Chapter V
SONG IN THE FLAME: LOVE'S SHIFTING FORMS

The criticism of Roethke's love poems based itself on the distinction drawn by Burke between personification and personalization. Roethke has a predilection for the former. His images usually lose their transparent concreteness and take on vague connotative and associative meanings. Those who wish to eulogize the poet would point out, as did Burke, that this kind of handling of images results in a symbolism which can express the dynamics of the mind more effectively than conventional symbolism which relies on the restriction of the suggestive potential of images. His portrayal of woman also reveals this propensity to generalize. Burke notes that there is "no personal particularization in his epithets." Woman is, in other words, not individualized. Ralph J. Mills also echoes more or less the same views when he says:

The woman of these poems is various. Sometimes she assumes the form of a wraith or entrancing spectre, sometimes she is purely physical. Her place in the poems can only be called that of the female or the opposite or the other, since her role involves metamorphosis.

The poet's partner goes through an endless process of transformation. This fluidity of form enables her to perform two functions. She makes possible the reaction of the poet to an encounter with the others. As a symbol she reveals, in the same way as the minimals do, the internal struggle, rapture or doubt of the quester. Relationship with woman thus provides what Malkoff
calls “a biological symbolism” for the evolving self. The question now to be asked is whether the poet needs to be condemned for merging realism with symbolism. As Randhall Stiffler has remarked, Roethke’s love-poetry neither celebrates the reunion of the lovers nor laments their separation. He does not take “for his source of conflict a lover separated by time or space from his beloved one, or prevented by family, social class or political persuasion from consummating his love.” The concentration is, instead, on the lover himself. She appears simultaneously as the cause and result of the lover’s transcendence of finitude. On the one hand, like Dante’s Beatrice, she purifies him, and takes him beyond the mundane. On the other, the description of the beloved and the love-act are an expression of his spiritual bliss. The line “She was the wind when wind was in my way” ("Four for Sir John Davies," CP 101) sums up this dual character of the loved one. It does not follow, however, that erotic love always leads to experiences of beatitude.

W. D. Snodgrass is one of the critics who accuse Roethke of not having personalized the woman. He writes: “The woman was not affirmed as herself, a person in her own right, but rather as a symbol of all beings.” Yet, she receives in this statement of objection a tacit acknowledgement of merit. She becomes, for the lover, a microcosm of the universe, and his participation in the love-act as well as his reflections on its significance discloses the degree of his success or failure in his search for unity of being. Had Roethke particularized her in specific terms, and merely dealt with the sexual passion binding him to her, his achievement would have been considerably less.
As has already been pointed out, the most distinctive feature of the love poems is the duality in the character of the woman. Some of the poems deal also with an inability on the part of the poet to merge with the other. The tendency to retreat into the shell of solipsism is strong. A third characteristic is the numerous ramifications of the state of union with the beloved. The last two lines of “I Cry, Love, Love!” namely “we never enter / Alone,” as was already seen, carry sexual connotations. The physical union can be a symbolic equivalent of the merger of body and soul, or of the protagonist with the divine progenitor. Also, found in these poems is the conventional dichotomy between the body and the spirit.

It is useful to begin with the short poems that appear in the volume entitled The Waking. “The Visitant,” as Malkoff observes, “strikes a new and important note in Roethke’s poetry,” with “the particularly beautiful evocation of the female visitant.”7 The poem moves from expectancy through fulfilment to reminiscence. In the first section the poet creates a state of suspension, of stillness. Burke thinks that the woman is present here “prophetically.”8 Of great significance is the fact that the ethereal visitor is associated with the wind. In the first section after the shifting of the wind there is a state of stagnation. But the speaker has a premonition of the advent of the girl, with “the wind in her hair.” Hence, he waits expectantly, and is in harmony with nature. The second section deals with the embrace of the lover. But, the image of the wind lifts the physical union to a higher plane. The problem is whether the description of the consummation of love is intended to suggest the experience of epiphany. The actual and the symbolic are inseparably
fused. Whatever it is, beatitude or sexual ecstasy, its effect on the speaker is wholesome. The wind has not left with the visitant. “A wind stirred in a web of appleworms.” The worm and the wind represent the poles of the universe. But, there is some kind of communication between them. There is another movement, at the level of the images, as can be seen from the lines quoted below from the three sections: “A tree swayed over water;” “. . . she came/ . . . swaying in a long wave;” “The tree, the close willow, swayed.” The tree sways in the joy of anticipation; the visitant catches the rhythm and sways fish-like; retrospective musing makes the tree sway. The tree, we realize, stands for the speaker; it blends with the swaying girl implying sexual union. Moreover, the tree swaying “over” the water (quote marks added) merges with it through union with the visitant who comes from the water. Thus, the eternal and the temporal, and the finite and the infinite meet. Again, we face the same dilemma: which of the two is the primary experience? erotic rapture or spiritual bliss?

The poem’s symbolism is far richer than the foregoing account can reveal. The image of the stone, for instance, deserves special attention. In the first section the leech clings to the stone. The verb “wait” links the leech with the dog, the tree and the crab. The stone, by association, is related to water and the wind. Although no tension develops between the image-clusters, the polarity is significant. In the second section, the visitant does not touch the stone; despite her ethereal nature, she must be of the same kind as the stone. Perhaps, the water-land dichotomy, explored in The Far Field, is already in evidence here. In the third section, the speaker says: “. . . I felt the pulse of a
stone." There is some significance in the stone remaining untouched in the second section. This is an instance of the meaning superseding the word, of the idea superseding the symbol. The stone in Roethke’s poetry symbolizes a state of calm, spiritual joy. Since the visitant is more divine than human, and elevates the speaker to the realm of transcendental bliss, the stone merely serves to emphasize the ethereal nature of the girl. The dog, the fish and the worm put us in mind of their connotations in the sequence poems. John Wain’s observation on Roethke’s love-poems applies specially to this poem: “Reciprocated love, joyous participation in the rhythms to which all nature dances, physical fulfilment: these form one of the main avenues by which the individual spirit reaches its goal.”

