Chapter VI

A GLASSHOUSE IN THE LONG WATERS:
THE FINAL RECONCILIATION

Besides the love poems, *Words for the Wind* contains two sequences, "The Dying Man" and "The Meditations of an Old Woman," each consisting of five poems. In both these poems, Roethke grapples with the threat of non-being. However, it is beyond the scope of the present work to consider them in detail although the poems merit a close analysis. But the omission is not serious as the symbolism in these meditative sequences is of the intuitive kind already discussed at length in connection with *The Lost Son* poems. However, "The North American Sequence" which forms the first section of Roethke's posthumous volume *The Far Field* (1964) presents a different kind of symbolism. "The sequence" represents Roethke's greatest achievement. In this final work he exposes the protected space of the greenhouse to the more specifically American landscape. As a craftsman he discovers in this meeting of history and self a potential multi-layered correlative for his search for "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form." Thus comments Cary Nelson on the implication of Roethke's outward journey from the Michigan of his childhood to the Pacific coast:

> Field, meadow, and plain with their ravishing openness make up one end of Roethke's polarized poetics of nature. At the other end are spaces of enclosed germination including, of course, the famous Greenhouse poems. Both types of space have their characteristic inhabitants. To the fields belong the many species of birds who fly above them; to the greenhouse, the tiny animals
who cluster there—snail, slug and worm. . . . These animals embody the emotive qualities of their respective spaces, and they suggest thereby what human use those spaces have. The greenhouse provides both a retreat and an organic resource. . . . The fields offer suitably more expansive possibilities for both growth and threat.¹

In addition, the poet's shuttling between the centre and the periphery of the continent symbolically enacts the regression and the progression of the self. Corresponding to this oscillation between egocentric isolation and empathetic mergence with the other is the alternation of two kinds of discourse, viz. the exploration of the self and the description of nature. In other words, like the woman in the love poems, topography is simultaneously symbolic and real.

The polarity between enclosure and openness has, as Nelson puts it, a sexual dimension. Retreat into confined space and passivity are female qualities in contrast with the masculine readiness to dare the infinite associated with the field.² What Roethke seeks to achieve is a new creation of an acceptable self by the unification of the respective properties of the greenhouse and the prairie. Thomas Gardner ignores the sexual aspect, but emphasizes the importance of the creation of self: "Roethke's poem provides a clear example of how the constant infusion of new material and the equally constant activity of the poet combine to create what Roethke has called 'a shape of change'—a fluid, developing representation of self."³

What Roethke seeks in the sequence is a kind of order or form that informs the ever-changing, ephemeral things in the phenomenal world.
It resides in the midst of flux, and has no resemblance to abstract concepts arrived at through intellectual speculations. As Sullivan notes, "the values of the conceptual mind" are an obstruction to the apprehension of this regenerative principle. To discover it the seeker has to baptize himself in the primordial waters, to immerse himself in nature and process. Here, in the encounter with the formless, the infinite symbolized for him by the field and water, he sees a threat which is the possibility of the dissolution or extinction of the self. Hence, initially an ambivalence characterizes his drive toward union with the other. The fear of being swallowed up by the formless sea of processes pulls him back while the impulse for discovering the vital truth pushes him on. One comes across two kinds of form in the poem: one, the distinctive human form of the seeker; the other, a clear sense of serenity radiating from a centre of knowledge as Arnold Stein defines it. The poet has to overcome the dread of physical annihilation by coming to terms with death, by accommodating the fact of death within the scheme of life. Phenomena and death do not obliterate or destroy so much as disfigure and transform. Thus, at the end of the poem, reassured by the vision of the final man whose memory reaches back into the past over millennia and whose prophetic eyes see into the future, Roethke gets reconciled to the fluidity of form, having found a still point in its midst. The rose symbolizes the ideal condition of existence he has been searching for. It will be more rewarding to consider the symbolic complexity of these images in the appropriate context. It would suffice at present to note that the dialectic set in motion by the antithetical tendencies of fearful withdrawal from and empathetic identification with, the other culminates in the synthesis of the vision of the rose.
The idea of the poem's dynamism brings us back to "the polarized poetics of nature." The constriction of confinement is condensed in the image of the stone, and the formlessness of expansion in that of the field or water. A host of images, now, align with the one or the other. Bird, wind, light and air link up with the field or the meadow. Earth, tree, rock and sand rally round the stone. As if the spirited interplay of these images were not enough, the dynamics of the self's outward sallies and inward retreats is paralleled, as Blessing shows us, by the sense of motion which either increases to an incredible speed or diminishes to a stillness. The verse also in proportion expands or contracts reflecting the state of mind of the poet-protagonist. Thus, Roethke exploits all the techniques at his disposal to create this masterpiece of his.

Hugh B. Staples detects qualities of the epic in this poem: "... 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..." Roethke's engagement of his sense of the American culture contributes to this impression. Although his preoccupation is with the spiritual crisis, he elevates it to a dignified level where private concerns crystallize towards the archetypal. He dismisses the ugly vestiges of American civilization, and concentrates on "the abiding solace of the woods, mountains, rivers, and tides." This focus on what is primitive and enduring (in the mind of man, that is) invests the work with an air of mythic greatness and simplicity. He almost recreates the virgin wilderness of the new continent, and identifies himself with the original inhabitants of the
land. The aboriginal quality of the verse is, on a deeper level, related to the quest for a new selfhood. The abnegation of the accretions of civilization and the attainment of the primal simplicity are a precondition for the success of his mission. Only a mind which is divested of the encumbrances of phylogenetic growth, and which retains the primal imagination can be fully absorbed into nature, a state necessary for the perception of what Roethke calls “the imperishable quiet at the heart of form.”

In the first section of “The Longing” Roethke recoils in disgust from the nauseating landscape which he sees upon straying out of the greenhouse. The spirit feels “fatigued” and enervated by this bleak vista of the country’s “physical and moral decay.”

On things asleep, no balm:
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on bar-stools.

It is not merely the accumulation of dirt that repels the poet, but the sight of death-in-life. The term “crucifixion” is particularly powerful in conveying the sense of sterility and stagnation. The next stanza elaborates on the idea of inertia “Less and less the illuminated lips, / Hands active, eyes cherished.” Nelson finds in this bleak panorama of waste a suggestion of “jaded sexuality.” Against this cheerless backdrop the poet states his wish: “How to transcend this sensual emptiness?” Unless the spirit is rejuvenated and
re-vitalized, it will slip back into the shell of subjectivity. That is not the only
consequence. It will slide down the scale of being to become a slug or worm;
that is, despair will activate the regressive instincts. But more is implied in the
spirit's identification with the slug. The phallic connotation is strengthened by
"crevice." The increased depravity is accompanied by impotence because the
worm is "loose." The worm staring blindly and blankly into the crevice, on
account of being made sexually powerless, parallels the poet staring at the
landscape which he cannot come into contact with owing to his feeling of
revulsion. The pun on "eyeless" seems to be deliberate, and calls attention to
the impossibility of creating a new self as no creative interaction with the outer
world takes place.

In the second section the worm gains an elevation in status: "I'd be
beyond; I'd be beyond the moon, / Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm." The
worm is equated with the bud, and both these are then equated with the
stalk that he has become: "To this extent I'm a stalk." There, evidently, is
some progress from the condition of a "loose worm" to the vertical form of
"a stalk." What happens in the few lines that precede the affirmation needs to
be examined. If civilization is the plume of pride on the head of man, it has to
be renounced for the recovery of vitality. The flight into a dream is heralded
by the wishful longing for "A body with the motion of a soul." It is a dark
dream in which "A great flame rises from the sunless sea." It is in response
to the rise of this flame that the poet expresses his exultation over the
newly-acquired confidence of transcending the state of death-in-life portrayed
in the previous section. The dream, then, has the solidity of an actual
experience, the strength of a symbolic action. A Freudian interpretation is
justified by the context. The sexual frustration described at the end of the first section gives way to a symbolic fulfilment in the dream. The worm, lacking direction and rendered impotent, is “ready for any crevice.” In the dream “any crevice” becomes an “exceeding” rose with which the worm is usually associated. The poet struck dumb by the sight of the ravaged landscape dreams of the rose and the moon, both symbols of spiritual poise. The rising flame is the return of potency and animation. “The sunless sea,” borrowed from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” not only fits into this interpretation, but corroborates it. In Coleridge’s poem the sacred river Alph forces itself out of a deep chasm in intermittent bursts along with huge boulders, as though the earth were panting heavily. While the chasm is symbolic of the female phallus, the hot fountain seems to suggest male sexuality. The sacred river is, thus, born of the union of the male and the female. Ultimately, it sinks into a sunless sea. The dream of the birth of the Alph, evoked by the memory of the sunless sea, restores to the dreamer the lust for life and masculinity. As the experience is supernatural, there is a paradox in the description of it. In the dark dream of a sunless sea, a flame appears to the poet, and the light cries out to him. That the experience described is mystical (in a symbolic way) is supported by the images among which even the worm, the most earthly in the Roethkean hierarchy, finds a place. To the extent that he has become aware through the dream of the possibility of redemption he can regain the human form as different from that of the “loose worm.”

