All Natural Shapes:

Symbolism in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke

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Abstract

Before we ask what a symbol means we must know how it means. Theodore Roethke's symbolism does not work in the comventional way. To Roethke, language does not participate in a static, two-sided order of signification. Accordingly, his symbols should not be treated as ciphers of a coherent reality situated somewhere outside the poem. Roethke, influenced by his readings in the literature of mysticism, saw world and language alike as saturated with symbolic values. His poems attempt to communicate this "vision" not only in what they say, but in how they say it.

The way the symbolism works should dictate how it is read. The first three chapters of this thesis deal with the existing criticism and experiment with strategies for reading the poems. The remaining chapters describe actual symbols, such as "roots," "veins," "river," "house," "light," "stone," "water," "shells," "skins," and "ghosts." It is understood that these will often engender multiple, and frequently contradictory, interpretations. It is argued that the "symbolized" and "symbolizing" thing must be given the same status, as homologues in a continuum of related ideas. This principle is at the heart of Roethke's vision of a paradoxical universe in which the self is other, light is dark, and "Everything comes to One."

RESUME

Avant de demander ce qu'un symbole signifie, il faut savoir comment il le signifie. Le symbolisme de Theodore Roethke ne fonctionne pas dans la manière conventionelle. D'après Roethke, le langage ne prend pas part d'un système de signification statique et à deux faces. En conséquence, on devrait pas traiter ses symboles comme des chiffres correspendants à une réalité cohérente située hors du poème.

Roethke, soumis à l'influence de ses études dans la litérature du mysticisme, voyais un saturation des valeurs symboliques dans le langage et le monde de même. Cette vision est manifestée non seulement en ce que ses poèmes expriment, mais aussi en la façon dont ils l'expriment. La façon dont le symbolisme fonctionne devrait détérminer comment il est lu. Les trois premiers chapitres de cette thèse s'adressent à la critique actuelle de Roethke et essaient les différentes méthodes de le lire. Les chapitres qui restent décrivent les symboles particuliers tel que "racines," "veines," "maison," "lumière," "rocher," "eau," "coquilles," "peaus," "phantômes." Il est entendu que l'usage de ces symboles produira souvent des intérprétations multiples et contradictiores. C'est soutenu qu'on doit traiter ce qui est symbolisé et ce qui symbolise comme des homologues dans un continu des idées liées. Ce principe est au coeur de la vision de Roethke d'un univers parodoxal ou le moi est l'autre, la lumière est l'obscurité, et "Le tout parvient à l'unité."

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

CP — The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke, New York, Anchor Books, 1975.

OPC — On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1965.

SF — Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, ed. David Wagoner, Garden City, Doubleday, 1972.

SL — Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1968.

Introduction

Superficially the poems of Open House and those of Praise to the End! are quite dissimilar. The early book is usually described as "conventional," the later as "experimental." At first glance they do not seem to be the work of one poet. However, a second glance reveals an unmistakeable line of development uniting the phases of Roethke's career. And a third glance shows that, at the level of the imagery he uses, his poetry changes scarcely at all and that what changes it does undergo are of an essentially trivial nature. If in the early works Roethke is preoccupied with skin and veins, in the later work he is taken up with rinds and roots.[3] It costs little effort to invent categories describing specific "types" of imagery found throughout the Collected Poems: the "integumental" for images of enclosure, shells and cloaks; the "filiary" for images of tendrils, riverbeds, veins; the "lithic" for imagery of imperforable density; the "conjugal" for images of joined dyads and personal confrontation, dancing, reading, sex. In some types of poetry it would be difficult to do this. Sometimes the images in a poem are

used to serve a particular occasion. We cannot lift the skunks from Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" the way we can pull the snake out of "Snake," the slug out of "Slug" and the lizard out of "Lizard," seeing them all as representing the same "pure sensuous form."[1] This is not to say that "Skunk Hour" is just an accurate portrait of a skunk, or that Roethke's animals are any less "naturalistic" and closely observed. Each rises to universality in a different way: Lowell's by being presented in the dramatic context of a particular human life, Roethke's by allowing particular images to evolve into full-fledged symbols in a partially-fledged system of symbols.

We must use the word "symbol" advisedly. Roethke is not a symboliste, and has no use for the kind of symbol that vanishes from consideration the instant its tenor is revealed. As with Yeats, "players and painted stage" take all his love, but unlike Yeats Roethke does not lament that he has slighted "those things that they were emblems of." For Roethke "those things" are themselves emblems of other things. We can never, as Chaucer's Nun's Priest bids us, "take the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille," because the husk and kernel of Roethke's allegoria are apt to change places, so that the thing symbolized becomes the symbolizing thing. The snail emerging from its shell, the seed emitting a shoot, the penis becoming erect, and the soul ecstatically taking leave of its corporeal sheath are, to Roethke, events bound together in a web of

signification. While each image bears symbolic meaning of a sort there is no centre to which all of them refer--there is only, as Richard Blessing has shown, a continual motion between centres.[2] The word in Roethke is not to be seen as having a different essential substance than what it signifies, nor is its meaning situated beyond itself in a constant, identifiable realm of external reference. So when Roethke uses the traditional symbol of the Rose it is never simply the concrete embodiment of an abstract prinicple, love or beauty, nor does it entirely transcend particularity to become Rosa Mystica or the emblem of the lumen gloriae. Rather it coexists with all its homologues in a world saturated with symbolic value, where nothing remains merely itself, and all natural shapes continually surpass their own contours and become Other. We recognize Roethke's symbols as symbols only by their bivalent structure of signification. Within that structure there is no implied hierarchy of importance. The symbol does not stand mid-way between the reader and reality, an apostrophe to the elided truth. It stands between realities, mediating one condition to another.

In the early work the symbolism frequently undergoes a conscious allegorizing. The stone in "The Adamant" is identified as Truth. But at the same time that stone is the sign of something more concrete and, in a way, more abstract than Truth. It stands for an elemental hardness, to which Roethke returns again and again, permuting all of

its possible symbolic values. Because of this (and because practically every significant image in Open House is recapitulated in the later volumes) I will not deal with the poetry in any chronological order. Nor will I confine myself to any particular poem or body of poems in Roethke's oeuvre. Nor will I perform an exhaustive study of the symbolism in all of the poems. The main purpose of this paper is to show one way of approaching symbolism in Roethke's verse.

I have reserved plenty of space for the question of how to approach this approach. This is the sort of preliminary work that is normally suppressed in the final research paper. But I have included considerable hypothesising about how to read Roethke (much of which takes the form of a discussion of how we may read any poet). I have two reasons for this. In the first place, I think too many critics have traced particular thematic threads through the Collected Poems. This has resulted in fragmentary portraits of Roethke as an American transcendentalist; as a nature poet; as a confessional poet perpetually coming to terms with his father's death; as an apprentice mystic un-looking for God; as a kind of literary spirit-medium unusually susceptible to possession by dead writers. There is some truth in each of these portrayals (and no contradiction in adopting all of them). The problem is that each presents a fairly narrow aperture through which to view individual poems and at the level of

symbolism often produces either incomplete or patently false readings. I would like to expose the dangers of seeking detailed thematic unities in preference to broad structural ones, while avoiding the complementary error of making only general comments on the "type of poetry" we are dealing with.

In the second place, it is my contention that Roethke's poetry consciously addresses problems of interpretation not unlike ours. The confusion is mutual. The composition of the poetry prefigures what we must go through in order to read it. In "Open Letter" the advice he gives on how to read the Praise to the End! poems could apply as well on how to approach any of the central quandaries of human life:

> The clues will be scattered richly: as life scatters them.[3]

At the symbolic level Roethke's poetry (even that of Open House, if we look past the surface coherencies of the verse) mimics the structure of the world it depicts--and also of the perceiving mind:

> A poem that is the shape of the psyche itself; in times of great stress, that's what I tried to write.[4]

Their patterns of association imitate the existential puzzle for which they are supplied as an answer. The

"puzzlatory" character of the verse demands special consideration from the "unpuzzlatory" methods of criticism.

In the first three chapters of this dissertation I discuss the kinds of problems we encounter when trying to interpret Roethke's symbolism. These are not necessarily the same kinds of problems that we would encounter when reading another poet. Thus, as Roethke says of his own remarks in "Open Letter," my observations should not be taken as general strictures, but each should be read as if prefaced with the phrase "In this kind of poem..."

In these first chapters I discuss existing trends among Roethke's critics. These fit into two broad categories. There are those critics who see Roethke as a "difficult" poet, one whose most "obscure" symbolism demands an exceptionally energetic--indeed, almost athletic--style of analysis. Then there are those critics who see Roethke as an "easy" poet whose "obscurest" work is, after all, not to be explained but enjoyed. Of course none of Roethke's critics adheres strictly to one camp or the other. Most steer a difficult course between the extremes. And this is what I also propose to do. In this paper I will not succeed in resolving the controversy. The paradox that both positions are equally valid is itself quite informative and fully in keeping with the states of mind that Theodore Roethke was, quite deliberately, attempting to induce in his readers.

In the fourth and fifth chapters I move from a

discussion of general critical practise to a discussion of how and in what sense Roethke's symbols symbolize.

The chapter entitled "Doubleness" examines what we might call Roethke's "dynamic dualism," his use of oxymoron and metaphor to unite contrarieties. The chapter which immediately follows, "A Permutative System," simply applies the idea of a dynamic symbolism to some of Roethke's actual symbols, in particular that of the snail in "A Light Breather." Chapters six through eight examine particular symbols: house, stone, water, ghost, wheels, and machines. In the ninth chapter I attempt to put some of my discoveries to work in an actual reading of the poem "Where Knock is Open Wide." This reading is, of necessity, far from complete. A full and detailed account of this poem would also serve as the definitive explication of Theodore Roethke's entire poetic output. It is toward that project (being accomplished at the rate of two or three graduate theses a year) that I submit this contribution.

Notes to the Introduction

[1]Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York: Anchor Press, 1975), p. 144. All subsequent references to the Collected Poems will be incorporated in the body of the the essay with the abbreviation "CP."

[2]Richard Allan Blessing, Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 95, p. 68, et passim. On p. 95 he writes:

> Roethke has made a world of words where nothing is its solid self, or, more accurately, nothing is its solid self alone. Instead, such common words as cat or tree or fish or bite become a whirl of associations, some growing out of literary tradition; some out of psychological convention; some evolving out of their previous uses in the sequence and, naturally, reaching ahead to their subsequent uses; some coming from Roethke's personal history; and some, I suppose, from the reader's.

[3]Theodore Roethke, On the Poet and his Craft: Selected Prose, ed. Ralph J. Mills (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965). All subsequent references will be incorporated in the text of this thesis along with the abbreviation "OPC."

[4]Theodore Roethke, Straw for the Fire (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 178. All subsequent references to Roethke's published notes will be incorporated in the text of this thesis along with the abbreviation "SF."

I. Reading Backward

"Solve all the leaps of light." (SF, p. 182)

"Dear God, don't make me intelligible...I'm to be known slowly." (SF, p. 229)

Genesis begins with the letting there be of light, and the dispersing of darkness is prototypical of all subsequent creation. As noun, adjective and verb the word "light" occurs in the Collected Poems one hundred and fifty times, more than any word except a handful of pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions. Over and over Roethke repeats the first divisive, discriminatory gesture and struggles with its implications: "The only thing I want to write about is light, what's in the eye and the stone." (SF. p. 189) Light is the precondition of Vision. For Roethke the ultimate consummation of Vision is in poetry. Poetry is, therefore, a mode of cognition, a way of understanding. It seeks the light, as any sunflower or philosopher. The question is where to look.

The answer is not simple. If light emanates from any single source it must be the Creator. And the Creator seems to have left the scene. His light is refracted through all the things of nature. It is all-pervasive, in

the beholder and the beheld, the eye and the stone, but curiously hard to perceive there and easily obscured by the "false light" of the literal verities. It is present in times future and in times past, in the petal ("Light strides the rose." CP, p. 132) and the root: "Deep in their roots all flowers keep the light." (SF, p. 50) To seek the light of the heavenly rose is to return to a prior condition, to regain lost innocence, or retrace the root to one's origins. This is Roethke's favourite paradox, and the best known: "I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back." (OPC, p. 39) Toward the end of his career Roethke became fond of expressing this in the traditional mystical belief that God does not reveal himself in the light of knowledge but in a murk of unknowledge. The light is in darkness: "In a dark time the eye begins to see,"; "Dark, dark my light" (CP. p. 231); "Dawn's where the white is. Who would know the dawn/When there's a dazzling dark behind the sun?" (CP, p. 149) It has been pointed out by Neal Bowers and Jay Parini that Roethke was an attentive reader of Evelyn Underhill's writings on mysticism.[1] That Roethke was a self-conscious mystic in the central tradition of Western mysticism no longer needs to be established.

Roethke's best-known dramatization of the quest for light is in "The Lost Son." In that poem the protagonist, reading back through his own experiences, is not merely reminiscing about but actually <u>reviving</u> his childhood--and

in a more important sense, the childhood of his race.

> One belief: 'One must go back to go forward.' And by back I mean down into the consciousness of the race itself not just the quandries (sic) of adolescence, damn it.[2]

The greenhouse he returns to is a symbolic one--which is to say in the first place that it is made of a "symbolic" substance--words, for instance, and imagery--and in the second place that it is symbolic of something. It is at once symbolized and symbolizing, which gives us a clue as to why it is impossible to fix in our own minds "where" it is located, what it stands for, and how it can represent simultaneously a heaven and a hell, "order and disorder," and "a reality harsher than reality." (SF, p.150)

This polymorphism is to be expected of imagery taken straight from the unconscious. Jerome Mazzaro has written of the "Praise to the End!" poems: "Symbols of the unconscious have always bipolar potential, at times meaning a thing and its opposite coevally."[3] The "unconscious" need not be taken as referring to the Freudian subconscious, the Jungian unconsciousness, or any region discovered and mapped by psychology. There is a literary unconscious, which may or may not be dramatized in the poem as the murky lower depths of a fictional psyche, but which we may see as underlying the superfices of poetic meaning as white paper underlies print. Perhaps "the

unarticulated" would be a more accurate term for "that dark pond" into which the poet "dives"--as Roethke, second-guessing his detractors, ironically depicts him--"with or without pants on, to come up festooned with dead cats, weeds, tin cans, and other fascinating debris." (OPC, p. 37) T. R. Hummer divides these waters from the waters, identifying two realms (corresponding, we might say, to Eden and Heaven, the remembered light and the anticipated light). In these two states two orders of irrational articulation take shapeless shape:

> [Roethke] begins in a pre-rational state--human origin--and proceeds to a post-rational state--vision. Clearly, the two kinds of nonsense correspond to these two states: meaninglessness (which is also pure potentiality) to the prerational, non-sense to the post-rational (though it should be noted that, since Roethke's journey is not linear but "circuitous" the pre- and post-rational sometimes interpenetrate and so do the two kinds of nonsense).[4]

Regressing into the past, as the Lost Son does, is psychically equivalent to regressing to a pre-rational or unconscious state, which is equivalent to dying. "I'm dead at both ends" the narrator of "Praise to the End!" exclaims. (CP, p. 81) Moving backwards into the past we relive the dead lives, and, in so doing, experience the death we have not yet (consciously) experienced in life. (Very strange stuff, but essential to an understanding of Roethke).

Being symbolic and yet not in a simple way referential

Roethke's Greenhouse (or dark woods or cave mouth) may best be regarded as "proto-symbolic"--after an analysis which R. H. Pearce provides in a very perceptive comment on the Praise to the End! poems.

> In a sense they are not poems at all but rather pre-poems; so that the reader working through them, must bring his own capacities as proto-poet most actively to bear on them. In effect the reader completes them. One can hardly talk about these poems, or in terms of them. One can only try to talk through them--which perhaps is a way, a way we too much neglect, of learning, all over again, to talk.[5]

"Learning all over again to talk": Pearce is recommending that we regress with Roethke, or alongside him. But why should we? A zoologist does not need to jump like a kangaroo just because his subject matter does. On the other hand a zoologist may need to get down on his stomach to study a worm (though presumably he will deliver his lectures from a standing position). In writing about some poets it is far more difficult to separate the research from the findings. When the meanings are as richly connotative and parabolic as Roethke's the exegesis cannot do justice to them without to some extent reflecting the (il)logic of their construction.

In a poem such as "The Lost Son" we do well to retrace the protagonist's steps. In darkness, finding his way back to The Greenhouse, to the creative source, the Lost Son uses his feet for eyes:

> The way to the boiler was dark
> Dark all the way
> Over slippery cinders
> Through the long greenhouse. (CP, p. 54)

He gropes at first toward the "single light swinging by the firepit" and then toward the light of dawn, the approach of which is heralded by the coming of Papa: "The light in the morning came slowly over the white snow." (The scene appears again in "Otto" emphasizing that this "light" is behind Roethke (his source) as well as before him). The Lost Son is found, and the adult poet, groping his way back to the same memory, receives what Roethke refers to in the "Open Letter" as an "illumination" ("partly apprehended," for the final illumination, the light at the other end of the tunnel, has yet to be glimpsed). (OPC, p. 39)

The way back is the way of <u>feeling</u>. Unable to see in the "obscure passage" we feel our way "with all our faculties loose and alert." (OPC, p. 37) This recapitulates the primary distinction between the "rational" and the "intuitive"--a theme which recurs in Roethke and in Roethke's criticism. The theme recurs because the poet wrote the poems intuitively, trusting, as William Meredith puts it, in a "revealed order" to give coherence to them.

> Instead of ordering experience, [the <u>Lost Son</u>] poems attend on experience with the conviction that there is order in it. However imperfectly his eye might see it or his voice might articulate it--and he went on writing occasional shapeless lines and passages all his life--this

> revealed order was the only one Roethke served from this time on.[6]

Roethke himself believed that the poems of the "Praise to the End!" sequence would be "difficult" for the scholarly intellect to deal with and very easy to approach intuitively:

> ...I know that poems that run back into the unconscious and depend upon associational rightness have a hard time breaking in on readers who are conditioned by the purely literary kind of thing. (SL, p.116)

But for those who are not so conditioned, or who have it in them to "get down in the subliminal depths" (SL, p. 116), these are not obscure poems (any more than life is obscure to those who approach it correctly).

> ...[Y]ou will have no trouble if you approach these poems as a child would, naively, with your whole being awake, your faculties loose and alert...listen to them. (OPC, p.37)

Far from intending to trade in obscurities Roethke set out in The Lost Son to write "a lively understandable poetry that a good many people can read with enjoyment without having their intelligence or sensibility insulted." (SL, p.114) There is something in Roethke that wants to be William Carlos Williams ("In a sense, it's your poem" he writes to "Bill," SL, p. 122). Roethke loves to condemn the ellipsis and ambiguity that were fashionable in the poetry of his time:

> It is hard to be both plain and direct and not appear a fool to contemporaries fed on allusions, sybilline coziness, hints and shadows. (SF, p. 176)

The target here, of course, is T.S. Eliot and "the conceptual boys" in general (SL, p. 111); and the kind of "sybilline coziness" he means is of the intellectual modernist sort and does not really refer to his own dysjunctive, associative, style ("The gnomic rather than the sententious" SF, p. 175). Nevertheless, the fact is that Roethke's opinions and practise are frequently at odds. (He writes "God is one of the biggest bores in English poetry" (SF, p. 172), but has much to say about God in his own poems). Especially in Open House, he seems to value "plainness" and "directness"--alligning himself with the English "Thirties" poets against Eliot ("[W]hatever I am I don't think I am confused or vague..." (SL, p. 12). But at the same time he is also a strong proponent of "associational thinking" (SF, p. 206) and "symbolic depth," and makes notes to himself on the point at which "plainness is no longer a virtue" (SF, p. 260):

> Literalness is the devil's weapon. (SF,p. 170)
> . . .
> The literal--that grave of the dull. (SF p. 260)

The charge that his poems are obscure disturbs Roethke but it does not surprise him--hence his exhortation that we read them "as a child would, naively," and that we "read

them aloud." However, most of us are conditioned to see and not to feel or hear. According to Richard Blessing, critics of literature have generally lost the ability to "become as little children for naivete is not what is required of us."[7] Perhaps a truly sensitive reader of Roethke would, as Pearce bids us, regress with him, and re-acquaint himself with his lost naivete. This approach has the advantage of seeming to carry Roethke's endorsement and, perhaps; of easing any embarassment at studying a writer who never disguises his contempt for "text-creeping" academics. Yet it is hard to imagine what the naive critic could possibly bring back to us from his regression. It is an unfortunate paradox: what we trade for the sensitivity to read Roethke is the ability to articulate him, and that loss might make this paper, for instance, impossible.