Each of the four sections of “Four For Sir John Davies” is energized by the tension between faith and scepticism, sheer animal passion and desire rooted in spiritual aspiration, clumsy frolicking and graceful imitation of the harmonious cosmic dance, and unambiguous vision of God and obscure view of a dubious apparition. The first section is entitled “The Dance.” Roethke deals with three kinds of dance—the first is the rhythmic movement of the celestial spheres in tune with the divine harmony; the second is the dance of lovers in Davie’s poem “Orchestra”; the third is the antics of the bear. Dance must be informed by love if it is to become an approximation of the divine melody. Divorced of love, the speaker’s “romping with the bears” becomes a ridiculous parody of the dance of the universe. Perhaps, it is not so much the absence of love, as that of faith that makes the dance absurd and meaningless. But, the poet warns us against the danger of carrying the argument too far:
"But what I learned there, dancing all alone, / Was not the joyless motion of a stone." The crazy capering does make him happy. Perhaps, it is the knowledge of the impossibility of attaining the sublime kind of joy that makes the speaker feel contented with his humble achievement. The identification with the bear underscores the urgency of the dance. The speaker, George Wolff contends, is imprisoned "in a world of doubts and fears." The performance of the dance appears irrational when viewed against the backdrop of despair and void. But, the very act of singing and dancing has the wholesome effect of pressing back the reality, which is the absence of divine music and order in this world. Thus writes Robert Boyers about the absence of faith:

If there is something vacuous in commitment to commitment itself, such an orientation does enable the organism to retain its sense of vitality and purpose. For Roethke, where there is song there is life. The negative possibilities that beset us are to be at least temporarily dispelled by the singer's continuing desire to articulate them and sing them into oblivion.

In the second section, "The Partner" the speaker does not despair of attaining the rapture of Davies' lovers. He is perplexed by the upsurge of sexual passion. The tension appears in a different form: "Was I the servant of a sovereign wish. / Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?" In other words, as Stanley Kunitz puts it, could passion burn "with a spiritual light?" He doubts whether the sexual dance is a mere rollicking in sensualism, or a means to transcend finitude, whether this passion is kindled by impersonal biological
urge, or by personal desire motivated by the spirit. In the first case the other (the woman) has a separate existence. In the second, she causes him to look beyond the mundane, and is the way and the end. As mentioned earlier, she becomes the cause and the result of his spiritual elevation, as sexual ecstasy symbolizes the experience of oneness with God, or the fusion of the body and the spirit. However, the rest of the poem embodies the ambivalence in his attitude to the physical union with the other. He indulges hysterically in carnal love with abandon: “She kissed me close, and then did something else. / My marrow beat as wildly as my pulse.” The doubt surfaces in these lines: “The living all assemble! What’s the cue? / Do what the clumsy partner wants to do!” Confident assertion dominates in the concluding stanza: “This joy outleaps the dog.” “The body and the soul know how to play / In that dark world where Gods have lost their way.”

In the third section, “The Wraith” the dance goes on against the bleak backdrop of “the lonely pastures of the dead.” The “incomprehensible gaiety and dread” clashes with the image of the sepulchre. The sombre setting lends a seriousness and urgency to the sexual dance. The darkness of non-being looms large in the offing. Love is sought as a means of encountering the spectre of death: “We two, together, on a darkening day / Took arms against our own obscurity.” As Norman Chaney has shown, a set of new contraries enter Roethke’s poetry with which, however, the poet does not engage in a serious way in the love poems. They are “consciousness and unconsciousness, being and non-being, life and death.” Roethke seems to believe in the efficacy of love in combating the advancing threat of death.
Charmed by love time stays: “Our souls looked forth, and the great day stood still.” Despite the affirmations like “the flesh can make the spirit visible,” the last stanza of the section does not resolve the tension. Instead, fantasy and reality, faith and scepticism seem to mingle in the apparition that appears to the lover at the climactic moment. It could be the projection on the partner of the anima. It could be indicative of a transcendental vision. It could simply be an externalization of a wish in the mind of the lover. The stanza is quoted entire as it epitomizes the conflict:

What shape leaped forward at the sensual cry?
Sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore?
Did space shake off an angel with a sigh?
We rose to meet the moon, and saw no more.
It was and was not she, a shape alone,
Impaled on light, and whirling slowly down.

The image of the moon appears in the first section: “I tried to fling my shadow at the moon.” It expresses the spiritual craving of the lover. In the same way, at the end of the sexual act they look upward to “meet the moon.” For an instant the lover sees an ethereal shape. The image of the sea-beast invests the apparition with certain primordial qualities, and the phantom represents the anima. Bird and angel suggest release from temporality and finitude. Perhaps, just as Dante saw the spirit of Beatrice from the top of the purgatorial hill, the lover in the poem, also, ultimately gets beyond the skin of the beloved and sees her spirit. Malkoff writes on this complex symbol: “Sexual climax becomes a complex symbol which draws together the meaning of the poem;
it represents the creation of spiritual love from physical, of the work of art from 'reality', of the eternal from the temporal, of meaningful existence from the emptiness of a 'dark world.'\textsuperscript{14}

In the final section, "The Vigil" the lover still believes that there is a possibility of "the vision of the spiritual self" being illusory, of its being "a wilful act of the imagination."\textsuperscript{15} Hence, he doubts the authenticity of the transfiguration of Beatrice: "Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?" The scepticism is summed up in these lines: "All lovers live by longing, and endure: / Summon a vision and declare it pure." Despite the uncertainty there is a belief in the power of love: "We undid chaos to a curious sound: / The waves broke easy, cried to me in white; / Her look was morning in the dying light." We notice in these lines a transformation of the partner, or the ability of the partner to transform the finite world into an infinite one. "Dying light" is changed to "morning." Emboldened thus they mock "... the black / And shapeless night."

In the concluding stanza there is a paradox: "Alive at noon, I perished in her form." Noon is the time when light is at its intenpest. If "perish" means "die," it is a strange kind of death. He does not die when the dark closes in on him. Love protects him, and fights off the surrounding gloom. The lovers have the courage in them to scorn "the black and shapeless night." Yet, at mid-day he "perishes." Death may connote the consummation of desire. But, the ecstasy should result not in "the fall," but in an elevation. The last line, "The word outleaps the world, and light is all" contradicts the implications of the previous line. The light that illuminates the whole world is
the consequence of the death. It has already been seen that death sometimes implies the union of the body and the soul. The immediate result of the "perishing" is a rise from "flesh to spirit." Another thing to be noted is that it is "in her form" that he "perishes." Kunitz calls her "a shape-shifter." She has no constant form. Thus, to die in her form amounts not only to a loss of his distinctive form, which is involved in the growth from flesh to spirit, but also to being at one with several things simultaneously. "She was the wind when wind was in my way." By "fall" Roethke suggests the release from the constriction of the fleshly form. It seems that the lover has finally resolved the tension between doubt and belief, and the poem ends on a note of confidence and assurance. James McMichael summarizes the end-result of the dance in the following way: "It is in having dared the dark by engaging one another as the other really is that they reach the white and warm." The transformation that follows is "the rise from flesh to spirit" and the momentary restoration of a value that "outleaps the world" and illuminates infinity.

