Kenneth Burke breaks fresh ground in the criticism of Theodore Roethke by paying special attention to the quintessentially Roethkean mode of versification. He observes that in Roethke's work “we go from intuitions of a sensory sort to intuitions of a symbolic sort.” Casual as this remark might appear, it offers an insight into Roethke's aesthetics. An intuitive apprehension of reality and an unconscious acceptance of the Coleridgean, organic concept of form are the distinctive features of this aesthetics. Roethke rejects the rationalism of such masters of high modernism as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In his verse nonetheless the intuitive mode of perception involves conceptualization of a special kind. But it is not a cerebral act. The objects and creatures described in his poems shed their illusory exterior of concreteness through an endless series of permutations and metamorphoses. These infinite combinations and transformations are manipulated in such a way as to create a baffling range of associations. The apparently tangible images in the end carry a heavy load of meaning and indicate things and ideas with which, on the surface, they have nothing to do. This dissertation is intended to illustrate the way in which this intuitive symbolism operates in the work of Theodore Roethke.

Roethke's artifice evolves from the thematic burden of his verse, which is an obsessive quest for his self. The self cannot independently exist in isolation. Hence, the poet's persistent search is for fulfilment in his relationship with the other. Roethke's work provides a vast spectrum of the
'others' with which or whom, longing for a harmonious dialogue with the entire cosmos, he forges kinships, from the moss-covered pebbles on river-beds at one end to the creator of the universe at the other. We have the picture of a protagonist scaling up and down the chain of Being in search of true selfhood.

Roethke's craftsmanship is geared to meet the pressures of his thematic concerns. He has to express the dynamics of the self, record its findings in the course of its myriad excursions through strange terrains. These discoveries made by the self are complex to an unusual degree; different planes of reality seem to converge to produce these experiences. Roethke is forced to invent a rhetoric, which is flexible enough to simultaneously represent different orders of reality. The intuitive symbolism discussed at the outset of this chapter is a logical corollary of the poet's thematic preoccupations.

What is generally considered the limitation of Roethke's art, namely, his narcissistic introversion and the resultant avoidance of public happenings, contributes to the magnetic appeal of his verse, which is actually the effect of the poet's intense concentration on the theme chosen for exploration. For instance, the quest-motif, which informs his work, is complex and multi-dimensional as a result of the coalescence of perspectives. The autobiographical, the psychological, the mythical and the mystical are inextricably woven together into the texture of the verse. Roethke obviously sacrifices amplitude for the sake of depth and intensity.

Of the various strands mentioned above the autobiographical one has considerable significance as it infuses a fierce sense of personal urgency into
the struggles depicted in the poems. The most important of the early circumstances of Roethke’s life which have a bearing on his poetry is the fact that his father Otto Roethke and his Uncle Charles Roethke were great horticulturists. Together they owned one of the largest greenhouses in America. Their floral establishment covered a stretch of twenty-five acres of land. As a child Roethke grew up in and around this vast garden. He played delightfully and watched with curiosity the manifold activities within the enclosure. His father appears to have been a taskmaster who applied the German sense of perfection to the cultivation of flowers in the glasshouses. In his poetry, Roethke exhibits an ambivalence in his attitude to his father. It swings from worshipful admiration to vengeful hatred. Sometimes he deifies his father who could bring the flowers into being. At times he loathes him savagely because of his sense of his own inadequacy in comparison with the excellent gifts of his father. However, his father died when the child was only thirteen. It is said that all children hate their fathers at one stage or another during their childhood; but normal reconciliation occurs in the course of their growth and maturation. The sudden demise of his father was a trauma for Roethke, as he had not had a chance of normalizing his relationship with his father. He felt guilty, in a strange way, of having brought about the death of his father, perhaps, because of the coincidence of his wishes and their fulfilment in the form of this unexpected bereavement. Roethke was never able to get over this haunting sense of guilt in the remainder of his life. A streak of Freudian confessionalism appears in the poetry as in the process of artistic transmutation this personal emotional crisis takes on sexual connotations. Allan Seager, the poet’s biographer, dismisses the possibility of
a psychoanalytic interpretation of the father-son relationship, and suggests that the son's hatred could be nothing more than a "resentful flare-up" after being beaten or slapped. Even if one ignores the question of Roethke's familiarity with the theories of Freud and the relevance of the application of the psychoanalytic method, one is struck by the sexual implications of the guilt-motif. In conclusion it may be inferred that the verse gains in complexity by the addition of this new layer of meaning even if it is only part of the poet's rhetorical device.

