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An Approach to Imagery in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke

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AN APPROACH TO IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

by

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of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
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VITA AUCTORIS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY

It is the purpose of this paper to confirm that Roethke's use of imagery bears the mark of original creative talent as well as human universality which distinguishes the major poet as he restates the human condition for his own generation. This will be done specifically by examining the pattern of his imagery and then by examining in detail a few relevant poems representative of different periods of his development, showing how images typical of his earliest work consistently reappear with enriched significance as the poet's talent and life unfold.

I

The great achievement of modern poetry lies in its exploration of self. Because Roethke deals with the search for self, a personal identity, and the conflict between the ego as individuated and master and the ego as longing for union in the transcendent, he has been accused of dealing with too narrow a world, too small an area of experience to be considered a major poet.¹ However, his very attempts to reconcile the opposing

dynamics of personality illuminate a theme of universal significance and, as realized in the poems, represent an artistic achievement that is unique and enduring.

One who comes to Roethke's work, reading and re-reading it entire in a generally chronological order, is impressed with the balance, variety, growth, and wholeness of the several volumes which constitute his output. One is impressed by the inter-relation and balance between strictly structured verse patterns and free verse, between logical statement and associative, pre-conscious archetype; always there is the integrity of thematic development and a continuing growth toward fulfillment as a poet and a man.

Roethke grew up with the essential substance of his imagery; the cold, wind-swept prairies of the Midwest with their rough terrain and rougher roads. This land he loved held for him at its center the man-organized loveliness of greenhouse sensuality. This structured environment within natural environment, with the opportunity it afforded for witnessing elemental life, growth, and decay, has formed the shaping metaphor of his poetry. The environment has provided not only the images, but also the underlying dialectic which was to be Roethke's way of handling imagery. The inner polarity of his personal universe was objectified in the vital struggle between budding and dying, heat and cold, weeds and flowers.
The imagery is elemental (light, water, roots, flowers), but dense in that it is an organic growth, developing as a bud unfolds. The blossoming flower, nurtured by the underground life of its roots, mirrors for him man's flowering of spiritual awareness, evolved from the sub-human or preconscious life of childhood and infancy. There was for him an underlying order to life; it was provided by his perception of its evolutionary scheme. Showing man's place in the scheme is the achievement of his poetry.

II

The method of illustrating Roethke's achievement is as follows. Chapter two, in presenting a brief summary of Roethke's work, provides the context for the individual poems which will be examined in detail later. The third chapter provides what must be central to the paper, a pattern or schema for his approach to the use of imagery. He is not an imagist (though he probably learned much about recording observations from them), which means his poetry has intellectual or conceptual content; in some poems concepts are suppressed, but they are not absent. In dealing with psychological states and pre-rational life he uses the image to objectify, to verbalize his meaning; thus image is wedded to meaning, as for example the line, "She moved in circles, and those circles moved," an image of his

beloved's ability to beguile into life the atmosphere around her.

A detailed analysis of the poetry begins in chapter four with one of the greenhouse poems,³ "Cuttings, later," which serves as a point of departure to examine the positive growth theme of the psychological biography contained in The Lost Son and Praise to the End. In this cycle Roethke delineates the emergence of the individuated, self-knowing person.

Chapter five examines imagery in certain of the love poems, included among which are "Four for Sir John Davies." The poetry up to this point has described the movement from primal unity toward individuation, and goes on, spiral fashion at a spiritual level, to describe the movement toward the transcendent One, an experience of wholeness first glimpsed in the experience of human love. For Roethke the growth implied in the movement is dependent on the experience of love which makes tangible the beautiful, so that the protagonist who has struggled into manhood now desires union (or more accurately communion) at another, higher level. It is essential to an understanding of Roethke's personal human

³Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Winter, 1950). It is in this essay that the phrase "greenhouse poems" seems first to have been used to designate a related group of short poems which first appeared in The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948).
achievement as well as his artistic distinction to stress the
difference between the primary individuation of self and the
final movement toward the Pure One. His last poems are not
simple re-statements of an accomplished fact (awareness of self)
but an expression of deepening spiritual awareness and receptiv-
ity. 4

Finally, poems from the meditations and the short lyrics
will be considered. It is in these poems of his mature years
that Roethke's imagery reaches its richest development as he
addresses himself to the question of life beyond or outside of
time, the crucial aspect of which is death. It is the medita-
tions in which the search for ultimate meaning is explored.
The final lyrics, some composed within a year of his death, show,
for the most part, a resolution of the issues dealt with in the
meditations. The mature man, in accepting first love and then
death, comes to learn what eternity is.


4Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry
(New York: Pantheon, 1953), p. 95. Although it is difficult to
cite a brief quotation on the problem of self-awareness, this
book deals essentially with the struggle in the poet who,
"seeking his own inner universe...finds himself wandering in a
false kind of self-interiority" in which his creation becomes
an absolute end, as opposed to the self-awareness that leads
the poet to transcendent values, primarily beauty. It was
beauty, as recorded in anima imagery, flowers, waters, and the
woman herself, that led Roethke to the right ordering of his
internal universe. The order and harmony produced by love of the
beautiful helped lead him outside of himself to relate meaning-
fully to the external world.
It seems plain that in discussing the growth and development of Roethke's poetry, one inadvertently discusses his growth as a man, because the man experiencing and the poet creating are in him inseparable. He was essentially a poet.5

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5Richard Eberhardt, "On Theodore Roethke's Poetry," Southern Review, I (Winter, 1965), p. 618. In an elegiac tribute Eberhardt describes Roethke thus: "...totally a poet...he gave all to poetry, lived his intensest times for it, gave it total devotion, and discovered his true nature and scope in relation to it."
CHAPTER TWO

A SUMMARY OF ROETHKE’S WORK

A brief summary of Roethke's archetypal journey is in order to present more clearly the context of those few poems which will be examined in detail. The first volume of Roethke's poetry presents a prologue to the journey, offering a clear indication of the nature of the journey and the nature of the imagery, and for this reason it is worth consideration here.

I

Of Roethke's first volume, Open House, published in 1941, sections one, two, and three are highly indicative of his development in theme, imagery, and diction. Section one is perhaps most prophetic; all of the poems, although carefully wrought art forms, deal with the poet's immature psychological projection of his own doubt, fear, and mistrust; they mark the beginning of the quest for self-knowledge. The titles of individual poems reveal the withdrawal from life their author was experiencing: "Feud," "Death Piece," "Prognosis," In "To My Sister," he admonishes,"...do not deign to give./ Remain secure from pain preserve thy hate, thy heart."1

1"To My Sister," p. 5.
The second section, predominantly nature poetry, is important in that it points toward Roethke’s mature work in imagery. The close and precise observation of the changing seasons is well depicted; already the Roethke analogy is evident, relating the process of growth in nature to the process of growth in man. An apt example is the final stanza of "The Light Comes Brighter:"

And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,
The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled
Will turn its private substance into green
And young shoots spread upon our inner world.2

Section three of his first volume deals with negation or death, reflecting again the poet’s negative psychic state, and pointing to the psychic collapse explored in his second volume of poetry. A line like, "The flat land has become a pit,"3 indicates the first use of an image, the pit or abyss, which develops in importance in later work. He is saying that "the flat land" that is his home, the prairie-land of Michigan, has lost its nurturing value. He must leave it, although to do so is difficult, just as physical birth is difficult. A young person must separate himself (often physically) from his parents in order to see them objectively, as well as to see himself as distinct from them. The images of light and the eye offer a complement to the pit. A poem in praise of sight concludes:

2"The Light Comes Brighter," p. 11.
3"Against Disaster," p. 19.
Therefore, O Lord, let me preserve
The sense that does so fitly serve,
Take Tongue and Ear—all else I have—
Let Light attend me to the grave!  

The dichotomy presented between pit-potential life, confined, dark, and light—pure energy, immaterial, unconfined, total realization, although not juxtaposed in these poems, indicates the dialectic tension found in his mature imagery. The antithetical approach reflects the tension the young Roethke felt between matter and spirit. His early rejection of the flesh (seen in "Epidermal Macabre") is nullified by his mature experience of love which, as a total human experience, confronts him with the value of the body as a means through which one approaches light. Later in speaking of his beloved, the mature poet says, "She knows the speech of light;" and "Light listened when she sang." 

The visual precision and verbal finesse evident in Roethke's first volume remains with him; but in his later work the image very often has the added dimension of dramatic presentation and is used to render psychological and spiritual experiences more concrete. Thematically, the Open House poems indicate that a change would be necessary if Roethke was to grow both as a man and as a poet. For him, to achieve maturity as a

---

5"She," p. 129.  
6"Light Listened," p. 212.
person meant achieving artistic maturity. The hate, the isolation, the "witless agony," the rain that stayed in its cloud, the face of his father that "was lost in a maze of water," had to give way to the stirring of life and love. What keeps these early poems from the confessional level is the language "strict and pure," the highly disciplined, impersonal form he imposes on his feeling. For the young poet who usually does not want for intense, if at times convulsive, emotional raw material this use and mastery of form is essential. Instinctively Roethke knew it, and the purity of form throughout Open House sustains the vitality of this early poetry.

As early as 1935 Louise Bogan, then a poet more widely known than Roethke and the poetry reviewer for The New Yorker, cited him for his resonance, his lyric sureness—which is related to another gift, "a gift for form" and for his "feeling for epithet." It is a distinct credit both to her critical awareness and to Roethke's talent that with the handful of poems he had published in 1935 she could discern these qualities.

7"Open House," p. 3. 8"Interlude," p. 6.