The title poem of the volume *The Waking* abounds in paradoxes: "I wake to sleep," "We think by feeling," "I hear my being dance," "This shaking keeps me steady," and "What falls away is always." Opposites are thus yoked together to express a unique, mystical experience, to articulate a special kind of awareness. In each of the five tercets and in the final quatrain Roethke deals with a basic paradox. The opening line is seldom explained satisfactorily. The first tercet says: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow / I feel my fate in what I cannot fear / I learn by going where I have to go." To explain the first paradox, it is useful to go back to the second stanza of
"O, Thou Opening, O" in which the poet deals with the significance of wakefulness and darkness. The speaker, enlightened by experiences as much as his counterpart in the present poem, says: "Waking's / Kissing." Earlier in the stanza we hear: "The dark has its own light." Roethke, we know, relies heavily on the technique of association. Thus, "I wake to sleep" could be crudely paraphrased as: "I accept my physicality in order to gain spiritual light." Since waking is associated with the flesh, its antithesis sleep should be linked with the spirit. The body is equated with the dark, and the soul with light. Neal Bowers thinks that the problem is ultimately one of grammar, for how we interpret the clause, "I wake to sleep," depends largely on whether we read "to sleep" as a prepositional phrase. "Sleep, then, becomes not a process, but a condition." She goes on: "Little by little, the speaker wakes to a perception of death, seeing it as another state of awareness, not to be feared, but accepted."  

Susan Pinkus contends:

Being awake is normally a more conscious state than being asleep. But in the poem, being awake is the unenlightened, pedantic state in which only logic guides us. Here is the paradox. To sleep is to acquire the vision that releases us from the involvement of our intellect and helps us drift into the acceptance of our fate.

A close reading would show that the paradox is subtler than it appears to be. Of the two states mentioned in the line, one could never be certain, which is the more desirable. He is reluctant to wake because he finds sleep more enjoyable. He takes his waking slow because upon completing the
process he has to pass into the other state. The two states are delicately poised in the line. They are ultimately inseparable. They form a kind of circle, and at any point the speaker can be said to be partly asleep and partly awake. Likewise, sensual pleasure is inextricably bound up with spiritual joy—neither can a person be totally immersed in sensualism nor purely as a spirit transported into a realm of transcendental bliss. In the same manner life is related to death. The circular conception of life and its manifold processes prepare the speaker for the ready acceptance of anything that fate puts in his way. "Fate" and "fear" vaguely hint at what it is he is willing to welcome. What is implied in the third line is a passive surrender to experience.

We are struck by two kinds of fusion in the second tercet: "We think by feeling, what is there to know? / I hear my being dance from ear to ear. / I wake to sleep, take my waking slow." The first is the fusion of thought and emotion. Mere rationalization of the problems of life is meaningless and inadequate. In fact, the speaker finds abstract intellectualization an obstruction to real learning. Secondly, he fuses the senses of sound and sight. Presumably, the experience he is undergoing is a mystical one. The third tercet juxtaposes the partner and the dead: "Of those so close beside me, which are you? / God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there, / And learn by going where I have to go." It is a rehearsal of the dance that the lovers performed "in the pasture of the dead." What is surprising is the inability of the lover to tell the living from the dead, the waking from the sleeping. Susan Pinkus writes in this context:

... the word 'Ground' is capitalized. The ground is not simply an object but the life force, where the dead body dissolves, nourishes
new life, and continues the cycle. In this sense, the repetition of
the second of the key lines ("And learn by going where I have to
go") makes clear that death is the fate that he 'cannot fear'.

It is an elaboration of one of the meanings packed into the simple opening
line. Death blends into life and vice-versa. Malkoff is of the view that the
lover's indifference and detachment comes from a stoic attitude to life. But,
stoicism results from the realization of the inevitability of the phenomena in
nature called process. One acquiesces because there is no other alternative.
Here, in the speaker's cyclical view of the ends of life, process is equated with
permanence, and what is finite partakes of the transcendental, the infinite.
While discussing the serious problems thrown up by the poem one tends to
forget that it is, first of all, a love-poem. The fourth tercet, for instance, recalls
an image from a previous poem: "Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us
how? / The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair; / I wake to sleep, and take
my waking slow." The tree, we recognize, is an image of the body. In
"O, Thou Opening O" the protagonist exhorts himself: "Be a body lighted
with love." That is precisely what happens in the first line. It has also been
shown that light and delight are two aspects of the same thing. The
immediate consequence of the tree being penetrated by light is the ascent of
the worm which is basically an image of the phallus, but by extension can also
stand for the body indulging in physical pleasure. Malkoff would have us
believe that man's "ultimate equality with the worm" is the direct result of the
confrontation of death as an equalizer. The fifth tercet is quoted below:
"Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me; to take the livery air, /
And, lovely, learn by going where to go." The great "thing" that nature has to
do is to “swallow up” the lovers “into the impersonal natural order.”

Everything in nature is subject to change, growth, death and decay. It is interesting to note how the poet unfolds the complex meaning of “sleep” and “fate” step by step. Where they have to go and what they have to learn become more specific as the poem draws to the end. The quatrain sums up the meaning of the whole poem:

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Richard Allen Blessing considers “The Waking,” “a poem celebrating the ‘Always’ that falls away whenever we near it and one which finds its only steadiness in the ‘shaking’ by which the world advances.” Perpetuity and process do not appear as a pair of irreconcilable opposites in the enlightened view of the lover. It is also possible to relate this passage to the first and second stanzas. The shaking refers to the sexual act, which is what waking implies in the first line. Steadiness, then, becomes synonymous with sleep. As in “Four for Sir John Davies,” “the flesh” makes “the spirit visible.” The dance of the being in the second stanza calls to mind the erotic dance in the earlier poem. Fall and rise do not create any tension in that poem: “Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall.” Hence, “falling away” suggests at once transience, flux and the enjoyment of carnal pleasure. The image of the circle, which structures the poem, unites the contraries. In a still earlier poem Roethke affirms: “What slides away / Provides.” (“Give Way, Ye Gates”).
Thus “The Waking” is a kind of epilogue to “Four for Sir John Davies” and celebrates the culmination of the dialectical play of the contraries in the synthesis of a profound vision.

Neal Bowers provides a good introduction to the love poems contained in *Words for the Wind*:

> It is important to note that the love poems were not a digression for Roethke. They simply afforded him another set of symbols for his familiar themes: the search for self—this time through another person—and his struggle to perceive and unite with the Absolute, the Godhead above God. Significantly, the love poems are characterized by a mystical symbolism that makes them wholly compatible with Roethke’s earlier work...”

She places the primary stress on the quest motif, and views erotic love as a means both of attaining union with the Absolute and of articulating the pain, struggle and the final exultation. She observes the dualism in the portrayal of the woman: the real and the symbolic merge. As a means of attaining illumination, she has a real existence; as a means of communicating the experience she functions as a symbol. Thus, as indicated earlier in the chapter, she is the cause and the result of the lover’s self-transcendence. Richards Allen Blessing thinks that the sequence “begins a little before the beginning and ends a little beyond the end.”