Of the combination of the consciousness of self-depravity and the longing for another condition in the third section Balakian writes:
The building rhythm and expansiveness of section 3 bring together Roethke's longing with his present sense of deprivation. The rhetoric of the conditional "I would" generates a terrific quality of inertia and anticipation. The act of cataloguing and naming is a counter force to this time of nothingness, which makes the poet's condition more poignant and painful.\textsuperscript{11} Balakian does not seem to notice the dramatic quality of the poem; that is, the slow but sure progress from a state of helplessness to one of self-confidence. In the first section he asks in despair: "How to transcend this sensual emptiness?" Now he is able to describe his goal: "I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form." Despite the subjunctive mood in which his longing is stated, the list of creatures and things that he wants to identify himself with, indicates that he has got a sense of direction in which to continue his journey. He also realizes that he must be an explorer, not merely a passive observer which is what Balakian's account makes of him. Roethke restates his desire as an ability to delight "in the redolent disorder of this mortal life." In the second section he speaks of the felicity of having "a body with the motion of a soul." In the same way the eternal flow of process is in harmony with the motion of the soul of form. Only after apprehending this principle can he delight in the world of ceaseless change.

In the third section Roethke swings over from the repugnant features of civilization to the primordial forms of life: the fish, the salmon, the lemmings, the flowers, even the buffalo chips drying in the sun. He does so because their mindless absorption in nature enables them to live in harmony with the stable
principle of form hidden deep within the interior of nature. Roethke advocates primitivism only as a means of discovering this order. He should be able to delight in the manifold processes of life which includes death, decay and the dirt and filth excreted by civilization through the mechanization of life. In "The Journey to the Interior" the poet experiences an epiphany during a car ride over a terrain littered with all the rubbish that sophisticated life spews out perpetually. That appears to be the fulfilment of the poet's wish. Hence, Roethke's primitivism has to be accepted with some qualification. The ugliness of civilization now only depresses and dispirits him. But the perception of "the imperishable quiet" will make possible, as in the dream of the second section, the changing of the shadow into flame. In the first section "The great trees no longer shimmer / Not even the shoot dances." In the second, he mentions as one of the advantages of the vision of form the transformation of shadow into flame.

The discussion of the shadow and flame takes us to a consideration of Roethke's use of leitmotifs in the poem. Shadow and flame, for instance, occur in all the three sections. They delineate the poet's progress. In the first section the absence of shimmering brings into relief the shrinking of the spirit. In the second, on account of the experience of transcendence, they exist not as contraries, but as complements. In the third, as has already been shown, their interchangeability is perceived as a wholesome result of the vision of form.

At the end of the first poem Roethke journeys from "the edge of raw cities" to the kingdom of the Iroquois Indians. Ann T. Forster quotes from
Roethke's notebooks: "'Now a longer piece in which the protagonist faces the horrors of the modern city rises out of his own spirit to achieve an equanimity with an earlier more primitive American life—the world of the fish, the bird, the child, the Indian' (13: 192)." The original inhabitants live close to water. Thus, it is a move towards water which, as Sullivan notes, is a "regenerative principle of life seen as cycle, change and proliferation of being." Roethke's problem, as we will see in the remaining poems, is to engage his self with water which represents both flux and formlessness.

Neal Bowers finds in the first poem "The Longing," "something of a death wish, or at least a fascination with death. ..." She goes on:

... there is a fundamental difference between the lost son's regression and the longed for regression of the speaker in this poem. The lost son's drive is back to the point of his origin, to the beginning of life. ... The speaker in "The Longing" who desires "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form," embraces his own mortality.

It is a misreading of Roethke's phrase for the principle of order that leads Bowers to suspect a death wish in the poem. The poet himself is aware of the danger that immersion in water poses to his identity. The first section of the next poem "Meditation at an Oyster River" should dispel any doubt one may have regarding the poet's attitude to death. As the water runs up to him, he retires to a higher rock for safety. At present, he is unwilling to lose his distinctively human identity.
At the beginning of “Meditation at Oyster River” the poet is found sitting on a rock at the edge of a bay, with the mouth of a river at his back. As Hugh B. Staples says, “section 1 is almost hypnotic in its gentle rhythms and repetitions.” The atmosphere is one of quiet repose and seductive beauty. Motion has almost slowed down to an alluring stillness. Even sound has subsided to an unusual tranquillity. The first tide-ripples gently flow towards him. Then, a small rivulet approaches him from behind. However, he is protected by “a barrier of small stones” and “a sunken log.” In the deepening twilight even the birds stop chirping. At last one wave comes in over the barrier and slaps against the sunken log. The poet dabbles “his” toes in the brackish foam sliding forward. Soon, for safety, he retreats to a higher rock. It is a gesture of refusal of the embrace. It is the persistent brooding over the security and protection of the individual self that prevents him from reciprocating the wave’s affectionate advance towards him. It is a variant form of the light crying out to him in the first poem. The stillness that results from the refusal is of an undesirable kind. It cannot reinvigorate him. It is as if the poet were in a trance. But he is not. The wind is as gentle as a child’s breath, not strong enough to turn a leaf. The sound of the fire crackling is barely audible. Unless he throws himself into the whirling process of life, he cannot achieve unity of being. The barrier of small stones, the sunken log and the dead tree in the river mouth represent the insulated self. As James McMichael writes, “what he desires is outside him, outside the self. But this desire is blunted by the unavoidable awareness and fear that to be lured out of the confines of the self is to court death, the absolute loss of self.”
The polarity referred to at the beginning of the chapter is discernible here. The rock protects the poet from the water which symbolizes process or flux. Akin in function to the rock are the sandstones. The tree and the log stand for the self that refuses to leave its shell. The rock and the sandstones are symbolic of confinement and stasis. The wind also acts as a leitmotif. In Roethke's poetry a breakthrough to an illuminating vision is often indicated by the rising of a wind. Here, in the first section of the poem, the motion of the wind slows down to a deathly stillness: "The wind slackens, light as a moth fanning a stone: / A twilight wind, light as a child's breath / Turning not a leaf, not a ripple." In contrast to the last section of "The Song" (CP 140) in which the speaker celebrates his attainment of a harmonious union with the inner self, the eternal child within him (which will appear later in "The North American Sequence") throws light on the experience of the protagonist.

And a wind awoke in my hair,
And the sweat poured from my face,
When I heard, or thought I heard,
Another join my song
With the small voice of a child,
Close, and yet far away.
Mouth upon mouth, we sang,
My lips pressed upon stone.

Strangely enough, the union with the inner self is union with the infinite; the wind unites with the stone, and the child blends into the stone. The inner and the outer selves, self and the other, fluidity and solidity, in short, the dominant
Roethkean dichotomies undergo a synthesis at the end of this poem. The last two lines of “The Small” (*CP* 142) can be cited as an instance of the mergence of the polar opposites: “And things throw light on the things, / And the stones have wings.” The mystical experience described at the end of “The Shape of the Fire” begins appropriately with an embrace of the air, and the light:

To have the whole air  
The light, the full sun  
Coming down on the flower heads,  
The tendrils turning slowly,  
A slow snail-lifting, liquefied. (*CP* 64)

Nowhere else is the fusion of the finite and the infinite, of form and formlessness so beautifully described as in these lines from the final section of “The Long Alley:” “Send down a rush of air, o torrential, make the sea flash in the dust” (*CP* 58).