The greenhouse looms large in Roethke's poetry in more ways than as the scene of the poet's love-hate relationship with his father. Karl Malkoff accurately estimates the significance of the floral universe. Roethke, he says, "... derived much of his poetic power and originality from his attempt to interpret adult life in terms of a permanent symbolism established in childhood." The greenhouse ambience permeates Roethke's work primarily as a vehicle for communicating his experiences as a man. The marvellous spectacle of growth fascinated him. The germination of seeds, the sprouting of cuttings, above all, the fierce struggle for survival, which he witnessed in roots rotting in root cellars, held him spell-bound. He must also have been aware of the inevitability of death and decay. But this enclosed space was not exclusively a vegetable realm. Beneath the concrete benches where flower bearing plants were reared, in the miry bottom of the root cellars the young child saw another kingdom swarming with multitudinous, wriggling forms of life. They repelled and attracted him at once. Roethke describes what the greenhouse was to him: "They were to me, I realize now, both heaven and
hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan, where austere German Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful. The obvious dualism in Roethke's description can be traced to the juxtaposition of growth and decay in the world of vegetation and to the combination of abhorrence and sympathy for the lower forms of life. The fecund and protective enclosure was sometimes stiflingly oppressive and destructive.

Roethke's use of Jungian psychology needs to be examined here in the context of the present discussion of the ramifications of the greenhouse. Jenijoy La Belle convincingly proves that Roethke was acquainted with the theories of Jung through Maud Bodkin's book *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry.* The descent into the abyss of the unconscious for self-renewal and regeneration underlies often both the structural organization of Roethke's poems and the visionary experiences with which they usually end. As a poet of paradoxes he withdraws into the interior of his own psyche in order to reach out toward the other. It is clear that Roethke borrows the principle of regression from Jung. He orders most of his sequences on the pattern of a plunge into the depths of the unconscious followed by a triumphant emergence. Even in his descriptions of the state of self-transcendence, of absolute union with the other there are indications of an inward retreat. An evocation of the past, now of the greenhouse, now of a state of being he had long before the beginning of ontogeny, seems to precede or coincide with his experiences of beatitude. The reader is struck by the intersection of two movements, one inward and the other outward.
The floral world imaginatively recreated in the verse, with its implicit hierarchy of being, holds great symbolic potential for the poet to exploit. Roethke has merely to relate these various spheres of life to the mechanics of regression. In this peculiar world of inter-dependence and inter-connection between the different categories of life the awakening of atavistic tendencies appears natural. Roethke has two advantages in portraying the greenhouse. The first is that he gets a language adequate enough to express his inward backslide in quest of himself. Secondly, he is in possession of a suitable space in which to enact the drama of his interior journey. At the beginning of Roethke’s exploration descent up to a level is deemed wholesome and invigorating. Hence, when he glimpses an affinity with the striving plants he feels inspired by their tenacious battle for survival. But, when he senses a kinship with the disgusting creatures moving about in the dirt and muck of damp pits, he is horrified. Later, however, he goes all the way down to the phase of phylogenetic origins. At a still later stage in Roethke’s evolution, when he feels emboldened to dare mergence with the infinite, the greenhouse gets equated with his self.

What remains of the autobiographical content of his work is the periodic attacks of manic depressive psychosis to which Roethke was subject till the end of his life. The first onslaught of this debilitating illness occurred when he was teaching at Michigan State College. These cyclic breakdowns are discussed in Roethke criticism from three perspectives. There are those who believe that Roethke deliberately brought this mental disaster on himself. They argue that as the aftermath of the destabilizing experience Roethke’s
creativity rose to a feverish pitch. There is substance in their contention
because the psychological disorientation both inspired hectic creative work
and gave rise to radically new perceptions. He could also brag of belonging to
the brotherhood of mad poets like William Blake, John Clare and Christopher
Smart. Others dwell on the mystical aspect of the experience. There is an
entire book on Roethke devoted to a study of the resemblance between
the experience of manic depressive illness and the mystical experience.
Neal Bowers parades considerable evidence to prove that the cyclical
emotional phases through which the victim of manic depression passes closely
parallel the periods of expansion and contraction of consciousness which
characterize mystical experiences. Yet another view focuses on the
therapeutic value which the act of writing had for the poet. Such an argument
presupposes that Roethke’s work is intensely personal and that the process of
composition released psychic tensions through what Peter Balakian calls “the
catharsis of memory.”