The first poem in the sequence is “The Dream.” The woman in this poem is an ethereal creature like the woman in “The Visitant.” She resembles the eternal child that frequently appears in Roethke’s poetry. She is conjured up from the collective unconscious: “I met her as a blossom on a stem / Before
she ever breathed. . . .” In the dream she appears as “A shape of change, encircled by its fire.” The fire image appears in the first stanza also: “My dream divided on a point of fire.” Soon after the emergence of the girl with the fiery halo the mind gets cut off from the sea of the unconscious. The cessation of the dream coincides with the awakening of passion. The “cold lip” seeks warmth from the “sensual lip.” “Roethke’s ‘deeper sleep’ recalls,” says Peter Balakian, “his lover’s sensual form which wakes him to the world.”

The image of the moon elevates the natural to the supernatural. In “Four for Sir John Davies” the poet says: “I tried to fling my shadow at the moon.” At the moment of the consummation of desire the lovers look upward “to meet the moon” and are granted the vision of a wraith of light, which links the sexual with the transcendent. The bird singing from the centre of a tree and the dancing stones not only emphasize the transformation of the world by love but symbolize the lover’s union with the divine. The last stanza is quoted entire to show how the images of water, fire and log lead to a complex symbolism:

She held her body, steady in the wind;
Our shadows met, and slowly swung around;
She turned the field into a glittering sea;
I played in flame and water like a boy
And I swayed out beyond the white seafoam;
Like a wet log, I sang within a flame.
In that last while, eternity’s confine,
I came to love, I came into my own.
In the ecstasy of physical union the field gets metamorphosed into “a glittering sea;” the finite stretches out towards the illimitable. Flame and water develop further from their vague mention in the first stanza. The woman, encircled by fire, rouses him to a violent, burning passion, which lifts him out of the mundane and plunges him into the sea of eternity. Flame is then clubbed with song to reinforce the oneness between mystical intensity and the consummation of sexual love. The last two lines summarize the end-result of his experience. First of all eternity is paradoxically glimpsed in “the last while.” The brief span of sexual climax confines eternity. “By swaying out beyond the white seaform” he comes into his own. The pun on “come” is deliberate and almost has the effect of a restatement of the paradox. The climax of the erotic act leads him to self-knowledge.

The twin functions of the woman are quite apparent in this poem. In the first two sections as Blessing points out, the speaker is merely a non-chalant observer of her ethereal form. It is she who kindles his emotions, and thus transports him to the plane of transcendental rapture. The union with the divine (if that is the primary experience) is communicated through the metamorphosis of the world, which is brought about by her. To use Roethke’s familiar image, by perishing in her form he wakes to a richer form of life. The woman is, in short, the cause and the result.

“Consciously, wilfully,” writes Roy Harvey Pearce, “to give and to be given to—this initiates the dialectic of relationship to the other which now moves the poems and gives them the formal control which everywhere characterizes them.” This kind of dialectic informs “All the Earth, All
the Air.” A state of stasis, one even of alienation from nature, is described in the first stanza. The lover has rejected the girl as he refuses to accept the responsibility of being loved. Freer compares the lover to the Prodigal Son who leaves the loved ones. It is when he returns to them and shows his willingness to accept responsibility in return for the inheritance that he is reborn. The experience of the lover is a variation on this parable. The present stagnation is the direct result of the abandonment of the beloved: “I stand with standing stones / The stones stay where they are.” Love in Roethke’s poetry is always felt as a motion; hence the dialectical opposition of stasis and motion, and responsibility and profligacy begins at the start of the poem. The dynamism of nature by contrast brings into relief the immobility of the speaker.

“Fall” takes on a new connotation in the second stanza. It is not occasioned by the supposed defilement of the spirit by the sensual play. It springs from the humanization of love, from the sacrifice of a part of his self to the partner. In order to accentuate the loss, he calls himself a rich cat. Inheritance, as we have seen, involves loss of a different kind. He describes his loss as a condition of being imprisoned in the loved one, as a spending of a fraction of his self.

The loss is more clearly described in the third stanza. When she is animated by sexual passion he has to leave himself, reach out and get united with her. In the fourth stanza nature imparts a lesson: “The blossom stings the bee.” The bee experiences pain while approaching the flower, but does not keep off. “The ground needs the abyss.” The abyss might scare man, but it,
nevertheless, is part of the world. It is useless to sleep over this reality. Deliberately shutting our eyes to it will only make the field of revelation recede. Acceptance of the exhortation revitalizes him, and he says: "The tree glides with the moon." We have by now come to take the tree to be an image of the speaker, and the moon of supernatural vision. He is in raptures over the regaining of the field: "The field is mine! Is mine!" Implicit in these words is the acceptance of the loved one and responsibility. In retrospect the earlier state appears to be hell which is, according to Peter Balakian, "a world without the complex responsibilities of giving oneself and denying selfhood." He takes a decision to rejoice in the presence of the beloved. Thus, the poem progresses from the initial condition of stasis through speculations on the causes to enlightenment and affirmation of love. The tension created by the dialectical play of opposites provides a firm structure to the poem. Contraries like loss and gain, prodigality and responsibility, sacrifice and selfishness, fixity and dynamism and stone and field energize it.

In poems of this kind where the poet is sceptical of the value of love and conscious of its harmful effects on identity, the woman's presence is felt rather than seen. The woman as well as love takes on a purely symbolic significance as the poet's concern is more with the health and integrity of his selfhood. But it is articulated in terms of love.

Roethke says in *Poet's Choice* that "Words for the Wind" is "an epithalamion to a bride seventeen years younger." In the early part of the poem she is like a wraith as in "The Visitant" and "The Dream." She transforms the world, and undergoes transformation herself. The first two lines
establish the fluid, ethereal quality of her form: “Love, love, a lily’s my care, / She’s sweeter than a tree.” In tune with her character she assumes myriad forms, and in union with her, the lover also identifies himself with them: “Mad in the wind I wear / Myself as I should be.” Already, one notices tension developing between his stable identity and its metamorphosis into a multitude of forms. He wears himself as he should be, not as he is. Again, the implications of wearing, as we have seen in connection with “The Open House,” are present here also. The question of the flower and the seed reiterates the theme of firm selfhood. However, the union with the loved one is not without its reward. The loss of identity is counterbalanced by the gain of transcendental joy and union with creation: “Motion can keep me still.” The paradox confirms the union of the sexual and the mystical. The stones leaping in the stream, the field breaking like the sea, and the lover’s walking with the wind are further indications of the marriage of the finite and the infinite. There are two kinds of stability: love confers a kind of stability which is experienced in the midst of change; this fruit of love causes him to lose the stability of his personal identity. The conflict resolves itself into one between two varieties of stability. Of the two the lover seems to prefer the one bestowed by love: “I bear, but not alone, / The burden of this joy.” The burden refers to the responsibility, the price to be paid for the joy. The “intenser day” created by “the rising moon” outweighs the painful necessity of wearing himself as he should be.

