contradict himself. Speaking of the words, "The mind enters itself," he says: " . . . this suggests (visually at least) an androgynous act, a hole disappearing into itself, 'crawling into your hole and pulling your hole after you,' the folk saying has it. An unpleasant image." The two glosses on the line seem to oppose each other. But perhaps this is another of the points where Roethke would hope that he has created "a genuinely rich dramatic ambiguity."

My paraphrase of the last two lines stayed quite close to Roethke's comments, but nevertheless I will quote him. Speaking of the words, "And one is One," he says: " . . . the one not merely makes his peace with God, . . . he--if we read One as the Godhead theologically

¹This and the following comments are from Ostroff, pp. 52-53.

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placed above God--transcends God: he becomes the Godhead itself, not only the veritable creator of the universe but the creator of the revealed God." A few sentences later, he continues: "The protagonist one and/or the Godhead are 'free in the tearing wind'---free to be buffeted by their own creation. God Himself, in his most supreme manifestation, risks being maimed, if not destroyed." If, as it appears, God exists only in His creatures, He, like the protagonist, is a victim of reality and can only try to accept the game without fear. I will return to this poem when discussing the theme of divine madness, but now I would like to point out other, perhaps less esoteric, occurrences of the theme under discussion.

The second poem of the sequence, "In Evening Air," provides an almost naively simple statement of the "dark theme." In stanza two, the protagonist cries out:

Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing
Time cannot overwhelm.

(FF, pp. 80-81)

But in the next stanza his attitude swings to the other extreme:

Night I embrace, a dear proximity.

The last stanza, though, brings him to a detached peace, an equilibrium:

I stand by a low fire
Counting the wisps of flame, and I watch how
Light shifts upon the wall.
I bid stillness be still.
I see, in evening air,
How slowly dark comes down on what we do.

"The Sequel," the third poem in the sequence, resembles the love poems quite closely. It describes the coming together of a man and woman and then their drifting apart. The theme of loneliness finds moving expression in the last two stanzas, but several lines go

beyond this to evoke connotations of death:

All waters waver, and all fires fail.

The poem concludes with the lines:

I am a man, a man at intervals
Pacing a room, a room with dead-white walls
I feel the autumn fail--all that slow fire
Denied in me, who has denied desire.

(FF, pp. 82-83)

Although these lines deal more directly with a spiritual or psychic decline than with physical death, the latter is on the fringes of their meaning.

One of the best poems in The Far Field, "Infirmity," develops in some detail the theme of the acceptance of death. The speaker sees that his fear of death grows out of his attachment to his own body; but as time makes his body less and less attractive, he realizes that he will relinquish it easily. The poem opens with a picture of the protagonist as Narcissus:

I stare and stare into a deepening pool
And tell myself my image cannot die.
I love myself: that's my one constancy.
Oh, to be something else, yet still to be!

(FF, p. 86)

The second stanza describes the "meager flesh" as it "breaks down":

Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity;
There's little left I care to call my own.
Today they drained the fluid from a knee

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And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone. . . .¹

In the next stanza, the protagonist maintains that "The soul delights in that extremity," and then affirms a phoenix-like triumph over bodily decay:

I'm son and father of my only death.

This is the mid-way point of the poem. The following three stanzas explore the matter of attachment to things of this world and detachment. The first of these stanzas presents the extreme of detachment:

Dead to myself, and all I hold most dear,
I move beyond the reach of wind and fire.

"Wind and fire," of course, symbolize the destructiveness of time.

The next stanza states the antithetical view:

Deep in the greens of summer sing the lives
I've come to love.

The last two lines here hint that through the miracle of incarnation some manner of attachment to things of this world does not automatically bring damnation or self-destruction:

My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,
And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

¹The stanza form here (iambic pentameter, ababcc), the tone and even the theme are almost identical with those of George Herbert's "Affliction" [1]:

My flesh began unto my soul in pain,
Sicknesses cleave my bones;
Consuming agues dwell in ev'ry vein,
And tune my breath to groans.
Sorrow was all my soul; I scarce beleaved,
Till grief did tell me roundly, that I lived.

The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 47.

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The last stanza reconciles the preceding stanza with the one before it by moving to a higher level of perception, in which the protagonist sees that all nature conspires to aid man and that even the body can part amicably with the soul--another way of saying that it can accept death:

Things without hands take hands; there is no choice,--
Eternity's not easily come by.
When opposites come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
How body from spirit slowly does unwind,
Until we are pure spirit at the end.