We should take a moment to think about what Roethke and others are advocating. The critics who have fared worst, says Blessing, have been those "who have tried to do line-by-line 'close readings' of [the Lost Son] poems; that is they have tried to illuminate the obscurities of the non sequitur, the nonsense, the oracular pronouncement, and cryptic command and question as each occurs, a step at a time."[8]

"Illuminating the obscurities of the non sequitur" is an intriguing phrase. The earnest exegete, "a step at a time," follows the non sequitur to where it does not lead.

He moves forward, attempting to displace darkness as he goes. The alternative way of escaping a labyrinth as we have noted already is that taken by the Lost Son, feeling his way back to the creative source. The worm, one of Roethke's favourite regressions is pure eyeless feeling, one who "learns by going where he has to go." (CP, p. 104) The sightlessness of the creature makes it a proper emblem of the spirit which, unable to move syllogistically forward,

> Falls back, a slug, a loose worm
> Ready for any crevice,
> An eyeless starer. (CP, p.181)

"Eyeless staring," one of those paradoxical modes of aesthesis, like "seeing through the ears" ("Infirmity") is akin to "thinking by feeling" ("What is there to know?"; CP, p. 104) or knowing by unknowing.

The worm's way is never straight but always crooked, labyrinthine, like the path into, and out of, Hell. Sometimes it is figured as a Dantean spiral, as in "Last Words": "O worm of duty! O spiral knowledge!" (CP, p.46) and "The Waking": "The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair." (CP, p. 104) The way out is down: to understand is to stand under. And in this catacthonic dig for light the worm is better equipped than the philosopher.

Talking "through" Roethke, as Pearce puts it, means learning all over again to talk.

> We do the world of these verses wrong if we translate it into a language appropriate to ours. Rather we must incorporate it, incorporate its style of apperception and knowing, into our own. Thus the way of exhaustion, the slipping-back so as to go forward, progress.[9]

I am making an effort to take Pearce's advice. And yet translation in the sense of moving an essential substance from one vehicle to another is just what the critic unavoidably does, whether probing "through" or circumambulating "about" the meaning-bearing text. What Pearce (and other critics who recommend reading "intuitively") really mean is that the "essential substance" which the critic wishes to expose as the answer to the riddle posed by the poem is, in Roethke's case, such that it cannot be transposed into an answer without ceasing to be itself, the "x" uniquely referred to in the words of the poem. It cannot therefore be grasped without losing its most essential quality, that of being avowedly ungraspable. Explaining Roethke is like switching on the light in order to get a good look at the darkness.

It is often supposed that a conundrum and its answer have a common referent: the answer simply translates the riddle into terms that require no further translation. There is more to it, however, in that riddles, as distinct from "ordinary" propositions, exist not only to be grasped, but also to be not-grasped by one or another of our prehensile modes of awareness. Thus, in Roethke's Praise to the End!:

> The poems seem to anticipate the effort to comprehend them, and to defy it; yet the thrust of defiance is itself a thrust toward the reader and on his behalf--so, paradoxically, a crucial factor in his mode of comprehension.[10]

The riddle represses what it represents: the answer abolishes concealment (or claims to, and this comes to the same thing), and adverts directly to the "repressented" thing. The advent of an answer terminates the Edenic order of multiple possibilities and installs a certifiable meaning at the center of the symbol. To avoid this fall from Vision (an upwards fall, from sentience, through perception and intuition toward cognition) Neal Bowers recommends that we regard the Praise to the End! poems as "koans, 'confusions of the intellect deliberately induced by paradoxical logic in order to evoke that dizziness which Zen Buddhists say opens the mind to a perception of higher consciousness.'"[11] Thus our written response to the problem text, defiantly "thrust toward the reader," should be, after the example that Bowers has set, to acknowledge its status as paradox and find another way of saying something like: Here once again, we find the poet boggling the rational faculty of his readership, preparing the ground for a mystical unknowing, after the fashion of Dionysius the Areopagite, St. John of the Cross and the Cloud of Unknowing.

But this is tangential to the specifics of the text and as a way of not-grasping Roethke it is scarcely better

than not reading him. And, while denouncing obtusely rational line exegesis, Bowers actually pursues his own via media, sometimes translating Roethke and sometimes merely enjoining us to appreciate his sonorous nonsensicality. There is always this doubleness in Roethke criticism, simply because it is the success of our reading which locates the floating boundary between the meaningful and the meaningless. "Pure" nonsense (the epitome of the kind Hummer classifies as "meaningless language, gibberish")[12] would be, naturally, quite featureless. One word would be as good as any other. But there is no pure nonsense in Roethke. At its least graspable the poetry does not issue as infantile gibberish or a dysphasic salad--though it may be a poetic representation of these. Being poetry it asks to be studied by that which studies poetry, literary criticism, in such a way that each word is assumed to be in its right place and that no other could stand in for it. Calling "pifflebob" nonsense classifies it well enough, but does not help to distinguish it from any other coinage, "mips," "bibble" or "hoo." It is the job of scholarship to expose the web of sense that is assumed to underly the opacity of the word's surface.

"Piffle": silly nonsense. "Bob": a weight on a plumb line. "I wish I was a pifflebob" may express the desire to sound out the depths of silly nonsense. Alternatively, we may read "bob" as "a float on a fishing line" and tie the phrase in with Roethke's abundant fishing imagery. Or we

may take it as a frozen verb, connoting the action of rising above piffle, or describing the condition of the conscious ego afloat on a tide of senselessness. The final interpretation will necessarily depend on many factors.

Notes to Chapter I

[1]Jay Parini, Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), pp. 35-6; Bowers, pp. 26-31.

[2]From a letter to Kenneth Burke published in Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 116.

[3]Jerome Mazzaro, "Theodore Roethke and the Failures of Language" in Heyen, p. 60.

[4]T. R. Hummer, "Roethke and Merwin: Two Voices and the Technique of Nonsense," Western Humanities Review 33: (1979), p. 275.

[5]Roy Harvey Pearce, "Theodore Roethke: The Power of Sympathy," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 180.

[6]William Meredith, "A Steady Stream of Correspondences: Long Journey out of the Self," in Stein, p. 41.

[7]Blessing, p. 83.

[8]Ibid., p. 144.

[9]Pearce, in Stein, p. 182.

[10]Ibid., p. 179.

[11]Bowers, p. 102.

[12]Hummer, p. 274.

II. The Woods

"Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation."
Wallace Stevens

"To each his own labyrinth." (SF, p. 217)

"It's dark in this wood soft mocker." (CP, p. 81) What wood is it dark in? Until we know we are as "in the dark" as the narrator. Finding out (in order "to know") means bringing a pertinent something to bear on the passage. The criterion of pertinence is that, when "brought to bear" on the line, that "something" will then seem to be interior to it, concealed by a veil of allusion which our scholarship freely transgresses. Between the "obscure passage" and the pertinent something there exists a state of relation which interpretation exposes to view: behind the passage a system of passageways that a reading discovers (brings to light) and escavates. The passage: a corridor between lucidities, a conduit for light.

"This" wood is specified and presumably may be looked for and located on a map of real or fictional times and places. Whether it is a figurative or a literal wood it

will have a discoverable referent (behind or interior to the words). Looking for this we can easily generate "sources," "meanings" or "influences" in every shade and degree of plausibility.

Looking in the usual places we find the usual clues. We may cut a channel from the poet's own life, as disclosed through his biography, to the word or symbol as it sits on the page. Thus, we carve a specific value for the word out of its lexical factotum, singling out the woods beside Hagedorn Road, on the grounds of Michigan State College, where Roethke suffered his first attack of a recurrent affective psychosis. This experience appears to have given Roethke a great deal to base imagery on; and it is probably not rash to propose that the wood where Roethke went mad is "behind" the opening lines of "Praise to the End." Roethke describes that occasion, when he "got in the woods and started a circular kind of dance," as "one of the deepest and [most] profound experiences I ever had."[1] That gives us something to remember, an association to make, every time we read "Praise to the End!" We pencil it into the Collected Poems, where it sits in the margins, the mysteriously displaced center of the text.

So: there was once in the real world a wood where Theodore Roethke, as Allan Seager records, "had a mystical experience with a tree and learned the secret of Nijinsky."[2] We can stop there, as Seager does when he reveals that the Far Field was actually a pasture near his

father's property.[3] If Roethke himself is any authority we should understand that the "circular dancing" of "Four for Sir John Davies" at least partly "refers to" Roethke's strange experience outside Lansing Michigan; and that the same event is interior to the third poem of the "Meditations of an Old Woman" sequence, "Her Becoming," where Roethke "just sort of put it in."[4] Alert to the possibility that Roethke's life is "in there" we might then, at the expense of our text's autonomy, find a little of the wood off Hagedorn Road in any of the fifty or sixty references to woods and wooded places in the Collected Poems. It comes to mind in "Unfold! Unfold!," where the speaker "danced in the simple wood" (CP, p. 86); and again in "In Late Summer" where he "walked the woods alone" (CP, p. 144); and in "In a Dark Time":

> I hear my echo in the echoing wood
> A lord of Nature weeping to a tree. (CP, p.231)

In this way we find inside the poem what our research discovers outside of it. A meaning becomes perceivable within the poem--or else not, depending on our criteria for distinguishing between the pertinent and impertinent extra-textual detail. We begin to find our way in the woods.

In this context "finding our way" is more than a metaphor. It is not a logical error that makes me conflate the reader's lostness with the narrator's, nor am I

savouring a rhetorical effect. I believe that the exchange of roles between reader and poet constitutes an important theme of Roethke's. In this particular instance, the "lostness" of the Lost Son partly refers to his search for a verbal formula adequate to describe the confusing circumstances of his subjective reality. The conveyance of a "meaning" outward to a receptive reader is equivalent to a liberation of the Lost Son from his chronic predicament.

It is a commonplace of Roethke criticism that the poet's journey is a journey out of himself and toward the Other.[5] What is not so often noted is that the Other is embodied not only in garden slugs and God but also in the reader, the presumptive reader on whose fore-imagined reading the poet relies for the "salvation" of his meanings. In other words the narrating self is not the only protagonist in the poem. The other is the Other, toiling back down the paths of association toward a state of identity with the speaker. This is reflected in the description Stanley Kunitz gives of Roethke as the "Poet of Transformation":

> We must remember that it is the poet himself who plays all the parts. He is Proteus and all the forms of Proteus--flower, fish, reptile, amphibian, bird, dog, etc.--and he is the adversary who hides among the rocks to pounce on Proteus, never letting go his hold, while the old man of the sea writhes through his many shapes.[6]

When the part of Proteus is played by the natural world the

"adversary" is the poet struggling to capture a piece of it in words; when the poet himself is Proteus we are his Aristaeus. I will return to this theme in Chapter 7 when I discuss the Love Poems.

Having come this far we may look further (or further afield). We will probably decide that in construing the lines of "Praise to the End!" it helps to know something about the "dark wood" in the first stanza of the Divine Comedy (although Jenijoy Labelle finds five pages worth or Wordsworth behind and within that poem, and never mentions Dante). Calling attention to the non-fortuitous relation, we expose a subterranean link between the first line of Roethke's poem and the second of Dante's. The nature of this link is still uncertain. The connection may be causal and direct: this seems likely. Roethke certainly read The Divine Comedy, and, except for Blake, Dante is the only poet mentioned by name more than once in the Collected Poems. Or it may be that what runs between Roethke and Dante is a common body of archetypal matter such as informs folktales of the "Hansel and Gretel" type. Or perhaps the route connecting the two passages is even more circuitous and winds down through the whole forest of literary forests, from the shady groves of Parnassus, through the "wandering wood" in which the Red Cross Knight loses himself, the Cad Goddeu, Jonson's The Forest (and Underwood and Timber), through all volumes of The Golden Bough, Eliot's Sacred Wood, and so endlessly backwards and

on until we find ourselves like the Lost Son hacking at the "black hairy" roots of the poem, trying to impose some kind of order.

There is a prodigious heritage to draw from. What parts of it pertain? In her study of Roethke, aptly entitled The Echoing Wood, Jenijoy LaBelle refers continually to the Literary Tradition. Her main concern is to demonstrate that Roethke took things from that tradition and put them into his poems. The critic's task, as she sees it, is to find out where these things originally came from, and wonder aloud about how they got into Roethke's verse (Deliberate imitation? Quotation? Subconscious recycling? Out-and-out thievery?). She is very exacting:

> It is not enough then just to place one of Roethke's poems in a tradition; we must find the particular author and even the particular work that the modern poet is responding to.[7]

The working assumption is that a full-scale inquiry into the causes and origin of the text will eventually yield the text's Real Meaning. For instance:

> Once the special context is discovered our entire conception of "No Bird" is irrevocably altered. Indeed we realize the poem's true subject.[8]

In fact, LaBelle makes a rather convincing case for a special link running between the forest in "No Bird" and another in a poem by Emily Dickinson, "Our journey had advanced." The similarities between "No Bird" and "Our

journey had advanced" are too strong to be coincidental. Both poems contain the phrase "The forests of the dead." On the strength of this and another, less compelling, "echo," LaBelle concludes that "No Bird" is an epitaph to Emily Dickinson.[9] The poem's true subject comes to light: "No Bird" is about the dead poet whose poem inspired the style and content of "No Bird":

> Slow swings the breeze above her head,
> The grasses whitely stir;
> But in the forest of the dead
> No bird awakens her. (CP, p. 16)

LaBelle's critical practise is as straightforward as Newtonian mechanics. The secret meaning of the poem is the literary event which precipitated its writing. All poetry is assumed to have grown out of other poetry. Roethke's collected verse, like a stand of swamp willows, has especially conspicuous roots, which is supposed to explain why they are such a pressing concern.

"Influence" has always been an issue with Roethke's commentators. Early reviewers[10] liked to point out that Roethke sometimes impersonated Yeats. Later writers have concentrated on the imagery, phraseology and techniques Roethke learned from Traherne, Davies, Wordworth, Whitman, and Eliot. This is partly because Roethke freely admitted to being influenced, writing a whole essay entitled "How to Write Like Somebody Else." As Anthony Libby said, "As Roethke said 'Eliot said 'Bad poets

imitate, good poets steal.'"[11] But the hackneyed controversy over how influenced Roethke was misses the mark. There is a crossover from the past. However its medium is not influence but confluence, a mingling of dead and living personalities in the extra-temporal realm of the poem. This at any rate is the opinion of Roethke himself. When a poet adopts somebody else's "voice" it is not any the less his own.

> The language itself is a compound, or, to change the figure, a bitch. The paradoxical thing...is that the most original poets are the most imitative. (OPC, p. 69)

When Roethke "takes this cadence from a man named Yeats" he also, as is too seldom noted, "gives it back again." That, of course, is all part of the central Roethkean principle that the true self is approached in the escape from the self, and that the dead "can come to our aid in a quest for identity."(OPC, p. 24) One consequence of seeing things this way is that "echoes" need not be treated as allusions, quotations, or examples of influence--as, in effect, transplants--but may be regarded as fluctuating values in a literary experiment in which the poetic "I" is also the "medium, the conveyor of the material of the not-I."[12]

Influence, and the problem of where the poetic utterance originates, preoccupies Roethke. How does something arise out of nothing? In "The Lost Son" he asks

some basic questions (or someone asks them: the protagonist of that poem is supposed to be "not 'I' personally but...all haunted and harried men" (OPC, p. 10); and besides, the author says of the poems in that sequence that "they are not...mine at all," that he is merely their "instrument"). (OPC, p.37)

> Who stunned the dirt into noise? (CP, p.52)

The query admits of many possible paraphrases, one of which is: "How does the poem come to be exactly what it is, and why is it not otherwise?" Out of what "nothings" do "all beginnings come"? (CP, p. 182)

> "Where do the roots go?" (CP, p. 52)

The speaker is wondering about his own ancestry but also the phylogeny of the utterance. (It was Burke who first raised that connection between roots and the "'pre-verse' way of life" that comes to flower in poetry).[13] In that same section of "The Lost Son" he supplies some non-answers to the old questions, identifying him at once as the "mole" who knows where the roots go, and the questioner who does not. (In "Unfold! Unfold!" it is a mouse who teaches the "happy asker" to "dance in the simple wood." That wood-dance is the ritual enactment of, among a great many

other things, the perpetual give-and-take of interrogatory consciousness). As we've seen already, Roethke plays all parts in the ongoing drama of creation. He is Job and the whirlwind at once, advancing toward and receding from his point of origin, his Creator. Where do the roots go? He is answered from the past.

> My roots spread out to the waters. (Job 29:19)

In due course he is also the pit from which that section of "The Lost Son" takes it name (echoing Blake's "Book of Thel"). In the notebooks Roethke jots: "The crater of hell: the navel" and "teetering on the brink of the navel." (SF, p. 151-2)

The next section of "The Lost Son," "The Gibber," provides an easy way back to the woods and to the problem with which we began.

> At the wood's mouth,
> By the cave's door
> I listened to something
> I had heard before. (CP, p. 52)

In the Inferno Dante's Dante has strayed from the right path and "finds" himself lost (mi ritrovai) in a shadowy wood. For him, as for Roethke, the way out is down, and he undertakes his famous spiral journey through hell.

All previous heroic forays into the depths supply a

context for the descent. The dead poet Virgil, whose Aeneid provides one of Dante's models for the descent through Hell--and also for the theme of the shadowy forest (cf. Aen. VI 179, 185-88)-- is himself lost in an inferno of Dante's making. The first stage of Dante's trip outside the Temporal takes him into Hell, the literal repository of his tradition. Among his dead predecessors (either beyond or awaiting redemption) Dante begins to learn. It is a longstanding poetic truth that the dead know something we don't. The dead show us the way ("In their harsh thickets/The dead thrash/ They help" CP, p. 85). A living man blocks the light and casts a shadow; but there is something luminous about a ghost. Dante addressing his mentor:

> O glory and light of other poets, may the long study and the great love that have made me search your volume avail me!

That we read Virgil in order to understand Dante and Dante in order to understand Roethke points the way to an infinite regress. Yet the less generously a text radiates meaning the more it appears to demand this treatment. The paradox has clear parallels in Roethke's thought, for instance in the idea of progress through regression. What did "No Bird" mean before LaBelle interpreted it to us? On the one hand the question is not unlike: What does a poem mean before we have read it? We may reasonably decide that there are "levels" of understanding and these vary in

proportion as the "depth" of the analysis. But there is always the question of where a deep delving is appropriate, and the attendant problem of whether some texts mean quantitatively more or less than others. Randall Jarrell says:

> Certainly the long poems in Praise to the End! are partially or superficially successful, but do they mean enough?[14]

Jarrell, answering that they do not quite, is admittedly making an evaluative critique. But the remark has its corollary in the purely descriptive critic's decision to interpret only as deeply as "plausibility" allows (lest he begin to resemble professor Dumpty expounding "Jabberwocky"). The rules for telling nonsense from non-nonsense are written into the premise of a descriptive criticism. And even the most flexible critical practise will have more to say about "Hinx Minx" than an empty page.