The mystical dimension of Roethke’s poetry is too transparent to
require an elaborate treatment here. His pursuit of a satisfactory selfhood may
be described as an overwhelming desire to escape from the oppressive
claustrophobia of egoism. In other words what he seeks is a meaningful
alignment with an ‘other’ which will ensure his release from the confines of the
false self. But this relationship is never normal. If it were so, the participants
in the comradeship could enjoy a certain measure of independence. Roethke
does not merely relate himself to the other; he identifies himself with the other.
It is as if Roethke were concerned not so much with the association with the
other as with the possibility of self-transcendence. His aspiration, evidently, is not a mundane one. His alliances with the other invariably lead to experiences of what in mystical literature is called illumination or union with the Absolute. That is the reason why the body-spirit dichotomy assumes such a central place in his work. It may be noted, however, that Roethke's mysticism differs from conventional religious mysticism inasmuch as he never jettisons the claims of the body. In his most accurate accounts of his transcendental experiences there is a paradoxical emphasis on a sense of rootedness while experiencing release.

Reference has already been made to Roethke's radical departure from the modernist movement. His deviation from the contemporary poetic tradition is nowhere more apparent than in the way he depersonalizes his experience. One of the strategies Roethke employs to achieve a trans-personal mythic effect is to suppress the concrete specifics of the incidents of his life which actually form the subject matter of his verse. The substance distilled from the chaos of private life acquires a general human significance, a primordial, archetypal quality. For instance, Roethke's quest, divested of the particulars of his individual life, assumes the proportions of a myth. Another of his methods is to consciously create a poetic tradition, a fraternity of poets who deal with similar experiences. Jenijoy La Belle, who pioneers this approach, is convinced that Roethke's work must be understood in the context of the tradition which is implicitly present in it. According to her this technique helps expand the dimensions of his theme. It may be observed that Roethke does not use the structural framework of a myth to
distance himself from his work. But some critics have interpreted his poems in
terms of one myth or another. Jay Parini, for example, thinks that Roethke's
work recapitulates the essential structure of the quest romance. He considers
Homer's *Odyssey* to be the prototype of Roethke's narrative poems. Thus,
the mythical character of Roethke's poetry emerges from its concern with
elemental themes abstracted from the traumatic events of his life.

Theodore Roethke was born in 1908 in Saginaw, Michigan. His first
volume of poetry appeared in 1941, entitled *Open House*. Stanley Kunitz
suggested the title and the organization of the poems. The book received
favourable reviews. From certain quarters the response was enthusiastic.
Critics like Yvor Winters lavished praise on Roethke's technical virtuosity. The forty-five lyrics arranged in five numbered sections reveal the poet's
thematic predilections. His concern with the body-spirit conflict, his love of
nature, his metaphysical longings, his agonizing quest for the self and his
regressive instincts are all found in these poems. However, Roethke appears
to be wary of unleashing his emotions. His rigorous self-control has its
equivalent in the metrical rigidity of the verses. He fixes in advance the limits
of his self-exposure in the form of a pre-conceived mould.

The unhampered outflow of these emotions, the direct confrontation
with the centres of pain in his psyche, occurs in *The Lost Son and Other
Poems*, published in 1948. The book is divided into four sections. The first
section consists of a series of fourteen lyrics, generally called the greenhouse
poems, which explore the correspondence between the external landscape of
nature and the internal landscape of the poet's mind. Roethke abandons the
metrical stiffness of the earlier poems in favour of an elastic organic form. The second section comprises seven poems, which do not have a unifying theme. These poems deal with his ambivalent attitude to his father, the awakening of lust, the sense of desolation induced by immaculately furnished public institutions, unfulfilled and indefinable longings, and chaotic and rebellious inner rage against the external world. The third section explicitly suggests the Jungian proclivities of the poet. Besides the collapse of the screen segregating the unconscious from the conscious, they indicate what may be called Roethke’s minimal mysticism. But the volume still remains the focus of critical attention primarily because of the radical experimentalism, which characterises the poems of the last section. These four narrative poems follow a pattern, which may be roughly described as a movement from a state of crisis to one of peace. The crisis seems to spring from a sense of anonymity, of alienation in its various forms. The startling originality of Roethke’s method in these poems lies in the fact that he directly transcribes the psychic conditions of his protagonist without any regard to the logical connections, the rational order, or the causal relationships of the experiences recorded. There is a deliberate enjambment of reason and a heavy reliance on the intuitive power with the result that the poems become somewhat opaque to rational interpretation. This technique is necessary because the protagonist’s regression takes him to the realm of the pre-conscious or the pre-rational and the unconscious.