11Louise Bogan, "Stitched in Bone," Anne Winslow, ed. Trial Balances (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 139. This is an anthology consisting of several poems, written by poets then between twenty and twenty-five, with a short critical commentary by an established poet or critic.
Roethke's second volume, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), which contains the greenhouse poems, other short poems, and "The Lost Son" sequence, offers the first view of the maturing poet. Both this volume and *Praise To the End* (1951) in the long, free form poems which are concerned with the evolution of self, first simply in terms of physical birth, then in terms of the psychological differentiation of the ego, and finally in terms of spiritual awareness, present the major theme of his poetry. The theme of self becoming self remains Roethke's essential theme and it is explored most explicitly in "The Lost Son," the major poem of this evolutionary sequence. In terms of their major poems, these two volumes can be discussed together since they are stylistically and thematically similar. In *Praise To the End* Roethke places "The Lost Son" in part two, giving a chronological sequence to the psychological biography, that is, a tracing of the development of the psyche of the protagonist. The terms "poet" and "autobiography" seem inaccurate here because the theme of self becoming self is universal and there is very little of Roethke's personal life evident. Roethke himself called it, "the spiritual history of a protagonist, not 'I' personally but of all haunted and harried men."12

The first biographical poems record the struggle of the search for self in terms of birth, that rending process which allows growth. As the self grows into increased awareness, each successive development, presented in birth imagery, is a little less terrible and terrifying than the previous one and is depicted on a higher evolutionary level. These poems are difficult to read because they explore the most deeply submerged levels of an individual's earliest experiences. In going back to the beginning for his biography, Roethke recounts from a small child's point of view his relations, within his limited experience, of the external world. "Where Knock is Open Wide," and "I Need, I Need" record the most primitive aspects of self, the small child not entirely differentiated from his parents, only vaguely aware of his parents as sexual partners and concerned about how he fits into their relationship. The third poem, "Bring the Day!" gives the adolescent's view of sex with the feeling of vigor and power it releases" "When I stand, I'm almost a tree."13 The poem concludes, "It's time to begin! To begin!" which is related to the title of the next poem of the sequence, "Give Way, Ye Gates," the opening sections of which rejoice in virility and potency:

13"Bring the Day!" 2, p. 78.
In the high-noon of the thighs,
In the springtime of stones,
We'll stretch with the great stems.
We'll be at the business of what might be. ¹⁴

The primary expression of this potency is sexual, that is, the
creative artist who wrote the lines is telling of another kind
of creativity, the first stirrings of which are just as exciting
as the physical. The protagonist who desires the woman,

A wish! A wish!
0 lovely chink, 0 white
Way to another grace! ¹⁵

desires the beauty, the animation, the everything-he-is-not
long before he finds a specific object in which to focus this
desire:

The poke of the wind's close,
But I can't go leaping alone.
For you, my pond,
Rocking with small fish,
I'm an otter with only one nose. ¹⁶

and before he can find a specific object, he must first find
out more about himself.

"The Lost Son" is the focal point in the struggle for
manhood and self-identification. The crux of his struggle lies
in the birth of self, not in the physical sense as in the
earlier poems, but in the psychological sense. This birth is at
best uncertain when viewed from the pit of psychic non-existence.

¹⁵ "O Lull Me, Lull Me," 2, p. 83.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 84.
In both section two, "The Pit," and section three, "The Gibber" (to be examined more closely later), the birth of self as knowing and conscious of self is enacted. Section four, "The Return," marks a physical return of the son to his father's house, the greenhouse, and an attempt on the part of the protagonist to see the father objectively. The fifth section, "It was beginning winter, / An in-between time," the indefinite time of realization, explores the relationship between recognition of the father and self-identity. Winter is associated with seeking the father, and light, specifically in this poem, is the image of self consciousness. The trembling questioning, "Was it light within? / ... Stillness becoming alive," captures the small voice of a newly emerged self.

The problem of self-identity is further explored in "The Long Alley," closely related to the preceding poem in the nadir of alienation and bleak desolation it presents. "The Long Alley" can be understood either as the birth canal, or simply a dark, death-threatening alley. Section one concludes, "My gates are all caves." The gates of life, the birth canal, remain closed, and the womb is a cave; the protagonist cannot get out, a highly appropriate image to indicate the tremendous psychological struggle one undergoes in striving for manhood and self-knowledge. The protagonist's psychological birth, the birth of "I," points up the problems of adulthood, of guilt, of responsibility, and the loss of innocence and unawareness.
Formerly, "I lived in a simple drowse,"\textsuperscript{17} or "a watery drowse,"\textsuperscript{18} but now, "the wind gives me scales,"\textsuperscript{19} an image of regression to a primeval, pre-human time in the evolutionary time-table. He feels less than human. These intense feelings of guilt and regression seem related to sexual desire and sexual release:

Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree;
I dream of nothing but boards;
I could love a duck.\textsuperscript{20}

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.
For whom have I swelled like a seed?
What bone-ache I have.\textsuperscript{21}

The protagonist seeks to reconcile the positive creative aspects of sexual power with self-destructive, uncontrolled lust.

After the crucial experience of withdrawal, depicted most terribly in "The Lost Son" and "The Long Alley" there is a more positive assertion of light, of seeing, in the poems concluding this level of the psychological odyssey. The constant spiralling from regression to rebirth moves outward to include other creatures. Gradually there is a shift in the emphasis in the poems from the destructive power of lust to the purifying and renewing capacity of creative and controlled sexuality. The individuated, self-knowing person, because of his self-assurance,

\textsuperscript{17} "The Shape of Fire," \textit{4}, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{18} "A Field of Light," \textit{1}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{19} "The Long Alley," \textit{3}, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{20} "Give Way, Ye Gates," \textit{1}, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{21} "Praise to the End!" \textit{1}, p. 85.
is now able to relate to others. "A Field of Light" depicts individuation and mastery achieved:

The great elm filled with birds.
The fat lark sang in the field.
I saw the separateness of all things!

Now that he is capable of seeing his own separateness, his own individuality, he is capable of seeing living things around him in their unique separateness.

The sensitivity which allows the protagonist to empathize with "the lovely diminutives," ("the ferns...and the pulsing lizards./And the new plants, still awkward in their soil," ) allows him to establish a harmonious relationship between himself and nature, to see himself as part of the whole pattern of evolution. This vision of being linked in the evolutionary pattern is reenforced later in the love poetry: "My lady laughs, delighting in what is./If she but sighs, a bird puts out its tongue." His lady who can converse with all nature brings him to a deeper awareness of the unity for which his soul longs.

"God bless the roots!—Body and soul are one!" he can say in one of his final lyrics.

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22"A Field of Light," 3, p. 63.
23"She," p. 129.
But the very joy of his heightened and maturing consciousness is later called the "anguish of concreteness," so that the protagonist's dilemma is that while he longs to be god-like, master, unique, and apart, he also longs for union and completion in another or in the other. How to reconcile these desires is the basic matter of the later poetry.

The reconciliation for Roethke seems to be finally achieved in the love for the One, Eternal Being, God. God is not dead for Roethke; he is the object of all desiring, as these verses from two poems in his final volume indicate:

My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,
And knowing this, I am not yet undone.26

Lord hear me out, and hear me out this day;
From me to Thee's a long and terrible way.27

The last poems of the biography are primarily a joyful affirmation of manhood. In section three of both "Praise to the End!" and "Unfold! Unfold!" the protagonist remembers childhood experiences:

The sun came out;
The lake turned green;
Rompèd upon the goldy grass,
Aged thirteen.28

26"Infirmity," p. 244.
28"Praise to the End!" 3, p. 87.
Fishing, I caught myself behind the ears.
Alone, in a sleep-daze, I stared at the billboards;
I was far back, father than anybody else.
On the jackpine plains I hunted the bird nobody knows.29

The poems then move forward in time to his present state of maturity. In "I Cry, Love! Love!" the pattern changes; section three of this poem depicts current experience of nature instead of remembrance of childhood, which seems to indicate a purgation or release from childhood trauma. The protagonist has freed himself of his regressive fixation and faces forward, "as a man turns to face the on-coming snow."30 The reason for his new freedom is evident in the conclusion of this poem:

Who untied the tree? I remember
Now, We met in a nest. Before I lived.
The dark hair sighed.
We never enter
Alone.31

III

"Short Poems, 1951-53" the final poems of Waking (1953), mark a return to the world of order and logic as exemplified in the tight structural form and the syntactic ordering. They are reminiscent of the poems of Open House, but the "Short Poems" are more mature and varied in technique and theme. Another significant aspect of these poems is that they reveal, how by becoming capable of love, other people come into his life,and

29"Unfold! Unfold!," 3, p. 89.
30"Decision," p. 245.
31"I Cry, Love! Love!" 3, p. 93.
thus into his poetry: Jane, his student; The Old Lady, his mother; and most important, the Partner. These poems offer a plateau, "a field of light" where Roethke rested and consolidated his human and artistic powers. The major poetic sequence, "Four for Sir John Davies," celebrates life, love, and the orderliness of the universe as none of his previous poems has. The sequence acts as a bridge between the confusions and regressions of the earlier poetry and the beautifully sensual and original sequences of love poems which follow.

The series of love poems, both in *Words For the Wind* and in *The Far Field*, offer a continuing revelation of the protagonist's growing affirmation of life. Roethke's ability to dramatise and verbally present in its psychological intensity the experience of different phases of love is exceptional. The poems record variations in the lover's attitude, ranging from lust ("The Sensualists"), to dazzle ("I Knew a Woman"), from joyful surrender ("Words for the Wind"), to a painful realization of the beloved's limitations ("The Pure Fury," "His Foreboding").

The poems in *Words For the Wind* record the male view, his falling in love and the splendor of his lady. This is especially true of poems early in the sequence, such as "All Earth, All Air," "The Dream." However, they go on to explore, perhaps more completely than any love poetry in English, the conflict between love and lust, that is, the protagonist's conflict
between possession of his lady for his own end, and the self-
surrender necessary for the sharing of mutual love:

Is she what I become?
Is this my final Face?
I find her every place;
She happens, time on time—
My Nose feels for my Toe;
Nature's too much to know. 32

As their titles indicate, the love poems in The Far Field
explore the beloved's response: "Her Words," "Her Longing,"
"Her Time." It is unusual for a poet to record his beloved's
feelings and attitudes. Such a record indicates an awareness
of "the other" as a person, and not simply as an object for ego­
centric emotional release. The presentation of "her" view adds
dimension, tension, and the aura of unfolding drama to the
poetry, which allows one to see not only her gentle acceptance,
but the humor in "Her Wrath," and in "The Happy Three." The
problems of moving beyond time, "the time we broke from time," 33
yet being forced to remain in it, an aging man, brings the
protagonist to an ever deepening sense of his own possible non­
being. "To be something else yet still to be," 34 is his wish.