(FF, p. 87)

The short piece, "The Decision," develops an idea that is hinted at in "Infirmity"--the speaker is pursued by the Hound of Heaven. Francis Thompson's poem comes to mind when we read:

Running from God's the longest race of all.

(FF. p. 88)

The concluding four lines of Roethke's poem, however, make us think of another English poet:

Which is the way? I cry to the bread black,
The shifting shade, the cinders at my back,
Which is the way? I ask, and turn to go,
As a man turns to face on-coming snow.

This, and many other passages in this sequence, recalls George Herbert, especially the last stanza of "The Pulley," which God speaks of his gifts to mankind:

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlesnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.¹

¹Herbert, p. 160)

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The last line of Roethke's poem perhaps also echoes Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." For Roethke, however, unlike for the other two poets, the dark is dreadful, and the poem must focus on the difficulty of facing it at all, rather than upon the peace that the darkness offers and the pleasure of succumbing to it.

"The Decision" marks a turning point in the "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," for the poems following it express a less distraught attitude toward the approach of death. In "The Marrow" the speaker's voice still shows a note of shrillness, but in the concluding stanza he says that he sacrifices his deepest attachment to himself, symbolized by his marrow, to God, who understands all that man doesn't:

Godhead above my God, are you there still?
To sleep is all my life. In sleep's half-death,
My body alters, altering the soul
That once could melt the dark with its small breath.
Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day:
From me to Thee's a long and terrible way.

I was flung back from suffering and love
When light divided on a storm-tossed tree.
Yea, I have slain my will, and still I live;
I would be near; I shut my eyes to see;
I bleed my bones, their marrow to bestow
Upon that God who knows what I would know.

(FF, pp. 89-90)

The poem "I Waited" ends with a quiet picture that employs fairly standard symbols for the "view" of eternity seen by one who has lived out his life:

The way grew steeper between stony walls,
Then lost itself down through a rocky gorge.
A donkey path led to a small plateau.
Below, the bright sea was, the level waves,
And all the winds came toward me. I was glad.

(FF, p. 91)

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"The Tree, The Bird" repeats this and adds to it the bird in flight, symbolizing the soul:

The present falls, the present falls away;
 How pure the motion of the rising day,
 The white sea widening on a farther shore.
 The bird, the beating bird, extending wings--.
 Thus I endure this last pure stretch of joy,
 The dire dimension of a final thing.

(FF, p. 92)

The present falling away is also time falling away, giving place to the timeless. The words "endure" and "dire" are beautifully weighted here, catching the double-vision of time and eternity. "Dimension" and "final thing" also take on interesting meanings in the context of these lines.

The last three poems of the sequence and with what is essentially an acceptance of death, though on the whole they deal with the theme of divine madness. "The Restored" concludes with a description of the poet's soul, which "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.

(FF, p. 93)

"The Right Thing" restates in terms that are only slightly different the conclusion of "The Marrow." The poet is describing "the happy man," who "takes to himself what mystery he can":

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

(FF, p. 94)

Concluding the sequence and the book, "Once More, the Round" celebrates

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the divine madness, but also to an extent depicts the speaker's acceptance of death:

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.

(FF, p. 95)

The "we" refers to the protagonist and William Blake, their dancing is a manifestation of visionary joy.

The theme of the acceptance of death is important throughout Roethke's work but achieves its fullest statement in the poems of the last book. It includes the ideas that an awareness of death adds something to life, that fear of death indicates the wrong kind of love of self, and that true love of self, which recognizes that "body and soul are one" (FF, p. 94), accepts the mystery of death and willingly yields everything to it.

Although not as important as the preceding theme, the theme of divine madness occurs frequently throughout Roethke's work and with especial clarity in several poems in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical." The first explicit mention appears in the second stanza of "In a Dark Time":

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!

(FF, p. 79)

Here the speaker is recounting his effort to achieve some sort of spiritual insight and is describing the purification of his mind. In these lines the "madness" might be any perception of or belief in spiritual existence. At this point the protagonist seems to be weighing the possibility that the fact, or "circumstance," of death has given rise to his own spiritual vision. "Madness," in other words, equals illusory

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wish-fulfilment. As we have seen, the poem goes on to affirm the vision, at least to the point of saying that the speaker will cast his lot with the imagination or whatever has created the illusion. Another reference to madness occurs in the last stanza ("My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly"), where the speaker describes his desire. Here, in a disturbed state, he condemns desire, and, by implication, the body; later, when calmer, he sees that he must accept whatever buffeting he receives at the hands of these creations of the imagination. If this is an accurate account of the meaning of the poem, then Roethke joins Blake and the Socrates of the Phaedrus as an adherent of the religion of the imagination. That this is so becomes clearer as we look at the theme of divine madness in these poems.