Still, advocates of extreme critical pluralism take the position that the empty page is as full as our ideologically-inscribed interpretation fills it. Thus we are never really "in" the text, we are always at its perimeters, in the con-text, looking for the ingredient that will flesh out the abbreviated allusion, complete the fragmentary reference. And the text, before an act of reading has occurred, is a featureless surface, continuous with its background. But this view of course ignores the

paradoxical truth that our delving in the first place presupposes a Pompei which was somehow "there" before anyone differentiated stone from ash. The doomed search for a referent at the center of the text is strangely reminiscent of the medieval problem of finding God "in" the things of material nature or, as The Cloud of Unknowing presents the case, in the words of a language that is never adequate to designate Him. It is a dilemma that may yet be found insoluble. But it is precisely the kind of puzzle for which Roethke seeks (and sometimes claims to find) a spiritual resolution, positioning himself at the crux of history when regress becomes progress, just as Dante's spiral descent into the darkness suddenly becomes, at Satan's groin, an upward climb toward the light.

Notes to Chapter II

[1]Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 90.

[2]p. 90.

[3]p. 22.

[4]Bowers, p. 8.

[5]cf. Ralph J. Mills, Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 8; Anthony Libby, "Roethke, Water Father," American Literature 44 (1974), 268; James McMichael, "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," in Profiles of Theodore Roethke, ed. William Heyen (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Corp. 1971), p. 78.

[6]Stanley Kunitz, "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," in Heyen, p. 70.

[7]Jenijoy LaBelle, The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 15.

[8]p. 15.

[9]As Profesor Ronald Reichertz has pointed out to me, the poem actually has a fairly long lineage which includes Emerson and Keats.

[10]W. D. Snodgrass, "That Anguish of Concreteness:

Theodore Roethke's Career," in Stein, p. 82.

[11]Libby, p. 268.

[12]Stephen Spender,"The Objective Ego," in Stein, p. 9.

[13]Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," in Heyen, p. 29.

[14]Randall Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1969), p. 327.

III. Terminus

> The reality-principle is an unreal boundary drawn between real and imaginary. Norman O. Brown, Love's Body
>
> The mind is like a bat. Precisely. Save
> That in the happiest intellection
> A graceful error may correct the cave. Richard Wilbur, "Mind"

Included in Roethke's second volume is the little poem "Moss-Gathering." Here is "Moss-Gathering":

> To loosen with all ten fingers held wide and limber
> And lift up a patch, dark green, the kind for lining cemetery baskets,
> Thick and cushiony, like an old-fashioned doormat,
> The crumbling small hollow sticks on the underside mixed with roots,
> And wintergreen berries and leaves still stuck to the top,--
> That was moss-gathering. (CP, p. 38)

That is an action that nobody who is not a florist's son will have experienced first-hand. Nevertheless it stands on its own, the action referred to as itself and not advertising any secret depths. But to the adult referring to the boy who does it, moss-gathering has special meaning:

> But something always went out of me when I

dug loose those carpets
Of green, or plunged to my elbows in the
spongy yellowish moss of the marshes:
And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging
back over the logging road
As if I had broken the natural order of things
in that swampland;
Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast
importance,
By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
As if I had committed, against the whole
scheme of life, a desecration. (CP, p. 38)

The "special meaning" of "Moss-Gathering" is only partly revealed through the feelings the child has doing it. The poem itself is the act of disclosure, a peeling away of the moss that has gathered on the poet's childhood self. But what is disclosed?

Most critics believe that the poem somehow "contains" the theme of masturbation. Karl Malkoff says:

> The 'gathering' itself takes place in a landscape with clearly sexual overtones; it is followed by a feeling of guilt at the onanistic action.[1]

For Malkoff the "overtones" of the landscape and the "feeling" of the boy in it refer obliquely to the secret meaning of the act of moss gathering, which is masturbation.

For Jenijoy LaBelle the poem yields something else, namely evidence that Roethke has read Wordsworth's "Nutting." She systematically compares the two poems, finds many "similar themes, structures and images" linking them, and concludes:

(1) that the bower in Wordsworth's poem is "a metaphor for

the heroic kind of poetry associated with authors like Ariosto and Spenser" (she draws this conclusion on the basis of specific passages especially pertaining to "bowers" in Spenser and Ariosto);

(2) that "[j]ust as Wordworth's poem makes use of the tradition of certain Renaissance Romances, Roethke in 'Moss-Gathering' turns back to 'Nutting' to sharpen and substantiate his sense of these patterns";[2]

(3) that there <u>is</u> a sexual element to the desecration of "Moss-Gathering," as Malkoff pointed out, but "the basic patterns of Roethke's poem do not spring from a disturbed subconscious but rather from the conscious exploitation of his poetic heritage";[3]

(4) the destructive action for which the poet feels guilty is symbolic of the maturational metamorphosis of the child's "willful consciousness" into the "sympathetic imagination": "The child destroys his self-centredness along with the bower."[4]

This last theme would not exist for us had it not been for the similarity of Roethke's and Wordsworth's poems. Thus, by exposing Roethke's <u>deliberate</u> allusions (LaBelle is usually careful to turn Roethke's "echoes" to his advantage by suggesting that they are consciously made), LaBelle exposes the secret theme that is behind the poem. So, in plundering the moss-marshes of Saginaw Roethke is also ripping up the Allegorical Bower of Rennaisance Romance.[5] We could theoretically trace the scent

further by finding the source of that renaissance motif. But that is a task that has no end, and we might after all discover that the "true" meaning of the poem is tangled up in the berry-patches and nut-groves out of which our cave-dwelling hunter/gatherer forebears exacted their livelihood. (And in fact there is an anthropological perspective from which the desecration of the moss-marsh takes on the character of a violated tribal taboo.)

Most critics take a more moderate position than either LaBelle or Malkoff and claim to see in the poem little more than the very feeling of remorse the poet plainly describes. Seen this way, "Moss-Gathering" is simply a poem about an ecologically-minded young fellow whose heart is attuned to the "natural order" and who feels "mean" at disturbing that rhythm, as if he had "committed against the whole scheme of life a desecration" (CP, p. 38). So for Richard Blessing the spectre of onanism raised in the expression "pulling off flesh" is in the nature of a poetic device serving to further the poet's real goal of "celebrating the energy that greens the earth."[6] To Neal Bowers the sexual resonance is present, but it is only one of many kinds of resonances.[7] In Rosemary Sullivan's book the poem is simply another example of the poet going down under the ground, investigating his own vegetal roots.[8]

So what is in or behind the poem? The historical moss patches of Saginaw, the real ten-fingered hands of the boy

who became the late Nature poet Theodore Roethke? The implication is that we have only to find the right map to get at the treasures buried in the poem. But for the scholar the act of digging is already the act of turning up something and whether that is a significant something is sometimes very hard to determine. Jenijoy LaBelle, who perceives with such appalling clarity the entire lineage of "Moss-Gathering," makes, as we have seen, a rather convincing case for the theory that "No Bird" is actually Emily Dickinson's epitaph. Hers is a potentially useful method, but one that when applied too mechanically can produce blatantly false misreadings of the prose-sense of certain poems. The poem "Long Live the Weeds" directly borrows its title from Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Inversnaid." It is a "conscious" allusion (Roethke puts it in quotes and affixes Hopkins' name to it). But LaBelle is so eager to make Roethke the mouthpiece of his dead precursor that she makes Roethke agree with Hopkins' "position" without qualifications. Her assumption is that Hopkins/Roethke is celebrating "roughness" and "wildness" for their own sakes and that he is advocating "a diction that, like the weeds and what they represent in the poem, is unrestricted...The unrestrained approach to language that Roethke commends here is exactly that most thoroughly exemplified in the poetry of Hopkins."[9] In fact, it is quite clear that Roethke values the "rough and the wild" for the challenge

they present to his own efforts at cultivation, not for their weediness. The weeds give a border to the garden. Because they force the "Son of Man to toil" they represent a kind of spine-stiffening impediment to the civilizing impulse; an enemy to contend with: "With these I match my little wit/ And earn the right to stand or sit." (CP, p. 17) The weeds "shape the creature that is 'I'" by giving order to its boundaries in chaos. And there is certainly nothing in the diction of the poem that in any way puts us in mind of Hopkins. The language here is as "strict and pure" as in any of the poems of Open House.

So, what evidence is too slender? We grant that "Moss-Gathering" is about death and masturbation too. That it "celebrates life" is already obvious. We can go further in any direction. The title is "Moss-Gathering," which puts us in mind of the old saying "A rolling stone gathers no moss." At this point we might proceed by discussing Roethke's attitudes toward proverbial utterance. In his later poetry he is addicted to the Blakean anti-proverb, though he appears to consider platitudinous readymades of the stitch-in-time kind the very antithesis of poetry. His own aphorisms and the bulk of his lines are "pithy" in one way or another and frequently play on the rhythms of tradition. Frequently (in "O, Thou Opening, O" for example) he seems to regard the proverb as a form which goes with the Father, the ancestor, the dead mouth of

society bequeathing its legacy of stale wisdom on the young. (Form itself is fatherly as Roethke observes in his notebooks: "Form is a father. When I looked for form/ I found a leaf, and on the leaf a worm." SF, p.98) If that theme is pertinent then it fits in somehow with the theme of death in the poem. The moss is used to line cemetery baskets.

If a rolling stone gathers no moss, a standing stone does gather some. Does the fact that the child "gathers moss" make him a standing stone? Or what do we make of the fact that the "living planet" has managed to gather sufficient moss on it to line a cemetery basket? We may think in terms of stasis, which Roethke often equates, not unnaturally, with death. Green growing things sprout from dead standing things: it is an old poeticism with many metaphorical values having to do with the birth and death of ideas and the transmission of cultural properties, as well as the plain, observable facts of nature. We may introduce as well the archetype of the dying vegetation god. Could the moss-plucking be a ritualistic act of violence against the Wood King? It is indeed an act of violence against a pre-existing order ("old and of vast importance"). The guilt that the young Roethke feels then becomes Oedipal, the guilt of the child at having killed his father and usurped the kingship. As so many critics have noted, the poem documents a maturational phase, namely the moment of the child's release from egocentricity. This

moment is marked by the child's accession to a state of power, adulthood, ego, through the final act of self-differentiation (slaying of the introjected parent). The guilt the child feels is the usual Oedipal guilt.

In the association of that guilt with a sin against the "natural order" we may see, if we choose, a twentieth century revival of the mysteries of the cults of Dionysos. Ovid's Fasti cites a case of plant desecration that Jenijoy LaBelle seems to have passed over. Ovid is accounting for the origin of the custom of sacrificing pigs and cows. The animal is said (with tongue in cheek) to have committed a sin not unlike Roethke's, and for this it must die:

> The first to joy in the blood of greedy sow was Ceres who avenged her crops by the just slaughter of the guilty beast; for she learned that the moldy grain in early spring had been routed up in the loose furrows by the snout of bristly swine. The swine was punished: terrified by her example, billy-goat, you should have spared the vine-shoot. Watching a he-goat nibbling at a vine somebody vented his ill-humour in these words: 'Pray gnaw the vine, thou he-goat, yet when thou standest at the altar, the vine will yield something that can be sprinkled on thy horns.' The words came true. Thy foe, Bacchus, is given up to thee for punishment and wine out-poured is sprinkled on his horns![10]

There is special irony in the fact that it is the goat, a frequent embodiment of the wine-god, who is the perpetrator of the crime against the vine. Dionysos is his own victim and persecutor. The ritual embodies the myth of social continuity. Roethke, as the Lost Son, feels guilt for his usurpation of divine privilege (the stripping bare of the

tree of knowledge of good and evil, the fruit tree vandalism to which St. Augustine confesses). The sin against the father is, in one sense, masturbation. Malkoff describes the masturbation scene of "Praise to the End!" in the following terms:

> The source of the hands' guilt is then the notion that masturbation is a sin against the father.[11]

Roethke, in his own gloss to the same passage make these rather cryptic remarks:

> 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. (OPC, p. 40)

If this passage has any relevance to "Moss-Gathering" it is that it may help to bridge the gap between the "death" theme, the "onanism" theme and the "patricide" theme in that poem. Guilt, as Freud describes it, is "the expression of the conflict of ambivalence, the eternal struggle between Eros and the destructive or death instinct."[12] The infantile answer to the conflict is narcissistic, auto-erotic; but the advent of the castration complex "shatters...the infantile solution to the problem of death."[13] With guilt comes the necessary introjection of the Father (eating of the host, the flesh of the

sacrificed animal; as Ovid points out, the host is to the hostes--"conquering army"--as the victim is to its victor). Introjection of the father implies completion of the Oedipal project which is, in essence, "the quest to conquer death by becoming father of oneself."[14] The peculiar state of identity between goat, vine and sacrificing supplicant (the child, the father and the author of the poem) represents redemption, conquest of death in the Dionysian mystery, the symbolical attainment of life everlasting. The fathering of a poem (from the sublimation of Oedipal anxieties) resolves the dilemma of death, restores generational continuity, reaffirms the natural order. (The failure ~~to acknowledge~~ his own guilt would be tantamount to a prolonging of infantile narcissism into adulthood. I will discuss this in terms of "materialism" in the chapter entitled "Doubleness").

If we were not accountable to common sense ("I pray for the death of common sense," SF, p. 216) we could go on like this forever, putting associational details end to end until they circled the world twice. The perfect program of associative thought pursues a thing through all of its shapes and incarnations until it finally become its own opposite. I have already quoted Jerome Mazzaro explaining why, in spite of Roethke's "Open Letter," the "Praise to the End!" poems are "unintelligible":

> Symbols of the unconscious have always bipolar potential at times meaning a thing and its

opposite coevally.[15]

There is always at some pre-logical level a line of thought that will permit a thing to both be and not be. Literary criticism and philosophy usually disallow such procedures, invoking a floating boundary of "plausibility" to supply the termini of thinking whenever its conclusions begin to seem far-fetched. In a poet such as Roethke, whose method of composition is often purely associative, it is not easy to locate (de-termine) that boundary and know from how far off we may fetch. Systematic study often presumes that there is a system latent in the object of study. One slightly outdated model of scientific procedure has the scientist "discovering" the laws and principles of an ordered universe: the scientist as mimetic perfectionist. But a pantographic extension of a poem constructed from associational principles will begin to resemble the poem itself (or the world the poem "represents") in being only half intelligible. There is something like an uncertainty principle at work. A completely faithful analysis would have to reproduce the pre-analytical (chaotic) state of the poem before it has been fully "grasped."

It might be argued that the pure uncritical apprehension of an English countryside resembles not at all the "comprehension" of that scene in, say, meteorological or botanical terms. But there are areas, especially in realms of scholarship like Art History or English

Literature, where what the student is attempting to comprehend is precisely the apprehension of such a countryside by the likes of John Constable or Oliver Goldsmith. There exists the equivalent of a meteorology for landscape art--stylistic analysis, for example, or psychobiography, or any approach that exposes the systems embedded in the content of a text or painting. But no system is possible for the immediate apprehension of the work. That immediacy, by definition, eludes mediation; it remains disordered, unknowable, inaccessible to the cognitive faculties. A scholarship that depicted it fully would have drawn an effective map of the universe down to its last molecule and First Cause. To know <u>that</u> way, theologians will agree, is to know as the angels know.

Notes to Chapter III

[1]Malkoff, p. 53.

[2]LaBelle, p. 26.

[3]p. 28.

[4]p. 29.

[5]p. 38. J. D. McClatchy has it both ways, seeing the guilt as "masturbatory" and the poems as closely linked to Wordsworth's "Nutting." See "Sweating Light from a Stone: Identifying Theodore Roethke," Modern Poetry Studies, 3, no. 1 (972), p. 7; p. 23.

[6]Blessing, p. 78.

[7]Bowers, p. 87.

[8]Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976.

[9]LaBelle, p. 18.

[10]Publius Ovidius Naso, Fasti, trans. Sir J. G. Frazer (London: W. Heinemann, 1931), ll. 349-359.

[11]Malkoff, p. 78.

[12]Civilization and its Discontents, quoted in Norman O. Brown, Life against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 120.

[13]p. 120

[14]p. 120

[15]Jerome Mazzaro, in Heyen, p. 60.

IV. Doubleness

The Door is Open; I Must Say
I Rather Fancy it That Way!
Gelett Burgess, The Purple Cow

The cage is open: you may go. (SF, p. 189)

"Poetry: a sense of the doubleness in life" (CP, p. 120): a passing thought from the notebooks, that remark can be taken in more than one way. There is little context for it apart from what David Wagoner gives it in Straw for the Fire. It may be that Roethke's poet, as so many philosophers have said, is a liar, but that his duplicity merely tells the truth about Nature: that her truths are multiple, contradictory. Uni-Directionality in thought is not only dull, it is imprecise: "All knowledge lives in paradox." (SF, p. 225)

Or Roethke might be referring to any number of specific "doublenesses": the doubleness of the symbolic order, for instance. Philosophy traditionally strives for transparency of language, trying to suppress those features of language which call attention to language itself. Poetry however has never hoped to wipe the spots from the mirror it holds up to "Nature," and happily embraces a simultaneous awareness of that which represents and that

which is represented (the controversial principle of post-Saussurean linguistics, that the signified need not be defined as having a different ontological status than the signifier is, for obvious reasons, far less problematical for the poetic than for the philosophical mode, simply because poetry accepts its own nature as objective artifact).

The title of "Double Feature," a short poem from The Lost Son, plays on this sort of doubleness. The poem begins at the end of a movie, at the very moment when the fictive is replaced by the real: "With Buck still tied to the log, on comes the light." (CP, p. 45) As the screen goes dark the lights of the theatre come on. For a short while the audience, including the poet, are suspended in transit between states, feeling vague and distracted:

> I dawdle with groups near the rickety
> popcorn stand;
> Dally at shop windows, still reluctant to go;
> I teeter, heels hooked on the curb, scrape a toe;
> Or send off a car with vague lifts of a
> hand. (CP, p. 45)

In due course the poet turns his back on the cinematic fantasia and directs his attention to the world he has re-entered. This move is externalized in the poet's progress from the inside to the outside, up the aisles, away from the popcorn stand in the lobby, and out of the theatre. The inside of the theatre is a region of human artifice. The sordidity of the "stale perfume" and the

"velvety chains" in the first stanza derives from their man-madeness. The same is true of the images the movie provides. In a way, the triviality of the movie-going experience is the triviality of narcissistic self-contemplation, as contrasted with the confrontation of an objective otherness that occurs in the final stanza of the poem:

> A wave of Time hangs motionless on
> this particular shore.
> I notice a tree, arsenical grey in the light,
> or the slow
> Wheel of the stars, the Great Bear glittering
> colder than snow
> And remember there was something else I
> was hoping for. (CP, p. 45)

The motion from an enclosed interior toward an uncircumscribed "elsewhere" extrinsic to all that is human is one of Roethke's main themes. The phrases "something else" and "somewhere else" recur in important places throughout the Collected Poems. The phrase is associated with the liberation of the spirit from its ordinary circumstances: "Certainly, flesh, I hear you perfectly. But this time and place are for something else." (SP, p. 187) "God's somewhere else," says the child narrator of "Where Knock is Open Wide," invoking the ongoing quest to find God and be given "a near" by Him. Merely asking is one way of approaching "elsehood." One stanza later, in the evening of a life long in passing, the speaker's older self comments:

> I'm somebody else now.
> Don't tell my hands.
> Have I come to always? Not yet. (CP, p. 70)

Any change prefigures the ultimate change. But the speaker is not yet in that promised realm "where knock is open wide" (the paradise of childhood lost and regained). In this world there are doors that no knocking will open:

> Maybe God has a house.
> But not here. (CP, p. 70)

A house (any house) is the "where" to which God is "else," as in this much-quoted passage from "I Cry, Love! Love!":

> Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!
> The hedgewren's song says something else. (CP, p. 88)

Here Reason is metaphorically identified with human constructions or enclosures. The "something else" which the hedgewren's song says is simply what lies outside the boundaries that a civilization draws for itself against impersonal Nature.