Thus, Roethke’s rejection of the water’s embrace, with the consequent slackening of the wind reveals a worsening of the condition of his spirit which at the end of the section becomes “a dead tree.” Gardner supports this reading: “Though the world around him steadily increases in activity, he seems as weary and tentative as he had been in ‘The Longing.’”17 James G. Southworth speaks of “the poet’s spiritual peace in the presence of nature.”18 It is true if serenity can be unequivocally equated with peace. But, in Roethke, one comes across several kinds of tranquillity, and several kinds of atmospheric disturbance. We cannot describe these conditions as indicative of peace or unrest. The final judgement must be governed by the leitmotifs.
In the second section, Roethke addresses the problem of his self-conscious preoccupation with his separate individual personality. "The Self," he says, "persists like a dying star." Mills gives the following gloss on the metaphor: "... the self stays on as a residue in the same way that stars many light years away are still visible on earth after they have actually been extinguished." He wants to become one with the shy beasts which throw themselves with abandon into the flow of phenomena. They don't fear being deluged by the flux, and hence enjoy participating in life: the doe 'lops' across the highway, the snake waits for its fly, the humming bird 'whirs' from flower to flower. But, the undying star of self only succeeds in silhouetting "Death's face." Thus, opening himself up to an influx of the other also vivifies the contours of the spectre of death. Reaching out in empathy toward the shy beats, a slight relaxing of the grip of the self forces him to encounter this threat. The tension is embodied in the image of water: "With these I would be / And with water." The process of identification can only end up in the immersion in water. In a sense, therefore, the animals, as representing the other, can be equated with water, the embodiment of infinity, of otherness in its infinite form, or formlessness. Nelson says that one of the consequences of leaving the greenhouse is "death by over extension." Roethke, has of necessity, to overcome the dread of death.

The willingness to "be" with water shows some progress in the long journey out of the self. But Roethke's description of the water with which he "would be" requires close examination:
With these I would be
And with water: the waves coming forward, without cessation,
The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp,
    miscellaneous driftwood,
Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous undercurrents
The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of stone,
The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.

There is no barrier obstructing the onward movement of the waves. However, the incoming tide is flanked by ridges of stone, suggesting the poet's reluctance in leaving the solid anchorage in the self. This image of the conjunction of fluidity and rootedness is perfected by the image of the rose in the final poem of the sequence. Moreover, in contrast with the stillness of the first section, the presence of the cross-winds is a necessary pre-condition for the poet's acceptance of water. The identification with the shy beasts and with water, according to Mills, presages "spiritual movement." Attention to the poem's symbolism, its balancing of images is crucial to an understanding of Roethke's purpose which is not, as some have alleged, an escape into "a religious stasis," or into "the stock cosmic pieties of sagedom." Roethke is not attempting merely to merge with water and seek eternal oblivion. His intention is not a plunge into the impersonality or formlessness of the sea. What he seeks is a transcendence of the clogging sense of self, not a surrender of selfhood to be completely submerged by infinity. It is possible to identify with the immensity of the other without losing himself, to share the formlessness of the sea without losing his form, to participate in the flux of life without losing the stability of his self. Just as exposure to the American
landscape does not mean the effacement of the greenhouse world, mergence with water does not result in the repudiation of land. Nor should the outward venturings of the poet, including baptism in the water, be construed too literally, for the spatial direction of Roethke’s journey does not always correspond to the direction of the actual movement of the self. Straying out is paradoxically, moving inward. As the lines quoted from “The Song” show revelation, for the poet, involves union with the inner self. It happens simultaneously with the experience of oneness with the wind, water, or light.

In “A Field of Light” prior to the experience of beatitude, the poet kisses “the skin of a stone” (CP 60). Then, he describes beatitude as an experience of weightlessness, of an expansion of the self: “And I walked, I walked through the light air; / I moved with the morning” (CP 60). Thus, in Roethke’s poetry one can move with the morning after becoming one with a solid, motionless thing. In “Her Becoming,” the third poem in the sequence entitled “The Meditation of an Old Woman,” the old woman describes her experience of illumination:

By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live.

My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;

I live in air; the long light is my home;

I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;

A light wind rises: I become the wind. (CP 161)

All the familiar symbols of the infinite are thrown together in the short passage: light, wind, field, air and water. Identification with the wind does not make her slacken her hold on the stone. Being moored in the stability of the stone,
she keeps herself steady “in the shifting stream.” Thus, if overextension implies death, so does claustrophobic confinement. It is Roethke’s desire to keep himself poised in the middle, between the extremes, between the large and the small, the American landscape and the greenhouse, the other and self, and fluidity and form.

The readiness to accept the embrace of the water works a miracle on his lethargic self. “The self takes on the pure poise of the spirit,” and he “acquires, for a time, the sandpiper’s insouciance.” Initiated thus into “the first heaven of knowing” the poet dwells on an image of release from the constriction of “the egotistic self.” The image is that of the birth of a Michigan brook. The water held back by a small stone gathers strength to overcome the blockade and form a small rivulet. Then, it has to pass through a narrow cleft in a rock, and escapes into freedom in the form of a cascade. The progress of the Tittabawasee is impeded by more obstacles. Ice piles high around the iron-bound spiles resulting in the freezing of the banks of the river. The blast of the dynamite liberates the river from the blocking ice, and carrying the debris of “…branches and sticks, / Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child’s shoe riding a log,” it moves forward towards the sea. Sullivan finds “the description of the ice-bound river breaking its boundaries in spring” “one of the effective moments in the sequence.”

Balakian is of the view that “the first heaven of knowing” is “part of the catharsis of memory.” Indeed, the description of the river gets its power from a convergence of memory and reality. At the level of reality it operates as a metaphor for the poet’s transcendence of the protective barrier of self, for
his ultimate willingness to come out of the fortress to merge with water. And in the remembrance of the course of the Tittabeswasee there is a certain measure of self-involvement, a kind of baptism in the water, both of reminiscence and of the river. The poet is, in a sense, reborn as the trembling Michigan brook which leaping over various impediments, finally joins the sea.

It is interesting to note that a journey through memory into the interior of the continent, the Saginaw of his childhood, precedes the immersion in the water. The word “precedes” is misleading because regression into memory and the outward stretching of the spirit are inseparable.

Nelson feels that Roethke’s use of the American landscape resembles, in certain respects, “the historical usurpation of the wilderness.” He goes on: “. . . there will be no loyalty to nature here except as it can be used to suit the poet’s spiritual imperatives.” He argues that the experience that Roethke is recording here is willed rather than genuine. It is a verbal artifice which bears no resemblance to reality. Nelson seems to deny the poet the freedom to imaginatively transform reality. It is difficult to understand why he expects from the poet so much fidelity to the topography of the land. But the sequence, it must be admitted, is according to him, none the less beautiful for being a product of sheer craftsmanship.

In the last section Roethke uses two paradoxes to describe the materialization of the longing stated in the first poem of the sequence. It begins with “this waning of light,” but moves on to describe his rocking “with the motion of morning.” At the end of the poem it is once again night, but the landscape is illuminated by the radiance of the moon. The transcendence of the temporal is first indicated by the confluence of three
kinds of light and the condensation of an entire day into one moment. Secondly, the half-sleep induced by the rocking motion, a state of trance, is at odds with the spirit running “in and out of the small waves.” Although he is in drowse, he is awake, and plays over the waves:

Water is my will, and my way,
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds.
How graceful the small before danger.