The poems at the beginning of the sequence show the protagonist vacillating in his attitude toward madness. "In Evening Air" links the speaker's self-love with being possessed, reminding us of the fusion of narcissism and self-disgust found in "In a Dark Time." I do not understand the presence of the madness theme in the former poem, the first stanza of which reads as follows:

A dark theme keeps me here,
 Though summer blazes in the vireo's eye.
 Who would be half possessed
 By his own nakedness?
 Waking's my care--
 I'll make a broken music, or I'll die.

(FF, p. 80)

Apparently, this is one of the poems in which the body and soul are set in opposition. The speaker, identifying himself with his soul, wishes to be possessed but cannot be as long as the body's weight pins him to earth. We may clarify the "waking" here by recalling the last

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lines of another poem that deals with narcissism and self-loathing,

"Infirmity":

When opposites come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see.
How body from spirit slowly does unwind
Until we are pure spirit at the end.

(FF, p. 87)

In these poems the speaker has not yet discovered the unity of body and soul, in other words has not yet accepted the oneness of his own identity and the body that he knows must die. Not knowing this, he is disturbed and his "madness" is not divine but is the disease of a "heat-maddened summer fly." He feels walled-in, imprisoned. "In Evening Air" ends with the protagonist watching light shifting on a wall, and this image reappears in the last lines of "The Sequel," another poem that touches on the theme of madness, divine and otherwise:

Leaves, leaves, lean forth and tell me what I am;
This single tree turns into purest flame.
I am a man, a man at intervals
Pacing a room, a room with dead-white walls;
I feel the autumn fail--all that slow fire
Denied in me, who has denied desire.

(FF, p. 83)

The "room with the dead-white walls" might be in an asylum. The man, whose madness is unholy, is imprisoned because he has denied desire, and all that that implies. The protagonist's recognition of his symbolic imprisonment for this "crime" shows that he is moving toward Blake's religion of the imagination. In "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" we find the exhortation: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires,"¹

¹The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, p. 37.

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"The Sequel," though, does describe briefly the coming of the divine madness. The speaker is ostensibly referring to a meeting of two lovers, but his words suggest that we are also seeing a wedding of the body and soul:

I saw a body dancing in the wind,

 We danced, we danced, under a dancing moon;
 And on the coming of the outrageous dawn,
 We danced together, we danced on and on.

(FF, p. 82)

Here the acceptance of death is accompanied by an ecstasy or madness that is symbolized by dancing.

The last four poems of the sequence present the clearest statements of the theme of divine madness. In "The Tree, The Bird" the protagonist describes the ecstasy that comes after the acceptance:

Uprose, uprose, the stony fields uprose,
 And every snail dipped toward me its pure horn.
 The sweet light met me as I walked toward
 A small voice calling from a drifting cloud.
 I was a finger pointing at the moon,
 At ease with joy, a self-enchanted man.

(FF, p. 92)

Following these lines comes an account of the speaker's awareness of his mortality:

Yet when I sighed, I stood outside my life,
 A leaf unaltered by the midnight scene,
 Part of a tree still dark, still, deathly still,
 Riding the air, a willow with its kind,
 Bearing its life and more, a double sound,
 Kin to the wind, and the bleak, whistling rain.

(FF, p. 92)

These lines describe a detachment that is not indifference, a heightened state of vision like that of "In a Dark Time": "free in the tearing wind."

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In "The Restored" the poet gives us a miniature allegory, the symbols and theme of which come from the Phaedrus. I quote the poem in its entirety:

In a hand like a bowl
Danced my own soul,
Small as an elf,
All by itself,

When she thought I thought
She dropped as if shot.
'I've only one wing,' she said,
'The other's gone dead.'

'I'm maimed; I can't fly;
I'm like to die,'
Cried the soul
From my hand like a bowl.

When I raged, when I wailed,
And my reason failed,
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.

(FF, p. 93)

This poem exactly parallels the description of the divine madness found in the Phaedrus. The word "rage" also recalls Yeat's use of that term, which associates it with desire and with the approach of death. In its last stanza, Roethke's poem provides another example of the linking of dancing and ecstasy.

"The Right Thing" is a straightforward, abstract statement of the two themes that I have been discussing. This poem says that the intellect and will should not struggle against mysteries of change and

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Let others probe the mystery if they can.
Time-harried prisoners of Shall and Will--
The right thing happens to the happy man.