Thus, the very joy celebrated in the love poems contains
the elements of another unsettling period of regression; the

32 "The Other," p. 130.
33 "Light Listened," p. 212.
34 "Infirmity," p. 244.
joyful "separateness" becomes the "anguish of concreteness," and the small death brings into clear focus the other dying man must face.

IV

From the last period come the first meditations which, although not as well known as some of Roethke's shorter, more anthologized poems ("I Knew a Woman" or "In a Dark Time"), form his single greatest achievement. The Far Field, published posthumously in 1964, opens with "The North American Sequence," a work exhibiting a total integration among elements of sound, image, and form, and one in which simplicity of language makes transparent the intensity of feeling. It records in spiritual terms the journey of the self toward the "far field" of death. For Roethke it has been a "journey to the interior" in that the mature self, purified by love and surrender, largely freed from the demands of the body, is seeking its final meaning, its final form which it finds in the beauty and perfection of "the rose."

Roethke's dialectical opposition of images is most fully explored in this sequence which attempts to reconcile the meaning of journeying ("Journey to the Interior") and stillness ("Meditation at Oyster River"), the waters ("The Long Waters"), and

35This sequence, to be examined in somewhat more detail in chapter five, has been called "a quest for salvation, a kind of contemporary Pilgrim's Progress" by Hugh Staples in "Rose in the Sea-Wind: A Reading of Theodore Roethke's 'North American Sequence,'" American Literature, VI (May, 1964), p. 198.
the field ("The Far Field"). These images represent the conflict within the poet between being and becoming, life and death, flesh and spirit. Interwoven among the major images is the recurring motif of the protagonist himself in the tree, and the stone, and his anima in the flowers and birds. The final reconciliation is achieved "where salt and fresh water meet," the place of the rose, "rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light."36 The rooted stalk has produced the sea-blown rose.

This last volume culminates in the beautiful and strictly formal short lyrics which are very simple in the Blakian sense, celebrating the mystic experience of the unity of all in God, and the final purity which can be achieved only by death, exemplified in this lyric partially presented:

Now I adore my life
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the Fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for Love's sake;

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.37

CHAPTER THREE

THE PATTERN OF ROETHKE'S IMAGERY

I

In an investigation of the pattern of Roethke's imagery two facts become immediately apparent: that his metaphor is his meaning and that he speaks in a colloquial voice, one that reaches the whole man through archetypal symbol rather than through literary allusion. Citing Jung's ideas can clarify what is meant by such a symbol:

The living symbol shapes and formulates an essential unconscious factor, and the more generally this factor prevails, the more general is the operation of the symbol: ...The symbol is always a creation of an extremely complex nature, since data proceeding from every psychic function have entered into its composition. Hence its nature is neither rational nor irrational.¹

The symbol is not an allegory and not a sign, but an image of a content that largely transcends consciousness. Yet symbols can degenerate into signs and become dead symbols when the meaning hidden within them is fully revealed, when it loses its richness of implication because its whole content has been made accessible to reason. For an authentic

symbol can never be fully explained. We can open up the rational part of it to our consciousness, but the irrational part can only be brought home to our feeling.\(^2\)

The reason the symbol can never be fully explained is that the fullness of its meaning lies in the collective unconscious.\(^3\)

Such an authentic symbol Jung calls an archetype.\(^4\)

Jung's description of the symbol-making process presents an accurate picture of Roethke, the poet:

Only the passionate yearning of a highly developed mind, for whom the dictated symbol no longer contains the highest reconciliation in one expression, can create a new symbol. ... For this co-operation of antithetic states to be at all possible, they must both stand side by side in fullest conscious opposition. Such a condition necessarily entails a violent disunion with oneself, even to a point where thesis and antithesis mutually deny each other, while the ego is still forced to recognize its absolute participation in both. ... But the ego rent between thesis and antithesis finds in the


\(^3\)C. J. Jung, Man and His Symbol (London: Aldus Books, 1964), p. 107: most simply the collective unconscious is "that part of the psyche which retains and transmits the common psychological inheritance of mankind."

\(^4\)"One can speak of an archetype only when these two aspects (the image and the emotional charge) are simultaneous. When there is merely the image, then there is simply a word-picture of little consequence. But by being charged with emotion, the image gains numinosity (or psychic energy); it becomes dynamic, and consequences of some kind must flow from it." Jung, Man and His Symbol, p. 96.
uniting middle territory its reconciling and unique expression. ... Hence, the energy created by the tension of the opposites flows into the mediatory expression, protecting it against the conflict of the opposites.\(^5\)

If one agrees that the above describes Roethke's poetic \textit{raison d'être}, then it is most useful to consider the pattern of his imagery as a series of motifs in which the important events in his journey toward psychic wholeness are dramatized (more than recorded) in terms of psychically charged archetypal images, capable of increasing significance and dialectical implication. The images, since they are archetypal, have at times negative and at other times positive aspects; of themselves they are neutral, as is all material from the unconscious. The cultural environment of the individual in which the unconscious matter comes to light provides the context for value judgments on such material. The poet who deals with elemental aspects of life, with sufficient intuition and intelligence to perceive the underlying signification of words adds to his poetry when he can use them symbolically. The good poet makes metaphors; the better poet, by universalizing, makes symbols.

This is not to say that Roethke's poems do not literally mean what they say, for as one critic put it:

\> I can think of no poet, in fact, who is more literal than Roethke; it is his literality which strikes the reader from the first; and after the symbolic levels rise to the surface, and expand and trans-

form our understanding of the literal, it is still the literal which impresses us above all, and which survives to haunt our minds.  

For example the line "In that slow dark that widens every eye," describes literally the reaction of the iris in relation to the eye-lens when subjected to darkness; or another less direct example:

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The oyster's weeping foot,
And the incipient star--
Are part of what she is,
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is literally true. We participate, in our growth from tailed embryo to adult, in the evolutionary scheme, though most people do not reflect on the fact. Both of these examples, while they present a literal, biological truth, present also a psychological truth.

II

To interpret Roethke's archetypes it is necessary to investigate briefly his concept of man. If the matter of his poetry is the journey from the primal fall toward final unity, then the terms of the journey must be understood. Since an archetype is valid for every era of every civilization, that is,

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7 "She," p. 129.

8 "Words for the Wind," 4, p. 125.
it addresses itself to what is universally human, one must understand what Roethke thought of man to interpret his images of man:

I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward; but there is some "progress." Are not some experiences so powerful and so profound... that they repeat themselves, thrust themselves upon us, again and again, with variation and change, each time bringing us closer to our own most particular (and thus most universal) reality? ...

To begin at the depths and come out---that is difficult; for few know where the depths are or can recognize them; or, if they do, are afraid.9

The images of this "allegorical journey" are the fall, the cave, the pit or the dark wood, and the path. Fall expresses on the negative side guilt, on the positive side joy, with regard to the sexual act. In a broader sense it represents the fall from the womb into physical awareness and the fall into self-knowledge, psychological awareness. When a child falls, he is hurt physically; when an adult falls he is hurt psychologically (as in love) or spiritually (as in sin). A fall can be used positively, can result in an extension of consciousness or can create a brokenness which can hardly be healed. In Jung's terms such an interruption in the daily flow of events is the means by which man matures, though there is a significantly close encounter with dying necessary to achieve

9On the Poet and His Craft, p. 39.
such maturity:

The most intense conflicts, if overcome, leave behind a sense of security and calm which is not easily disturbed, or else a brokenness that can hardly be healed. Conversely, it is just these intense conflicts and their conflagration which are needed in order to produce valuable and lasting results.10

The dark wood or pit, where the journey starts, can be broadly termed birth imagery, birth at a psychological level for which the image of cave or pit is most frequent; but in the later poems birth at a spiritual level, which is most often described by the dark wood11 or the abyss. The greenhouse, too, is a womb, teeming with life, where the rooting stalk, the seedling tree are impregnated. Thus womb imagery is positive in that it nourishes and protects, negative in that it impedes growth beyond a certain point.

After the dislocation of the fall, order (Ordnung) is established through the path. The universality or archetypal significance of the "path" becomes apparent when the Taoist concept is incorporated with the western:

Tao means path, way, but since it also has the meaning of speech, the term is at times rendered by logos. ... The perfect revelation of Tao, is therefore, not the man who goes his way without

10 Jacobi, p. 55.

11 "The dark enchanted wood is the starting point, the point to which everyman must return in order to make his fresh start." Dorthy Sayers, Introductory Papers on Dante (New York: Harper Bros., 1954), p. 109.
alteration, but the man who combines the maximum of change with the purest unity.¹²

Jung describes Tao as "the union of opposites through the middle path."¹³ The path then is the way man must walk; it represents the order (Ordnung that father brings) one must establish in one's life to survive.

The two necessary physical organs for the protagonist on his journey are his eyes and his hands: his eye because it is the physical organ of vision (in Roethke's work eye can often be read I and sometimes the supreme "I, Who Am."); the hand, because it is the means by which the eye reaches out to work, to others, to love. On the negative side, the use of the eye and the hands is a source of guilt feelings, especially at the sexual level.

If the way man must walk is "the middle path," achieved through a union of opposites, what for Roethke are the basic terms of opposition? The antecedents upon which he draws his


¹³Jacobi, p. 135.
motifs of opposition are at the philosophic level Hegel,\textsuperscript{14} who first conceived of man as a dynamic whole with elements of reason and non-reason interacting, and at the psychological level Jung,\textsuperscript{15} who saw the person as struggling to build a strong sense of self from the contrary but complementary forces of his psyche (conscious and unconscious; ego and anima).

\textsuperscript{14}R. G. Collingwood, \textit{The Idea of History} (New York: Galaxy Books, Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 117: "The reason whose plans are executed in history is, for Hegel neither an abstract natural reason nor a transcendent divine reason, but human reason, the reason of finite persons. And the relation which he asserts between reason and passion is not a relation between God or nature as rational and man as passionate, but a relation between human reason and human passion. ... Hegel's rationalism is of a very curious kind because it conceives irrational elements as essential to reason itself. This conception of the intimate relation between reason and unreason in human life and in mind as such heralds a new conception of man, a dynamic instead of static conception."