In the third section, with a shift in perspective he perceives a permanence in nature beneath the surface of change:
Under a southern wind,
The birds and fishes move
North, in a single stream;
The sharp stars swing around.

The perception of nature's unchangeableness leads him to the awareness: "Whatever was, still is." With these beliefs he turns to his beloved with renewed passion. But this idealized view of an unchanging pattern, according to Wolff, conflicts with the fact of ageing. "He cherishes his physical life even though it is moving toward its own end." Wolff's view is strengthened by these lines: "I cherish what I have / Had of the temporal."

While admitting the opposition, one has also to consider why man should be separated from nature, why man should not fit into the eternal pattern. Roethke is, obviously, working out the dialectic of change and fixity. It is unreasonable to suppose that one who has discovered stillness in motion, one who has strayed beyond into the illimitable and the immutable, is disconcerted by the awareness of the inevitability of growth and death. It is love that resolves the tension between the ceaseless flow of process and the divine, perpetual order. "All things bring me to love." It is true for two reasons—one is that love enables him to become one with all things, and conversely they lead him back to love; the second is that all things remind him of mortality and make him resort to love as a means of attaining immortality.

Having freed his mind from the nagging doubts, he participates almost hysterically in love with abandon. The progression is underscored in the lines: "Being myself, I sing / The soul's immediate joy." Now, it is not an unwilling
adjustment of the self to the demands of love as in the first section, but the paradoxical surrender and assertion of it. In the union with the loved one the self does not lose its separateness and intensity. There is some ambiguity in the concluding lines:

And I dance round and round
A fond and foolish man
And see and suffer myself
In another being, at last.

“Suffer” could be taken to mean “allow”; in this sense the lover with the lesson he has learned, permits himself to merge with the other. “Suffer” also denotes “experience pain”; in this sense the union involves sacrifice and loss and responsibility. Thus, the two facets of love—the transcendence of the earthly through love, and the readiness to surrender selfhood in return for the joy of love, are fused in the final lines.

Tension and paradox inform the structure of “I knew a woman.” Profligacy and responsibility, obsequious love and the fear of loss, levity and seriousness, and the temporal and the eternal are some of the opposites that vitalize the poem through their conflict. The slavish admiration and the concomitant loss of identity set the poem in motion. The exuberant praise of the woman borders on humour and flippancy:

Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only Gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew upon Greek.
I’d have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek.
William J. Martz comments thus on the second line:

The exclamation is perfect in context and perfect Roethke—accurate, humorous, original, particularly the wryly witty use of the verb "contain" in the sense of "keep within bounds" is a deliberate ironic contrast rather than the kind of apparent similarity represented by the repetition.  

It recalls the question in "Four for Sir John Davies:" "... What is desire? / The impulse to make someone else complete?" That seems to be what is hinted at in the first stanza, and what is described in the second. The observation of her beautiful form in the first stanza becomes ebullient enjoyment in the second. This goddess of eros makes the worshipper serve her like a slave:

She taught me Turn, and Counter Turn, and stand;
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
Coming behind her for her pretty sake
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).

The goddess-worshipper relationship becomes more relevant in the final stanza. What is of more significance here is the lover's description of himself as a rake. That Roethke does intend the pun is certain as the rake in the sense of a libertine is crucial to the meaning of the poem. He is aware of the prodigality, the "prodigious mowing" implied in the awareness of the need for compensating it with a surrender of selfhood.
This theme is considered in the fifth stanza. The slave-master, devotee-goddess relationship between the lovers is linked to the antithesis between the temporal and the eternal. First of all the speaker compares himself to a martyr. Martyrdom suggests death and rebirth. If the object of freedom is the attainment of immortality, the present slavery is not a bane. The slave dies for the goddess as a martyr and resurrects as a free man. The burden of responsibility borne by the slave gets transformed into the joy of illumination. Thus, the idea of martyrdom brings the dialectic of clashing contraries to a synthesis. Balakian observes thus on the significance of love in this poem:

For Roethke, sexual love and mystical illumination are inseparable ways of knowing. His lover is more than a dazzling lover, she is a lover in the flesh and in the spirit—a kind of houri who embodies nature and supernature; she creates a world in which body and soul rise into each other, affirming a greater unitive act which brings man beyond self and time into the eternal.35

In “The Voice” the woman becomes an ethereal muse whose melody inspires the poet and brings forth a mellifluous song from him. The music of the “Shy Cerulean” bird conjures up for him a world reverberating with divine songs, far beyond the frontiers of the mundane. Like the bird with which the girl is identified, he too flies up and drifts with the floating music. She enables him to live simultaneously on two planes: “I lived with open sound. / Aloft, and on the ground.” The precondition for receiving the import of the song seems to be the imagination. The poet is enthralled because, as the first two
lines show, he is imaginative: “One feather is a bird / I claim; one tree a wood.” Hence, he alone is able to get the intimations of immortality, which form the burden of the song. She unifies the whole of nature; the tree, the bird, the earth and the sky. It is at the end of the poem that he realizes that all this transformation has taken place on an ordinary day. The loved one achieves, as in most of the love poems, conjunction of the temporal and the eternal. Balakian comments on the poem thus: “... evoking Whitman’s trinity of ‘lilac’, ‘star’ and ‘bird’ twined to the chant of his soul, Roethke’s trinity of ‘bird, girl and ghostly tree join love, poetry, and the soul and unite ‘earth’ and ‘solid air’.”36 It is the absence of love that makes Coleridge dream in vain of reviving the song of the Abyssinian maid. Shelley also despairs of singing like the skylark. The comparison with the English romantics brings into clearer relief the positive value of love as Roethke conceives it.

“She” deals with another aspect of the beloved. She delights in “what is.” That would make us think that she exists in the present. When she speaks, he hears “down long sea-chambers of the inner ear.” Her sound, in other words, appears to him to emerge from the collective unconscious. She takes on the qualities of the primordial woman. She is the archetype of the woman, the abstract female principle that has existed in the mind of man over the ages. The speaker “feels her presence in the common day.” The archetypal and the realistic unite in her. The endless flow of process cannot change her as she is “stayed” by what was. But the inevitability of becoming pulls her into the moving water of process. The past, the present and the future meet in her. Thus, she becomes a sort of protean figure, which has
affinities with the final man in “The Rose.” She is eternal and, to borrow Kunitz’s term, a continuous “shape-shifter.” When she dances, the ground bears her away. She appears in the dark as well as in the common day. Antony Libby criticizes Roethke’s portrayal of woman as feeble and ill conceived.

Rather than being powerful they appear childishly vulnerable, soft and furry like the baby animals and plump birds which quiver about them. Though some of Roethke’s love poems are evident triumphs, many, especially toward the end, degenerate into pop love-song cliché, frequently involving the wind. As his words go limp, heavily precious sentimentalism takes over.37

Libby does not specify the poems which he considers weak. It is difficult to find them out as each poem of the sequence deals with one fundamental aspect of love. We do not come across a poem which is merely a sentimental praise of the loved one. In the love poems Roethke is concerned with the self, being and non-being, finitude and infinity, permanence and change, sensual pleasure and spiritual joy. As all of these are serious themes, Libby’s allegation is not justifiable.