The bird flies out, the bird flies back again;
The hill becomes the valley, and is still;
Let others delve that mystery if they can.

(FF, p. 94)

The second stanza repeats the detached-but-not-indifferent vision that we saw in "The Tree, The Bird." Here the speaker sees that mutability is only an appearance or that it is circular. When the protagonist realizes that time does not threaten, he also realizes that:

...Body and soul are one!

The last stanza continues the description of the "happy man," who:

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

(FF, p. 94)

His "surrendering his will/Till mystery is no more" reminds us of the conclusion of "The Marrow," where the protagonist slays his will and bleeds his bones in order to "bestow their marrow"

Upon that God who knows what I would know.

(FF, p. 90)

The divine madness is apparently an understanding of the mystery of time, but not an understanding in rational terms.

"Once More, The Round" concludes the book with an affirmation of the speaker's membership in the religion of the imagination:

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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.

(FF, p. 95)

The pebble and the pond perhaps represent the moved and the mover, the creature and the creator. The two words bring to mind the lines from "Bring the Day!":

The grass says what the wind says:
 Begin with the rock;
 End with water.

(WW, p. 71)

The known and the unknown operate here like Yeatsian or Heraclitean antitheses, each feeding on the other's life but also each giving the other life. And within the protagonist is the faculty that desires to see beyond the hill and that creates what it sees there. The line borrowed from Blake, "the Eye altering alters all," places the speaker at the heart of the religion of the imagination. This is the doctrine of romantic idealism: The perceiver creates the perceived. Believing this, the ecstatic speaker and his mentor, William Blake, "dance on, dance on, dance on."

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CONCLUSION

Poetry at a Discount

The most widely held critical dictum on Roethke defines his allegiance as being divided between this world and the beyond and describes his poetry as a dramatization of the struggle between flesh and spirit. The purpose of this dissertation has been to examine this proposition and to give it detailed support in so far as the poems warrant it. Although many commentators have repeated this statement in one form or another, most of them have either left it vague and unsupported or have overemphasized the spiritual side. Few have made such unqualified assertions as Glanco Cambon, who calls Roethke ". . . a thorough transcendentalist,"¹ or Hugh Staples, who calls him a "mystic."² But many repeat the rather more balanced opinions of Ralph Mills. In his many articles on Roethke, he points out that the protagonists endure ". . . anxiety over the questions of death, God, isolation, sexuality, and parental relations . . .,"³ and that the poet's ". . . ecstatic assertions of being do not hide an inability to face the realities of human life."⁴ But in the end, Mills always returns with special emphasis to his favorite point: "The pattern which visibly emerges from the writing as a whole is seen to fall into stages ranging from the psychological to the visionary and near-mystical. . . . The development

¹ "The Tangibles of Craftsmanship," KR, XXVII (Autumn, 1965, 760.

² "Rose in the Sea-Wind," (1964), 191.

³ "The Lyric of the Self," Hungerford, p. 12.

⁴ "The Lyric of the Self," p. 19.

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of Roethke's poetry is a record of the spirit's mutations, its divisions from nature and expansion into love and illumination, its final, anagogical disposition."¹ In statements of this sort--which are typical of Mills and others--there are two inadequacies which it is the purpose of this dissertation to overcome. First, these statements usually hide in such patches of obscurity or vagueness that no one expects them to be given detailed support. Second, they fail to acknowledge the true resonance of the poems by substituting for it what must be for almost every reader the illusion of profundity so easily conjured up by even the most mechanical manipulation of the terminology of mysticism. R. P. Blackmur has warned against this very betrayal, though he places the blame more upon the poet and the culture than upon the reader:

We find poets either using the small conventions of the individual life as if they were great conventions, or attempting to resurrect some great convention of the past, or, finally, attempting to discover the great convention that must lie, willy-nilly, hidden in the life about them. This is a labor, whichever form it takes, which leads as often to subterfuge, substitution, confusion, and failure, as to success; and it puts the abnormal burden upon the reader of determining what the beliefs of the poet are and how much to credit them before he can satisfy himself of the reality which those beliefs envisage. The alternative is to put poetry at a discount--which is what has happened.²

Later in this same essay Blackmur makes two other points that are relevant here: "No feature of a body of poetry can be as important as it seems in discussion."³ And: "The rational imagination in poetry,

¹"The Lyric of the Self," p.

²"The Later Poetry of W. B. Yeats," The Expense of Greatness (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 77.