\textsuperscript{15}Jacobi, p. 53: "Everything human is relative, because everything rests on an inner polarity; for everything is a phenomenon of energy. Energy necessarily depends on a pre-existing polarity, without which there could be no energy. There must always be high and low ... so that the equilibrating process—which is energy—can take place. ... The point is not conversion into the opposite but conservation of previous values together with recognition of their opposites."
III

A basis of opposition exists in the person between the conscious self or ego and the soul or anima,\(^{16}\) the person's contra-sexual complement. In Roethke's poetry the self and the anima are the principal foci of the imagery. Self-imagery is very often a tree (man), a bird (poet), or a stone (his inner self), each denoting different aspects of the person. The tree with its seasons of growth and change is an image of the conscious self or ego, growing and developing, seemingly dead, then flourishing again. In the early poetry the protagonist identifies himself with a stalk trying to root itself; as he grows toward manhood he is "almost a tree;"\(^{17}\) then he is a flourishing tree, and as he approaches death he dies "inward like an aging tree."\(^{18}\) Stones serve as an apt image of the inner self. The following verse most plainly indicates the significance Roethke attaches to the image of the stone:

\[^{16}\text{Jung, }\text{Psychological Types, }\text{pp. }593-94:\text{ "The inner personality is the manner of one's behaviour towards the inner psychic processes; it is the inner attitude, the character, that is turned towards the unconscious. I term the outer attitude, or outer character, the persona; the inner attitude I term the anima, or soul. ... As regards the character of the soul ... it maintains, on the whole, a complementary relation to the outer character. Experience teaches us that the soul is wont to contain all those general human qualities the conscious attitude lacks.}"

\[^{17}\text{"Bring the Day!", }2, \text{p. }78.\]

\[^{18}\text{"Infirmity," }\text{p. }244.\]
Yet for this we travelled
With hope, and not alone,
In the country of ourselves,
In the country of bright stone.19

The archetypal significance of stones, whether precious or
plain, is registered in most cultures by such varied means as
the use of tombstones, stone monuments, the Black Stone of
Mecca, Stonehenge, and is explained thus:

For while the human being is as different as possible
from a stone, yet man's innermost center is in a
strange and special way akin to it (perhaps because
the stone symbolizes mere existence at the farthest
remove from the emotions, feelings, fantasies, and
discursive thinking of ego-consciousness). In this
sense the stone symbolizes what is perhaps the
simplest and deepest experience—the experience of
something eternal that man can have in those moments
when he feels immortal and unalterable.20

IV

The anima is the inner, contra-sexual character of the
psyche; it is not precisely the same as the Christian concept
of soul.21 All aspects of the anima concept cannot be fully
developed here; however, there is evidence from widely
varied sources regarding the universality of an internal, an-
drogynous conflict which the person experiences in his striving


20Jung, Man and His Symbol, p. 209.

21An example of a well known Christian anima projection
would be St. Francis of Assisi's devotion to Lady Poverty.
for wholeness.\textsuperscript{22}

As he matures, the nature of Roethke's anima becomes more clearly defined in his own mind, until in his experience of love, he discovers in a specific woman his soul-image.\textsuperscript{23} It is through this woman, who for him is more than herself, that he learns to relate meaningfully to the external world. The images of the anima are flowers, fish, water, anything green or white, and growing; but on the negative side they are witches, stagnant water, dry seeds, slime, that which is sterile, as opposed to that which is fertile.

Water is an important and complex image. Although it is

\textsuperscript{22}In Freudian terms the conflict can be described thus: "At the deepest level the androgynous or hermaphroditic ideal of the unconscious reflects the aspiration of the human body to reunify Eros and the death instinct. The dualism of masculine-feminine is merely the transposition into gential terms of the dualism of activity and passivity and represents the unstable fusions of Eros and Death at war with each other." N. O. Brown, \textit{Life Against Death} (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 132. The Chinese say more simply: "He who lives his manhood yet holds to his womanhood, he is the river-bed of all the world." Buber, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{23}Jung, \textit{Psychological Types}, pp. 111-113: "The second stage of the individuation process is characterized by the encounter with the 'soul-image' ... The archetypal figure of the soul-image always stands for the complementary, contra-sexual part of the psyche, reflecting both our personal relation to it and the universal human experience of the contra-sexual. ... The variety of forms in which the soul-image may appear is well nigh inexhaustible. It is seldom unequivocal, almost always complex and ambiguous. ... The first bearer of the soul-image is always the mother (for a man)."
often the anima (a lake or pond), it also can be the "ultimate waters"24 which wind around the self:

The waves less than the ripples made by rising fish,
The lacelike wrinkles of the wake widening, thinning out,
Sliding away from the traveler's eye,

Our motion continues.25

Water is literally at the physical or biological level, that ancient element out of which all life came, the home of the fish parent and the "tenecled sea cousins."26

In the early poems the anima is the protagonist's unknown complement, always a part of himself. In his later poems, after she has materialized as a specific woman, the image is refined because, although she does become part of him, she retains her selfhood and thus cannot be wholly he. The working out of this relation forms the basic tension of the love poems.

To read all anima imagery simply at the sexual level is to misunderstand the nature of the anima, and to negate the level of Roethke's achievement in fusing various levels of experience. In using images with obvious sexual implications he usually means something more, if not always something other than the obvious.27

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24 "Praise to the End!" 4, p. 88.
For Roethke the specific woman never completely exhausted his anima. She brought him outside of himself, was the vessel by means of which he experienced love, beauty, and order, but his search for self-completion was not satisfied by the woman. Of her nature she was limited. Although she "wakes the ends of life," she is not Life; although she makes love visible, she is not Love. Thus, Roethke's later poetry has an increasingly mystical tone, a continuing search for the transcendent, for God.

By transcending his soul-image in his longing for a final purity, Roethke moves forward, at a spiritual level, seeking "the light that stayed." The coming of light is related to the coming of consciousness, an event which not only distinguishes man in the evolutionary scheme, but one which in its implications fascinates and bewilders. In the poetry, images of light offer beatitude; the absence of light threatens non-being.

In mystical experience and experiences of love, birth, and death, which for a spiritual person participate in the mystical, man can enjoy a higher consciousness or, in religious terms, an awareness of the Divine Presence. Most simply a mystical experience is "an experimental perception of God or

28"Words for the Wind," 4, p. 125.
29"The Lost Son," 5, p. 58.
His Presence." 30 It has to do with a perception or intuition of "divine immanence," 31 or the Divine Indwelling, so that one has a sense of being united with Pure Being.

Roethke's development in the mystic's way is obvious in these passages written just months before his death:

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. 32

This is because:

Everything that lives is holy. ... St. Thomas says, "God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as causing the being of all things." Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God. 33

For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time He is farther away, that in the Middle Ages, for instance, He was closer. He is equally accessible now,.... In the lowest forms of life, he moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails. Is this a new thought? Hardly. But it needs some practicing in Western society. 34

Ralph Mills says that this state of awareness in Roethke

... led him to comprehend and to incorporate in his writing the continuous but nearly imperceptible communication

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31 Ibid., p. 302.

32 Ibid., p. 24.

33 On the Poet and His Craft, p. 25.

34 Ibid., p. 27.
that goes on among all living things, as well as to know moments of heightened awareness in which his relation and that of the created world to the Divine were suggested.35

Very briefly, then, the pattern of Roethke's imagery is the result of his profound insight and almost tactile perception of the evolutionary pattern each man lives out in his life span. It represents his schema for expressing the struggle to affirm life by striving toward integration and wholeness of self, the fragmented aspects of which continually confront man in this society. To see more clearly how it operates in the poetry, several poems will now be examined in detail.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH FOR SELF

I

Before beginning a detailed reading of the poetry of Theodore Roethke some general comments on his poetic technique are in order because of the perception and authority with which he explored form. Three of his essays, now collected into a single volume are particularly useful: "Open Letter," How to Write Like Somebody Else," and "Some Remarks on Rhythm." He insists again and again that his work must be read aloud. As if to emphasize this, he has read his poetry both on record and in a film.

Roethke successfully used both rigid, formal patterns--for example the villanelle "Waking" or "The Right Thing"--and free form, as in the meditations and in the poems of the biographical sequence. He was vitally concerned with rhythm and its relationship to what he wanted to say:


2Ibid., pp. 37, 43, 60.

3Folkways Record 19736, New York, 1962.

4In a Dark Time, Poetry Society of San Francisco, 1964.
We must keep in mind that rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, and the rhythms of nature. It involves certainly stress, pitch, time, the texture of words, the total meaning of the poem.\(^5\)

Regarding the poet who used free forms, he said:

He must keep his eye on the object, and his rhythm must move as a mind moves, must be imaginatively right, or he is lost.\(^6\)

As for Roethke's diction, there is a predominance of concrete one or two syllable words of Anglo-Saxon derivation. An example of concreteness is his nominal use of the adjective: "the rocks south of quiet;"\(^7\) "Ye littles, lie more close;"\(^8\) "Come, littlest, come tenderest;"\(^9\) his use of which displays not only his profound grasp of the potential of the English language at a technical level, but also his insight into the psychological impact of words. Hilton Kramer, speaking specifically of "Where Knock is Open Wide," comments:

Here the drama has really become words: it is as if Mallarme's admonition to Degas—*Mais, Degas, ce nest pas avec des idees quon fait des vers, cet avec des mots*—had finally been heeded by the proper poet.\(^10\)

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\(^5\)On the Poet and His Craft, p. 78.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 83.

\(^7\)"Praise to the End!," 2, p. 86.

\(^8\)"In Evening Air," p. 240.

\(^9\)"The Long Alley," 4, p. 61.

\(^10\)Kramer, p. 136
A brief passage, depicting a fishing trip which the protagonist, then a young boy, enjoyed with his father, exemplifies Kramer's remark:

I was sad for a fish.
Don't hit him on the boat, I said.
Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
Papa threw him back.

Bullheads have whiskers.
And they bite.