In “The Other” Roethke himself is baffled by the problem of the other. “Woman as other,” argues Harry Williams, “is not developed enough by the poet to give a sense of definition between the poet and the woman...”38 What the reader has to understand, and what Roethke, in all probability, wishes him to do, is that the poems explore the impact of love on the poet’s self, and details such as the age, appearance and temperament of the woman.
are of little relevance. That is why he does not seek to personalize the relationship. In the first stanza of "The Other" the poet is worried by the question whether each becomes the other in the sexual act. Hence, "she plagues me with her shape" could be read on two levels. The first is that she plagues him with her tempting form. Despite the initial irritation, he adores her. The second is that she obstructs his spiritual progress. In this sense, the worshipful attitude is in conflict with the eternal child within him, the inner self that is waiting for the leap into the higher plane where the two selves get united. The loss of identity is not accompanied now by the elevation to the plane of supernatural reality. The exhilaration of seeing and suffering himself in another being has worn off. As Malkoff puts it, "the adoring poet watches his beloved with 'the absent gaze' of a child." Blessing thinks that "the sadness in the music" is caused by the poet's awareness both of his ageing and of the youth of his partner. It is possible that ageing has resulted in the decrease of the intensity of his love. Hence, he is not transported into the realm of spiritual joy.

Of "The Sententious Man" Blessing finds the title to be ironic. The "pithy pomposity" and the aphoristic quality of the verse obviously contrast with the linear progression of the poem. Each of the seven stanzas seems to enshrine a maxim, but at the same time remains part of the poem as a whole. The dialectic set in motion in the very first stanza acts in counterpoint to the preponderance of statements. "Spirit and nature beat in one breast-bone." The dual function of love is hinted at: the first is love as mere indulgence in sensualism and as such is indistinguishable from lechery; the second is love,
even sensual love, as a positive principle “sustaining” even “the loveless stone.” The second stanza is an elaboration of this theme. Roethke resorts to paradox to reveal the interplay between the flesh and the spirit. Lust is a fire that engulfs a sensualist. The flame of passion makes him forget the spirit, which, paradoxically, is also a kind of fire—“the spirit knows the flesh it must consume.” The latter is purgative. The relationship takes the form of a game or play of two kinds of fire competing for supremacy. The stirring of sexual desire kindles the soul. There is a difference in the quality of the fires. The heat of passion changes to ice, while the inner rage burns on purifying the lover. The third stanza deals with the result of the purgative process: “I stay alive, in and out of time.” Two images mirror the speaker’s state of mind—one, that of a lion kissing a rose; the other, that of passion and repose coexisting in harmony. In the fourth stanza sexual climax, as Kalaidjian puts it, leads to a sense of “cosmic unity.”*42 “But my least motion changed into a song / And all dimensions quivered to one thing.”

In the next stanza the speaker believes that all kinds of intense enjoyment “take us outside life.” In such moments the distinctness of things and persons gets blurred. With the disappearance of separateness the speaker can achieve oneness with several things and persons simultaneously: “I taste my sister when I kiss my wife; / I drink good liquor when my luck is good.” The nature of the experience is described more precisely in the last line: “Such ardour tames eternity, I think.” The sixth stanza once again emphasizes the advantages of undergoing purgation. “... I was schooled in pain, / And found out all I could of all desire.” The qualification of desire, or sheer
enjoyment, has many ramifications, and it is these that he has learned. We have to consider the contradiction implied. If pain is the non-fulfilment of desire, intense happiness is the materialization of desire. Thus, it is frustration that provides the necessary training. He is at one with the entire cosmos, yet retains his individual identity: "I know the motion of the deepest stone. / Each one's himself, yet each one is every one." What appears as an aphorism in these lines is, in fact, the end result of his questionings on the significance of love. Unlike Roethke's other poems, "The Sententious Man" appears to be the embodiment of a ratiocinative process. The fire symbolism of the earlier stanzas becomes complex in the final stanza. Impure body, that is a body aflame with passion, is now compared to water moving "toward a miry hole." The miry hole is a multiple symbol. It signifies the constriction of the self-experienced by "the true lechers" of the first stanza; it could represent the female phallus, and thus connote obsession only with the sensual; it could stand for the archetypal mire, the collective unconscious, which has the potential to purify the mind. The speaker tells us that the water goes on till it is purified. Naturally, it should flow on toward the sea of racial memory (the literal and the metaphorical merge here). If fire symbolizes impurity, that is sexual passion, it is water that does the function here. The distinction between fire and water vanishes, symbolizing in a different way the cosmic unity that the protagonist of the poem perceives. Love has to pass through many phases before it can have the potential to "strengthen" the weak bridegroom. Strength and weakness are also ambiguous terms which yield meaning only when they are related to the phases of love.
“The Pure Fury” is not a love poem in the conventional sense of the term. Here Roethke deals with the existential predicament of man. The significance of the woman is that she symbolizes the non-being, which he confronts. According to Richard Allen Blessing, she is vacuity personified, the apotheosis of mindlessness. To get an idea of the crisis depicted in the poem the meaning of the term “pure fury” needs to be explained. In his anxiety the narrator wants to become “The thing he almost was / When the pure fury first raged in his head.” One of the consequences of the attack of pure fury is that “… trees come closer with a denser shade.” Balakian thinks that the line must be construed as referring to the shade of the Garden in Eden and, therefore, suggesting the primordial imagination. But the denser shade seems to have more in common with “the black and shapeless night” of “Four for Sir John Davies.” Malkoff quotes the following passage from “The Exorcism” as a gloss on the passage:

In a dark wood I saw—
I saw my several selves
Come running from the leaves,
Lewd, tiny, careless lives
That scuttled under stones,
Or broke, but would not go.
I turned upon my spine,
I turned and turned again,
A cold God-furious man
Writhing until the last
Forms of his secret life
Lay with the dross of death.
The man struck by the pure fury resembles the speaker in “The Exorcism.”
The rage seems to be for purity, purity from the innumerable filthy selves, for integrity of the self. In “Slug” the poet expresses his rage at finding a slug during mowing:

And you refuse to die decently!—
Flying upward through the knives of my lawn mower
Like pieces of smoked eel or raw oyster,
And I go faster in my rage to get done with it.