³Blackmur, p. 104.

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as elsewhere, can absorb magic as a provisional method of evocative and heuristic thinking, but it cannot be based upon it."¹ Critics such as Mills have magnified the mystical element out of proportion, placing the poetry in danger of "being swept a way with the debris."² The general purpose of this dissertation, then, is to correct this false emphasis.

What I see as the more important part of the contribution made in this dissertation lies not in the general purpose, but in the explication of particular themes and images. Sometimes this explication only offers fuller and more detailed support for widely accepted readings, such as my discussion of the "Greenhouse Poems" as symbols for a developing human identity, or my discussion of the death-theme in poems of the early 1950's. In other sections, however, I believe that I have defined image-clusters and themes that have not been previously recognized. For instance, a full appreciation of the poems demands attention be paid to Roethke's frequent use of animating and deanimating metaphors and to the metaphors linking plants and animals. Kenneth Burke is the only critic who has dealt with this matter. A similarly neglected, crucial device, which I hope I have defined and clarified, is the extensive group of container images. Finally, I believe that I have filled a surprising gap in the commentary by discussing Roethke's exploration of idealism and materialism as possible views of life's origin and end.

¹Blackmur, p. 105

²Blackmur, p. 75.

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Much remains to be said about Roethke, but I am not certain that it will be said for many years. He was a highly conscious artist who was able to produce "interesting" poems, but he was neither an inventor nor a master. In so far as his work relies on the "debris" of mysticism and metempsychosis, it will be unread and forgotten. I think that it will remain alive to the extent that he achieved a style of his own, and this he was only beginning to do at the time of his death. What I suspect will happen is that Roethke will receive a fair amount of attention in the near future. A collected edition of his poems has just been published, and a Jungian and existentialist analysis of his work is scheduled to appear in the fall of 1966. Also Alan Seager is working on a biography. Beyond this immediate activity, it is difficult to foresee; but in my opinion, as the contributions of linguistics to the study of style increase, interest in Roethke's work will continue and perhaps even grow.

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• *Chlorophyll a* (Chl *a*) is the primary photosynthetic pigment in all photosynthetic organisms. It is a green pigment that absorbs light energy in the blue and red regions of the visible spectrum. Chl *a* is the most abundant pigment in the chloroplasts of green plants and algae. It is involved in the light-dependent reactions of photosynthesis, where it captures light energy and converts it into chemical energy in the form of ATP and NADPH. Chl *a* is also a component of the photosynthetic reaction center, where it plays a crucial role in the transfer of electrons to the electron transport chain.

• **What is the purpose of the study?** The purpose of the study is to determine the effect of the use of a mobile phone on the performance of a simulated driving task.

• *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2000; 284: 1039-1044

• *De la détermination des besoins et des attentes des clients* •

• 2007年12月11日，中国正式成为世界贸易组织（WTO）第143个成员。

• **Stress** is a response to a stimulus that is perceived as a threat to well-being.

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1. *Pharmaceuticals* – The pharmaceutical industry is a major contributor to the U.S. economy, with sales exceeding \$300 billion in 2013. The industry is heavily regulated by the FDA, which oversees the safety, efficacy, and quality of drugs. The industry is also facing increasing pressure from payers (insurers and governments) to reduce costs, leading to a focus on generic drugs and biosimilars.

© 2004 Blackwell Publishing Ltd, *Journal of Internal Medicine* 255: 105–112

$\frac{d}{dt} \left(\frac{\partial L}{\partial \dot{x}} \right) = \frac{\partial L}{\partial x}$

• **Intermittent** – occurs at irregular intervals

1. The first step is to identify the problem or question that needs to be answered. This involves understanding the context and the specific requirements of the task.

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19. *Chlorophyll a* and *Chlorophyll b* were determined using a spectrophotometer (Shimadzu UV-1601) at 663 nm and 646 nm, respectively. The concentrations of *Chlorophyll a* and *Chlorophyll b* were calculated using the following equations:

1. $\alpha = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.80$, $n = 100$, $\mu = 0$, $\sigma = 1$, $\mu_0 = 0.5$, $\mu_1 = 0.25$

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• *Chlorophyll a* (Chl *a*) is the primary photosynthetic pigment in all photosynthetic organisms. It is a green pigment that absorbs light energy in the blue and red regions of the visible spectrum. Chl *a* is the most abundant pigment in the chloroplasts of green plants and algae.

• *How can we make the most of the time we have?*

Journal of Management Education 36(7) 809–824

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1. The first step in the process of the investigation is the identification of the problem. This is done by the investigator who is responsible for the study. The problem is then defined in terms of the objectives of the study.