The paradoxes underscore the mystical nature of the experience that he is undergoing. Thus, the incandescence that bathes the landscape is at once metaphorical and real, “In the first of the moon, / All’s a scattering, / A shining.” Also present in the passage is another paradox, less obvious, but of more significance than the ones already examined. “Morning” and “cradle” suggest birth, the awakening of the spirit, but strangely, this awakening is experienced as a “half-sleep;” the images of incipient stirrings are undercut by an imperceptible slip into sleep. Cradle and sleep together point to the direction of the spirit’s movement. In the act of reaching out to merge with water the self appears to be moving inward. Once again, we are reminded of Roethke’s cyclical theory of progress. But retreat into the interior does not hamper the outward progress. By safeguarding the self from the danger of dissolution the regressive slide facilitates the union; by retaining the individual selfhood it leads unto the mergence with water. This is probably what the poet means when after announcing “water is my will and my way,” he says: “And the spirit runs, intermittently, / In and out of the small waves.”
In the next poem "Journey to the Interior" the perspective is reversed to highlight the inward journey, the regressive aspect of the union with water, that is, what happens in the "half sleep" mentioned at the end of the preceding poem. As has been indicated in the opening paragraph of this chapter Roethke does not relinquish the greenhouse so much as expose it to the larger world outside. The uniqueness of the sequence is the conjunction of the two worlds, and not the repudiation of one in favour of the other. In the convergence of the garden and the industrial landscape of the mid-continent America we find the symbolic union of self and other. Hence in the context of the sequence a firm grasp of the positive values of the smaller world, in other words, a possession of the regenerative principles embedded in the depth of the psyche, a possession of the true self, must accompany the attempt at attaining oneness with the threateningly formless other. It may be noted that Roethke's quest is for "the imperishable quiet," the principle of order that lies hidden in the midst of change. He needs a tool with which to penetrate to the core. Kunitz calls him "a poet of transformations." But the transformation of the real, changeable and ephemeral is made with the help of the findings of his regressive search. Thus, where Roethke describes a state of epiphany there is an implicit suggestion of a self-discovery achieved through a plunge into the mind.

Cary Nelson observes the juxtaposition of the title "Journey to the Interior" and the first lines: "In the long journey out of the self, / There are many detours. . . ." He adds further that the paradox that results is nullified by force by the poem. It is as if, according to him, the vision that is described
later in the poem, were not the logical outcome of the dialectic of motion in opposite directions. But such a contention rests on the assumption that Roethke's language serves only two functions; viz. it literally portrays the interior of the continent, and it symbolically represents the journey through the psychescape. It evidently does both these functions. But in the course of the description we come across passages which do not serve either of these linguistic functions. For instance, the following description of the second car certainly surprises us:

I am not moving but they are,
And the sun comes out of a blue cloud over the Tetons,
While, farther away, the heat-lightning flashes.
I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain,
The wind veering the car slightly to the right,
Whipping the line of white laundry, bending the cottonwoods apart,
The scraggly wind-break of a dusty ranch-house.
I rise and fall, and time folds
Into a long moment;
And I hear the lichen speak,
And the ivy advance with its white lizard feet.

Despite the simultaneity of the metaphoric and the literal meanings, normally they exist parallel to each other. But there are points at which they coincide, and the result of such coincidences is the emergence of transcendental visions. The arrival through memory in the greenhouse and the consequent recovery
of the primal simplicity seem to correspond to the perception of the fundamental order that lies submerged within the flux. In such cases both kinds of reality, both the inhabitants of the greenhouse and the bleak clutter of objects suggestive of America's industrial civilization, undergo some modification, and lead to what Nelson calls the "visionary synthesis."30 Neither of the journeys in itself can lead to such transcendental experiences.

In James McMichael's view, "the journey to the interior . . . seems to be . . . directly antithetical to the journey out of the self."31 The first section of the poem supports this view. The automobile comes to an abrupt stop with the wheels churning in the sand. But all along, the journey is impeded by obstacles with the shale sliding dangerously and the arroyo cracking the road. The canyons, the creeks swollen in midsummer, the reeds, the swamp alive with quicksand and the fallen fir tree make the car-ride dangerous. At the psychological level the Whitmanesque catalogue of obstructions indicates the perils inherent in regression. In the first chapter it was seen that the self is reluctant to divest itself of the benefits of civilization. A willing abnegation of the fruits of phylogenetic growth is a prerequisite for the regaining of that primordial selfhood which views itself not as separable from nature. The greenhouse, for Roethke, symbolizes the ideal condition of selfhood. The self, while it retains the qualities peculiar to the individual, is, yet, at one with the small of the universe. He has to experience this kinship afresh in order to relate himself meaningfully to the world at large. The inward movement for the re-discovery of this primeval link is, therefore, identical with the act of reaching out to the external world of phenomena in search of the radiant
centre of order. The union of the two discoveries leads to the coveted state of bliss. However, in the first section the egotistical self refuses to confront the risks involved in retreading the path of phylogeny. Thus regression becomes a retrogressive retreat into the false self. In this sense McMichael’s observation that the automobile “serves the self in a protective capacity” seems to be valid. But if the whole interior journey is to be explained as a desire for protection (from the threat of dissolution), the term protection will have to be defined as an anchorage in the values associated with true selfhood. Thus, the fallen fir tree that blocks the progress of the automobile symbolizes the false, clogging self that retards, in the name of security, the poet’s journey towards the goal which is the fusion of the temporal and the atemporal. “The thickets darkening,” as Malkoff has shown in his discussion of “The Pure Fury,” is suggestive of an onslaught of anxiety, a spiritual crisis akin to the dark night of the soul experienced by mystics.

In the second section Roethke’s journey through “an American landscape of death and desiccation” results in “a ritual catharsis, a redemption through acceptance.” Kunitz speaks of Roethke’s symbolic “dying into America, so to speak.” In the automobile he does traverse the landscape devastated by the country’s industrial culture, and catalogues in the manner of Whitman the disconcerting feature of this cultural decadence. He also encounters during the car ride the repelling sight of death. Yet it should not be forgotten that the journey is symbolic. It is easy to think that he submits himself to an influx of this outer world of destruction, death and decay, and undergoes a symbolic death. Such an assumption will account for the rebirth
or the vision that occurs later. But as Nelson says, "Roethke succeeds for a moment in fusing a traditional opposition in American culture. The machine and the garden are brought together and shown to have a common core."\textsuperscript{35}

The presence of the greenhouse in this section and its importance in the transfiguration of the ravaged land cannot be ignored. Thus, in moving past the relics of the wreckage of the land caused by civilization the poet reaches the greenhouse and recovers the primordial purity that it symbolizes. The epiphany he experiences is as much the result of his repossessing of the values of the greenhouse as of the catharsis of symbolic death. In other words it is the fruit of the marriage of the greenhouse and the prairie. According to McMichael, the difference between the two sections is that "in section I, the premium is on safety," in section II, "it is on abandon."\textsuperscript{36} Michael seems to miss the mark by assuming that rashness is the means of achieving a breakthrough to release from the confinement of solipsism. There is a suggestion of bravado and youthful recklessness in the following lines:

I remember how it was to drive in gravel,
Watching for dangerous down-hill places,
where the wheels whined beyond eighty--
When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the shale,
The trick was to throw the car sideways and
charge over the hill, full of the throttle.

But, it is a plunge with determination into the depth of the mind. Hugging close: "Wary or rubble and falling stones, he will not make it to the haven." That Roethke intends the description to have a symbolic dimension is clear from the lines:
But the road was part of me, and its ditches,
And the dust lay thick on my eyelids,—whoever wore goggles?
Always a sharp turn to the left past a barn close to the roadside,
To a scurry of small dogs and a shriek of children.

He reaches the phase of childhood; the next step is to rid himself of the vestiges of civilization. Accordingly he goes past the sand dunes, fish flies, towns with their high pitted road-crowns and deep gutters, the old bridge with a buckled iron railing, and the cemetery. He has also to face death and decomposition. That is the last obstacle in affirming his relationship with the organic world. We recall his initial disgust with the decaying roots and rotting leaves. With the regressive entry into the greenhouse begins the gradual transformation of the bleak landscape. It is not, however, suggested that the transcendence is made possible solely by the mechanics of regression. But it plays an important part in the attainment of the mergence with the infinite.

After describing the transformation of the plain into the sea, and his immersion in it, he writes:

And I hear the lichen speak,
And the ivy advance with its white lizard feet—
On the shimmering road,
On the dusty detour.