Reason, as a faculty which encloses psychic space, belongs to a very large family of phenomena that, in Roethke's poetics of space may be called "integumental." We include in this family all images of containment or nurture, including: houses, husks, skins, shells, pods, wombs, prisons, and the Plato's cave of the movie-theatre from whose spiritual confines the poet barely extricates

himself. The doubleness here and in "Double Feature" pertains to the position of a man in a landscape or of a human habitation against the elements, or of a subject at large in a world of objects. The impulse in both poems is away from the crass, familiar taste of one's self and toward the joyous release of encounter with an Otherness.

In Roethke's mind, the salvation of the self rests somehow in this very flight from selfhood:

> It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being--and in some instances, even an inanimate thing--brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances a feeling of the oneness of the universe...both [feelings] can be induced. The first simply by intensity in the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you--...If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee. (OPC, p. 25)

What is at stake is the individual man whose selfhood is subsumed by manmade things, "junk, ugly objects endlessly repeated in an economy dedicated to waste." (OPC, p. 19) The poem "Dolor," says Roethke, describes "one of the modern hells: the institution that overwhelms the individual man." (OPC, p. 20) That poem achieves its effect by personification: the poet refers to "the inexorable sadness of pencils," the "dolor of pad and paperweight," the "misery of manilla folders," the "pathos of basin and pitcher." All human qualities have been

usurped by artificial things. The pencils are "sad" not "sad-looking"; the place itself is desolate. Under different circumstances this personification might have become "animism," a positive enlargement of the same principle. The "externals" would come to life and seem to breathe or sing, as so many dead things do in Roethke's verse. But instead these objects invade the spirit and suffocate it. (The animism/personification contrariety brings to mind Kenneth Burke's attempt to distinguish "personification" from "personalization" in Roethke.[1] It is an imperfect equivalence however). Man is threatened with extinction in the form of a creeping morbidity, as the objective/external impinges on the pyschic/internal. Thinghood encroaches on Selfhood, as in the passage from "Old Lady's Winter Words" where the narrator's spirit dessicates under the dry wind of external reality sifting through the "windows" of her senses:

> The shadows are empty, the sliding externals.
> The wind wanders around the house...
> 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...
> I fall, more and more,
> Into my own silences,
> In the cold air,
> The spirit
> Hardens. (CP, p. 100)

Externality gradually displaces and supplants the moribund soul, as calcium does organic tissue in the creation of a fossil. But we cannot merely equate this externality with

the world of inanimate objects. To Roethke, as we have already seen, there is a great redemptive power in the true intercourse between a soul and its precincts. The real evil resides in the distinction between the man-made and the natural thing. It is man who describes boundaries between states and conditions, most importantly, the boundary between himself and his inanimate Other. The artifactual thing paradoxically inhibits our grasp of that Other by allowing us to see in the object an image of ourselves--as when we look up and see at once the stars and our own explanation for, or fictionalization of, the stars. Animism and animated cartoon are kindred but opposed modes of perception. In a sense the doubleness of vision in "Double Feature" refers to the ironic fact that the poem (which expresses hope for a "something else" that lies beyond the last frontier of the merely human--beyond, for instance, the screen on which our delusory notions are projected) is itself a manufactured thing.

The obstacle, one might say, is the screen itself--the membrane, the closed door, the mediations of experience. These correspond exactly to what Willim Blake called "the doors of perception." In Blake's prophetic books the evil of the human condition originates not in the fact of our material nature but in the sundering of the natural from the spiritual by the forces of Analytic Reason, the eponym of which is often the figure Urizen. Fortunately the imagination can help to unlock the "ratio of the five

senses."

Roethke too describes states in which the doors come open, with or without knocking. "Dying inward" is an abiding theme of the "Meditations of an Old Woman" where "...the rind, often, hates the life within." (CP, p. 151) The narrator asks: "What is it to be a woman?/To be contained, to be a vessel/ To prefer a window to a door?" (CP, p. 163) The kind of woman who prefers a window she can look out of to a door she can walk through, and who passively watches "with the fixed eyes of a spaniel" and does not interact with her surroundings has already surrendered to thinginess and has become a kind of automaton, a narcissist:

> 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 into metal,
> Match-makers, arrangers of picnics--
> What do their lives mean [?] (CP, p. 163)

But for such as the narrator of the sequence there are moments of transcendence. In "Her Becoming" the Old Woman looks for the meaning in material things and at first does not find it:

> Is there wisdom in objects? Few objects praise
> the Lord.
> The bulks cannot hide us, or the bleak sheds of
> our desolation,

> I know the cold fleshless kiss of contraries,
> The nerveless constriction of surfaces[.] (CP, p. 160)

Roethke rephrases the old question "Where shall wisdom be found" (Job 28:12 and "Words for the Wind," CP, p. 120). In this quest, the "bleak sheds" are another form of the house of the proverbs of the Bible: "Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars" (Prov.9:1); and "Wisdom builds her house but Folly with her own hands tears it down" (Prov. 14:1). This sends us to the final section of "Unfold! Unfold!" where madness and folly tear down some of the boundaries between things:

> A house for wisdom; a field for revelation
> Speak to the stones and the stars answer
> At first the visible obscures
> Go where light is. (CP, p. 86)

In that poem the image of a house is coupled with that of a field, to emphasize the important distinction between modes of knowing. The "house for wisdom" may be taken as standing for the Proverb, a form through which the ancestral dead speak to the living ("What a whelm of proverbs Mr. Pinch" CP, p. 85) Roethke seems to enjoy poking fun at this form: "Dazzle me, dizzy aphorist./Fling me a precept." (CP, p. 93) Occasionally in the "Praise to the End!" sequence he will intercept proverbs with bursts of nonsense:

> Who reads in bed
> --Fornicates on the stove.

An old dog
--Should sleep on his paws. (CP, p. 95)

It is clear that inherited learning is "integumental" in the same sense as deductive reasoning is. It is wisdom's house.

The "field for revelation" gives us Roethke's image of another way of understanding, the way of intuition, the way of the mystic (to be contrasted with "that hutch for grubby schoolboys"). The field signifies a non-prehensile way of knowing. It does not enclose, contain, or objectify. As locus for the advent of understanding, a field is very different from a house. It is indistinctly bounded and therefore does not "centre" the object of understanding within itself, or identify a single interpretation of a symbolic something as the one true meaning of that thing. We will return to this presently.

The crux of the passage is the phrase: "At first the visible obscures:/Go where light is." The seen hides the unseen; the understood stands over the un-understood. But the opacity of the casually perceived object can be penetrated by what Roethke calls, in the essay "On Identity," "intensity in the seeing." The trick is "to look at at thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you." (OPC, p. 25) To succeed in this is to surpass the "nerveless constriction of surfaces." It is a victory over the integumental, the primary form of which is the philosopher's distinction between subject and object.

Obviously there is no wisdom in "objects"--in objects such as are posited by "subjects." But there are conditions under which the inanimate object comes to life (and there are conditions too in which the animate consciousness comes to death).

In a state of "heightened consciousness," as Roethke calls it, some time before the phrase became fashionable (OPC, p. 25), the "visible" no longer occludes by its obviousness, but becomes translucent. The object loses its status as the terminus of all speculation, as the unassailable, unassimilable, irreducible "It" against which the light of consciousness expends itself.

The object acquires an interpretable exterior; its surface becomes "symbolic" (like the surface of a page covered in words). And in Roethke's poetry it ceases to be merely the represented thing, a constituent of external reference, and becomes a representing thing with a voice of its own and the capacity to sing.

In his own life Roethke had experience of what he calls "the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: the sense that all is one and one is all." (OPC, p. 26) This experience, he goes on to say, is "inevitably accompanied by a loss of the 'I,' the barely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocency." (OPC, p. 26) There is no need to argue the extent to which that mystical experience pervades

Roethke's poetry: Neal Bowers has given an excellent account of it in The Journey from I to Otherwise. In that book Bowers quotes for the first time an unused sequence from the footage for the film In a Dark Time, wherein Roethke discusses his own experience of pathological/mystical states of mind:

> But you know I got in this real strange state. I got in the woods and started a circular kind of dance, and I've never put this down very...I refer to it in 'I tried to fling my shadow at the moon,' I kept going around and just shedding clothes. Sounds Freudian as hell, but in the end, I got sort of a circle--as if, I think, I understood intuitively what the frenzy is. That is, you go way beyond yourself, and...this is not sheer exhaustion but this strange sort of a... not illumination...but a sense of being again a part of the whole universe. I mean, anything but quiet. I mean, in a sense everything is symbolical. In one of the Old Woman poems I just sort of put it in there, because I know if you put this down in prose, for God's sake [people will say,] 'Oh, this is merely clinical'--I mean, "Obviously he's crazy" and so forth. But it was one of the deepest and [most] profound experiences I ever had.[2]

The Old Woman poem that Roethke is referring to is "Her Becoming," where, having observed that there is sometimes no wisdom in objects, the speaker goes on to remember occasions when she has been privileged with a deep, reciprocal relationship with her objective environment:

> There are times when reality comes closer;
> In a field, in the natural air,
> I stepped carefully, like a new-shod horse,
> A raw tumultuous girl
> Making my way over wet stones.

> And then I ran--
> Ran ahead of myself,
> Across a field, into a little wood
> And there I stayed until the day burned down.
>
> My breath grew less. I listened like a beast.
> Was it the stone I heard? I stared at
> the fixed stars.
>
> The moon, a pure Islamic shape, looked down.
> The light air slowed: It was not night or day.
> All natural shapes became symbolical. (CP, p. 160)

The locus for her revelation is, again, a field, and, as in "Unfold! Unfold!" we see stones and stars coupled in the mind of the narrator who is uncertain as to which voice is speaking. Here, as always, the escape into "elseness" is accomplished through a merging of the natural and human orders. This is made possible by the removal of the barrier the ego erects between itself and the layered thinginess that swaddles it.

In "Infirmity" the dilemma of encroaching thinghood and the natural growth of the soul toward "another place and time/Another condition" takes on a new complexity. We see once again the narcissism which prevents the spirit from happily taking leave of itself and cleaving to an Otherness (there is an analogy between death of the ego in mystical illumination and the real death which makes the self finally and irrevocably "other").

> 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.
> I love myself: that's my one constancy.

> Oh, to be something else, yet still to be! (CP, p. 236)

We find in this passage the familiar lament at being himself and the impulse toward "something else"; the equally familiar urge to become, in Jean-Paul Sartre's terms, a for-itself which is also in-itself; and the usual sense of the sterility of objects and the threat (or promise) of death:

> Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity;
> There's little left I care to call my own.
> Today they drained the fluid from a knee
> And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone;
> Thus I conform to my divinity
> By dying inward, like an aging tree. (CP, p. 236)

But there is a positive note to all this, for this time the bonds are coming unstuck of themselves, as they are for the Old Woman who can declare "I'm in love with the dead!" (CP, p. 164) even as, against her own will to withstand death, she becomes with each moment a little less vital. By the same paradoxical relation that makes Otherness the salvation of the self, death somehow becomes the poet's chance for true life. It is a well-used conceit, popular among religious poets (especially the so-called metaphysicals): this life is the real death, our death is the new life. But here it has evolved beyond the level of a mere conceit into a vision (of a strongly mystical order) of the reconciliation of basic antinomies in the natural world. The equation of life and death is not merely for

the sake of rhetorical ornament or wit, but has become truly a vision of actual equivalence in a man's life, and so, in a way, a vision of the essentially poetic character of life itself, wherein all things must undergo changes of a metaphorical sort.

> 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. (CP, 236)

The resolution of the irresolvable is perhaps the central poetic act. Metaphor proclaims a state of identity; ratiocination, a state of distinction. In madness, childhood, and the extremis of poetic composition the psyche continually dissolves and reconstitutes boundaries, following a logic that is sometimes called the logic of association. There is still the necessity of creating perimeters within which to centre the (otherwise indefinable) logos; but the barriers are continually under reconstruction (as in a labyrinth whose layout changes from one moment to the next). This is one aspect of the "dynamic vision" of which Richard Blessing writes, describing the peregrinations of the psyche as a "quest for salvation," a "quest that demands a continuously altering pace and direction for the terrain through which one journeys is changed in every instant."[3]

> Reached for a grape
> And the leaves changed;
> A stone's shape

Became a clam. (CP, p. 59)

That quest initiates itself at every moment in the temporal shift which situates the soul literally beyond itself and forces it to become Other. In "Infirmity" Roethke celebrates this sort of change, identifying the long process of dying with growth--an ongoing birth, in which we joyfully take leave of our various dwellings, the accouterments of our senses, the tomb-like, womb-like appurtenances of reasonable thought, and our bodies which degenerate in the act of generation like plants that have gone to seed.

Oxymoron is the supreme metaphorical gesture. Metaphor merely turns a figure; oxymoron inverts it. To say that dark is light (as Roethke does in "In a Dark Time" and "The Dying Man") is to stretch a pair of definitions over the entire continuum of lexical extension. Interpreting that sort of paradox is a special problem for the critic. The exegete must burst in on the poet's semantic delinquency and bring it to an abortive finish. He makes it make figurative sense. Paradox seen in this way becomes a rhetorical maze with a definite S and F, and traceable, if circuitous, pathways between them. The critic might say: "dark is light, in the following specialized, figurative sense...." and supply the route of association that makes it so.

This goes as well for the critic engaged in exposing

the "meanings" of the symbols in a poet such as Roethke. Roethke uses symbolic equations but attaches no fixed, eternal values to them. The snail in "A Light Breather" may symbolize the spirit but it also symbolizes the penis, the child in the womb, the seed emitting a shoot or all of these at once. These are symbols of one another and they are all bound up in a vast web of homology which extends outward in all directions from any single particle of meaning, ultimately embracing All (again, the sense of Oneness that Roethke refers to, in connection with the realization that "everything is symbolical"). It is normal for the investigation to vivisect the symbol at one of its levels and to go no further. When the critic explains Roethke's symbols he is apt to find himself producing metaphors of his own. Here is Malkoff, elucidating a passage from "The Lost Son":

> ...the cave's door seems to be the womblike symbol for the regressive journey rather than a Platonic reference...the dogs of the groin barking and howling are clearly the guilt-producing sexual urges, the sun is the father who has turned against the son, the moon is the mother who rejects the son's love...[4]

That the interpretation of a symbol should be a metaphor in its own right is not so strange. One completes another person's metaphors with symbols: it is the usual practise. When the poet says "My mother is a moon" one reflects that in this case "a moon" stands for the mother's inaccessibility, distance or disdain. But we have not yet

shelled all the pods; the "kernel" of figurative meaning which a reading yields up to public view still refers outside of itself, back to the discarded husk, of which it is said to be the "sense." In other words, the meaning of the interpretation is the text, and vice versa. It is not the reader who "comprehends" the text; the text and its reader are comprehensive of one another. And this, I think, is what Roethke was getting at when he wrote in his notebook: "The idea of poetry itself is a vast metaphor." (SF, p. 175)

Notes to Chapter IV

[1]Burke, in Heyen, p. 45.

[2]Bowers, p. 8.

[3]Blessing, p. 144.

[4]Malkoff, p.

V. A Permutative System

> And here must be noted the importance of the demand that such types of thought do exist. This is, no doubt, a quality of subjects, rather than relativity between modes of expression.
>
> So, too, are questions of affecting the expression of coherent symbols of equal importance with the methods by which these symbols are expressed.
>
> Gelett Burgess, "A Permutative System,"

Few writers have been so attached to a "poetic" vocabulary. Light, field, stone, river, shell, seed, dance, house, ghost, door, flower, sea, fire: the elementary particles of a world picture. Roethke returns obsessively to these primary materials. In the later poems of Words for the Wind he configures them in endless permutations, seeming to delight in discovering new relationships between them, like an abstract painter working through the possibilities in a particular set of geometrical shapes. Adjectives train the eye on specific irreplaceable details; Roethke dispenses with adjectives. Nothing could be further from mot juste naturalism. The nouns verb one another in line after line of plain declaration:

> The sun declares the earth
> The stones leap in the stream;
> On a wide plain, beyond
> The far stretch of a dream,

A field breaks like the sea;
The wind's white with her name,
And I walk with the wind. (CP, p. 119)

Although difficult to articulate, this is not "cryptic" in the sense that the right interpretative gesture will break open the symbol and bring down a rain of answers like candies from a piñata. If we could say Sun = God, Stone = Unsaved Soul, Stream = Time, we could satisfy the needs of critical interrogation with less effort. But Roethke's symbols do not stay put from one poem to the next, and whatever we determine the symbolic "content" of the word to be, it is bound to prove inconsistent with the symbolism of the same word used elsewhere.

It would simplify matters if we could say that the word acquired its symbolic value in the context of the particular poem in which it appears, and that the poem should therefore be dealt with as an autonomous statement, deriving no meaning from its place in Roethke's whole output. But the poems have thematic and stylistic continuities too obtrusive to ignore. (Neal Bowers somewhat overstates this point, saying that Roethke "wrote only one poem in his life, a song of himself, or perhaps more accurately a song of his search for himself, comprised of six volumes...the ultimate sequential poem." 1 Besides, there is often too little contextual matter in individual poems (especially in Praise to the End! and Words for the Wind) to allow any values to emerge for certain symbols.

Thus, on the above passage from Words for the Wind we would have nothing more to say than that the poet, a sort of abstract expressionist in verse, is emitting a stream of giddy nonsense, a light-headed hyperbole of his love for his love's love of him. And it might satisfy us to merely comment on how Roethke's rhythms evoke the motions and emotions of love, as Richard Blessing (for all the limitations in his approach one of the most astute of Roethke's readers) does. Blessing points out Roethke's "use of repetition and his use of ambiguity" as devices for "heightening intensity."[2] He does not venture to unravel the symbolic stuff of the love poems. And we get no deeper into the concealed underparts of the poem than the knowledge that it is indeed ambiguous and the ambiguity repeats itself to produce that sense of mystery, that promise of hidden depths. We understand in advance that we are not escavating a pharaoh's crypt, merely contemplating the sealed entrance to the passage.

I have already said that this sort of symbolism is not cryptic in the ordinary sense. Yet it does ask to be read symbolically. The mere fact that a poet's words are not interchangeable leads us to speculate on the mechanism that necessitates the inclusion of one word and not another (not to imply that the mechanism has to do with authorial intention, though much criticism is still carried out as if the scholar were disclosing the writer's hidden purpose). What I call "necessity" is the substance that the critic

exposes--his program of critical practise will determine what that necessity will consist of: a noticed pattern might be attributed to (1) rhythmical exigencies (in a stylistic analysis); (2) archetypal structures (in a mythical analysis); (3) the literary tradition (in a study of influence). Perhaps the ideal understanding of a poem is not reached until all the the underlying "necessities" overlay the poem; until they are dug out from under and brought into the light so that no part of what the poem is is not in plain view; until the poem is fully exposed, like an anatomical diagram made up of overlapping transparencies.

The recurrence of certain words and motifs tantalizes us with the prospect of symbolic equivalences. And that is reason enough for looking closer. Susan R. Bowers writes:

> The fact is that Roethke's symbolism is extraordinarily complex. It may be convenient and useful to generalize about his images, as does Denis Donoghue, who characterizes Roethke's life-enhancing images as rain, rivers, flowers, seed, grain, birds, fish and veins, and his danger signals as wind, stream, darkness and shadow. But the difficulty is that Roethke's images are not static, but evolve and change. For instance, the wind is not a danger signal at all, but a very positive, life-enhancing image in the final section of "The Long Waters": 'So the sea wind wakes desire:/My body shimmers with a light flame'...We must not make the mistake of establishing an exclusive symbolic function for any of Roethke's extremely complex images.[3]

That is a useful warning. As it is, not too many critics have tried to affix "exclusive symbolic functions" to

Roethke's images. The symbolism--"extraordinarily complex" as it is--eludes simple equivalences. Nothing is less Roethkean than the kind of systematic symbolization that informs, for instance, Yeat's A Vision, which, by Yeats' own admission somewhat recalls "those complicated mathematical tables that Kelly saw in Dr. Dee's black scrying stone, the diagrams in Law's Boehme, where one lifts a flap of paper to discover both the human entrails and the starry heavens."[4] The occultist's cosmos is curiously amenable to systematization, and magicians from Cornelius Agrippa to Aleister Crowley (whose Liber 777 consists entirely of tables of occult 'correspondences') have always loved to formularize their esoteric knowledge in diagrams and charts, reducing the world to a range of manipulable quantities. A case can be made that Roethke was influenced by Boehme's theory of 'correspondences'[5]: if this is so it is nevertheless sure that he was himself not Boehme's kind of mystic, nor Swedenborg's either. And if he is like Blake in some respects--and is unmistakeably influenced by Blake in many respects--he does not much resemble the Blake of the prophetic books. There is no possibility of a Roethke dictionary like Foster Damon's dictionary of Blake (perhaps there ought to have been no dictionary of Blake either, but my point is that it is simply impossible to imagine a comprehensive directory of Roethke's symbols). His symbolism has no bones--he draws correspondences, but they

do not fit into any permanent structures. Roethke joins pipes together, like any scaffold-maker, but does not make scaffolds.