2. The second step is the selection of the research design. This is done by the investigator who is responsible for the study. The design is then defined in terms of the objectives of the study.

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Figure 1. The effect of the number of iterations on the accuracy of the proposed algorithm. The accuracy of the proposed algorithm increases with the number of iterations. The accuracy of the proposed algorithm is 100% when the number of iterations is 100.

• *Illegitimate* – a person who is not a member of the family, but who is treated as such by the family.

[illegible]

• *Staphylococcus aureus* • *Staphylococcus epidermidis* • *Staphylococcus saprophyticus* • *Staphylococcus sciuri* • *Staphylococcus carnosus* • *Staphylococcus hyicus* • *Staphylococcus saprophylus* • *Staphylococcus* sp.

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1. The first step in the process of identifying a problem is to determine the nature of the problem. This involves gathering information about the problem and its context. The second step is to define the problem in terms of specific goals and objectives. The third step is to identify the causes of the problem. The fourth step is to develop a plan of action to address the problem. The fifth step is to implement the plan and monitor progress. The sixth step is to evaluate the results and make adjustments as needed.

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Abstract: 1300. *Aspergillus fumigatus* and *A. niger* are the most common fungi isolated from indoor air. The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of *Aspergillus* spp. in the indoor air of a tertiary care hospital in the city of Bogotá, Colombia. A total of 100 samples were collected from the indoor air of 100 rooms in the hospital. The results showed that 60% of the samples were positive for *Aspergillus* spp. The most common species was *A. fumigatus* (40%), followed by *A. niger* (20%). The prevalence of *Aspergillus* spp. in the indoor air of the hospital was significantly higher than in the outdoor air (p < 0.05). The results suggest that the indoor air of the hospital is a potential source of *Aspergillus* spp. infection.

• *How do you think about the future of the world?*

• *Laurea* in Scienze della Formazione, Università degli Studi di Padova, 2002

• **2010** – **100th Anniversary** of the **1910** **Flu Pandemic** •

[illegible]

• *Chlorophyll a* (Chl *a*) is the primary photosynthetic pigment in all photosynthetic organisms. It is a green pigment that absorbs light energy in the blue and red regions of the visible spectrum. Chl *a* is the most abundant pigment in the chloroplasts of green plants and algae. It is the primary electron donor in the light-dependent reactions of photosynthesis, where it transfers electrons to a series of electron acceptors, ultimately leading to the production of ATP and NADPH. Chl *a* is also involved in the regulation of photosynthesis, as it can be converted to a non-fluorescent state in response to high light intensity, a process known as non-photochemical quenching (NPQ). This helps to protect the photosynthetic apparatus from damage by excess light energy.

[illegible]

1. The first step is to identify the problem or question that needs to be answered. This involves understanding the context and the specific requirements of the task.

1. $\mathcal{A} = \{A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n\}$ is a family of n sets, where $n \geq 1$.

[illegible]

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$\mathcal{L}(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{X}) = \prod_{i=1}^n \mathcal{L}(y_i|\mathbf{X}_i)$

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1. The first of these is the fact that the number of cases of disease is increasing in many parts of the world. This is due to a number of factors, including the growth of the human population, the spread of disease-carrying insects, and the development of resistance to many of the drugs used to treat these diseases.
2. The second factor is the increasing incidence of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. These diseases are often caused by lifestyle factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and smoking, and they can often be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle.
3. The third factor is the increasing incidence of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. These problems are often caused by stress, and they can often be treated with therapy and medication.
4. The fourth factor is the increasing incidence of infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. These diseases are often caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites, and they can often be treated with antibiotics, antiviral drugs, or antiparasitic drugs.
5. The fifth factor is the increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. These diseases are often caused by lifestyle factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and smoking, and they can often be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle.
6. The sixth factor is the increasing incidence of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. These diseases are often caused by lifestyle factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and smoking, and they can often be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle.
7. The seventh factor is the increasing incidence of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. These problems are often caused by stress, and they can often be treated with therapy and medication.
8. The eighth factor is the increasing incidence of infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. These diseases are often caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites, and they can often be treated with antibiotics, antiviral drugs, or antiparasitic drugs.
9. The ninth factor is the increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. These diseases are often caused by lifestyle factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and smoking, and they can often be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle.
10. The tenth factor is the increasing incidence of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. These diseases are often caused by lifestyle factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and smoking, and they can often be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle.

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