He watered the roses.
His thumb had a rainbow.
The stems said, Thank you.
Dark came early.11

Here is the relationship, or characterization, the incident or plot, and the retrospective comment, focused into ten brief, but compelling lines.

His images and telescoped metaphors often probe to the heart of associativity, giving his language a freshness and vitality that make it lastingly current. This instinct for the simple, concrete expression also helps him to objectify in images non-verbal states of being, to successfully depict the timeless moment of birth, the child's view of sex, the shape of lust. In an elegiac tribute to Roethke, Richard Eberhardt says:

He had an instinctive sense of the justice of words, their economy in use, their connotative values, their combining strengths to give delight and to increase in us, the receivers, the large increase and heady flow of his intellectual, sensuous, and spiritual knowledge.12

11 "Where Knock is Open Wide," 4, p. 73.
12 Eberhardt, p. 613.
II

On childhood experience in and around the family's commercial greenhouses Roethke has fixed his unique stamp, drawing for his metaphor upon the raw stuff of daily life. The paradox of the lush, steaming abundance of tropical fertility, sustained by the ordering and controlling hand of the father, surrounded by the windswept Michigan winter, offered him a system of dialectic as well as a motif of imagery.

The greenhouse poems present a positive view of life as growth and portray an involvement with living and growing which his first volume of poetry lacked. Of this group, "Cuttings, later" is a good point of departure for the discussion of specific poems, because the imagery of the archetypal rebirth, the interior struggle, is seen clearly for the first time. Terse and richly meaningful at several levels this poem is quoted entire:

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

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

The "dry sticks" wrestle, struggling to put down roots. The poet can hear within them the sucking of the sap as it seeps up
and the grains of bark finally parting when the new sprouts break out. This is the literal picture. The protagonist relates this literal scene to himself as everyman, striving for psychological and spiritual growth. What saint worked so hard to reach a purer life? What infant or mother strained so much in accomplishing parturition? Roethke, stripping aside all that is inessential, in "strict and pure" language dramatizes what a human beginning is at the physical, psychological, and spiritual levels.13

The effect is new life. How does it come about? Again in strict language he dramatizes it: "I quail lean to beginnings, sheath-wet." All new life involves a cutting apart, whether a birth cord or a plant stem, and a "straining" to break through to now. This hidden struggle must be undertaken to grow; Roethke was "leaning to beginnings" as a poet as well as a man in this volume.

"Cuttings, later" is a carefully controlled experiencing of vigorous, outward-thrusting life. The poem's view is interior, however, and the image is of the interior struggle. The protagonist as the image of "dry sticks" is Roethke's enduring image for himself, as a conscious, maturing person. It can be called the ego motif of his poetry. The "dry sticks" grow into a tree out of which blossoms a rose, the transcendent, enduring aspect of his person, while the tree will become a

13 "Open House," p. 3.
broken, dying tree, the physical aspect of his person. The "dry sticks" will finally die, but not until they have rooted and flowered.

III

As one moves from the greenhouse poems which form something of a prologue for the biography, to the core poem, "The Lost Son,"14 (a sequence of five poems) it is immediately apparent that the various image motifs appear here in their first thematic richness. For the most part these images are presented in their negative aspects: for example anima imagery as "Mother Mildew," the pit, and the cinder-rose, and ego imagery as a rat, an otter, and stalks.

Of the five poems which comprise this cycle, the crux of the struggle to be born, to become a person, is illuminated in section three, "The Gibber," which opens:

At the wood's mouth,
By the cave's door,
I listened to something
I had heard before,

Dogs of the groin
Barked and howled,
The sun was against me,
The moon would not have me.

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14 A partial listing of criticism of "The Lost Son":
The weeds whined,
The snakes cried
The cows and briars
Said to me: Die.

The birth or beginning indicated in "Cuttings, later" produces the "lost son." What he "had heard before" is presumably the howl of "the dogs of the groin," an image for lust that recurs later in "The Shape of Fire." These three stanzas focus all of their emotional impact on the final word: "Die."

But he does not die; he endures. The next passage depicts the struggle to accept and acknowledge the father without negating his own identity. Cold, snow, and ice, in Roethke, are associated with seeking the father.\(^{15}\) Fear, whose look is capable of "draining the stones (the core of the son's being)," is his father.

The protagonist's struggle with the father for a unique identity is waged at several levels, one in feelings of sexual guilt, another in terms of the values which as a child he had unquestioningly accepted: "I have married my hands to perpetual agitation, / I run, I run to the whistle of money."

Moneymoneymoney/waterwaterwater. Of the water-money dichotomy, "the two liquidities, the two potencies," Kenneth Burke called them, "money out of the social order and water natural and universal,"\(^{16}\) water wins out: "The stalk (nourished by water)"

\(^{15}\)See a much later poem, "Decision," p. 245, where facing "oncoming snow" is the image of turning toward God.

\(^{16}\)Burke, p. 90.
still sways." And finally "the sweeps of light" break through the cave-pit-ditch, now "running white." His veins are nourishing him; earlier they were "running nowhere." The image of psychological individuation is "falling through a dark swirl."

"The Return," part four of "The Lost Son," is pictured in terms of returning to the father's greenhouse in winter. Once he has accepted the father and himself as son, the father can serve a positive function in his life; he can bring the warm, bring order: "Pipe-knock/Scurry of warm over small plants./Ordnung! Ordnung!" Even "the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds (like himself and distinct from the beautiful flowers), moved in a slow up-sway." In the final section the light, the image of consciousness in the sense of both self-awareness and Transcendent Consciousness, stays: "light moved slowly over the frozen field, ... Light traveled over the field;/ Stayed."

IV

As the son grows into manhood he is gradually freed of his guilt feelings regarding his parents. However, in discovering the joy and freedom of his manhood, he also discovers the agony of lust.

"The Shape of Fire" is a comment on the nature of that agony. This poem is difficult because the experience of passion is a psychological phenomenon, a non-verbal experience, one
which not many poets have attempted to concretize at the depth Roethke attempts. It explores quite fully the struggle between human love which is lust, an act of aggression or domination, and human love which "makes the spirit visible." 17

The image of fire has been growing in Roethke's work. In "I Need, I Need," "Dew ate fire," but the protagonist knows, "another fire/Has roots." 18 In "The Return," at the "fire-pit" the rooted fire has produced a rose, the rose of lust, dead and sterile: "...roses,/The big roses, big bloody clinkers." 19 "The Long Alley," the poem preceding "The Shape of Fire" concludes, "Give me my hands:/I'll take the fire." He takes the fire to give it shape or form, to gain control over it.

The protagonist is at an age where he must recognize the 'shape of fire' and he explores the possibility of using it, not only guiltlessly, but positively to bring him to the form of the true rose (as opposed to the cinder-rose). What he is seeking is a form for creative energy, not only physical but more important for him, artistic energy. One example of the positive imagery of fire is seen in a much later poem, "Meditations of an Old Woman": "How I wish them awake! ... May they

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18 "I Need, I Need," 4, p. 76.
flame into being."20 It is this "true burning" of the creative and loving heart the poet is seeking. The fires of manhood have not yet been purged, shaped into "true burning;" they are still "pits of a tongue (of flame)."21

The opening lines of "The Shape of Fire," "What's this? A dish for fat lips," can be explicated as "What's this? A woman (or less complimentary term) for me." Calling a girl a dish would cause no problem in the expression, "She's quite a dish." The term is also consistent with Roethke's earlier use of it, as in "A deep dish. Lumps in it./I can't taste my mother."22 The symbol of woman as dish relates to woman as mother and source of nourishment. This is an example of Roethke's ability to touch the vital well-springs of language. Woman as a dish might be archetypal, but it becomes evident only in slang and in good poetry, those areas where language is closest to life.

In the next lines, the "nameless stranger" who has answered the first question is the protagonist. When asked if he is a bird or tree, the protagonist answers, "not everyone can tell." In fact, he wants to be both, poet (singing and

22 "I Need, I Need," p. 74
non-earthbound) and man (strong, unmoving, rooted in earth).23

The next three lines offer three images of sterility and desolation:

   Water recedes to the crying of spiders.
   An old scow bumps over black rocks.
   A cracked pod calls.

Since he cannot release himself without help, the dish is asked to "mother me out of here," this sterile place where a living "toad folds into stone," and "flowers are all fangs." "Will the sea (wherein he is trapped and out of which he must emerge to become an individuated person) give the wind (spirit, that which is outside and above himself) suck?" The protagonist is asking if his unconscious can be expected to nourish the transcendent, when rather it is the spirit which must help the sea-merged soul. "Wake me witch (a negative aspect of "dish," as is "fury" in the line above) and we'll do a dance (not the later dance of "Four for Sir John Davies," but a sterile dance) of rotten sticks" (which recalls the dry sticks of "Cuttings, later"). He prays to the Spirit (recalling the wind above) to "come near." He wants more than the "edge" of manhood, of awareness. Still nothing moves. The images of negation and sterility continue ("In the hour of ripeness the tree [he] is barren.") throughout the first section with only a hint of possible life: "The warm comes without sound."

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23 In a later poem he describes himself as a "song tied to a tree." "Words for the Wind," p. 125.
Section two dramatizes the negative shape of fire in vivid, though certainly not vulgar, pictures of lust:

Where's the eye?
The eye's in the sty.
The ear's not here
Beneath the hair.

Eye should be read "I," and the I is in the sty. The protagonist is a "two-legged dog, hunting a new horizon of howls," and finding only the "snakes" (instinctive drives) and "sticks" ("rotten sticks" of section one) of "another winter," one whose lust devours him: "My meat eats me." Finally the wind comes to his aid: "The wind sharpened itself on a rock (the core of his person)." Life stirs and the protagonist hears a song:

Who, careless, slips
In coiling ooze
Is trapped to the lips
Leaves more than shoes.

Realizing that he still is not free from the destructive power of lust, he prays to the "mother of quartz," mother of his soulstone, a positive anima image, to "renew the light, lewd whisper." "Lewd" can mean unlettered or untaught,\textsuperscript{24} hence an instinctive or natural whisper. Renewing light would give fire its positive and creative value, rather than make him subject to its violence, for it is the negative and destructive force of fire which the protagonist now experiences.