That is: Roethke's symbols do not participate in a static, two-sided order of signification, such that the symbol stands in a fixed, steady relationship with the symbolized. We do not say, for example, that the shoot emerging from the seed is a "symbol" of the soul. It is equally true to say that it symbolizes the child leaving home (the Lost Son in flight from the greenhouse), the evolution of higher life forms; the growth of life from inanimate matter, the emergence ex nihilo of human consciousness, the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden, the child being born. The list could go on. We allign that in our minds with some of Roethke's favourite images of metamorphosis: the snail leaving its shell, the stone surpassing its own stasis, and, of course the soul in its "false accouterments of sense." (CP, p. 18) We can try to find a term wide enough and flexible enough to contain all of these processes and say the seed/shoot dyad and others like it are images of "growth," of "time" or "change in time," of the union of the "self" with the "other"; but no single conceptual act seems to be capable of circumnavigating the entire region of the symbol's reference. We are left with partial answers.[6]

And when we come across the image of the seed without its ghost or a use of the seed/shoot motif which colours

the event of the seed's emergence in a negative or ambivalent way (playing, for instance, on the guilt associated with sexuality, equating the emerging shoot with the penis groping mindlessly toward its female complement) then we tend to lose our way in a symbolism we thought we understood.

It is often said, in reaction to a perceived change in attitude toward a problem like the duality of flesh and spirit that Roethke has "changed position on that issue." But it doesn't seem to me that Roethke's position need be of any special interest to us at all. More important is the structure in which he positions himself.

Sometimes Roethke seems to be "for" gardens and "against" weeds; and sometimes, indeed, he is "against" gardens and in favour of weeds. Sometimes he is "for" keeping the spirit "undefiled"--a program that involves retracting it into itself and fortifying its orifices--and sometimes he is all for sending the spirit forth to be soiled by the grime and mire of the real world. In the essay "On Identity" Roethke calls attention to these two "positions" on the issue of spirit:

> [T]he spirit or soul...this I was keeping 'spare' [in Open House] in my desire for the essential. But the spirit need not be spare: it can grow gracefully and beautifully like a tendril, like a flower. I did not know this at the time. (OPC, p. 21)

He cites "A Light Breather," a poem in which the spirit

grows gracefully and the spirit is compared to a blossom which "stirs/Still wet from its bud-sheath,/slowly unfolding." Here we do not find order raising its ramparts against chaos, or the independent ego maintaining its pristine integrity against the encroachments of an outlying wickedness, but rather a model in which the spirit happily leaves its sheath, and goes out to meet and merge with its environment. The primary model of the spirit in the world retains is validity. But the motion is different. The issue does not change but (to use the usual way of describing it) Roethke's "position" changes. Where the "spirit" of Roethke's first book trembles like Blake's Thel behind the walls of its closed "open house," the spirit of "A Light Breather" goes out into its surroundings, making a shelter of its lack of shelter:

> The spirit moves,
> Yet stays:
> Stirs as a blossom stirs,
> Still wet from its bud-sheath,
> Slowly unfolding,
> Turning in the light with its tendrils;
> Plays as a minnow plays,
> Tethered to a limp weed, swinging
> Tail around, nosing in and out of the current,
> Its shadows loose, a watery finger;
> Moves, like the snail,
> Still inward,
> Taking and embracing its surroundings,
> Never wishing itself away,
> Unafraid of what it is
> A music in a hood,
> A small thing,
> Singing. (CP, p. 97)

The snail takes its surrounding with it (on its back); it

is always leaving home, but does not become lost. This is in contrast to the spirit of Open House which does not venture beyond its walls, in spite of the repeatedly expressed wish to be freed from its "coat of unessential skin" (CP, p. 23); and it is in contrast to the narrating voice of The Lost Son, who leaves the "empty house" to peer, like the mole of Blake's Thel, into the Pit, but whose state of grace is intermittent.

Although Roethke's "position" changes, the problematic on which he takes a position is quite constant. The spirit enclosed in its body is symbolically equivalent to the snail in its shell, a bud in its sheath, a man in his house. The motions change--the imagery changes somewhat--but the structure of related antinomies is constant.

In this form the concepts are properly called "abstract" (drawn from--abstrahere--clusters of concrete particulars). But Roethke's characteristic method is to expose the abstract in the concrete (con-crescere, "together-growing"). One of the most revealing observations yet made on Roethke is Kenneth Burke's:

> Though Roethke has dealt always with very concrete things, there is a sense in which these very concretions are abstractions.[7]

Roethke looks at a "real" thing--presumed to exist at the world-end of the poetic telescope--with such concentration, applying to it such powers of "association," that it is

"drawn away from itself," from its contextualizing reality, into the limbo of perpetual change and flux that occupies the widthless boundary between the mind and its world. A tulip bulb is just that; but behind its obvious "just thatness" it is also "something else." Things must be "otherwise," identities must shift and merge, tropism, and trophism must continually occur, there must be turning, growing, bending, altering, becoming--or else there is no life. A thing which is merely itself is no-thing. So too, a mind which is merely its own conscious reasoning self is no-mind: "A mind too active is no mind at all." (CP, p. 236) It is not as the no-mind of Zen Satori, but the no-mind of the all-thing: nullity and death.

Our list of antinomies is "abstracted" from Roethke's imagery which constitutes the "concretion" of our commentary. That is: our remarks grown-together, de-abstracted, <u>are</u> the poem. The relationship between the pure image and the symbol is like that between the pure thing and the living growing thing. There is no such thing as the pure image, as long as there are readers who "think in symbols naturally, as the mad do, as children do." (SP, p. 237)

Notes to Chapter V.

[1]Bowers, p. 2

[2]Blessing, p. 178; p. 177.

[3]Susan R. Bowers, "The Explorer's Rose: Theodore Roethke's Mystical Symbol," Concerning Poetry 13,11 (1980), p. 42.

[4]W. B. Yeats, A Vision (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 24.

[5]Bowers. p. 6, p. 209; Malkoff, p. 102; Lynn Ross-Bryant, Theodore Roethke: Poet of the Earth...Poet of the Spirit... (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1981), p. 120, p. 159.

[6]Approaching the same problem, Blessing writes:

> [T]he word fish is a symbol meaning 'what it usually means,' and, as Roethke puts it, 'something more.' In 'psychic shorthand' it joins together Papa; the phallus; sperm; Christ; Roethke's phylogenic and ontogenic ancestors; the poet's involuntary, neural life; and the self, one might, with luck, catch behind the ears. (p. 95)

[7]Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," in Heyen, p. 45.

VI. House

> What if something <u>really unheard-of</u> happened?--If I, say, saw houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause, if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words; if trees gradually changed into men and men into trees. Now, was I right when I said before all these things happened "I know that that's a house" etc., or simply "that's a house" etc.?
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, <u>On Certainty</u>, p. 67e

What would a closed house be? One that restricted access or prevented escape: a womb or a tomb. An interior space may either nurture or constrict what inhabits it. The enclosure is either a fortification or a prison. Heaven and Hell alike have walls and gates to repel or contain the evil. The enclosed space is the primary order against chaos. A boundary is drawn in the wilderness and what comes into existence is locality, a place, a State. Motion across borders is always motion between States, between conditions. The Altered State: what Roethke calls "another condition," "another life," "another way and place."

The prevailing theme of <u>Open House</u> is escape from the various material and spiritual enclosures that restrict the spirit's freedom to expand outward and grow. Throughout <u>Open House</u> the poet speaks longingly of the possibility of escape:

In "The Auction" the narrator comes home one day to find his house and possessions being sold.

> Once on returning home, purse-proud and hale,
> I found my choice possessions on the lawn.
> An auctioneer was whipping up a sale
> I did not move to claim what was my own. (CP, p. 20)

Instead of calling the police, the narrator stands and watches while he is disburdened of much ponderous allegory.

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

Becoming destitute of so much false wealth the speaker feels relief and a growing sense of hope:

> My spirits rose each time the hammer fell,
> The heart beat faster as the fat words rolled.
> I left my home with unencumbered will
> And all the rubbish of confusion sold. (CP, p. 20)

The poem decisively situates the house not only as a place, but as a time, in this case the past. To Roethke, leaving the home means being literally released from the entanglements of his upbringing, his acquired dogmatisms, his unquestioned values, his, in the Freudian jargon, superego. Why must we live in the houses we make for ourselves? Past selves jam the river; the present self yearns to be cut loose. It is the traditional posture of adolescent rebellion (or Romantic Individualism). The

formula calls for shackles to be broken, moorings cut, walls blasted away, loads to be thrown off the shoulders. And the vectors of poetic will are fixed on the future.

But we cannot fail to notice that the poem itself is drearily conventional in form. It is true of all the poems in Open House. Married to the poet's muse is the paternal god of form--the first father, builder of greenhouses, cultivator of tame roses: "Form acts the father: tells you what you may and may not do." (SF, p. 164) To appease that Old Testament figure the poet must make his ark of all the proper materials, in the prescribed number of cubits. The poems of Open House have the air of being built like little duplexes from a preexisting plan. They are elaborately insulated against criticism, in particular against the disapproval of the ancestral role models that Roethke is attempting to live up to. There are no soft members protruding from these poems for the Castrating Father to lop off. They are sturdily built out of irreproachable iambics (tri, tetra and pentameter), masculine rhymes, and crisp alliterative phrases,[1] They are very safe.

Many writers have remarked on the irony that a volume of poems entitled Open House should be so closed in form.

> An open house suggests informality, a kind of unstructured, free-floating gathering in which guests come and go pretty much as they please. But Roethke's Open House is so traditional in its strategies and so formal in its techniques that his party takes on an ambience of butlers and

> engraved invitations and dinners served promptly at eight.[2]

It is an Open House in name only: the way into these poems is blocked at the door by the substantial figure of Roethke himself inviting us in. The mood is alternately hospitable and paranoid. The voice of rebellion howls from within the tight little vessels like Poe's black cat walled up in the cellar.

Living interment, so much a concern of Poe's, is present imagistically in many of these early poems along with several other elements of Gothic romance. The little poem "Death Piece" derives its power not from the contemplation of sheer nullity but from a conception of the imprisonment of life within dead matter. It is the horror of paralysis, of living death. Roethke does not mourn the goneness of life; he binds life down and stops its mouth. He imagines it tied to and occluded by its opposite. The poem, like many in Open House, is easily disassembled as a structure of dualities:

Invention	/ **sleeps** (within a skull No longer quick with light)
hive that **hummed**	/ **sealed** (honey tight)
thought	/ **tied**
motion	/ **moored** (to rock)
minutes **burst upon**	/ a brow **(insentient to shock)**

The skull, which ought to be the womb or incubator of thought, becomes its sarcophagus. In its stupid opacity,

its homogeneous thinginess, it presents a hermetic barrier against motion, energy, time and the thinking subject; against all things that flow, grow, change and live. The covering which no longer lets sense-perception in, or original thoughts out, has become a sealed vessel. Not a ship of death (it is an exact reversal of D. H. Lawrence's poem, where "the frail soul steps out into her house again," undertaking "the voyage of oblivion")[3] but a stone boat, embedded in a continuum of objectivity from which it does not differentiate itself.

The claustrophobia of "Death Piece" takes another form in "Sale" wherein the poet announces the auction of someone's ancestral estate. Here again is the institution that overwhelms its occupant, although this time the house is explicitly identified as the repository of an ancestral legacy of guilt. The "remaining heirs" by whose order the house is put up for sale have apparently done most of their growing up in this stifling milieu and they are, like the narrator of "The Auction," well rid of the place, with its "attic of horrors and closet of fears." (CP, p. 30) The house symbolizes an unspecified burden that is visited on the children by their progenitors and its sale constitutes a symbolic release from the child's obligations to the codes of his parents. Capitulation to the past, to the parental archetype, the family ghost, leads to spiritual death, to a perpetuation of some form of undeath, a curse of vampirism that descends through the family history: bad

blood. Hope exists only in the possibility of escape. But, as anyone acquainted with Gothic romance knows, the doors of the classic house of horrors are apt to slam shut behind one. Thus, prospective tenants are rightly notified that with the property come "grandfather's sinister hovering hand," a "fume of decay that clings fast to the wood" and "the taint of a blood that was running too thin." (CP, p. 30)

The house in that poem is the symbolic equivalent of the "devouring mother" in "Prognosis," wherein the poet's very life (or spirit) is threatened by a murky cluster of abstractions associatively linked and identified as "the out-pourings of the spiritual coward," "the ruminant reason," "platitudes garnished beyond a fool's gainsaying," "pride in a furnished room." (CP, p. 5) The poem, like others in Open House, uses asyndeton, piling one image on another to create a multi-dimensional antagonist roughly corresponding to Blake's "spiritual enemies"--though Roethke's spiritual enemies are not so much his "natural friends" as his (literal or figurative) progenitors.

> Though the devouring mother cry, "'Escape me?
> Never--'"
> And the honeymoon be spoiled by a father's ghost,
> Chill depths of the spirit are flushed to a
> fever,
> The nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost.
> (CP, p. 5)

The lares familiaris reappear in various places throughout Roethke's work. The "beckoning figure" of "The Lost Son"

is one. He appears in the section entitled "The Gibber." In that sequence the narrator confronts not only his own death, in the form of a complete dissolution of the ordinary ego-structure (achieved in the act of flight from the father, the attempt at establishing an independent identity), but also the mystic experience of "oneness." Categories run together; solid things "flow." Currencies merge in the poet's mind: "Money money money/Water water water." The artifactual and the natural are reconciled; primary antinomies are resolved in oxymora. The vision of utter symbolic flux, where nothing can be expected to retain its proper shape or identity, acts as a solvent on the poet's own fragile sense of inhabiting a discrete self. In the act of detaching himself from the Father the poet discovers the truth that he <u>is</u> his father, that his father's blood runs through his veins, that the ancestral <u>forms</u>--leading back ultimately to the "minimals": the slugs, snails, and protozoa--are behind him or in him. The reservoir of this sense of identity is the poet's unconscious wherefrom the ghostly apparitions of the ancestor emerge. It is in the unconscious that the poet can be said to coexist with his ancestors, out of time.

> Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going. (p. 53)

(Here, as usual, the stones embody stasis <u>in</u> time, persistence of the solid/literal in the

fluid/metaphorical.)

The confluence of the poet's own streaming consciousness and the general "streaminess" of the world as he now sees it results in a kind of roundabout answer to the puzzle posed in the Book of Job and echoed in this section of "The Lost Son": "Hath the rain a father?" The narrator finds himself in close proximity with the metaphysician's "ultimate cause"; but it is not the still source of all breezes and streams: it is the whirlwind, and within it all motion is not only started but also ended:

> Is this the storm's heart? The ground is
> unstilling itself
> My veins are running nowhere. (CP, p. 53)

Those veins are another crucial image of the streaming continuity of life in time, and we will consider them in more detail with regard to "Feud" and other poems in Open House) The substance that flows through the veins or riverbeds is finally indefinable (money or water?). It is the Father's sperm--"Is the seed leaving the old bed?"; it is also the "primordial milk" which may or may not be the "substance" flowing "from the mouths of jugs/Perched on many shelves." (CP, p. 53). At the end of "The Gibber" it takes the "filiary" form:

> Look, look, the ditch is running white!
> I've more veins than a tree!
> Kiss me, ashes, I'm falling through a dark swirl.
> (CP, p. 54)

The old ashes-to-ashes formula expresses that quasi-causal flow from state A to state B, ("delta" in the physicist's river). The father's kiss, at once his blessing and the kiss of death; ashes cast on the water consolidate the link between man and nature (we enter the "Zion of the waterbead"). We are already ashes; the wind that swirls them, God.

The ghostly apparition that spoils the honeymoon in "Prognosis" returns as the sexual saboteur of "The Sensualists." That poem, which first appeared in the Love Poems section of Words for the Wind is usually taken to be an indictment of lust.[4] But if this is so it is the only one of its kind in Roethke's oeuvre, and its place in the Love Poems is entirely anomalous. Fortunately, I think the poem may be read as a critique not of sensuality but of Puritanism (or, perhaps, to introduce an idea of Blake's, of the fact that a state of division between chastity and sexual improbity exists at all). The woman "pinned so close" in sexual intercourse complains about the physical discomfort of the act and cries out for deliverance from what she sees as an imprisonment: "O angel let me loose." (CP, p. 131) Beside the two figures stands a third: "A woman...pure as a bride/Affrighted from her wits." If we take this delicate creature as a projection of the woman's guilt, born from her need to dissociate herself from her own carnal nature, then this figure becomes another incarnation of the dead past, a morbid secretion of the

woman's super-ego.

> The ghostly figure sucked in its breath
> And shuddered toward the wall;
> Wrapped in the tattered robe of death
> It tiptoed down the hall. (CP, p. 131)

The woman apparently wishes to abdicate from her physical being, which puts her in a position analogous to that of the narrator of "Epidermal Macabre," who professes to hate his "epidermal dress" and looks forward to the day when he will "sleep immodestly, a most/Incarnadine and carnal ghost." (CP, p. 18) After Open House Roethke repudiates this attitude, opting instead for the view that the body is the house of the soul, and not its prison. The flesh, in other words, has a redemptive character. A body with its senses open is an earthly paradise unto itself; with no cherub swordsmen at its gates:

> I gave her kisses back, and woke a ghost
> O what lewd music crept into our ears!
> The body and the soul know how to play
> In that dark world where gods have lost their way. (CP, p. 102)

The ghost that is woken in this line is the ghost of his lineage, of procreation. This figure is not the menacing unnatural presence of the introjected father (superego); it is a benificent presence, the primordial seed, a vision of the continuity of life. In the following passage from "The Swan" that "carnal ghost" is identified with one of Roethke's poetic forebears, one of those figures, either

menacing or helpful, who guide his own writing:

> I am my father's son, I am John Donne
> Whenever I see her with nothing on. (CP, p. 135)

The ghosts of Roethke's poetic mentors frequently find their way in. "Four for Sir John Davies" was, by Roethke's own account, literally written in the presence of Yeats' ghost (elsewhere, however, he says that Davies and Ralegh are "the true ghosts in that piece" OPC p. 69).

The dead are not necessarily our enemies but their "help" can be murderous. Often they are seen as speaking in proverbs, in "platitudes garnished beyond a fool's gainsaying" (CP, p. 5), which is appropriate because a proverb is a kind of "dead utterance." Proverb is a reflexive, autonomic form, and therefore the opposite of poetry, the best of which is traditionally regarded as "immortal." Roethke mocks such aphorisms in "Unfold! Unfold!" Near the end of the poem he makes a proverb of his own to overturn all dead forms:

> What the grave says
> the nest denies.
>
> In their harsh thickets
> The dead thrash.
> They help. (CP, p. 87)

The grave sayings of our dead predecessors either inhibit our growth or encourage it. As always there are two ways of seeing.