Although he is in the water (water and plain being symbols of infinity and formlessness), he is close enough to the lichen to hear its murmur. He is still in the enclosed space of the greenhouse. It is not merely an instance of the blend of the finite and the infinite, but the paradoxical state of the poet moving in both realms simultaneously.
At the beginning of the third section the process of the transformation is reversed although the resultant vision does not change. In the preceding section the plain is metamorphosed into a sea. Here, "I see the flower of all water, above and below me, the never receding, / Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the moonlight." Water envelops the poet. But it neither obliterates nor even submerges the land. Perhaps it is a metamorphosed form of water. In Roethke's world of transformations one cannot be sure which of the two is implied. What needs to be noted is that immersion in water is accompanied by a firm grip on land. In "Meditation at Oyster River" we see the self being rocked into a drowse. At the same time it is wide awake and moves in and out of the waves. Here "the soul is at a still-stand." The body is asleep. The condition of the self is the same in both poems. It is alert although it is in a drowse. As in the earlier poem, sleep implies the quiet retreat into the protective space of the garden while the easeful alertness indicates creative encounter with the other. Malkoff contends that the "still-stand" is "the stand at the stretch in the face of death." "Roethke here rejects neither the temporal nor the eternal; he rather laments the lack of connection between them." The poem's images do not warrant such an inference. They reveal the harmonious union of opposites—land and water, stability and flux, stillness and motion, darkness and light. "The flower of all water" appearing in "a parched land" combines the two elements with the respective values they are associated with. It is an instant suspended from the temporal cycle of process, an instant between the formation and the descent of the drop. It is the point of the intersection of the temporal and the eternal. It is a moment in which "the heart of the sun" is known "in the dark and light
of a dry place." It is "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form." The mingling of light and darkness, it has already been seen, accompanies the experience of this perception of order. The sense of fulfilment is reiterated by the emphasis on the state of dryness or sterility being put an end to by contact with water; at first there is a "parched land;" in the second stanza it is "a dry place." The poet feels reanimated; but it is a "dusty wind" that brisks "a flicker of fire." There is an insistence on the retention of the mortal form even in this moment of union with the infinite. Once again we sense the presence of the greenhouse in such lines as: "I have heard, in a drip of leaves, / A slight song."

Roethke restates his goal here. In the first poem, which, according to Staples, serves as an overture, the object of his quest is described as an ability to delight "in the redolent disorder of this mortal life." In this poem he is more specific: "I rehearse myself for this: / The stand at the stretch in the face of death." Death is apparently the most unacceptable part of this eternal and inexorable flow of process. To delight in this whirring flux he must be able to discover the still centre of order. The goal and the present experience are united in the participle "delighting" which links the noun "the stand" and the verb "roam:"

Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves,
And I roam elsewhere, my body thinking,
Turning toward the other side of light,
In a tower of wind, a tree idling in air
Beyond my own echo.
He can now face the sombre spectre of death which confronts him on “the other side of light.” He is carried there “in a tower of wind” which is symbolic of the infinite. However, it is necessary to note that he does not identify himself with it, but remains distinct as “a tree idling in air.” The long journey out of the self is complete; he has been able to get beyond his own echo. Roethke describes the sense of a stillness in motion; where earlier we found simultaneous movement in opposite directions, we see a kind of stillness, the poet moving “Neither forward nor backward.” Thus writes Harry Williams about the conclusion of this poem:

What does the poet learn from all this shifting in and out of memory? There is nothing gratuitous about the process of regeneration that the poet structures for himself; it involves a conscious choice of imagery and a sustaining belief that exacts a commitment, as well, to uncertainty and the surrender of identity.39

Despite his mention of the choice of imagery, Williams seems to neglect the polarization of these images around the central figures of the greenhouse and the field, and how their dialectical play ends up in the synthesis of the vision described at the end of the poem. Everywhere in the poem from start to finish we are aware of the emphasis placed on the importance of keeping the self intact in the attempt to throw himself into the sea. Roethke is conscious of the eerie silence that prevails “on one side of silence;” but when he “breathes with the birds,” the unsettling silence gives way to a communion with the dead. The poet is dealing with another aspect of the experience. Like the ultimate
man described later in the sequence the man who has discovered "the
imperishable quiet at the heart of form" is able to direct his glance backward
in time over the ages, and converse with the dead. There is a paradox in this:
breathing with the birds, that is, leaping into the whirling world of process
(with the possession of the values of the greenhouse), leads to a sleep in
which the dead sing to him. The sleep-wakefulness dichotomy is operative
here too. It is as if the extreme form of wakefulness were sleep. Sleep, as we
have seen, is a state of mind that is associated with the regressive journey of
the self. In regression the self enters into a friendly colloquy with the dead.
Thus, getting beyond his "own echo" he absorbs the song of the ancestors into
his voice. Staples argues that the vision presented in this poem is an "illusion
of eternity" which "bears no relation to normal experience." It is, moreover,
"a world of the perverted imagination." Such a contention presupposes the
validity of the literal sense of the written word. For instance, Staples reads the
expression "after rocking the flesh to sleep" as expressive of the divorce of the
body from the soul, and finds it equivalent to what Roethke calls "my
foolishness with God" in the next poem in regard to a different outlook on life.
This interpretation also does not take into account how Roethke prepares us,
through repetition, for the proper understanding of such expressions.
Moreover, Staples' interpretation does not explain the conscious statement of
the object of his quest in the lines: "I rehearse myself for this; / The stand at
the stretch in the face of death / Delighting in surface change. . . ."

Roethke's language at the start of "The Long Waters" shifts frequently
between the comic and the serious. The dualism in the language bespeaks a
relaxed mood and self-assurance, both the result of the illumination he had in
the previous poem. But the levity in the tone should not lead us to play down
the importance of the problem dealt with. Roethke presents before us, in a
humorous way, a few small creatures with their respective ways of knowing
the world:

    Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say,
    But the hind part of the worm wiggles the most,
    Minnows can hear, and butterflies, yellow and blue,
    Rejoice in the language of smells and dancing.

There is no reason for Roethke to consider the problem of choosing one of the
two ways of responding to the world. One is to rely on the senses as the bees
and the worms do, and immerse oneself in the actual world. The other is to
transcend this world of transient things and unite with a higher order of reality.
Roethke who has been able to combine both these ways, and who knows that
a certain kind of knowledge is necessary for the free participation in the world
of change, surprises the reader by discussing the advantages and
disadvantages of the alternatives. Perhaps, that is why he can afford to be
playful. Hence, he solemnly "rejects the world of the dog" (the effect is
humorous). Roethke’s intuitive symbolism links the dog with the child. The
dog is not merely an image of innocence. It is symbolic of the intuitive way of
contacting the world, which is condemned in this poem. The humour arises
from the contrast between the serious way in which he articulates the decision
and the transparent fact seen alike by the poet and the reader that the
decision is not only wrong but absurd. He has repeatedly told us that he
wants the insouciance of the sandpiper, the ability to delight in what he calls "surface change;" in short, he wants to plunge into the swirling tide of life. He has also learnt how to do it. Thus, there is nothing new in his decision in the poem. Or he must be imagined to have relapsed to the stage in which he was in the second section of "Meditation at Oyster River." In that poem he says he would be with the doe, the young snake waiting for its fly and the humming-bird. In that case what he desires is the mindlessness and primeval purity of these creatures. So he reproaches himself for his "foolishness with God." The ideal condition Roethke has always wished for is the one in which light is inseparable from the stone. Now in his degeneration, that condition which symbolizes the union of the greenhouse and the field, appears loathsome.

It is interesting then to consider, in some detail, the place where he would rather be. It is the shoreline where the continent and the ocean meet. Several other pairs also meet there: fresh water and salt water, sea-wind and the pine-tree, fire and water, life and death. Roethke employs the images in such a way that one cannot help feeling that there is a suggestion of the contact of the finite self with the infinite. However, he is not yet ready for the experience of epiphany. Having stated his desire to be with the bees and the worms he faces the same problem as he did in the earlier poem—how to safeguard the self from the danger of dissolution. He addresses Mnetha, the guardian of two perpetual infants in Blake's *Terei*el, and asks her to protect him from the flurry of change. Already Roethke seems to realize the futility of seeking the mindless absorption of the worm and the snake in the flow of
process. As Thomas Gardner observes, "She" in the second stanza seems "to be a stand-in for the poet, or for those faculties of the imagination and memory that intersect the changing world and magnify its potential." Roethke is exploring ways of countering the threat of change with which his present mode of responding to the world brings him to face. Imagination can lessen the threat in so much as it can intensify the present pleasure so that even after its cessation the pleasure will linger on in the mind:

How slowly pleasure dies!