\textsuperscript{24}NED, VI, 231-32.
Section four goes back to childhood remembering the time before guilt, ("Before I fell! I fell!"). This is the necessary, regressive journey to redeem the past, to achieve a catharsis, a purification: "In that lovely age when Death was not. I lived in a simple drowse:/Hands and hair moved through a dream of waking blossoms." In youth the stirrings within the protagonist of the contra-sexual are pictured as "waking blossoms." The guiltless childhood projection of his anima onto the flowers of the greenhouse is the child's immediate and enthralling contact with the beautiful which wakes in him a vision of pure love:

. The flowers leaned on themselves, the flowers in hollows;
And love, love sang toward.

The concluding section pictures what he hopes his newly emerged adult powers will bring—beauty, love, and creativity. Although the entire section is a prayer for the blessings which fire, rightly used, can bestow, the concluding lines effectively epitomize his desire:

To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing,
As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick pouring,
Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,
Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.

May I be nourished by the purifying power of love as an opaque vase filled with unseen water which trembles to the edge but does not overflow (the control necessary to creativity),

25"Where Knock is Open Wide," 4, p. 73.
nourishes the stem (creative power) of the contained flower (product of the stem, in this case, the poem). Hence, the elemental fire, the sex drive, which in its first appearance was so devouring and destructive when controlled (as the element of water can be controlled by its vessel) by a knowing adult, can be used to make and preserve the beautiful.

V

"O, Thou Opening, O," the final poem in the biography of the "lost son," did not appear in Praise to the End, but was added in Waking (1953). This poem is a brilliant and beautiful conclusion of the protagonist's journey to maturity, a joyful affirmation of life. The poem opens: "I'll make it; but it may take me." By not including, "forever," the expected conclusion, Roethke utilizes fully the nuances possible in "take."

"The rat's my phase" probably refers to the evolutionary phase he feels he has moved through. "My left side's tender" recalls the earlier, "I'm alone with my ribs." Now he is Adam stripped of his rib, waiting for Eve to end his aloneness.

Section two is a satiric reply to the glad exuberance of the protagonist: "Whoever said God sang in your fat shape... You're not the only keeper of hay." The questioner, who is the protagonist himself, since the poem is an interior monologue or dialogue of self and soul, further asks: "Where's

26"Sensibility! O La!," 3, p. 82.
the...rage/...the...dangerous indignation!" which recalls to the protagonist his statement in "Open House." The questioner continues, "Let me persuade more slowly:

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

One can know light only in terms of dark, life in terms of death. All those, even the dead ("They help," he said.) from whom we learn, are our fathers. Stand by the stream of life and hear the rhythms of living. One needs "light's broken speech...a bright moon on gleaming skin" as well as the rage. To accept and to use both is waking, is kissing, is yes.

In part three the protagonist speaks again, "You mean?--
I...can.../Be a body lighted with love;/...Oh, what a webby
[system of veins and nerves] wonder I am!" The humor in this poem is part of the exuberant sense of fully living that it communicates. "This frog's had another fall"; first from the womb in physical birth, now a psychological fall into self.

27"The anger will endure;
    ··········
    I stop the lying mouth:
    Rage warps my clearest cry
    To witless agony."

28"Unfold! Unfold!" 5, p. 91.
The "old stalk" (again the dry sticks of "Cuttings") still has life. "I'm king of another condition,/So alive I could die."

In affirming life, he affirms death; he affirms, in other words, the human condition.29 "The round home of a root" (the womb) is not the place to go, for an Eye (the transcendent I Who Am) beckons.

Although especially evident in this poem, one finds it generally true of Roethke's poetry that various strata of truth reinforce one another, so that a given poem can be read simply in psychoanalytical terms or in mystic terms. To read them so simply, however, is to lose much of the richness of the poetry and to ignore Roethke's achievement in synthesizing the psychological and religious aspects of contemporary human experience.

29Brown, p. 100: "Freud's own formula--'the goal of all life is death'--suggests that at the biological level life and death are not in conflict, but are somehow the same. That is to say, they are some sort of dialectal unity, as Heraclitus said they were: 'It is the same thing in us that is alive and dead, awake and asleep, young and old;' we thus arrive at the idea that life and death are in some sort of unity at the organic level, that at the human level they are separated into conflicting opposites."
CHAPTER FIVE

"DREAM OF A WOMAN, DREAM OF DEATH"

The poems discussed in this chapter are concerned with Roethke's "dream of a woman" and his "dream of death."1 Learning to "see and suffer myself/In another being at last,"2 and "not to fear...the windy cliffs of forever,"3 although heart-rending, will prove to be his means of salvation. The poems discussed in the first part of the chapter are broadly termed love poems, because they show an affirmation of life in the relation of the self to another and because they exemplify the technique of formal prosody which Roethke used for his love lyrics. The second section deals with poems which exemplify the different aspects of death which haunted Roethke, first physical non-being in "The Dying Man," and psychic or spiritual non-being in "The Abyss." The reconciliation with and acceptance of death is found explicitly in "The Far Field," the fifth poem of "The North American Sequence."

1"The Pure Fury," p. 133.
2"Words for the Wind," 4, p. 126.
There is discernible a shift in emphasis in these later poems, toward a more rational\(^4\) stance than was assumed in the earlier works. Woman, both as sexual partner, thus a source of joy, and as a spiritual guide, thus a source of salvation, is the single most important object of imagery. As "the shape of fire," formless until controlled, was his quest in an earlier poem, here the shape or form of the relationship with the woman is his quest. It is the woman within him (ie. the source of salvation) as well as the objective woman who is reckoned with in these poems. Giving shape through discipline and control to the external relation with the woman helps him to learn to control and order the woman within, that is the feminine aspects of his own person, and thus gain the power of ordering his own person. The shape or form of the relation between the protagonist and his beloved is objectified in the wraith image. Since this relationship participates directly in the rational and has the effect of producing order and life, the poetry both in imagery and technique reflects this.

I

The affirmation of life the relationship produces is exemplified in "The Vigil," the final poem of "Four for Sir John Davies," which is a sequence, reflecting the spirit of John Davies' "Orchestra," and which celebrates the reconciliation

\(^4\)By rational is understood the conscious human activities of analysis, intuition, judgment, and sense perception.
and harmony between spirit and flesh, carnality and love, and death and life as none of his previous poems have. The sequence displays a fascinating use of slant rime, usually with humorous effect, and always with the precision of a sensitive and sure ear. Each poem consists of four stanzas of six lines, riming ab, ab, cc.

As their titles indicate the four poems form a meaningful pattern of order in both the interior and external universes within which the protagonist moves. "The Dance" reflects the rhythmic harmony within his person and between him and the external world; "The Partner," (a dancing partner) is one with whom the protagonist can express and experience "the dance." "The Wraith" is the image of the partnership; it is the harmony of these relations which lead the protagonist to a sureness of salvation, found in the purgatorial poem, "The Vigil."

In "The Vigil" the protagonist identifies himself with Dante on the purgatorial hill. Dante, having passed through hell, meets the beatified Beatrice, whom Roethke identifies with the wraith. Wraith means ghost or spirit of one's self; thus, the protagonist is saying that the physical "she," assumes a life or shape beyond her own, a supernatural life: "It was and was not she, a shape alone,/Impaled on light, and whirling slowly down."5 He answers the earlier question, "What

is desire?" with "All lovers live by longing and endure:/ Summon a vision and declare it pure." If one accepts this reading then the earlier desire, associated with the flesh, is being transformed into the longing "for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form."7 "The longing" in a later poem of that title is "to transcend the sensual emptiness"8 and to find this quiet. The theme of the search for form, for logos, for Ordnung, gains prominence in this phase of Roethke's poetry. It is directly related to his relationship with his beloved which, in turn, leads him to an awareness of disinterested love that enables him to experience the "quiet at the heart of form."

The access to heaven is not immediate or easy: "Though everything's astonishment at last/Who leaps to heaven at a single bound?" Through love, order is established ("We undid chaos"), and eternal death is overcome. Purgatory is after all, a promise of heaven, just as, in another way, Beatrice is. "The visible (day to day events) obscures (the longing for the eternal)/But who knows when." When does one perceive what is true and when does one simply deceive himself. The enraptured "we leaned forth with what we could not see," that is their relationship, which is their source of strength and that which gives form to their lives.

7 "The Longing," 3, p. 188.
8 Ibid., 1, p. 187.
The concluding images of the stanza are of dawn and of the "dance to shining" that dispel "the black and shapeless night," at least for the time being. To establish this harmony the couple "dared the dark." By accepting the dark and passing through it, they overcome it and find "the white and warm." Being "alive at noon" in the fullness of his manhood, the protagonist "perishes in her form." To read perishing only as a sexual surrender is too narrow; his person perishes in the form, the shape, of the relationship. The individual ego perishes in order to be re-formed in terms of another, so that a new whole can be formed of two previously private selves. It is the beginning of self-detachment, of the hard learning of that virtue Christians call poverty. The poem concludes, "The word (a rich symbol, significantly used by St. John and having so wide an area of interpretation as logos, Christ, order, path, Tao) outleaps (transcends or encompasses) the world, and light is all."

9Maritain, p. 257: "We may believe that the conquest and discovery of the immense fields contained in poetic knowledge, and revealed by its becoming self-aware, will make the fortune of poetry if the poets are thus quickened in their work of creation, that is, if their spiritual experience is deep enough, and their operative reason strong enough, to turn self-awareness into a superior sort of simplicity, through an esprit d'enfance, of disinterestedness, and of voluntary poverty. For the virtues required of the modern artist—I mean, in the very sphere of art, as aesthetic not moral virtues—are, as Max Jacob put it, evangileic in nature."
The experience of love which renders the protagonist capable of spiritual growth has inherent in it the elements of regression (the black night or the dark wood) because, "Love is not love until love's vulnerable."\textsuperscript{10} What is implied is not just sexual vulnerability but a surrender of the total person. Thus the dark night symbolizes death or disintegration at the physical, psychological, and spiritual levels with the greatest terror reserved for the two latter states. It is not a purely negative or regressive state, rather it is the necessary but terrible time of stillness before new growth.\textsuperscript{11} The resulting extension of consciousness which the experience of love engenders points the protagonist toward God, toward the transcendent, because the woman cannot fulfill him completely. She is not absolutely other, but only partially other, and he must go on alone to find the wholeness of the rose in the transcendent. She points the way; that is all a "creaturely creature"\textsuperscript{12} can do.