In Open House the ancestral dead and the mansions they

haunt are generally seen as threats to the living spirit. "Feud," surely one of the strangest, most idiosyncratic pieces in that volume, epitomizes this. The issue here is not living interment in dead matter, as in "Death Piece" or "Epidermal Macabre," but all out war between the "fathers" and "the young." Some kind of spiritual decrepitude--Adam's legacy, more or less--besets some young person whom the narrator addresses (it may be he speaks to himself). Again, the evil is not specifically named (sexual repression, as in "Prognosis," is hinted at). Death climbs up out of the past through the nerves and bloodveins that connect the living human to his antecedent forms. (These go back, as we have said, to the lowest life forms, and finally to inanimate matter. A good book on Roethke could be written using evolution as its theme). We, the living, are those nerve ends and tendrils extended from the dead unthinking past into the present, like young shoots in the stump of a dying willow. The deadness impinges in "Feud," as in "Meditations of an Old Woman." I will quote the poem in full not because it is an especially good one ("a not very good poem," OPC, p. 23) but because it contains an unusual concentration of Roethke's favourite images, gathered together, some of them, for the first time: blood-veins, roots, seed, light, walls, nerves. (To these we might add images of special importance to Open House: eyes, secrets, siege of a fortified enclosure).

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

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

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

The dead leap at your 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,
Inflame with hate. This ancient feud
Is seldom won. The spirit starves
Until the dead have been subdued. (CP, p. 4)

Sun, seed, light, hopes, day, secrets, and the spirit are literally inundated beneath a litany of terrors: corruption, menace, fate, exhaustion, pain, disaster, canker, darkness, spies, starvation and the dead. The spirit of rebellion has never been quite so urgently invoked. The soul is infertile, incapable of growth or of any act of creativity (including, presumably, the creation of poetry) as long as The Dead murder "infant desire" in its cradle. The third stanza finds the subject cut off from light ("essential to your need"). He is not merely locked-up, a child invalid, a seedling in too tough a seed, but under siege. The dead are bizarrely potent. They leap at the throat, scale the walls, gouge out the subject's

"secrets" and generally behave as if they had more life in them than the poor youth himself. ("The terrible energy of the dead" Roethke jots in his notebook. SF, p. 151)

The stringy connections--veins, nerves, roots--that run from one generation to the next are of special importance. Roethke in Open House finds himself in the common existential quandary of having a consciousness which is rooted temporally in the dead past and spatially in the meat of his own body. The "content" of a poem like "Feud" is the centrifugal fantasy of disentanglement from those ties ("I have been too long a Laocoön of my own entrails." SF, p. 137) This means detachment from the localized, the defined, the bounded; and ultimately, as we shall see, from such forms as the poem itself, which consists of a symbolized something "embodied" in a flesh of arbitrary sounds or printed marks. In that fantasy the poem climbs off of the page, the soul flies out of the body. The roots are severed.

It is well known that Roethke eventually reverses the centrifugal fantasy and travels back down the veins into his own past, through his ancestral line and down into the mire of our collective origins.

> I romped lithe as a child down the summery streets of my veins. (CP, p. 82)

That journey is ecstatic, liberating, exosomatic in a way that Roethke's "flight" from the flesh in Open House is

actually not. However it is merely the inverse of the journey by which the soul has come to its present. The poem "Unfold! Unfold!," from which the above quote is taken, is about finding the way back, about being unable to cross over to the dead land, about being rebuffed by the inanimate. Coming to its strange evolutionary predicament, to the nadir/zenith of human accomplishment, "by snails, by leaps of frog" (slow progress and trans-temporal leaps), the spirit finds itself unable to retrace its route, while sensing the necessity of doing so.

> I can't crawl back through those veins,
> I ache for another choice.
> 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. (CP, p. 85)

To be cut off from one's origins is to be, in one sense, cut off from life (in another, from death). There is a paradoxical sense in which the past is at once the spring and reservoir out of which all comes streaming (the water image in this regard is of central interest); and it is the stagnant pond ("the soft pond of repose," the "old wound" in which the Lost Son fishes) into which the events of the present flow. There is no contradiction there: the river flows both ways. We shall return to this in the seventh chapter, entitled Water/Stone. To be rootless, a disembodied consciousness, is to resemble the "cut stems" of the first two poems of The Lost Son, "Cuttings" and

"Cuttings (later)." The plants are severed from their roots, as the Lost Son himself is, in his "flight." The first poem "Cuttings" merely sets a scene. The cut plants are attempting to live; the narrator is sufficiently impressed to make a poem describing them. The stems, cut off from the main rootstock of the parent plant, leave hold of their previous life and grope towards a new one. The metaphor is latent: we see in those plants a human condition. Cut off from God we struggle to re-attain what Adam lost for us, eternal life, the New Life promised by our Saviour. In Freudian terms, the child, divided from his parents, struggles for a new definition of selfhood, labours toward completion. Leaving one home we return to another. Metaphors suggest themselves to us if we look for them.

But in the second "Cuttings" poem they are explicitly called to our attention. The struggle of the cut stems to "put down feet" is compared to the saint toiling up toward the heaven from which his Adamic inheritance excludes him. But in a most startling apotheosiss of what, until then, is apparently "figurative" in the ordinary sense (A symbolizes B) Roethke identifies himself, quite literally, with the plants.

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

I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet. (CP, p. 35)

That goes beyond mere empathic involvement. The poet actually becomes the object of his contemplation: "to look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you." (OPC, p. 25) It is a peculiar phenomenon, but not uncommon in the lives of the poets. The metaphor comes real. The dead object receives its new life in the poet, in his poetry, at the same time as the poet lays to rest his living remains in a sarcophagus of his own making: the poem. "New life" is reached in the suffusing of one identity with another. That is the gist of the essay "On Identity," by far the most valuable piece of prose Roethke ever wrote. It is akin to the process whereby the forms, techniques, themes and styles of past writers--the poet's literary antececents, spiritual fathers--need not be visited on the young poet in the form of a judgement, a curse, a claw at the throat, but may actually liberate him by allowing Ralegh or Dante or Yeats to come alive within him. "The extent to which the great dead can be evoked, or can come to us, can be eerie and astonishing." (OPC p. 23) Form is our downfall and salvation. (It is like the medieval doctrine of signs: it is because we are fallen creatures that we must "read" the spirit of the divine through material signs. And yet it is through such mediations of godhood that we must seek salvation).

In Open House Roethke does not yet feel things in his

bones and veins. The veins in his hands are reminders that he is as rooted as a tree, as sedentary, as mortal. In "Interlude" an impending storm brings with it an exhilerating sense of chaos drawing nigh. The wind (that which "roars in the trees" and turns the house of "Mid-Country Blow" into a ship in a raging sea) suddenly becomes very powerful and out of control. It rips leaves off the trees and throws them "in confusion on the land." Chaos builds up, hour by hour, and the narrator anticipates a rainstorm, as some form of climactic release. But the storm does not materialize; the tension (sexual) is not relieved; the usual stasis reasserts itself..

> The rain stayed in its cloud; full dark
> came near;
> The wind lay motionless in the long grass.
> The veins within our hands betrayed our fear.
> What we had hoped for had not come to pass. (CP, p. 6)

The promise of liberation is frustrated. And the rather odd line about "the veins in our hands" (echoed in the very next poem "Orders for the Day") implies that the liberation which the poet anticipates is in some way a liberation from the bonds of flesh and ancestry. The inclusion of these veined hands in a poem about upheaval in the natural order is a little incongruous--like the place of a human being in a world. The phenomenological stance is the very opposite of that in "In Praise of Prairie" where "distance is familiar as a friend./The feud we kept with space comes to

an end." (CP, p. 12) It is more in keeping with "Against Disaster":

> The flat land has become a pit
> In which I am beset by harm[.] (CP, p. 18)

Beleaguered by ghosts, snarled up in his own veins, the poet of Open House simultaneously reinforces his ramparts and cries out for deliverance. He advocates a paranoid program of self-preservation in "Reply to Censure":

> Repulse the staring eye,
> The hostile gaze of hate,
> And check the pedantry
> Of those inveterate
>
> Defamers of the good.
> They mock the deepest thought,
> Condemn the fortitude
> Whereby true work is wrought. (CP, p. 19)

What are we defending? Something more precious than the crown jewels: the individuated self, the spirit ("should we say the self, once perceived, becomes the soul?" OPC, p. 21). Here the spirit is something condensed and pure. It is a fragile essence, always in danger of "defilement." The defense of that substance is a priority:

> Though just men are reviled
> When cravens cry them down,
> The brave keep undefiled
> A wisdom of their own.
>
> The bold wear toughened skin
> That keeps sufficient store
> Of dignity within,
> And quiet at the core. (CP, p. 19)

Reading this we have the eerie sense that the poem itself is the poet's fortification: not so much an extension of the soul--a delicate member projected into the world where it is vulnerable and apt to be pruned back--as a vessel designed to preserve the soul. The linguistic surface of this poem is impenetrable. The opposing agencies are not identified. Who are these defamers of good? The kinds of people who might criticize a poem? The Castrating Father? The entities are made perfectly abstract by a variety of simple circumlocutory motions. The definite article does not single out any particular thing but raises before us a host of generic forms: the "staring eye," the "hostile gaze of hate," the "bold." There is nothing like a central image or a "real object" to anchor the terminology. We do not know what it is that makes the just man just. The accuser is "hateful," "pedantic," "mocking," "craven" and "corrupt"; yet he has no existence except as the empty space in which these adjectives convene. The poem, in other words, is unusually thick-skinned. It repulses our staring eye like a lens so heavily tinted that only vague shapes and broad outlines can be perceived through it. The core of the poem is blurred. Its surface, however, is very clear.

The diffusion of abstractions in the rhymed poems of Open House recalls in some ways the accretive proliferation

of objectless images in the Love Poems of Words for the Wind. There, as here, the parts of the poem rarely coalesce into an identifiable something; they refract our interpretative consciousness like diamonds and frustrate the attempt to focus. But whereas the abstractions of Open House attempt to speak in some traditional language of the emotions (and, failing at that, come across as repressive structures, inadequate to their burden)--"flawed stylistically by [their] cryptic and disjunctive quality," Mary H. Hayden writes[5]--those of Words for the Wind are abstract in the way a painting can be. They allow the wordy surface, at which level the poem "is," to merge imperceptibly with its contents, at which level the poem "means." Because of this they may be described as essentially Post-Modernist.

Notes to Chapter VI.

[1]cf. Mary H. Hayden, "Poetry of the Constricted Self," pp. 119-21; p. 125.

[2]Blessing, p. 40.

[3]D. H. Lawrence, "The Ship of Death," The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto & Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1964) vol. ii, p. 720.

[4]Malkoff, p. 126; Bowers, p. 135; Harry Williams, The Edge is What I have, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 146

[5]Mary H. Hayden, "Poetry of the Constricted Self," in Northwest Review, 11, No.3 (1971), p. 119.

VII. Stone/Water

the Wall

To arise from the River, the Diorite Stone

Charles Olson
Causal Mythology, p. 10

The first stone in the Collected Poems is the rock to which thought's motion is moored in "Death Piece." There, the stone occupies its traditional symbolic niche as an emblem of death. In that poem the head-stone is actually a stone head, a skull impervious to sensory experience and incapable of cognitive activity. This is stone in its primary form as the end of all questioning. Nothing is less "thought" than stone. A stone finishes the debate: it is what Samuel Johnson kicks in order to "refute Berkeley, thus." It localizes the real, the inescapable, the unchanging, the infertile, the insentient, the inanimate. It has no soft living interior; it is all shell.

The next stone in Open House appears in "The Adamant," and there supplies the concrescence of an abstract quality, Truth. And in this instance stone (or Truth) is something to be admired for its irreducibility, its resistance to corrosion. It does not grow, it is as sterile as the paranoid soul of "Open House." It is indestructible.

Stone, too, is the material out of which battlements are constructed. And Roethke's ambivalent longing for "singleness of spirit" (CP, p. 23) is in one sense at least the death wish--a misplaced enamorment of the inanimate (we have already discussed this in terms of narcissism and the defensive posture of the self-involved self, the "minions of benzedreine and paraldehyde").1 And we have that strange equation that Roethke makes in "Open Letter": "Onanism equals death" (OPC, p. 40) Norman O. Brown discusses masturbation in terms of death and petrification:

> ...[T]o be 'turned to stone' by the sight of something means to be fascinated by it. The child is stiff, with the actual inability to move, the rigidity which comes over someone who suddenly sees something terrifying. But the rigidity is also the erection of his penis. The child is petrified. Petrification as death represents erection seen through the mirror of anxiety.[2]

The dead man's stone monument is the exhibitionist's erection--an impotent prominence (Ozymandias exhorting the living to look on, and despair). The "impetuous, impotent dead" (as Ezra Pound named them) are transfixed by the living, with whom they cannot interact. Likewise, the narcissistic self, dedicated to an inadequate consummation of its love, is consumed by its love. We have already seen how the "ritualists of the mirror" are spiritually dead. The spare spirit is that stone of selfhood immobilized by its own anxieties ("The soul is a penis").[3] So: sexuality--or any act of simple perception, improperly

directed--is death. Not seen in the "mirror of anxiety," the erection is that kind of spirit which can "grow gracefully like a tendril, like a flower." The sterility of stone is such that it cannot nurture the tendrilous spirit. Stone is a compacted soil, the medium of growth made imperforate. Roots cannot penetrate "this stony rubbish" so they encircle it.

> I lived with deep roots once:
> Have I forgotten their ways--
> The gradual embrace
> Of lichen around stones?
> Death is a deeper sleep,
> And I delight in sleep. (CP, p. 134)

The two sleeps--"living" death and "dead" death--meet. Out of the one comes (we hope) spritual life. Out of the other comes the next generation. And a living person, made up out of dust or clay or whatever traditional mélange, is literally rooted in "rock," sprouting ex nihilo, full-blown, improbable, out of a death which precedes and succeeds him. The rock-rooted rose of "The Rose" is his emblem (CP, p. 205):

> 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 on the wildest wave alive,
> And yet was still.
> And I rejoiced in being what I was:
> In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,

> In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
> With all the air to greet him as he flies,
> The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;
>
> 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. (CP, p. 205)

It may be the original platitude, as old as the first clay-man to wake up in the Earthly Paradise, that we are a binary compound of matter and spirit. The "Sententious Man" puts it as follows (no more sententiously than Roethke himself--the dramatic irony seems an afterthought):

> Spirit and nature beat in one breast bone--
> I saw a virgin writhing in the dirt--
> the serpent's heart sustains the loveless stone:
> My indirection found direction out.
>
> Pride in fine lineaments precedes a fall;
> True lechers love the flesh, and that is all.
> (CP, p. 126)

This is one of the Love Poems in Words for the Wind, which means merely that there is a "she" on whom all the sententiousness focusses--or, to be precise, does not focus, for she is alternately dissolved and reconstituted in a dozen different forms, no one of which is the center of attention for more than a single line. The end-stopped lines in which Roethke specialized perfectly mimic his morphology of the flesh. The lines are all as discrete and self-contained as proverbs but waves of association ripple through them, making them "one."

This, as it happens, is also the main theme of all the

Love Poems. Matter, seen as a plurality of particles--of pebbles and grains--is animated by the motive power of love, perception, the spirit. Wiggly matter, true lechery in snakes and rivers, redeems the "loveless stone," suspended in its own haecceitas. The waves that "repeat the mind's slow sensual play" make one thing out of many:

> I know the motion of the deepest stone
> Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone.
> (CP, p. 127)

Imagistically, the female Other of the love poems is more fractured than a Picasso. Her shape is the shift between shapes:

> My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
> Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
> Or one lip quiver with a mobile nose
> (She moved in circles, and those circles moved).
> (CP, p. 122)

She is water ("She moves as water moves" CP, p. 124). He too is water. And they are both, to use one of Roethke's favourite dyads, stones in the stream.

It is Roethke's explosion of the creation myth: man, woman, serpent and stone. The stone is this world an sich--"Big Stone" as Charles Olson names it. The serpent is anima mundi, matter at large. The fall is a perpetual re-enactment of the collision of the one self with the other, and the ensuing chaos, and the ensuing re-emergence of form, and the ensuing dissolution of that form. Spirit and nature beat in one breast bone: Genesis is not a

moment. It is a pulse, a rhythm, a wave. (Ordinarily the waves are in the water and the stones just stay put: "I know the backstream's joy, and the stone's eternal pulseless longing." (CP, p. 84) But in the (pro)creative reciprocity of love the "joy" is also in the stones: "Staring at a tree, I felt the pulse of a stone.")

Serpent and stone meet again in the little poem "Snake":

> I saw a long snake slide
> Out of the mottled shade
> And hang, limp on a stone:
> A thin mouth, and a tongue
> Stayed, in the still air. (CP, p. 144)

The stone is background, a prop to support a snake. Snake on stone: a simple juxtaposition, limber life raised against stoney lifelessness. The third element is the conscious human onlooker who projects himself into the snake.

> I felt my slow blood warm
> I longed to be that thing
> The pure, sensuous form.
> And I may be sometime. (CP, p. 144)

That "pure, sensuous form" is of interest to the narrator's own "tendrilous" spirit precisely because it is ultimately physical, because it exists so close to the Aristotelian boundary between bios and geos (a line that is itself subject to redefinition), because it is alive at a level so nearly that of the rock against which it is depicted. The

rudimentary "sensual" life of the snake and the high-level "spiritual" life of the man begin to seem alike. And the questing spirit that gravitates toward God is not just metaphorically but quite literally identical to a slug, snail, snake burrowing through the materia of the Natural World. The snake: emblem of a primary ductility existing in contradistinction to a primary lithicity in which the stone participates. But what emerges finally is a crude evolutionary family tree in which the snake stands midway between man and stone. Life and death, in other words, are not opposites but extremes in a continuum. And self-conscious human life--life par excellence--exists at a point so far removed from death that it is death all over again: in life.

What this means is that when the poet reminds us that we are clay or the food of worms (a venerable poetic tradition) the consequences are not merely moral, conducing to humility, but profoundly existential. It is the hubris of the intelligent clay that it thinks up a class distinction between mind and matter. The taxonomical impulse, which segments the Ouroboros of the natural world, is "deathly," like all forms of analysis. Its opposite is metaphor which couples separate identities and calls them One. In poetic composition the lines "between" are blurred, and things assume new shapes. In Roethke's poetry, stone, the most reliably inert of substances, continually suffers dramatic changes in its elemental

character:

> I stared and a garden stone
> slowly became the moon. (CP, p. 118)
> .....
> Reached for a grape
> And the leaves changed;
> A stone's shape
> Became a clam. (CP, p. 59)
> .....
> The stones sang
> The little ones did.
> And flowers jumped
> Like small goats. (CP, p. 49)
> .....
> The stones leap in the stream[.] (CP, p. 119)
> .....
> And things throw light on things
> And all the stones have wings. (CP, p. 142)
> .....
> Near the graves of the great dead
> Even the stones speak. (CP, p. 170)
> .....
> The stones rang with light sound[.] (CP, p. 229)

In the Horatian poetic tradition the artist respects the natural order and claims only as much "license" as an audience of temperate appetites will give him. Birds may sing, fish may leap in the stream; and when they do, all is as it should be. But Roethke is everything that Horace ridicules, a poet who acts like a wild bear:

> [W]hatever, he is mad; and as a bear
> that has managed to break the opposing
> bars of his cage, he sends everybody
> running, learned and unlearned alike, with his
> horrible readings.[4]

That passage from The Art of Poetry describes Roethke rather well. In "Four for Sir John Davies" Roethke even likens himself to a bear, a captive bear who (perhaps

unable to break the bars) has taught himself to dance in his cage:

> But what I learned there, dancing all alone
> Was not the joyless motion of a stone. (CP, p. 101)

Roethke claims absolute latitude for himself, the right to make "fierce things...associate with peaceful" and "snakes couple with birds or tigers with lambs."[5] Creation is not a classifying process. It is copulatory: "By lust alone we keep the mind alive." (CP, p. 235) It is a diffuse kind of lust, embracing not only sexual desire but the apprehension of objects and the yearning for salvation. Lust is merely the "motion" of the mind toward otherness, toward that state in which the granular self can "lose [its] identity to a pebble." (CP, p. 84) The creative principle is seen as a re-negotiation of boundaries. Rock and earth form a channel through which a river flows. But the river alters the channnel too, cutting new channels through which it is forced to flow. (Wittgenstein uses the same image to describe how language functions.)[6] It is a reciprocal altering. "Mist alters the rocks" says the Old Woman (CP, p. 166); but "Love alters all" (CP, p. 130). Love is just a word for lust resolved, a mutual enlightenment ("light altered light along the living ground" CP, p. 102). In this condition the "motions of the soul" are answered by strange motions of the world:

> 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. (CP, p. 130)

To be "in" love is to be out of anywhere. Love denies locality: it is not a state of the psyche but a motion, a motion that animates everything, everywhere, all the time. To say "God is love" is to say "everything is everything" or "I am that I am," a tautology that dissolves the focus, blends the object with its noun. Love is not accessible to a centripetal consciousness <u>of</u>. When reflected back upon it vanishes like Orpheus' Eurydice. Roethke retells that myth his own way in "Memory."