The dry bloom splitting in the wrinkled vale,

The first snow of the year in the dark fir,

Feeling, I still delight in my last fall.

But it is at once clear that this comfort is feeble.

Roethke has not yet told us what happens at "the charred edge of the sea" after his arrival. He sees "the trout and young salmon leap for the low-flying insects," "the ivy-branch, cast to the ground," put down "roots into the saw-dust," "the pine, whole with its roots" sink "into the estuary," and "a fisherman" dawdle "over a wooden bridge." These things represent the world of phenomena, and the quiet contemplation of these happenings creates a serene mood of suspension and expectancy. The phenomenon of change does not frighten him as it does in the previous section. Nor does it produce havoc. It is difficult to explain the transition from fear to a tranquil passivity. The transformation of the waves into flowers effected by the imagination cannot by itself account for the change in the poet's attitude. Roethke says that the waves remind him "of flowers." Probably it is the remembrance of
the greenhouse that emboldens the poet to adopt a submissive posture before the whirling current of change. The last stanza of the section also throws some light on the cause of the change:

I have come here without courting silence,
Blessed by the lips of a low wind,
To a rich desolation of wind and water,
To a landlocked bay, where the salt water is freshened
By small streams running down under fallen fir trees.

The first line is suggestive. He has come here not in the hope of getting this calmness. The next two lines reveal the poet's dilemma. "A low wind" has "blessed" him; but he is not fully prepared to accept the blessing. The riches with which he is blessed are the proximity to the confluence of wind and water. But for him this gift is a "desolation." In "Journey to the Interior," "a fallen fir tree" blocks the progress of the automobile, and prevents him from re-entering the greenhouse through memory. Here also the reluctance to move forward is caused by the fallen tree. But the "small streams running down under the trees" and ultimately flowing into the sea counter the negative force. In a way, despite the hesitation, the poet is in touch with the sea by means of the streams. This probably accounts for the equanimity enjoyed by the poet.

Two things may be noted in this context: the first is that this poem does not disprove or invalidate the method of participating in the flow of process described in the previous poem. The celebration of the sensuous world occurring at the start of the present poem is proved defective by the
experiences recorded in it. The defect is that Roethke provides no means of encountering the threat of self-annihilation. The second is that the expression “my foolishness with God” does not refer to the experience described in the previous poem. Instead, as Sullivan remarks, he “rejects the appeal of a fixed and final order, and the desire for absolutes as spiritual self-indulgence.”

In point of the approach to the world of perpetual mutation there is resemblance rather than difference between the two poems. In the first stanza of the fourth section Roethke describes an incoming wave:

In the vaporous grey of early morning,
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 description shows that he is fascinated by the beauty of the wave. He is still unwilling to step in. But the reluctance appears to be waning. That is the impression produced by the leitmotif of the tree. The wave advances towards the tree with its crown half-broken. The tree is weakened, and submergence is possible. The idea of submergence reminds him of his observation in the past of a stone being drowned by “en eddying current.” For a time he identifies himself with the stone lying in the middle of the current. The condition of being swallowed up in the water terrifies him. It is “a vulnerable place.” To be in the midst of water implies virtual death, the dissolution of the self.
The desire for mergence is kindled by the sea-wind. Roethke compares the awakening of this desire to the flaring up of a fire "seemingly long dead from a downdraft of air in a chimney." Now his body "shimmers with a light flame." Again, we are hard put to it to find a rationale for the shift in his attitude. There is no clue in the elaborate simile. The following stanza, however, serves as a gloss.

I see in the advancing and retreating waters
The shape that came from my sleep, weeping:
The etemal one, the child, the swaying vine branch,
The numinous ring around the opening flower
The friend that runs before me on the windy headlands,
Neither voice nor vision.

What strikes the reader first of all is the presence of paradoxes. The child, for instance, is not a figment of the imagination. Yet the poet sees it floating on the waves. Secondly, by association with the advance and retreat of the worm in the second stanza water represents primarily the flux of life. But the child is "the eternal one." Thirdly, the child emerges from his sleep. The effect of its rise is the awakening of the poet. It should also be noted that Roethke was impatient at the opening of the poem with the dog, and by association with the child. But it is the child that eventually braces him up for the plunge.

According to Sullivan, the eternal child is an "image of the deep-buried principle of life—the soul principle, not merely of the interior self, but of all
things." She continues: "Multiple and seemingly contradictory, it is 'child',
'swaying branch,' 'numinous ring;' it is all these things because it is being."43
But it arises in sleep. In "Her Becoming," the third poem in "The Meditations
of an Old Woman," this image appears to the woman in sleep:

A voice keeps rising in my early sleep,
A muffled voice, a low, sweet watery noise.
Dare I embrace a ghost from my own breast?
A spirit plays before me like a child,
A child at play, a wind-excited bird. (CP 159)

Reference has already been made to the concluding lines of "The Song." Yet
they are quoted as they throw some light on Roethke's vision:

When I heard, or thought I heard,
Another join my song
With the small voice of a child,
Close, and yet far away. (CP 140)

In "The Song," the child responds when the poet sings into a "watery hole."
In all these instances the child seems to arise from the depths of his own mind.
The vision of "this principle of being" has a salutary effect on the poet, and he
feels inspired to step out of himself, and be at one with the creatures and
things in the world of change. The diffident withdrawal gives way to a gusto
for participation in process. It is not necessary to equate the child, as Sullivan
does, with "the numinous ring" and "the swaying branch." The latter objects,
captured up in the whirl of change, generally do not compel empathetic love.
Their transformation is the result of Roethke's vision of the child. Now, he
sees “the numinous ring around the opening flower.” In the second section of
the poem, dismayed by “the butterfly’s havoc,” and meagrely comforted by
the transforming power of the imagination, he describes a flower that
epitomizes the disheartening fact of change: “The dry bloom splitting in the
wrinkled vale.” The child in a sense embodies the values associated with the
greenhouse. In the greenhouse he struggled hard to find the underlying
principle of life so that he might reconcile himself to the reality of death and
decay. The child also enables him to come to terms with this grim reality.
The long-delayed mergence occurs in the final stanza.

My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;
I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world.

There is a small paradox here: he is gathered together once more by
becoming “another thing.” Union with the other does not destroy his self;
instead, the self feels strengthened and vitalized.

“The Far Field,” the fourth poem of the sequence, begins with a
regressive ride in search of the reassuring security of the enclosed space of the
garden. But, as has already been seen, mere reminiscence of the untroubled
days of his childhood cannot provide the succour that he craves for. It is the
catharsis of memory that he seeks. By reliving those experiences, by cleansing
himself of the vestiges of civilization he should acquire the primitive,
primordial qualities which will fortify him against the fear of extinction. The
primal innocence will enable him to tackle the question of mortality.
However, his journey, from the beginning, is doomed to fail. “The tarface” changes into “a rubble of stone.” Finally, the car is trapped in a sand-rut.