\section*{II}

Lest the negative aspects of Roethke's love experience be too greatly emphasized, look at one of his poems which explores the psychological dazzle of this love that "wakes the

\textsuperscript{10}"The Dream," p. 120.

\textsuperscript{11}This image will be explored more explicitly in the discussion of the poem, "The Abyss."

\textsuperscript{12}"Words for the Wind," 4, p. 126.
ends of life," specifically at one poem from the "Words for the Wind," wherein the harmony of nature's perfect form, which reflects the protagonist's interior order and the harmony of his relationship with his beloved, is depicted:

Under a southern wind,
The birds and fishes move
North, in a single stream;
The sharp stars swing around.

However the protagonist "gets a step beyond" nature. The depth of his experience takes him beyond the day to day and into the timeless. He is "odd (not even as is nature where "all's even with odd") and full of love." Love is for him a supernatural phenomenon, a participation in the timeless and transcendent, "eternity's confine." In the second stanza the joyful harmony of nature is reflected "in rivery air and ferny ground" and in his own "ease walking with my true love." Wisdom and faith are found by loving. His poetry is "a song tied to a tree." However, despite his joyful experience of "nowness," he remembers, "I am no longer young/But the winds and waters are." He is a part of the world of time and change, but he can perceive the unchanging essence behind the visually changing

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13 Ibid., 125.
14 "Words for the Wind," 1, p. 123.
15 "The Dream," p. 120.
elements. "What falls away will fall," indicates the spirit of acceptance and receptivity necessary to the union of love. The phrase is made more clear by recalling an earlier line, "What falls away is always and is near."16

The deepening significance of the relationship makes him increasingly aware not only of the threat that "she" poses to his ego, but that she arouses instinctive desires ("I would drown in fire."17) he had thought he had under control. In "His Foreboding" the struggle is depicted:

Is she the all of light?  
I sniff the darkening air  
And listen to my own feet.  
A storm's increasing where  
The winds and waters meet.

In "Shape of Fire" the wind and water had not met; now at this point in his life they are intermingled. The image can be read just as it was in the earlier poem, but whereas in that poem it was the control and direction of the wind that was needed, in this poem it is the conflict which leads to purification, for "The spirit (wind) knows the flesh (water) it must consume."18 The quest for self-detachment and a movement toward disinterested love lie before him.

The epitome of self-detachment lies in accepting death. Such acceptance becomes crucial and the theme is explored in several poems, namely, "Meditations of an Old Woman," "The Dying Man," and "The North American Sequence."

"The Dying Man" is a sequence of five poems of varying but standard stanzaic structure which Roethke has dedicated to the memory of W. B. Yeats. The separate poems of this sequence, as in the other sequences, are meaningfully inter-related: thinking of death ("His Words," poem one) has led the protagonist to consider "death's possibilities" ("What Now?," poem two); one of these possibilities is negation ("The Wall," poem three), but through love, death can be transcended ("The Exulting," poem four) at least by love, that is the creative energy that generates art ("They Sing, they sing," five). The significance of the dedication to Yeats becomes apparent. Death's only real possibility for the dying man (Roethke, Yeats or anyman) is that meditation on it can occasion the release of creative energy which can be captured in an enduring form. Roethke is in agreement here with Yeats, but in his final poems Roethke seems to move toward another, more positive affirmation of man's participation in a transcendent life.

The third poem of the sequence, "The Wall," depicts the crucial struggle to affirm and to maintain life: "I found my father (the father who brought Ordnung and warmth in "The
Return.1) when I did my work/Only to lose myself in this small dark." The wall signifies separation, a blank, being out of touch with reality. He finds that his questioning ("In the worst night of my will,/I dared to question all")19 has raised "a ghost/...out of the depths of the unconscious mind" which forces itself into consciousness, perhaps the ghost of one of his "dead selves."20 To be purified, purged of guilt, would be to make himself capable of facing and accepting death: "What sensual eye can keep an image pure?" None, the eye (I) must be purified, but purification, growth out of the flesh is a "slow growth...a hard thing to endure." Instead of a bridge between the sensual and the spiritual (as in the wraith image) he now has only a wall, a separation behind which he must stay, "raging at the visible." The protagonist ("madman," "spirit") does not despair, but by accepting ("I must love the wall") and enduring the night, he survives till dawn: "I breathe alone until my dark is bright." This is the dawn he wanted to lean out to greet in stanza two.

Now, purified, he can "lean across the sill [an image of communication, an opposite of the wall] to greet the dawn." The image of the sill recurs in another poem, its significance more clear, which can help to clarify the usage here: "In the


20"The Abyss," 4, p. 221.
slow coming out of sleep,/On the sill of the eyes, some thing flutters."21 It was the "dazzling dark behind the sun" that had confused him. "Dazzling dark" of divine love is one reading. The dark dazzle of divinity man's eye cannot perceive as light; only the sun (son, Christ) can be perceived by it.22 Dark dazzle can also be read, it seems, as the allurement of the sensual which must be purified and then incorporated into the white, the creative, and the living.

The imagery here is closely paralleled by the "The Vigil" where "they dared the dark to reach the white and warm...they leaned forth....her look was morning."23 The positive affirmation of that poem seems to be convulsed with ambiguity in this one. Perhaps the "dance to shining" is nothing "but dancing on a grave."24 However, by affirming the dawn, that is creative vitality, art, he can transcend physical death, his personal non-being. There is no resolution in this poem just an affirmation of life against the "immense, immeasurable emptiness of things."25

21 "Meditations of an Old Woman," II, iii, p. 162.
22 Malkoff, p. 154.
25 "They Sing, They Sing," p. 156.
IV

The sequence which is an affirmation of being over non-being and in which the poet makes his reconciliation with death is "The North American Sequence," a work which in the rich implication of its imagery, its formal perfection, and its thematic grandeur, establishes itself as an achievement "curiously suggestive of the epic." The sequence, in achieving the completeness of the rose, records the perfection of form both in self and in art Roethke had been seeking throughout his life. It was this search for form which gave meaning to his life, because it was the path or way he had to walk to maintain his psychic balance. The six poems taken together form a well-integrated whole, each moving forward in an organic development.

The first three meditations, "The Longing," "Meditation at Oyster River," and "Journey to the Interior," are similar in their use of the catalogue to amplify an emotion and in the image of desire or longing as journeying. Desire is experienced as a reaching forward, a going out to meet someone or something. What is reached is dramatized in "The Long Waters," namely the release of love, and in "The Far Field" which explores the

26Staples, p. 189: "Roethke, attempting to project his interior spiritual vicissitudes upon a screen much larger than that of private experience, achieves in these poems a dimension curiously suggestive of the epic."
meaning of death, and finally in "The Rose" which explores that "still point beyond becoming and perishing."

The love which has given the protagonist the courage to undertake the journey to the "far field" is re-lived in "The Long Waters." Water, as already has been indicated is a complex image which must be understood primarily as what it is, that mothering element, source of all life, out of which man has emerged.

The thematic base of "The Long Waters" at both the biological and metaphysical levels is the anima image, for it is in this poem that the protagonist comes to terms with the anima aspects of his person or his soul-image:

I return where fire has been,
To the charred edge of the sea
Where the yellowish prongs of grass poke through the blackened ash,
And the bunched logs peel in the afternoon sunlight,
Where the fresh and salt waters meet

The coming to terms with the anima is depicted by unifying the water with the flower images:

These waves, in the sun, remind me of flowers:
The lily's piercing white,
The mottled tiger,...
The heliotrope, veined like a fish, the persistent morning-glory,
I have come here...
To a landlocked bay, where the salt is freshened
By small streams running down under fallen fir trees.

and the bird images:

Over the thin, feathery ripples breaking lightly against
the irregular shoreline...
Feathers of the long swell, burnished, almost oily--
A single wave comes in like the neck of a great swan
Swimming slowly, its back ruffled by the light cross-winds,
To a tree lying flat, its crown half broken.

The "half broken crown" of the "tree lying flat" and the "fallen
fir trees" are images of the protagonist's diminishing physical
powers which are balanced against the strengthening of the core
of his person, the stone that breaks the current:

I remember a stone breaking the eddying current,
Neither white nor red, in the dead middle way,
Where impulse no longer dictates, nor the darkening shadow,
A vulnerable place
Surrounded by sand, broken shells, the wreckage of water.

The waters running into the interior bring him "to a still,
but not a deep center" in the "far field." In facing and ac-
cepting time, that is change and death, he learns "not to fear
infinity, the far field, the windy cliffs of forever." It is
because he rejoices in the now and accepts his human condition
that he has achieved harmony or unity with nature, or speaking
in other terms, that he has moved beyond nature into the super-
natural. The release of reconciliation pictured in the flowing
waters guides the protagonist on the journey out of self and
shows him the way of survival.

"Out of self" is a key statement in pointing up how this
journey is a development of the journeying of "The Lost Son."
Having achieved his primary individuation, his selfhood, the
protagonist has had to move outward, a movement he first ex-
experienced in loving a woman. To those critics who say that Roethke's work shows little development, one can only answer that there is a great difference, which must be experienced rather than explained, between the return to primal unity which is envisioned as a return to the womb, an escape from life, and the affirmation of life which is a movement outward toward pure unity, that still point toward which life tends.

That still point is explored in the final poem of the sequence, "The Rose." The wholeness of the rose lies in that it has reconciled the elements of opposition which is the life struggle of a man. Longing, purged of the sensual, has become beautiful: "Beautiful my desire and the place of my desire." Desire is no longer devouring, as in "The Shape of Fire,"

27 Paul Engle and Joseph Langland, eds. Poet's Choice (Dial Press: New York, 1962), p. 99: "I was able to move outside myself—for me sometimes a violent dislocation—and express a joy in another...I mean Beatrice O'Connell," Roethke's comment on his selection of "Words for the Wind" to be included in this anthology.