The anger is unusual. In a way the slug also represents an impure self. Stiffler comments on the poem:

. . . it is impossible to miss the phallic imagery in the poem. The ‘fat, five-inch appendage,’ the ‘white skin of spittle’ the slug drags, the references to the smoked eel and the aphrodisiac raw oyster, all reinforce an equation of penis and the slug. This makes the killing of the slug with the ‘knives of my landmower’ all the more terrible, of course. Out of his frustration at being unable to return to his childhood innocence, he resorts to obliterating this symbol of his manhood.46

What the speaker craves for is purity; it develops into a fury (rage) because the absence of it results in the fragmentation of a self. The question of innocence assumes significance in the context of the speaker’s confrontation of non-being. In one of his last poems, “In a Dark Time” similar images are found: “In a dark time, the eye begins to see, / I meet my shadow in the deepening shade.” A suggestion of the fragmentation of the self is found in the question: “Which I is I?” Resemblance to “In A Dark Time” reveals
another aspect of the experience of the narrator. He is facing the dark night of the soul. The confrontation of non-being must be viewed against the mystical quest for illumination.

The first stanza describes the onset of the anxiety, or on another level, the state of the dark night of the soul, followed by morning and the dissipation of the darkness of terror or resurrection or union with the Absolute. In this sense the section provides a paradigm for the movement of the poem. However, the rest of the poem focuses on the sense of emptiness or vacuity that the confrontation of non-being induces in him and only vaguely hints at the possibility of transcendence. That the woman symbolizes nothingness is clear from the line: “I love a woman with an empty face.” The woman becomes a projection of the vacuum within the poet. She is ethereal and unsubstantial like the wraith of some of the previous poems; but she is not a disembodied spirit. She is merely a form of emptiness, neither spiritual nor physical. The woman with the empty face contrasts with purity which is mentioned twice in the previous line: “The pure admire the pure. . . .” Purity as substance is the antithesis of emptiness. The woman, despite her phantom-like appearance, seems to exist independent: “She tries to think, and it flies loose again.” The purity-emptiness dichotomy takes the form of the existence-nothingness conflict. Parmenide’s phenomenal world is in conflict with Platonic essences. The entire stanza is made up of pairs of opposites which philosophy is incapable of resolving. That is why, this knowledge lacks “inwardness.” Thus, neither the world nor the knowledge of it has a solid centre. His knowledge does not enable him even to understand the woman he loves.
The inner rage for purity, substance, innocence, integration and being tortures him. The self-cannibalism only objectifies this rage. The appetite for life clashes with the phantom of emptiness; the self-devouring with the affirmation of being, the pure fury with the denser shade.

In the final stanza, despite the equation of the woman with death, signs of redemption lie scattered. His breath, for instance, is taken away not by this image of death, but by “the light air.” In the fourth line, the light air is linked up with the woman. Once again, she becomes the wraith-like figure of poems like “The Dream.” The conflict between the brighter sun” and the “long night” is softened by hope. Thus, the paradigmatic first stanza and the transformation of the phantom into a wraith and the patient waiting indicate the possibility of attaining oneness with the Absolute.

“The Pure Fury” is defective as a poem because it is static. There is an accumulation of pairs of contraries, yet the poem is not vibrant with the dynamism of dialectical play. In contrast, “The Renewal” progresses stage by stage from a state of endless conflict through the dark night of the soul to the moment of illumination. The centaur and the sibyl, indicative respectively of the body and the mind, symbolically act out the drama of the mystification of eroticism. However, their romping and singing do not succeed in keeping off “the shift of thing” which, like a tree, the speaker has to “endure.” Despite the marriage of the traditional antagonists a new conflict crops up—constancy or perpetuity versus flux. The word “shift” occurs twice in the poem.

The second stanza describes the state of life on the edge of imminent reanimation, recreation or renewal. The chaotic universe lies meek in a state
of suspended animation awaiting the touch of the divine creator: “The night wind rises. Does my father live? / Dark hangs upon the water of the soul.” The narrator’s breath becomes slower, not because of the attack of anxiety as Malkoff would have us believe, but in consequence of the tranquil mood of expectancy, in readiness for the quickening breath of the Creator. The emphasis is on the anticipative wait. He, too, prepares himself for the transformation by “unblooding” the instinct. The word “drowse” in Roethke denotes the states preceding rebirth: “These waters drowse me into sleep so kind / I walk as if my face would kiss the wind.”

In the third stanza, the speaker is aware of divinity flowing into him and quickening him into a richer life, but along with the awareness come doubt and fear. This stanza marks the crisis of the poem. He knows that something has happened to his self. The metamorphosed self bears no resemblance to the original. Illumination has not yet flooded his mind, so that he does not identify with all that he gazes at. Nor does he see the individual self in the original form. It is an in-between state, one in which the mystic faces the threat of death: “I know I love, yet know not where I am; / I paw the dark, the shifting midnight air.” His fear is the result of two things—one, the shift of things has engulfed him and he does not have a reliable anchorage, the second, the self is on the point of disintegration.

The final stanza celebrates the mergence with the Absolute:

Dry bones! Dry bones! I find my loving heart,
Illumination brought to such a pitch
I see the rubble stones begin to stretch
As if reality has split apart
And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
I find that love, and I am everywhere.

David Ferry complains that poems, which have real power, are sometimes marred by impulses which “are quite simply disastrous.” What he seems to have in mind is “the stridently asserted affirmation” of the stanza. Roethke, he goes on, fails to bring off this sort of affirmation. “... the failure is more lamentable because the poem has promised to be the successful expression of feelings of a rather different, a more complex and more limited kind.” In other words, he wishes Roethke to have ended the poem with the uncertainty and fear presented in the penultimate stanza. But that would have been unsatisfactory because the poem had “promised” to chart the progress of the mystic quest. Ferry’s argument reveals the modernist impatience with solutions of problems, its tendency toward nihilism. All said, it needs to be borne in mind that “The Renewal” is a love poem, and as such it deals with the potential of love to protect the lovers from the threat of non-being.

Robert Boyers notes on the part of the poet-protagonist a waning of belief in the protective powers of love:

... he eventually discovers that the love of woman is not the ultimate mode for him. True, the speculation evoked by erotic involvement becomes less and less draining, more and more spontaneous and improvisatory, but there still remains a level of self-consciousness that is unsatisfactory.
Surrender to carnality does not lead to transcendence. In “The Sensualists” rollicking in sensualism becomes a wallowing in the sty. The lover exclaims in disgust: “I hate this sensual pen.” The sudden hatred in the poem has to do with the appearance of an apparition:

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

The ghostly figure could be taken as a hallucination of sexual guilt. But Charles Sanders gives a different construction to the passage. He thinks that it stands for the muse that vanishes withdrawing the inspiration. He also relates it to the fable of the Prodigal Son. It is the poetic inheritance that is denied to the lover on account of his self-dissipation. Blessing thinks that the apparition of the pure woman, affrighted from her wits, may be the objectification of the innocent, virginal self of the poet’s partner. As she leaves sucking the breath away from the couple, innocence vanishes:

The passing of the dreamy shadow leaves the poet in a nightmarish reality complete with burning forehead and parching tongue. In any case, her departure—taking her breath ‘with’ her and ‘from’ the lovers—signifies, for good or ill, the passing of an innocence and the purity from a relationship of the two who now must find a way in a fallen world, the world of men.