> A doe drinks by a stream
> A doe and its fawn
> When I follow after them
> The grass changes to stone. (CP, p.136)

Love is everywhere, but interlaminated with death. Reflective consciousness, consciousness which "looks back," cannot cross over those gulfs. Time divides thought from afterthought, the unmediated perception from the articulated reminiscence, and inscribes its <u>noli me tangere</u> not only on the beloved but on the phenomenon of love itself. The word confines by defining. It is like the Chapel in Blake's "Garden of Love" with "'Thou shalt not' writ over the door." Turning back to the Garden of Love the experienced speaker of Blake's poem finds closed gates

and gravestones where he "used to play on the green."[7] But it is the turning back which sees them there. We cannot recapture the immediacy of innocence by convections of the soul's centrifugal journey away from itself. If Roethke recovers his lost Eden it will be because, like Eliot in "Ash Wednesday," he "does not hope to turn again."

Notes to Chapter VII.

[1]Anthony Libby points out that stones do not necessarily indicate the presence of a "death wish". Stones can have a fluid character:

> "Confronting [Roethke's] lithic preoccupation critics tend to discover death wishes in Roethke...But to identify with stones is not necessarily escapist or self-destructive; it can be the logical end of a particularly visceral sort of mysticism...Though the lithic experience seems as close to the experience of unchanging timelessness as the resolutely earthbound poet can come, at the same time stones...are physically part of the constant flow of matter, dissolving and dissolving in accord with the earth's reverberations." (p. 280)

[2]Norman O. Brown, Love's Body, (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 68.

[3]p. 51

[4]Horace, The Art of Poetry, trans. Burton Raffel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974), p. 62.

[5]pp. 43-4

[6]Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 15.

[7]William Blake, "The Garden of Love" in Blake: Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 215.

VIII. Centrifuge

"...But you are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence[.]"
H. G. Wells, The Time Machine

Only
The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
He can turn the wheel on which he turns. (SF, p. 166)

The notion of the spirit as the "quiet core," the eye of the storm, a place of silence and fixity in an environment that is active, threatening, noisy, changing: this is the opposite of the spirit as the lively seeker, the young shoot, probing at every chink in the dark stillness of inanimate nature. But the basic antinomy persists, although the subject and the object switch roles within it. Sometimes the spirit is rigid, crystalline, stoney, pure, and the world outside is a streaming flux. Sometimes the reverse is true and the spirit rages within its own walls. In "Silence" Roethke renders account of a psychic tintinnabulation that is present to nobody but the poet himself:

There is a noise within the brow
That pulses undiminished now
.....
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. (CP, p. 21)

We see again the living interment of "Death Piece." The poet is cut off from his world, incapable of speech. The brow-boundary--an externalization of the speaker's psychic detachment--is too thick, the "lines" of connection too thin. The poetic line, as lifeline, should save the isolated man. But the poem itself is too insubstantial a link. The poet does not cry out, he merely laments his own incapacity to cry out. We hear, loudly enough, a voice saying, in effect, "no one can hear me," but it is that voice which drowns out the other.

This is a classic example of the "repressentational" stage of poetic utterance, at which the speech is in conflict with its own motives. The poet uses a method we might call "centripetal" because it speaks "about" rather than "from" experience. The experiencing self "about" which it speaks is mute, suspended in the description that is made of it, silent.

> 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. (CP, p. 21)

Silence is always the ground on which a poetic figure is raised. The rhythmical utterance is perforated with

silences, and the text is a structure which alternately raises and represses elements taken from a reservoir of possibilities, conveniently referred to as the unconscious. Entity is salvaged from nonentity, the discrete appears against the continuous. The agent of this selective disclosure is the attention, the directed consciousness of reader and writer. There is something "in" the text only if there is someone to see it there. For Roethke, the poetic self "lives" through dialogue. There is speech if there is a listener.

The poem itself sometimes presents a barricade to true utterance. The tight forms of "Open House" owe allegiance to the examples of the past--the past in which the poet is so frequently imprisoned and from which he so earnestly desires to be delivered. The poem becomes the repository of the poet's remains after he has passed on or passed onward into his own living future, leaving his former selves to persist only in their recorded utterances. The poem is that out of which the poet's voice either succeeds or does not succeed in being heard. To the extent that it succeeds it "sings." And when Roethke refers to such singing he is usually referring to a sort of transcending motion making the static or dead thing, immured in its own outlines, surpass itself, reach beyond itself, speak. It is an event that in the corpus of Roethke's work is enacted not only by human beings communicating in one or another of th formal artistic constructions but by stones and other

inanimates. (Stones, as we have already noted, are Roethke's favourite image of impenetrable deadness. When such as these succeed in "singing" or "flying" or switching skins with a human onlooker it means that a kind of triumphal tropism has occurred. The thingiest thing has surpassed itself; to surpass oneself is to "live"; to "live" is to "sing.") The poem, constellated out of dead matter, has this capacity to make the poet live again (the act of reading gives new life to the poet just as the purest act of perception vivifies the inanimate thing--it is a reciprocal illumination: "...things throw light on things,/And all the stones have wings." CP, p. 142) But equally often the poetic form, inherited along with the ancestral estate and a load of old moral debts, is the poet's tomb, the final resting place of his passions, his dreams, his voice. (If it were not already so, the act of critical analysis finalizes it. To Roethke, criticism kills, as surely as "good" reading resurrects).

The poem "Genesis" is ambiguous enough in its treatment of the theme of "creation" to stand for the making of a poem and also its re-making at the hands of the reader.

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. (CP, p. 17)

Roethke does not say what elemental force. The "central grain" around which new meaning is secreted may be seen as any percept lodged in the mind of a conscious perceiver (it is an essentially idealist, Kantian conception of world interacting with mind to produce newness).[1] What the mind "receives" has no solidity; it is fluid, elemental, amorphous, "flooding": in short, there is a fluid which can be encapsulated in a hard vessel of some kind ("narrow bone," the "rind," the "mind") and transmitted from one such vessel to another. If the fluid is, for example, "being," then in its fluid state it may pass freely between a poet and his world. If it is the poet's own "meaning" then this can be locked in the narrow bone of his poem and unlocked in the sun/mind of his readership. The fluid in its container, the soul in its body, the tenor in its vehicle: when the vessel has "life" in it, its center, its "central grain," is liquid, formless, pre-rational, unconscious, silent. The fluid should be removable. The soft center of the seed emerges as a sprout; the poem "sings."

This model of creation does not affix any one time or locality to Genesis. Creation is a continual transference of "elemental forces" between forms. Wherever forms change

there is life. Life without growth is an impossibility. A poem which did not grow would be silence.

The poet speaks "out" of that silence (the preconscious from which the intuitive "bloodthinker" derives his matter). When the besieged self (the isolated, insulated self of "Silence," "quiet at the core") turns to address his other he achieves simultaneously his release and a new state of imprisonment (the leap between states). The poet accomplishes self-transcendence in that centrifugal gesture: not speaking "about" but speaking "out." In Roethke's terms, reason, as we have seen, is circumscriptive. It spirals in toward the quiet centre of truth hoping to compel it to speak. The often misread "The Adamant" is about the assault of "thought" (that is "abstract" thought) on Truth. The assault comes from without and is rebuffed by an impenetrable skin (of a sort analogous to that which the narrator of "Silence" exhorts his listeners to grow). But the campaign is unsuccessful (the implication is perhaps that Truth reveals herself only to a passive listening, to the intuition which itself moves backward/outward rather than forward/inward).

> 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. (CP, p. 9)

The "teeth of knitted gears" that "turn slowly through the night" recall the "wheels of circumstance" that "grind/So terribly within the mind" in "Silence." (CP, p. 21) The circular, grinding motion aligns ratiocination with machinery. It is a traditional romantic equation: reason = machine, intuition = animal. "Crane's assumption: the machine is important; we must put it in our lives, make it part of our imaginative life. Answer: the hell it is. An ode to an icebox is possible since it contains fruit and meat." (SF, p. 239)

We might think of the cogs that carry the good-smelling vegetables in "Pickle Belt," where a young man, "prickling with all the itches / Of sixteen-year-old lust," is plugged into a tedious and repetitive task. (CP, p. 44) The machine-cages we build to convey living tissue from place to place present only the illusion of motion. The motion is routine, and leads nowhere (like the narcissistic self-reflection of the "ritualists of the mirror" in "Her Becoming." Machine motions and institutional thing-obsessed thinking do not lead the self out of itself. The motion is the very opposite of growth, a "perpetual agitation."

The man-made wheel (to be distinguished from the "slow wheel of the stars") does not convey its passengers into

any kind of an "elseness." The poem "Highway: Michigan" provides a picture of people struggling to escape from themselves in vehicles of their own making. The poem can be read as a parable of ratiocination.

> Acceleration is their need:
> A mania keeps them on the move
> Until the toughest nerves are frayed.
> They are the prisoners of speed
> Who flee in what their hands have made. (CP, p. 31)

However, there is real escape in death:

> The pavement smokes when two cars meet
> And steel rips through conflicting steel.
> We shiver at the siren's blast.
> One driver, pinned beneath the seat,
> Escapes from the machine at last. (CP, p. 31)

The flight from oneself is undertaken in the wrong vehicle: a car going forward rather than one's own body dancing backward. The forward motion centres the objective, sets the destination. But the arrival at that destination (self-escape, discovery of other) is paradoxically only possible through a de-centering of the attention, the centrifugal gesture. In "Prayer Before Study" the poet expresses a desire to "put off myself and flee/ My inaccessibility" (CP, p. 23). But that poem is not the realization of his purpose, the flight from the <u>flight from</u>. It is a prayer:

> Deliver me, O Lord, from all
> Activity Centripetal. (CP, p. 23)

Eventually--in such poems as The "Meditations of an Old Woman," "The Far Field" and "Journey to the Interior"--Roethke undertakes that "long journey out of the self" in earnest. By way of the usual paradox, that voyage out turns out to be an inward journey. The Old Woman who thinks of herself as "riding--/Alone on a bus through western country," and observes that "all journeys...are the same:/The movement is forward," soon finds herself moving, not forward at all, but "backward/Backward in time." (CP, p. 152) All journeys are indeed the same, because the way in is out, the way out is in, and the way forward is back. For Roethke's symbolic purposes in these later poems the "car" is a perfect means of conveyance. He is not the prisoner of its speed, just as he is no longer the prisoner of his own body's acceleration toward death. The final drive he dreams of in "The Far Field" does not end with steel ripping through "conflicting steel." It ends in an almost beatific resignation, with the car stalled, "Churning in a snowdrift/ Until the headlights darken." (CP, p. 193) "I am renewed by death, thought of my death," he writes in the third section of that poem. Roethke has arrived at a satisfactory formulation for his "thoughts" of death. It no longer matters which way the soul travels. The loss of one place or condition is the discovery of another. "Body and soul are one!" (CP, p. 242)

Notes to Chapter VIII

[1]Jay Parini, pp. 3-16.

IX. Where Knock is Open Wide

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

Henry David Thoreau, Walden

"Altitude these chimney simplify." None of the words in that phrase is unintelligible. Their incomprehensibility lies in the implicit claim that, together, they form a sentence. The fact that "Where Knock is Open Wide" presents itself, in the conventional way, as a poem, defines the kind of intelligibility we expect of it (and which Jerome Mazzaro says is missing from this and all the Praise to the End! poems, even though Roethke is reported to have written "careful outlines" for each of them).[1] So far, I have not taken much interest in individual poems as coherent arrangements of symbols. But if we are to read the poem in its natural sequence, from the title down, we must understand the way symbols have of altering and informing each other within the freestanding text, merely by virtue of being grouped together. Obviously the setting in which the symbol occurs must govern our reaction to it. Roethke comments in his

notebook: "Response to the image is not free but controlled by the context. The incongruous response--a common fault." (SF, p. 175)

Avoiding the incongruous response to a poem like "Where Knock is Open Wide" is probably impossible. In that poem the context has so little control over the images that one critic sees the "ears" of the third stanza as belonging to the cat in the first;[2] while another critic takes it for granted that they belong to the father of the poem's child narrator.[3] (I will try to show how they may belong to both, insofar as the cat is linked symbolically to the worm, the fish and child, and therefore, by a very circuitous route of connection, to the father as well).

In this case it is precisely the lack of a detailed context that most strongly shapes these images. If the poet has not specified to whom the "ears" are attached we certainly should not treat this as an oversight. The outlines of this "whom" are explicitly diffuse. We will never know how tall he is or whether he smokes a pipe.

Yet this whom and his ears are not a mystery. His role in "Where Knock is Open Wide" is plain enough, in light of everything else that is going on in the poem. But we must read him, like the monsters of Revelations, as a symbolic agglomerate. What we must avoid is inventing a false context to frame his "individuality."

The remaining pages of this chapter deal with the

symbols in "Where Knock is Open Wide," the first poem of Praise to the End! cycle as Roethke arranged it in Words for the Wind. I will begin where it begins.

> A kitten can
> Bite with his feet. (CP, p. 67)

Here is a generalization about kittens which is also an observation about "a kitten." It is not that "all kittens must" or that any particular kitten necessarily does. The indefinite article is used as it is in proverbs ("A leopard can't change his spots"; "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush") to marry the general with the particular. It is not pure generalization, as in: "A kitten can/ Communicate rabies." Nor is it a case of plain observation like: "A kitten/ Is biting my foot." It is a figure of speech; an original figure of speech.

It is clear that "a kitten" means something different than "this kitten." It may be less obvious that it means something different than "kittens" or "any kitten." It is a construction that Roethke uses repeatedly, especially in the initial poems of the Praise to the End! cycle, as they are published in Words for the Wind.

> A real hurt is soft.
> . . . .
> A worm has a mouth.
> . . . .
> A ghost can't whistle.
> . . . .
> A hat is a house.
> . . . .
> A pick likes to hit ice.

. . . .
A swan needs a pond.

The lines resonate like proverb. But they also read (and the cues for this are not syntactical but semantic) as naive observation, as the most rudimentary type of abstraction, as the child's (mis)perceptions of reality. There are lines constructed differently that we read in much the same way: "My father is a fish." The fish, or the father, in that phrase is read symbolically. There will almost certainly be a carry over from that reading to the next instance of the word fish so that when we come to "I was sad for a fish./Don't hit him on the boat, I said." we allow this fish--a character in the narrator's reminiscence--to be taken as a symbol, perhaps of the speaker himself and his desire for salvation: "Fish me out. Please."

Our first problem in the poem is what to do with the kitten. Our first solution, based on what we already know about Roethke's habits of symbolization, is that the kitten is a "lower life form" and therefore belongs with the worm and the hedgewren in the broad symbolic category of the proto-human. Kitten is to cat as child to adult, so we are encouraged to think of the kitten as an externalization of the speaker's regression. It is a "sinuous" form, like the snake. Later in the poem, in the section where the narrator "falls," Roethke writes: "The worm has moved

away." In the simplest terms that kitten is that worm, and it is also the snake at the end of the section: "I'll be a bite. You be a wink./Sing the snake to sleep."

At one level the fall is growth out of sinuosity. The kitten can bite with his feet, but "Papa and Mama/ Have more teeth." Kitten and narrator alike are pre-predatory. They are creatures, like the mouse in the third section of the poem or the meadowmouse of "The Meadowmouse," which "live by courtesy of the shrike, the snake, the tom-cat." (CP, p. 219) The kitten will live to become a cat, a predator in its own right. And the narrator will fall from the idyllic circumstances of his childhood into a toothy adulthood.

We already know enough to suspect that there is more going on in the initial stanza than an attempt to "mime the thought processes of a very small child."[4] That the protagonist is a child (as Roethke confirms in public remarks about the sequence)[5] has given some critics an apparent rationale for not investigating the specific contents of the text too deeply. Norman Chaney has this to say about the poem: "The first stanza reflects a free play of mental associations."[6] Chaney does not notice any symbolic values. He does not even acknowledge that they are there. For him the poem documents a psychological condition, that of the child, and records a series of actual or fictional events as seen through the eyes of that (actual or fictional) child. He quotes the stanza and then

goes on: "Some rational power is indeed operative in a child's world where the painful 'Bite' of a cat's feet is somehow associated with the 'teeth' of Papa and Mamma. (Perhaps the child has been playfully bitten by a parent!)"[7] The "somehow" in the above sentence betrays Chaney's tactics. Why delve into the "how" of the association--a child's mind is one of "immediacy and feeling." The mechanism of his associations is a pure mystery because "the laws of reason do not dominate."[8] Psychobiography cannot supply a detailed account of that which makes the child's associations "necessary." The most Chaney's method can offer is the fatuity of a parenthetical "perhaps," effectively dismissing the whole question.

Chaney is not the only writer to beg this question. Ralph Mills observes that Roethke "establishes his atmosphere with childlike perception," quotes the passage and then goes on to discuss the "archetypal symbolism of the tree in the fourth stanza."[9] Rosemary Sullivan's psychobiographical approach is not equipped to deal with lines like those of the first stanza, so she slips to the third, saying: "The poems begins with a narrative incident, the father's refusal to sing the child a lullaby--'His ears haven't time.'"[10] Having found "firm ground" in the form of a real event (or the protagonist's distortion of a real event) she then jumps back to the first stanza and explains that the child, hurt by his father's neglect, "tries to order the chaos of his feelings

by analogy."[11] She sees all the teeth and biting in terms of parental rejection (which is, I think, quite accurate, though it is only one facet of the matter): "Here pain and teeth have become synonymous. Mama and Papa have deeply hurt the child; therefore they have more teeth. They have effectively said: Sit and play/ Under the rocker/ Until the cows/ All have puppies."[12] The explanation of the second stanza is an unexpected bonus. Told to go and sit under the rocker the young protagonist has opted--resentfully, perhaps, to sing his own lullaby.

This may or may not be a "correct" picture of the events the child is (indistinctly) seeing. But in any case it has little bearing on our interpretation of the passage, for the lines do not refer narrowly, as through a microscope, to one reality, but telescopically outward to a plurality of them.

The lines about the kitten "biting" with his feet are not merely a result of the child's inadequate vocabulary, but a metaphorical response to the limits that a pure vocabulary imposes on the experience it articulates. A lexicon restricts one to the few thousand words contained on it. But metaphor--and any figure of speech that violates the lexical extension of a word--liberates an infinity of uses to which a word may be put. Catachresis, the rawest rhetorical figure, involves a deliberate misapplication of terms in our finite vocabulary.

"Biting with the feet" is not, after all, synonymous

with "scratching." It invites us to wonder about the implications of "biting" in general. It supplies a connotative window in the denotative continuum of the proposition.