28 In line with the thinking of Teilhard de Chardin, Theodosius Dobzhansky (a more acceptable scientist to many) puts into scientific terms Roethke's vision, quoted in The Biology of Ultimate Concern, (New American Library: New York, 1963), p. 134: "...in progressive evolution we find a competition for cooperativeness. There is also an evolution of love; love ascends from sexual love, to brotherly love, to love of mankind, to love of God. Love unites without casting off the diversity. On the human level it is the means whereby a person as well as the species achieves self-transcendence. The megasynthesis is 'a gigantic psycho-biological operation' in which love is the main agent, and which leads to the unity in diversity."
consuming flesh, but an enlightening still flame. "This rose in the sea-wind ([The unconscious and spiritual joined]),/Rooted in stone ([his innermost being]) keeping the whole of light,/Gathering to itself sound and silence--" is the protagonist and is his image for himself as a completed, fulfilled human being.

Roethke sees in nature, its constant freshness and renewal (as in "Words for the Wind") the perfection of form signified by being fully in harmony with the nature or essence of what one is. This man does not have, except early in childhood, and then at a sub-human level; but for a snail or a rose there is no choice, thus there is no disharmony. A rose can express only, but on the other hand, express fully and totally, essential "roseness" and as an archetype it expresses psychic wholeness:29 "The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all."30

V

The final stages of self-purification (the man who can experience even fleetingly the fullness of the rose) are

29Jung, Man and His Symbol, p. 241: "Abstract mandalas also appear in European Christian art. Some of the most splendid examples are the rose windows of the cathedrals. These are representations of the Self of man transposed onto the cosmic plane. (A cosmic mandala in the shape of a shining white rose was revealed to Dante in a vision.)"

30"The Longing," 2, p. 188.
There are two poems which record these approaches of disembodiment, "The Abyss," and "In a Dark Time," beautiful records of an experience not singularly rare, but rarely recorded by one with such artistry at his command.

"The Abyss," called by one critic Roethke's masterpiece, explores the threat of spiritual non-being, in classical terms "the sense of being without God," as physical non-being was explored in "The Dying Man," with a more positive answer now given to the question of human transcendence.

The positive value of the regressive experience of the abyss is thus described by a psychiatrist:

They are (states of spiritual blackness)...periods of intense labor, of experience, of powerful and progressive organization; the ascetic emerges from them with a more tempered and efficacious will, and more independent of those contingencies which influence the lower psychological life; and this, if we look at the matter more closely, amounts to saying that he comes out of them with his lower automatism reinforced in its useful parts, with habits of virtue which are more solidly anchored in the sense-life itself. ...

31 Roethke, "In a Dark Time," Ostroff, editor, The Poet as Artist and Critic, p. 49: "It is the first of a sequence, part of a hunt, a drive toward God: an effort to break through the barrier of rational experience." Roethke was talking of "In a Dark Time," but the comment seems equally appropriate for "The Abyss."


33 Kunitz, quoting John of the Cross, p. 42 of The Poet as Artist and Critic.
And always, amid the most diverse wanderings, it is the same great Unity which is being progressively realised. 34

Roethke's poem is a dramatic presentation of the experience described above, and the protagonist's movement out of it. It can almost be considered a five act drama. Part one sets the scene: the abyss is "right where you are--/A step down the stair," but the stair "goes nowhere."

Part two introduces the main character:

I have been spoken to variously
But heard little.
My inward witness is dismayed
By my unguarded mouth.
I have taken, too often, the dangerous path,
The vague, the arid,
Neither in nor out of this life
A furred caterpillar crawls down a string.
My symbol!

I'm no longer a bird dipping a beak into rippling water
But a mole winding through earth,
A night-fishing otter.

The images of self used in this characterization are familiar ones. The mole and the otter, creatures of blindness and night are negative ego images; the bird, a winged creature of light, nourished by water and the caterpillar are especially apt contrasts for this stage in his life. The caterpillar is a creature who retreats into a cocoon, only to emerge again beautiful and winged, a spiritual thing. Now the protagonist's

soul is a caterpillar; later he sees it as "an old wind-battered butterfly" and in "The Restored" as a broken-winged butterfly. In "The Restored" the emphasis is on the positive (the butterfly aspect) experience of light and growth, rather than on the negative (or caterpillar aspect) experience of the abyss.

Section two also presents the conflict:

What speech abides?
I hear the noise of the wall.
For the world invades me again
And once more the tongues begin babbling.
And a terrible hunger for objects quails me:
The sill trembles.

Again, the wall, the image of isolation and disorientation, and the sill, the image of communication. The climax comes in part three wherein the experience of non-being is likened to "the terrible violence of creation" that "strikes like a flash into the burning heart of the abominable." But if the protagonist can encompass the experience, can endure, "wait unafraid beyond the fearful instant,/(then) The burning lake turns into a forest pool,/The fire subsides into rings of water,/A sunlit silence."


36 Kunitz, quoting Tilloch says, "The self-affirmation of a being is the stronger the more non-being it can take into itself." Quoted in The Poet as Artist and Critic, p. 48.
Part four offers a resolution:

In this, my half-rest,
Knowing slows for a moment,
And not-knowing enters, silent,
Bearing being itself,
And the fire dances
To the stream's
Flowing.

As in section three fire is controlled, given shape and beauty by water. If man can endure and survive the "violence of creation" by directing it toward a transcendent good, beauty, he achieves a contemplative calm, "a luminous stillness."

In part five the resolution is achieved: "Being not doing is my first joy." What has been achieved by the protagonist in Freudian psycho-analytical terms is a release from a regressive fixation to the past:

The repetition compulsion—the conservative tendency of instincts—seems to be a biological principle imposing the limitations of a species—essence on each individual member of a species and directing the individual to enjoy the life proper to his species. In the discontented animal, man, it is transformed into a regressive fixation to the past, with the effect of unconsciously compelling him to change himself, to become, to find the life proper to his species. But, if repression were overcome and man could enjoy the life proper to his species, the regressive fixation to the past would dissolve; the pleasurable quest for novelty would be reabsorbed into the desire for pleasurable repetition; the desire to Become would be reabsorbed into the desire to Be.37

37N. O. Brown, pp. 92-93.
This joy in being, simply being, is celebrated in Roethke's beautiful final lyrics, simple and perfectly integrated poems that have an aura of completeness about them. One feels as though Roethke had finished his work and "the right thing happened to the happy man."38

In one of these lyrics, "The Manifestation," the author celebrates the real movements that "make us live" where there is no apparent movement and the stillness which gives the appearance of motion. The title signifies epiphany or showing forth, and recalls his line from "In a Dark Time," "A steady stream of correspondences" which in turn recalls Baudelaire's "Correspondences": There is a logical as well as a psychological relationship among the three poems. The other two mentioned throw some light on what the author is saying in this poem. The images of apparent stillness which are in fact great activity are literally themselves, but are also the protagonist himself striving toward life:

...the tree becoming
Green, a bird tipping the topmost bough,
A seed pushing itself beyond itself,
The mole making its way through darkest ground,
The worm intrepid scholar of the soil--

"Do these analogies perplex?" he asks; then he follows with four more images, this time of apparent motion:

...a sky with clouds,
The motion of the moon, and waves at play,
A sea-wind pausing in a summer tree.

He concludes: "What does what it should do needs do nothing more (the state of nature)/The body moves though slowly toward desire (the purified desire for the transcendent)/We come to something (good for us) without knowing why." The reader can arrive at the state of grace, or inversely at the state of nature, experience it without intellectual comprehension, but rather with only an intuitive or psychological awareness of what he has experienced.

VII

Certain of Roethke's poems have been ignored in this paper, most notably his humorous poems. They are delightful, but not essential to an understanding of his mainstream of development. They are worth reading because they give an added dimension to poetry of psychic search and spiritual growth. As for the second posthumous volume, Collected Works, its chief merit is in gathering into a single volume his previously published poetry, some of which had been out of print. Including as a postscript certain poems which Roethke's fine critical sense had disallowed does him no great service.

To accurately assess Roethke's achievement as a poet, specifically for this paper in terms of his use of imagery, is difficult because he is still so near us. What can be said is
that his achievement in his use of patterns of imagery is unique. His images are his content, not merely an appended amplification, and he weaves of them throughout his poetry a whole cloth.

By making the reader aware of other than the analytical function of the intellect, by showing in his work the value of intuition and the feminine and a reverence before life, Roethke makes a counter-balancing contribution to a male-valued dominated and death-oriented civilization. Jung has said that no theory of man is an adequate object with which to meet a patient; the only adequate equivalent is the doctor's total person. In the same way, one can say of Roethke's poetry that approaching it with only a part of oneself is inadequate. The reader must bring his whole self, his logic, his intuition, his sense experiences, and his love to the poems in order to meet Roethke on equal terms. No theory of criticism is adequate.

In his concern with the preconscious, what Ralph Mills calls his "vision of a profound evolutionary pattern," and

39 John C. Ransom, speaking of "In a Dark Time" makes this comment appropriate to much of Roethke's work: "A poem made mostly out of pure images often taxes the mind of the reader who would make out the scheme of its argument." The Poet as Artist and Critic, p. 26.

40 Jung, Man and His Symbol, pp. 65-66.

41 Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Contemporary American Poetry, p. 71.
indeed much of his poetry specifically deals with man's evolution from the mire in the simplest living organisms and traces the movement upward and outward to the consciousness of self and to the commitment to love, he accepts the fusion of reason and unreason in man, a fusion that fascinates and frightens him as it does anyone who tries to face himself honestly. It is precisely because he so profoundly and so successfully explores the regions of the non-rational, both the depths and the exaltation, and makes words, words carefully chosen and meticulously ordered, bear the weight of the experience that his images become living symbols which speak directly to the whole man and invite him, if he will open himself to it, to experience with the poet the continuing human quest for self-knowledge.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Barbara Bubon Steinbeigle has been read and approved by the director of the thesis. Furthermore, the final copies have been examined by the director and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

[Signature]
Date

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