Roethke is not invalidating his earlier affirmations. Just as there are setbacks on the mystic quest for union with the supernatural, love is also subject to
various fluctuations. What Roethke is concerned with is the recording, symbolically or literally, of his experiences.

In "Love's Progress" Roethke deliberately draws attention to the title and to Donne's poem dealing with the theme of love. In the latter there is real progress—eroticism confers sainthood on the lovers. In Roethke's poem, ironically the progress is from bravado to fear, from the joy of sexual union to a longing for death. A complex symbolism informs the structural and thematic progression. What the hero dares are the consequences of carnalism. It is symbolized in the image of the vine winding around the tree. The light striding the rose qualitatively elevates the union to a higher level. The loved one can conjure up a bird from nowhere. The cumulative effect of the image-cluster is the emphasis on the metaphysical aspect of physical union. Violence and light are not antithetical to each other. The violence of the sexual act leads to "... light / Beyond the look of love." In the fourth stanza, midnight, flame, song and fear are mixed up. The flame of passion creates darkness; the singing log is consumed in the fire. He is alienated from home without straying out of it. Home, in this context, implies the abode of the spirit. The paradox is that the burning body is separated from the singing log; normally singing connotes harmony. Union, in short, becomes separation. The final stanza is ambiguous. The embrace of the woman is the embrace of death: "The close dark hugs me hard." The bird of the second stanza transforms itself into a stone. The third line brings in the idea of joy. One has to bring death, stone and joy into a meaningful formula of relationship. "Stone" is an ambiguous image; it is associated with both joy (spiritual) and
lovelessness. Associated with joy the stone should represent a state of ecstasy, which is what darkness as death connotes. Death stands for sexual ecstasy. The man who has “gone nowhere” fears himself in the field. The field in Roethke carries overtones of the infinite. The fear is specified in the last line: “For I would drown in fire.” The poet seems to suggest that love or the fire of passion lifts him up beyond into the realm of the infinite. The problem is in relating the vision of infinity to the sense of fear. Death, then, takes on a new significance: it is not merely symbolic. The lover wants to stay where he is, that is, in the realm of the spiritual and the eternal. The fear arises from the longing for the release of death. As Kunitz observes, “the love poems gradually dissolve into the death poems.”

“The Surly One” does not qualify as a love poem. It is an expression of inner rage. Despair seems to have activated atavistic tendencies. “I keep a dog, and bark myself.” He fears himself more than anything else. The regressive instinct is, obviously, stirred up by love. In “The Return” Roethke identifies with a dog. In that poem atavism is resorted to as a means of keeping the fragile psyche intact. By association love seems to have had a destabilising effect on his mind. What seems clear is that Roethke has exhausted the theme of love, and his mind is fastening itself on other matters. In “Plaint” for instance, death wish becomes more pronounced. Hell is defined as the sameness of days as they follow one after another: “In hell there is no change.” “This dusty road” will not take him to God unless it is moved by wind. There is a veiled reference to Genesis here. Light is diminishing instead of expanding. He has almost forgotten: “The gradual
embrace / Of Lichen around stones.” The poet despairs of ever attaining immortality. Perhaps, it is the symbolic death implied in regression that he means when he says: “Death is deeper sleep, / And I delight in sleep.”

In the first section of “The Swan” the speaker finds it difficult to detach himself from the tangles of the loved one’s hair. He asks almost in the Yeatsean manner: “Is there no way out of that coursing blood?” He knows that he must fall from all light. But he is the descendant of John Donne. He is prepared to risk the loss of light for the sake of sensual love. But, as Sullivan notes, this very love affords him “a vision of the final purity for which he had been waiting...”

At the beginning of the second section, Roethke describes a silver swan floating on the surface of a lake. He wants to become a swan. The opposites, undergoing a fusion, sing of “the nothing” which is the origin and end of everything. They infuse the silence of eternity into him. William Heyen attacks the poem for the obscurity of its symbolism: “Is this what the last stanza of ‘The Swan’ is about, a place where the contraries of experience reveal their illusory nature and leap only to song? The symbolic direction of Roethke’s poem is not at all clear.” “The Swan,” as Heyen remarks, is an art object similar to the golden bird in the boughs of Byzantium. It is clear that it is symbolic of immortality. The bird as an embodiment of form floats on the water, which symbolizes formlessness. Thus we have here a union of the temporal and the eternal, and it is out of this union that the song springs.

The sequence of love poems begins with “The Dream.” It is appropriate that it should end with “Memory.” In the memory of the
protagonist, the lovers "breathe in unison." The outer and the inner worlds unite leading to unmixed spiritual joy. But she cannot stay in his memory for long. She is not the ethereal wraith of "The Dream," but unites in herself the animalistic and the spiritual. As she fades out of his reminiscence, "the wind dies on the hill." But, he declares rapturously: "Love's all. Love's all I know." He tries to conjure up her image in his remembrance, but the world of make-believe changes into the world of reality: "When I follow after them, / The grass changes to stone."

In Roethke's poetry, thus, love is a means both of transcending the finite and the temporal and of communicating the quest for the union of the natural and the supernatural. Both the rapture of sexual consummation and the ecstasy of oneness with the Absolute involve the loss of individual identity, and some of the poems deal with the poet's reaction to the loss. Quite a few poems explore the flesh-spirit dichotomy. It has also been shown that the nature of the woman is not constant. Sometimes she symbolizes the flux of life, and appears as a perpetual shape-shifter, paradoxically providing her partner a kind stability. In certain places she is a shadowy ethereal creature, the anima or the female principle. In others she exists as a real woman, and physically delights the poet. In "The Pure Fury" she symbolizes reality which the poet-protagonist struggles hard to understand. The union with the beloved, at least in one instance, creates a death wish in the poet. The last few poems look forward to the meditative poems, which form the subject of the next chapter.
Notes


2 Burke 280.


7 Malkoff 110.

8 Burke 256.


14 Malkoff 119.
15 Sullivan 103.

16 Kunitz 26.


20 Pinkus 243.

21 Malkoff 122.

22 Malkoff 122.

23 Malkoff 122.


25 Bowers 121-22.

26 Blessing 174.


28 Blessing 178.


31 Balakian 106.


33 Wolff 78.
34 The Achievement of Theodore Roethke (Glenview: Scott, 1966) 10.

35 Balakian 107.

36 Balakian 110.


39 Malkoff 127.

40 Blessing 186.

41 Blessing 187.

42 Kalaidjian 106.

43 Blessing 189.

44 Balakian 112.

45 Malkoff 134.

46 Stiffler 138.

47 Malkoff 137.


49 Boyers 688.


51 Blessing 193.

52 Kunitz 26.