What does "biting" do here that would make us want to see the kitten in terms of it? We have already touched upon the "predation" imagery in the poem. A child is too young to bite. A parent is one who has the power to bite. Biting is power, certainly. And it is judgement--the power to "castrate" in Freudian terms. Biting invites us to think of mouths. Above all the mouth represents the power to surround and incorporate portions of reality. Through it we return again to the kind of threatening enclosure that preoccupies Roethke in Open House. The"Mama" of "Where Knock is Open Wide" is the very "devouring mother" who cries "Escape me? Never!" in "Prognosis." In musing on Papa and Mama's teeth the child is contemplating the mysterious potency of his progenitors. That potency is enacted, as we have seen, in parental rejection, and in the severing of ties. The "biting" here has some of the same symbolic meanings as the cutting of "Cuttings." The stems are cut from the main stalk as the Lost Son is cut off from his father. It is also, at some metaphorical distance, the Biblical Fall. The potency of the parent consists in two things. It is in his capacity to reject the child ("His ears haven't time" leads to the prayer, iterated in a thousand ways throughout Roethke's mature verse: "God give

me a near.") And it is in his capacity to imprison the child, to prevent escape, to limit his growth. The two channels of power present contradictory threats: the threat of entanglement in the umbilicus and the threat of the disseverment of parental ties. In the child's universe these have the status of natural laws. They are the givens of the time-bound world at the entrance (womb) of which stands the Janus-faced parent, Provider and Judge.

The themes of predation and biting are picked up several times in the poem. The world into which the child has been introduced is a dangerous place. It is a place, as the child discovers in Section 2, from which it is possible to "go for always," that is, to die. (CP, p. 68) Time is Edax Rerum, the all-devouring, the world-parent in its most voracious guise. In the third section the narrator declares: "a worm has a mouth." That worm, in one sense the familiar Elizabethan "conqueror worm" is also the parent, the ancestral form ("My father is a fish") that not only engenders the child but threatens to engulf him. The kitten with which the poem begins is, like the worm, an ambivalent figure, one that is small, sensuous, and vulnerable, but which has this latent potency--a potency which the child is beginning to discover in himself. (The worm is not only an eater, it is bait for another "minimal" life form, the fish, which is in turn both prey and predator). Having observed that a worm has a mouth the speaker goes on:

Who keeps me last?
Fish me out.
Please.

The easiest answer to the speaker's question is: Death. The other answer is: God. He formulates a sort of prayer and his prayer, thankfully, is heard. He is "fished out" (momentarily) from the river of time:

God give me a near. I hear flowers.
A ghost can't whistle.
I know! I know!
Hello happy hands. (CP, p. 69)

The speaker has a sort of revelation. In that moment of grace flowers exceed their flowerhood and become audible. A ghost, on the other hand, can't whistle, presumably because he has no mouth. The power of convention to silence a flower, or the power of the dead to exert their unnatural influence upon the living, is broken (see my comments on ghosts in chapter six). The Manichaean symmetry of flesh and spirit is transcended. The "happy hands" which lift him out are his father's.

The section which follows picks up the fishing imagery.

We went by the river.
Water birds went ching. Went ching.
Stepped in wet. Over stones.
One, his nose had a frog,
But he slipped out.

I was sad for a fish.
Don't hit him on the boat, I said.

> Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
> Papa threw him back. (CP, p. 69)

The narrator still identifies with the prey and not the predator. He is without power, while his father is all-powerful, indistinguishable from God:

> He watered the roses.
> His thumb had a rainbow.
> The stems said, Thank you.
> Dark came early. (CP, p. 69)

The mist at his father's thumb (a sort of procreative organ) recalls the rainbow of Genesis 9:8 which commemorates Jehovah's promise never again to destroy the world by water.

This Greenhouse world is the "where" of "Where Knock is Open Wide." That domain, which is already vanishing as the poem begins, now disintegrates entirely.

> That was before. I fell! I fell!
> The worm has moved away.
> My tears are tired. (CP, p. 69)

The fall is the fall into <u>this</u> world. It is in some measure "Birth"--birth, that is, into the death of life. The tone is of resignation:

> Nowhere is out. I saw the cold,
> Went to visit the wind. Where the birds die.
> How high is have?
> I'll be a bite. You be a wink.
> Sing the snake to sleep. (CP, p. 69)

The wind which the narrator visits represents the negative

aspect of externality. It is erosive, like time. It is predatory like Nature itself, as in the passage from the "First Meditation" of the Old Woman: "The bleak wind eats at the weak plateau." (CP, p. 151) The speaker in "Old Lady's Winter Words" cherishes a wish to "hold high converse/Where the winds gather." (CP, p. 99) The "converse" she wishes for is an intimate communion with the "sliding externals." But these are hostile:

> The shrunken soil
> Has scampered away on a dry wind. (CP, p. 99)

The wind in "Where Knock is Open Wide" is an image of an external hostility and sterility. It brings to mind the refrain from Ecclesiastes "All is vanity and a striving after wind." (Likewise the snake may echo the serpent in the proverb from Ecclesiastes: "If the serpent bites before it is charmed there is no advantage in a charmer." 11:18). The protagonist finds himself imprisoned in the place that nowhere is out of. This is the place where Knock is not quite Open Wide, the place where all knowledge is mediated and every ocurrence falls apart into acts and consequences.

The fall is a fall into a whole range of new capacities: the capacity to verbalize; the capacity to exercise control over the world, (i.e. to surround and enclose objects conceptually; i.e. to kill). The protagonist's accession to power diminishes the father and mother to a merely human stature. His introduction to time

is his introduction to mortality. In the last section the parents are dwindling. Father is practically a ghost, not the hyperactive ghost that spoils the honeymoon in "Prognosis," but a prisoner of his decaying flesh, a fish out of water.

> Kisses come back,
> I said to Papa;
> He was all whitey bones
> And skin like paper. (CP, p. 69)

Kissing may be contrasted with biting as something that can be done with the mouth. Biting is extremely one-sided (like rational thought, it appropriates its object). But kissing is reciprocal. It symbolizes the state of give and take that Roethke's seeker seeks, and is made of the same symbolic stuff as dancing, dialogue ("high converse"), or sexual congress. The phrase "kisses come back" reflects this reciprocity: a kiss is returned. At the same time it alludes to the idea that time and its events are somehow cyclical (a notion that occurs to the child in the first section: "Everything has been twice.") This seems true when there is a state of identity between one self and another, between the form and the proto-form that engenders it. The child is not only father of the man but, as the reiteration of an ancestral pattern, he is father of his father. He is one with the first father (ontologically, God; phylogenically, a fish; ontogenically, the sperm).

However true, the protagonist's words are no comfort.

As he says in the preceding section: "The worm has moved away." The father-worm slips into oblivion. The other worm--or the other end of the same worm--is the death which consumes the child's parents.

"Where Knock is Open Wide" ends in this world. The poem that began with Mama and Papa's teeth ends with God's house. "Maybe God has a house" raises doubt as to whether there is any word, gesture, symbol, thought or thing that can encompass its first cause. Even if there were, it would not be "here," or any particular where ("God's somewhere else." CP, p. 70). There is no way into that house, or out of this one. At the end of the poem the protagonist is left alone with himself, a differentiated being, a "somebody else," on this side of the wide-open door that is not there.

Notes to Chapter IX

[1]Mazzaro, p. 60.

[2]Denis Donoghue, "Roethke's Broken Music," in Stein, p. 147.

[3]Sullivan, p. 60-61.

[4]Norman Chaney, Theodore Roethke: The Poetics of Wonder (Lanham: University Press of America, 1981), p. 45.

[5]James R. McLeod, "Bibliographic Notes on the Creative Process and Sources of Roethke's 'The Lost Son' Sequence," Northwest Review, 1, 3 (1971), p. 99.

[6]Chaney, p. 45.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ralph J. Mills, Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis: Univ, of Minneapolis Press, 1963), p. 19.

[10]Sullivan, p. 61.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., p. 60.

Conclusions: The Dance

The first line of the last poem in Roethke's last book reads "What's greater, Pebble or Pond?" (CP, p. 243) It is a catechism test for mystics, like "Who cleft the divell's foot?," to be answered by the foolhardy or the inspired. It is Roethke at his most parabolic, most riddling, most heavy-handedly oracular, conjuring the God of all binary systems to choose, once and for all. ("The question was, Where was the Questioner?/ When we abide yet go/ Do we do more than we know...? CP, p. 229) It leads directly into the more familiar query, by implication as unanswerable as the first, and (in a small victory over the dialectical game) promptly answered:

> What can be known? The Unknown. (CP, p. 243)

It is a balanced judgement. The answer dispels exactly as much murk as it makes. More dogmatically than usual, Roethke celebrates the poetic capacity to step free of recursive systems, and yet somehow <u>not</u> to step free at all, but to step first forwards, then backwards, then sideways, learning and executing the steps and measures of a cosmic dance:

> And everything comes to One
> As we dance on, dance on, dance on. (CP, p. 243)

The usual conflation of opposites; a lateral leap over the boundary line from the branched and bifurcating plurality of Order to the oneness of chaos. The dance: a movement that is free, yet controlled, random, yet rhythmical.

The title "Once more the Round" summons to mind the "round" as a traditional form of dance and music, as well as the commonplace perception that things--time, nature and life--move in circles. This provides an unsubtle reminder that what is ostensibly a poem of summation is actually a poem of beginning, of new birth and change. The Heraclitean river sweeps particulars from the scene, yet the form persists. Blake is gone; by the time "The Far Field" is published Roethke will also have passed away; but, in the timeless sphere in which it was possible for Blake to dine with Ezekiel, Roethke and Blake are eternally alive:

> And I dance with William Blake
> For love, for Love's sake. (CP, p. 243)

To read Blake is to dance with him. This dancing is homologous to the dancing that Roethke does with his beloved in the Love poems, with his father in "My Papa's Waltz," and with Yeats in the well-known passage from "Four for Sir John Davies." In "The Dance" Roethke first claims to have learned his dancing all on his own:

> Though dancing needs a master, I had none
> To teach my toes to listen to my tongue.
> But what I learned there, dancing all alone
> Was not the joyless motion of a stone. (CP, p. 101)

But the dance has a continuity that entirely subsumes the dancer (as in Yeats' "Among School Children.") The individual self, the dancer, is to the dance what standing water is to a wave: a medium through which the motion is transmitted. The wave that runs through Roethke in the early nineteen sixties passed through Yeats in the twenties and Blake a century before that. It is in this sense that poetry is supposed to be eternal. This is the real meaning of that passage from "The Dance," so often quoted as an example of Roethke confessing the stylistic "influence" of his great predecessor:

> I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;
> I take it and I give it back again:
> For other tunes and other wanton beats
> Have tossed my heart and fiddled through
> my brain.
> Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how
> That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.
> (CP, p. 101)

A poetic cadence is not merely a stylistic flourish of the sort that a younger poet can admire and copy: it is a pattern of ripples spreading outwards from no known center. It is like the poet's own self which blurs at the edges with everybody else:

> The pure serene of memory in one man--

> A ripple widening from a single stone
> Winding around the waters of the world. (CP, p. 195)

To understand this we must adopt a view of time in which readers and writers stand at intervals, like radio relay stations, receiving and transmitting the true signal of poetry. Poetry is one way for the Self to directly address its Other (or, as we have already decribed it, for the Self-Other to address its other self). This again is the generational continuity that we described earlier in relation to ghosts and parent-figures; and, in another context, the transcendence of the flesh-bound, time-bound ego. This is another form of the principle of "progression through regression." The artist finds his "original" voice in the voices of the past; the child "becomes" his parents as he severs the ties with them. By now these are "founding principles" in Roethke criticism, the substructure of most recent work. And Roethke's own views regarding imitation, which in part deny the "romantic notion of the inspired poet" (OPC, p. 70), validate the view that Roethke's poetry, comes out of the modernist position. The inspired self is not the "source" of the cadence anymore than it is the source and foundation of objective reality (as extreme Idealist philosophy has it). There is a very peculiar poem among the extra, previously unpublished, pieces appended to The Collected Poems, where Roethke puts the dead and the living on equal footing.

This is the poem "Supper with Lindsay," which parallels the dinner with Isaiah and Ezekiel in Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Ezekiel's old query reverberates below the surface of Roethke's light-hearted, slightly manic, poem: "Can these bones live?" And the answer, of course, is that they can.

> When Lindsay bent his head
> Half sideways in the shifting light,
> His nose looked even bigger than it was,
> And one eye gazed askew. "Why, Blake, he's dead,--
> but come to think, they say the same of me."
> (CP, p. 265)

As Vachel Lindsay utters these words a spider drops into sight. Lindsay speculates that it is actually Whitman (Blake would never come back as a spider: "He'd be a worm,/ One of those fat ones winding through a rose.") And the generational continuity of "visionaries" is complete, proceeding in a straight line of ascent from Roethke to Lindsay to Whitman to Blake to Ezekiel to King David (who, Blake's Ezekiel says, believed that "the Poetic Genius...was the first principle and all the other merely derivative...") And, somewhere behind King David, the spider or worm or something lowlier generate the first ripples of our poetic tradition. The reincarnation of one poet in another (cf. Donne's "Metempsychosis") is the interface between the writer and his reader. The process of identification with another is process of resurrection in the same sense as the recognition of the Other is the

salvation of both the self and its contemplated other.

In this paper I have tried to arrive at a way of reading Roethke. Throughout I have tried to be aware of the extent to which Roethke wrote with the prospect of being read uppermost in his mind. (There is a level at which many poems are allegories of the process of communicating through poetry. "I Knew a Woman" can be read this way). If Roethke is sometimes "obscure" it is not because he is manipulating a "private" symbolism. On the contrary, so much of his symbolic vocabulary is common property that he sometimes drifts dangerously close to greeting card cliché. To read Roethke successfully is not to familiarize ourselves with the quirks and habits of one man's mind. It is to develop a picture of one man fitting his individuality (quirks included) into his tradition--a tradition that encompasses both the writers Roethke read (his so-called "influences") and those who will read him.

I accept Jenijoy LaBelle's emphasis on Roethke's tradition, although I think she exercises her method too mechanically. If "No Bird" is unmistakeably connected to Emily Dickinson's "Our journey had advanced," it is nevertheless quite uninformative to pronounce, with Archimidean delight, that it is her epitaph. The lines of connection are far more intricate. Both poems are, to use Roethke's own metaphor, dropped ino the stream of the tradition (which meanders through many a "forest of the

dead," from Virgil to Emerson) and our reading takes place at the very point where the ripples intersect.

To explore the bewildering richness of his cultural inheritance Roethke concocts a special kind of symbolism. As Brendan Galvin observes:

> [R]ather than attempting to invest the time-worn and objective with new life, in the manner of lesser poets, he took the subjective elements of his own experience and made from them a new symbolism.[1]

This symbolism is extraordinarily flexible; so flexible that a symbol such as the Wind can represent both sterility and rebirth. In fact this symbolism is so thickly encrusted with levels of meaning that we might be tempted not to regard it as a symbolism at all. However, the way "wind," "stones," "houses," and "journeys" are used in particular contexts, and the way they recur throughout the poetry, strongly encourages us to draw symbolic correspondences from them. Therefore I have offered a view of this symbolism as a symbolism in flux, a symbolism in an ongoing re-negotiation of boundaries between such quantities as parent and child, interior and exterior, life and death.

A special kind of symbolism, we may reasonably decide, needs a special kind of reading. In this paper I have dwelt at some length on what this kind of reading would be, although my first question has been whether it is necessary at all.

When at lunch somebody asks me to pass them the salt I perform a simple act of interpretation on what, depending on the circumstances, I might take to be a simple request. By use of mental procedures, far more complex than I am competent to analyze, I know how far to advance my interpretation. I can imagine circumstances under which "Pass the salt" would seem to be, for example, a veiled threat. And there are also many situations in which my so interpreting that phrase would serve as strong evidence of my mental instability. My "intuition" may be said to function better for some problems of interpretation than others. If at the dinner table someone whispers to me "This salt can't warm a stone" (CP, p. 82) I am then in a position to question his sanity, or else to doubt that my interpretational modi operandi are functioning adequately.

When we stumble on that line in "Praise to the End!" we are faced with similar dilemma. What salt? What stone? There is nothing in the poem that enables us to derive a "plain" or "literal" value for the phrase. It is at this point that we are forced to adopt one of two attitudes, corresponding to what I have described in this essay as the two main critical approaches to Roethke. We may wade into the symbolism and make what sense we can of the line. Or we may simply describe the kind of poetry we are dealing with, and the kinds of rhetorical strategies the poet is using, assonance, paradox, and so forth. In the first three chapters of this thesis I have examined both

approaches and found neither to be wholly satisfactory. Most critics, in fact, adopt both attitudes, shifting from one to the other at their convenience.

Yet, at the risk of adding incidental absurdities to the poet's deliberate ones, I have expressed a tendency to favor detailed explication of Roethke's symbolism, even to the point of using Karl Malkoff's "line-by-line" method in some places. This method fails to the extent that it imposes a false sequentiality and thematic rigor on Roethke's "associations." It succeeds only to the extent that it operates within Roethke's vision of a perpetually shifting universe of symbols, of which the symbolic language of the poems is only another constituent.

I have tried to recreate Roethke's vision of symbolic equivalences in a world overflowing with meaning. It is perhaps his most central belief that there exists an invisible network of correspondences underlying all the discrete identities of created nature, linking them together ("Everything comes to One.") In moments of illumination Roethke finds he can perceive the (normally concealed) lines of connection between stone and water, between being and not-being, between man and thing. At such times, he writes, "all natural shapes" become "symbolical." That is, language and thing, word and object are reduced to the same essential substance. We might suppose therefore that a revivification of Roethke's mystical vision was needed to read Roethke well. And

indeed it was one of Roethke's most cherished hopes to be revived through such reading. However, we must live with the paradox that the "naive" reading which Roethke himself recommends ceases to be naive the moment we attempt to communicate our findings. If in a flash of intuition we glimpse the aptness of an image or juxtaposition we must then move on to the laboricus business of restoring to the poem the lost logic of its associative jumps.

Bearing the contradictions in mind, I have taken steps toward analyzing some of the main symbols in Roethke's poetry. I have offered a preliminary description of certain families of symbols. There are those I have referred to as "integumental." This class includes shells, houses, and skins. We might also include under this rubric human reason and other "circumscriptive" modes of cognition, and also the symbolizing process itself, by which an idea is "contained" in the shell of an image. I have described another broad class of Roethke's symbols as "filiary." This category would include veins, rivers, roots and shoots, and all symbols tied up with ideas about "time," "growth" and states of connection. I have invented these and other categories--the "fluid," the "conjugal," the "lithic,"--with the intent of providing a simple framework for uniting groups of related ideas.
Throughout this essay I have argued against an excessive preoccupation with Roethke's "position" on issues such as the soul's relationship to the body. Knowing where the

poet stands from one poem to the next does not add much to our comprehension of the symbolism. In some poems the "house" represents the negative aspects of "containment" (the containment of the soul in the body being an example). In others--the so-called "Greenhouse Poems" for instance--the house has a thoroughly positive character. Sometimes it is a womb; sometimes it is a sarcophagus. We do not need to conclude that Roethke's symbolism is, therefore, "inconsistent." On the contrary, it is very consistent indeed, a fact which becomes clear as soon as we realize that Body, House, Tomb, and Womb are symbols of each other, and there is no single thing for which all or any of them may be said "to stand."

This is paradoxical, but paradox is the very stuff of Theodore Roethke's world. To him, the ultimate reality is an Up which is Down, a Back which is Forth, a One which is Everyone. Above all, it is this insight which I have struggled to communicate. The struggle to capture that insight and reformulate it in words of our own is prefigured in the poems. It is the struggle of the Self toward its Other; the struggle of cut stems toward New Life. It is the Dance in the Dark Wood. And it is Genesis, the struggle of all the lightless nothing of Chaos to find expression in a Word:

> The word outleaps the world, and light is all.
> (CP, p. 103)

Notes to the Conclusion

[1]Brendan Galvin, "Theodore Roethke's Proverbs," Concerning Poetry, No. 1, vol. 5, 35.

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