Although he is not able to undergo the purgation and get through the early phase of phylogeny, his inward expedition is not entirely fruitless. The remembrance of one experience is especially useful in preparing him to come to terms with death. “At the field’s end” near a “grass-hidden culvert” amidst a heap of garbage he “learned of the eternal.” Roethke also mentions the proximity of this place to “the ever-changing flower-dump.” The phrases, “the eternal” and “the ever-changing” seem to be used in the same sense. What is eternal is the ceaseless process of change. The individual organism does not exist forever. The poet chooses the scene of the revelation carefully. It is in a place littered with refuse and debris that one witnesses change in its most conspicuous forms. The knowledge of the eternal is supplemented by the sight of “the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and ground-beetles,” and of “the torn-cat, caught near the pheasant-run / Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers.” If the sight of the mutilated, rotten rat and the decaying cat repels and dispirits the observers, his gaze must be directed to another aspect of the things seen. The decomposing corpses feed the living organisms. Roethke felt some sympathy for these poor animals. But he says: “My grief was not excessive.” His grief is offset by his knowledge of the ways of forgetting “time and death.” According to Denis Donoghue, the second section presents “images of force, aggression, suffering, death, dead rats eaten by rain and ground-beetles.” He continues: “But, the poet, meditating upon these images, thinks of other images, of life, movement, freedom. . . .” One of the ways of transcending time and death is by listening to the songs of
birds: “For to come upon warblers is early May / Was to forget time and death.” Roethke’s empathy comes out in the images describing the birds. They move “elusive as fish,” or hand “bunched like young fruit, bending the end branches.” It is a different kind of transformation. It is not actual, but metaphoric. Some emphasis seems to be placed on the word “fearless.” This is the kind of spontaneous participation in the sensuous world adumbrated at the beginning of the previous poem. Another way of coping with the fact of mortality is to believe in the process of evolution, in the continual metamorphosis of all organisms. He can persuade himself to believe that once he was a shell, “mindless.” He is comforted by the faith that life is ultimately indestructible, and that it will be preserved in some form or other. The theory of reincarnation also offers him some relief. The possibility of being reborn as an animal can make him face death calmly:

Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire:

Or with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,

Believing:

I will return again,

As a snake or a raucous bird,

Or, with luck, as a lion.

Although Roethke does not espouse any of these theories, he seems to feel convinced of one thing: death does not mean the annihilation of the self or life. Life, in this sense, is a continuum, and the myriad transformations that it undergoes do not damage or destroy it. Thomas Gardner thinks that the poet learned a way of “thinking” himself “into contact with an older world and relieving earlier shapes.” Thus the poet,
. . . Learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,
The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water.

The third section opens with a paradox: "The tree retreats into its own shadow." However, he feels "a weightless change, a moving forward." Tunnelling inward is a surging forward. "My mind moves in more than one place, / In a country half land, half water." We are reminded of the spirit "moving in and out of the water" in "Meditation at Oyster River." Roethke does not lose himself into the "long water." He does not let go of the hold on the greenhouse. It is to be emphasized at the risk of repetition that what the poet accomplishes in "The North American Sequence" is the bringing together of the greenhouse and the vast space without. He meditates on death, subjects himself to it. The result is a sense of renewal. Roethke's death, whether it is symbolic or otherwise, is not complete, as the immersion is partial. The renewal is not actually the result of death, in the sense of a rash, mindless dive into the sea. He owes the rebirth to the conjunction of self and other, land and water, greenhouse and field. Rebirth is also a metaphor for the poet's release from the negative tendency of withdrawing in fear and doubt from the world of pulsing life. It is not easy for him to liberate himself from introversion. His desire is to plunge into the eddying currents of life. Rebirth, then, is a ritual of initiation into life, brought about by the cathartic
memory of his reconciliation with the inevitability of the flow of process. This is where the greenhouse comes into prominence. Inspired by memory he reaches “a still, but not a deep center, / A point outside the glittering current.” The lines recall the Eliot of *Four Quartets* in which the still centre refers to the intersection of the temporal and the eternal. Sullivan makes a clear distinction between the poets in regard to their attitudes towards life: “From his notebooks, it becomes clear that he thought of ‘the still centre’ as a psychological rather than a theological conception borrowed from Jung to imply a point of stasis within the self, a stasis reached through a willing acceptance of the idea of death.” Although Roethke is at a still center, his mind is in motion. The moving mind is related to the glittering current pointing to the readiness of the poet to embrace life, and the still center to the self in repose, being firmly anchored in the knowledge gained from the greenhouse. Thus, symbolically, the garden is present in the poem, as well as in the water. So he declares:

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
The dry scent of ‘a dying garden’ in September,
The wind fanning the ash of a low fire,
What I love is near at hand,
Always, in earth and air.

One is reminded of Emerson who once said: “They ask me whether I know the soul immortal. No. But do I not know the Now to be eternal? . . . I believe in this life.” In the same vein, Roethke considers perpetual what is “near at hand.”
In the fourth section, Roethke takes some pains to describe the shape the alliance of the greenhouse forms with water. He says:

The lost self changes,
Turning toward the sea,
A sea-shape turning around,—
An old man with his feet before the fire,
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

The lost self is the self united with water, the self which is engaged in ceaseless motion. At the instant of contact with the sea it is metamorphosed. It turns towards the sea in its own form, and it turns back after the mergence "a sea-shape." In the previous poem the offspring of the union was the eternal child. Now it is "an old man," "a sea-shape," the archetypal man. This Proteus figure, like the child, is eternal although it undergoes endless transformations. "The garb is symbolic," says Blessing, "for the green of the robes suggests perpetual renewal, while 'the garments of adieu' hint at a ceaseless falling away." Critics have tried to compare Roethke's final man with the central man in Stevens's "Asides on the Oboe." Stevens's description of the "philosophers' man" is quoted:

In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
The impossible possible philosophers' man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.
Roethke’s man “faced with his own immensity” whose gigantic spirit “moves like monumental wind,” who “is the end of all things,” resembles the central man, the huge mirror that “sums us up.” The conception of the final man is the culmination of the thought hinted at in the second section of the possibility of reliving the earlier shapes. Thus, “the man of glass” and “the sea-shape” embody the memory of the human race. It is a memory that not only reaches backward into the past but forward into the future. Roethke compares it to “a ripple widening from a single stone / Winding around the waters of the world.” We are reminded of his exhortation: “Begin with the rock / End with water.”

“The Rose,” the final poem of the sequence, brings to a satisfactory resolution the contending opposites that Roethke was at pains to reconcile in the preceding poems. The past and the present, the Pacific Northwest coast and the Midwest landscape, the greenhouse and the ocean, sound and silence, and motion and stasis coalesce in the image of the rose. The rose represents the synthesis of the stone and light despite the poet’s “foolish” rejection of the place “where light is stone” at the start of “The Long Waters.” Eliot conflates the rose and fire in Four Quartets:

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Roethke’s rose carries in addition to the traditional implications the memory of an intimate kinship with it in the greenhouse; hence, the rose grows not only
on the craggy edge of land, but in the mind of the poet as well. The verbal artifice, the amalgamation of the contraries in the vision of the bloom, parallels an inner, subjective synthesis. As Parini observes, “Eliot’s symbols remain emblematic, Roethke’s continually refer back to the literal level.”

At the outset of the poem he says: “There are those to whom place is unimportant, / But this place, where the sea and fresh water meet, / Is important.” Obviously, in a poem where two kinds of space converge to produce the felicitous vision locale is of considerable importance. The place is described in detail, the hawks swaying “out into the wind,” the eagles sailing “low over the fir trees,” the gulls and the crows crying “in the carved harbours,” and the tide rising “up against the grass.” The description is not merely meant to provide a sense of the concreteness of the place. The wind and the birds are in contact with the trees and the grass. At least, the hawk swaying out into the wind prefigures the poet swaying “outside himself.” One gets the impression of an intersection of finitude and infinity.

In the next stanza in the fading light of the sinking sun, the air reverberates with the cries of birds. Yet, in the midst of sound the poet finds silence. Perhaps, the shift from sound to silence is caused by the old log subsiding with the lessening waves. Mergence is prophetic or potential in the first two stanzas. In the third it materializes:

I sway outside myself
Into the darkening currents,
Into the small spillage of driftwood,
The waters swirling past the tiny headlands.
This outward movement is set off against the memory of a similar experience, in the past, of union with the infinite. As has repeatedly been seen, the release into the external world is accompanied and offset by an inward retreat. Roethke's description shows that the remembered experience either did not take place in water or was, in some ways, related to the rocks:

Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment
While on a far point of the rocks
The light heightened,
And below, in a mist out of nowhere,
The first rain gathered.

Identification with the other, in Roethke's poetry, assumes many forms: light becomes stone; water becomes flower; plain becomes sea; darkness becomes light. In the case of the remembered epiphany the first of these seems to have been the form taken. This reminiscence is important because the poet cannot undergo submergence in water without the steadying support of the stone or the greenhouse.

The second section is an elaboration of the twin movement described at the end of section one. The first stanza deals with the progress of the self when it is released into the water. It moves like a ship: “. . . rolling slightly sideways, / The stern high, dipping like a child's boat in a pond.” The motion appears to be smooth and effortless. However, it poses a danger. Roethke is aware of it. That is why he introduces, by way of counterpoint, the image of the rose. He puts a heavy emphasis on the stasis symbolized by the flower: “But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind, / Stays.” The rose embodies what he
has been seeking. The impression of stasis is created by the fact of its being rooted in stone. Otherwise, it also moves the way he wants his self to move.

The rose

Stays in its true place,
Flowering out of the dark,
Widening at high noon, face upward,
A single wild rose, struggling out of the white embrace of the morning glory.

The sense of stillness gives way to one of motion. Thus, Roethke has of necessity to counterbalance the metaphorical journey by ship by an interior journey through memory into the greenhouse. Hence, in the third stanza he thinks:

. . . of roses, roses,
White and red, in the wide six-hundred foot greenhouses,
And my father standing astride the cement benches,
Lifting me high over four-foot stems,
       the Mrs. Russels, and his own elaborate hybrids,
And how those flower heads seemed to flow
       toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself.

On the one hand, this is the remembered experience which can complete the act of immersion in water. The flowers enticed him out of himself or, in other words, he identified himself with them. But more is accomplished in the act of identification than an escape from the confinement of the self. Sullivan writes: "It (the rose) is magically potent and mysteriously satisfying because it evokes
the hybrid roses of the greenhouse, the two conflated in union of past and present, a subjective synthesis that is symbolically a reconciliation with the father. The reconciliation with the father and the sense of security afforded by it invigorate the self so that it can take the leap into the water. The self, then, is simultaneously in the greenhouse and in the water. What happens in the section can be summed up thus: Unprotected plunge into the water is dangerous. The rose symbolizes the ideal condition of existence because it embodies rootedness and freedom, stability and fluidity, stasis and motion. The rose, moreover, merges with the roses in the greenhouse with which he used to feel at one, and makes possible the reconciliation with the father. As Kalaidjian says, "unlike romantic reminiscences on childhood such as Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality,' Roethke does not brighten his recollected youth with an ideal, spiritual landscape." But it needs to be noted that although Roethke does not idealize his childhood, his recollection is not merely of the roses and his father. It includes an early experience of self-transcendence. This experience is not a privilege of childhood as intimations of immortality described in Wordsworth's poem, are.

The structure of the third section demands attention. The present experience summed up in six lines lies sandwiched between two memories, one of American sounds, the other of the previous glimpses of the intersection of the temporal and the eternal. The scene is dominated by a pervasive silence, or a sound (the twittering of the swallows) too feeble to "woo a bird." Song, wind, silence and light, the essential ingredients of a Roethkean experience of transcendence predominate in the third stanza. The first
represents the flux of life in terms of sound. The catalogue includes such sounds as "the ticking of snow around oil drums in the Dakotas," "the thin whine of telephone wires in the wind of Michigan Winter," "the shriek of nails as old shingles are ripped from the top of a roof," "the bulldozers backing away," "the hiss of the sandblaster," "the deep chorus of horns coming up from the streets in early morning." "Just as speed builds to a stillness," argues Blessing, "noise also builds to a stillness." He seems to forget the fact the sounds listed form a unit of memory, and the description does not flow into the passage dealing with the present. But it is striking that the sound rises to an unbearable crescendo, and is followed by the ravishing serenity prevailing over the shoreline. Roethke's account of the American sounds is an illustration of his delight in the world of eternal change. At present he is only aware of an influx of light into his reposing soul. The juxtaposition of the polluting noise and the redemptive silence reminds us of both "the redolent disorder" and "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form."

In the third stanza, there is a reverie of strange happenings in the world which are indicative of the conjunction of the self and the other. The rock sings; light makes silence; the moon lolls in the close elm and the wind "tries the shape of a tree." The last of these is the reversal of the process he is undergoing. The infinite seeks to contain itself in form. It is as if the relationship between the finite and the infinite were a reciprocal one.

Since Roethke has already identified himself with the rose through the medium of the greenhouse, he now wants to strengthen in a symbolic way the analogy by rooting himself among the rocks. So at the beginning of the fourth section he says:
I live with the rocks, their weeds,
Their filmy fringes of green, their harsh
Edges, their holes
Cut by the sea-slime, far from the crash
Of the long swell.

The word "slime" brings the greenhouse more literally into contact with the
Pacific coast, and the conflation of the rocks with the slime combines stasis
and solidity with the primitive, primordial level of life at which spontaneous,
instinctive immersion in the flow of process is possible. Roethke describes the
result of such a total identification with the rose:

. . . I came upon the true ease of myself,
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,
And I stood outside myself,
Beyond becoming and perishing,
A something wholly other,
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
And yet was still.

The man that "appeared out of the depths" of his being is the final man, the
Proteus figure who, as Blessing says, "... squirms with the selves he has
been, with the selves he might have been, and with those he might yet be."
Blessing goes on: "He is . . . the impossible possible sum of human experience
and potential human experience, a finite figure vibrating with infinite
revelations."

He rejoices, therefore,
... in being what I was:

In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,
In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
With all the air to greet him as he flies,
The dolphin rising from the darkening waves.

The lilac, the reptile, the bird, and the fish represent the entire cosmos. He is, thus, the man "faced with his own immensity." He sways out, and is still: he comes upon the true case of himself, but becomes "a something wholly other." He becomes the rose that gathers "... to itself sound and silence," and all the warring opposites: motion and stillness, sea and land, wind and light, confinement and release, self and other.

A unique feature of "The North American Sequence" is Roethke’s engagement of his sense of the land of his birth, the landscape of America. He has often been charged with a lack of concern for the world around him, an inability to respond to the eventful experiences of his age. Denis Donoghue remarks, for instance, on his lack of interest in the historical circumstances: "... it is quite possible to think of Roethke as one of the best modern poets without troubling about the fact that he was, after all, an American poet." In "The North American Sequence" the paradox of being at once himself and the protean figure imposes a responsibility on him to make his verse democratic. The final man identifies himself with every one and everything, and fuses them to form his immense identity. The self-Proteus union is paralleled in the union of the protected space of the garden and the expansive domain of the far field. The confessional mode
has, therefore, to give way to the democratic mode. As Kalaidjian observes, "Roethke's vision becomes openly democratic, identifying with his audience now through the collective pronoun 'us’. What do they tell us, sound and silence?"\textsuperscript{55} It is as if the experience were communal. Anyone familiar with the flora and fauna can participate in it. However, as the poet has an individual identity in addition to that of the final man, after describing the multiplicity of the American sounds or the variety of animals and birds, he will absorb them all into his mind. As an instance we may point out the catalogue of the sounds. At the end of it all the noise vanishes except

\begin{quote}
That single sound,
When the mind remembers all,
And gently the light enters the sleeping soul,
A sound so thin it could not woo a bird,
Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire.
\end{quote}

Thus, this democratic openness should not blind us to the emphasis Roethke puts on individuality, what Whitman calls "the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself."\textsuperscript{56} In conclusion it may be said that although Roethke makes no reference to the big events of the age, it is unjust to accuse him of showing no concern for the land of his origin.
Notes


2 Nelson 36.


4 Sullivan 149.


6 Blessing 138-56.


8 Staples 191.

9 Ralph J. Mills, “In the Way of Becoming,” Essays on the Poetry 120.

10 Nelson 38.

11 Balakian 139.


13 Sullivan 149.

14 Bowers 159-60.

15 Staples 197.


17 Gardner 240.

19 Mills, “In the Way of Becoming,” 123.

20 Nelson 34.

21 Mills 123.


24 Sullivan 156.

25 Sullivan 156.

26 Balakian 141.

27 Nelson 41.


29 Nelson 42.

30 Nelson 43.


32 McMichael 18.

33 Sullivan 157.


35 Nelson 44.


37 Malkoff 181.
38 Staples 193.
39 Harry Williams 110.
40 Staples 199-200.
41 Gardner 245.
42 Sullivan 150.
43 Sullivan 159.
45 Gardner 248.
46 Sullivan 161.
48 Blessing 153.
49 Parini 170.
50 Sullivan 163.
51 Kalaidjian 156.
52 Blessing 155.
53 Blessing 153.
54 Donoghue 163.
55 Kalaidjian 156.
56 Qtd. in Kalaidjian 157.