In 1951, Roethke published *Praise to the End*, which considerably expands the scope of his poetic project begun in the conclusive part of the
previous volume. Besides enlarging the sequence with the addition of more poems, Roethke includes the whole of the final section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* in the new book. His intention is to present to the public the sequence in its complete form. Moreover, he rearranges the poems in order to highlight the growth of the protagonist from the state of infancy to adulthood. In terms of argument and structure these thirteen poems resemble one another. But the sequence enables the poet to dwell on the various phases of the hero’s evolution, both spiritual and physical. For instance, in "Where Knock is Open Wide," the opening poem of the sequence, the desire of the child-protagonist is for the nearness of his father. The death of his father opens his eyes, for the first time to the possibility of a disjunction between desire and fulfilment. In "I Cry, Love! Love!," the last poem, the desire has more overt sexual and spiritual connotations.

*The Waking*, which came out in 1953, won the Pulitzer Prize for that year. It is by and large a reprint of selections from the previous volumes. *Praise to the End* in its entirety appears here. Roethke adds one more poem to the sequence, "O, Thou Opening, O." He broods over the theme once again as if he were not satisfied with the conclusion of the previous volume. However, there is a section entitled "New Poems" which consists of five short poems and a long poem, "Four for Sir John Davies." These poems strike a new note in Roethke's poetry. From now onward till the publication of the posthumous volume *The Far Field* a female character dominates his poems. In the five short poems of the present volume she appears as an ethereal figure who partakes of the qualities of the minimals of the universe and, at
times, is at one with nature. She even appears as a projection of the poet's own spirit. Malkoff's summation of her character is fairly accurate: "she seems to be no particular woman—she appears as personification of the spirit, student, mother, and . . . both the sensual partner and figure of Beatrice—but rather an image of woman in general." Another novelty of the volume is Roethke's confrontation with the prospect of death. The entry of the woman seems to coincide with the disturbing awareness of death. "Old Lady's Winter Words," for instance, represents the thoughts of a woman, physically shrunken. Her mind constantly fastens on the spectre of death. "Four for Sir John Davies" anticipates Roethke's love poems.

*Words for the Wind*, which is a collection of poems of sorts, appeared in 1958. The book received the Bollingen Prize and the National Book Award. The book is divided into two parts and contains a sizeable quantity of new work in the second part and selections from previous volumes in the first. The first section consists of light poems for children. A series of sixteen poems form the second section entitled Love Poems. These poems were inspired by his marriage in 1953 with Beatrice O'Connell, formerly a student of his. The sixteen poems are characterized by a deeply personal, sexual celebration of love. Some of these are as Rosemary Sullivan observes, "sheer epithalamia to the beloved, rampantly, triumphantly sexual." But, although he indulges in physical love with an abandon, an intriguing fear of defilement perplexes him. The poet also desires through immersion in sensuality mystical transcendence. These themes are intimately connected with the question of identity.
Roethke directly addresses the problem of identity in the third part of the volume. It consists of ten short poems. In “The Beast” and “The Song” the speaker has a fleeting glimpse of his inner self. The first poem concludes with the description of the union of the selves, the second with the speaker’s lamentation over the loss of the chance for the union. “The Exorcism” deals with the awakening of the poet from his regressive liberation. He rids himself of the multitude of selves and gathers himself together. In “The Small” he once again affirms his affinity with the small. In short, it may be said that these poems investigate the chasm between the true self and the false self, and the poet’s relationship with the minimals.

In “The Dying Man” and “Meditations of an Old Woman,” which form the fourth and fifth sections respectively, Roethke successfully makes use of personae in his attempt to evaluate life in the face of death. In the former, Roethke pays his tribute to Yeats, his spiritual father, by appropriating some of the Irish poet’s techniques like the use of trimeter lines and slant rhymes. Roethke himself becomes the dying man and speculates on the significance of art, love and the message of the dead in the context of imminent death. The ruminations of the poet do not reach a satisfactory resolution at the conclusion of the poem. The idea we get is that irrespective of whether the temporal merges with the eternal or not one can make one’s finite existence meaningful only by boldly facing the abyss of death. “The Meditations of an Old Woman” ends on a more positive note. Whereas the speaker in “The Dying Man” despairs of transcending his finitude and is apprehensive of being engulfed by the darkness of death, the old woman’s vision becomes radiant through a mystical experience.
Roethke died of a heart attack on August 1, 1963 while swimming in a neighbour's pool near the house at Puget Sound. In 1964, *The Far Field* was published posthumously. This volume also won the National Book Award. It is divided into four sections. The first, "North American Sequences" brings Roethke's quest to its logical culmination in the visionary evocation of the rose floating freely in the air while firmly rooted in the rocks. A peculiarity of the sequence is that the other with which he merges here is nothing short of the infinite. Hence an undercurrent of overtly mystical longings is felt throughout the sequence. The love poems which appear in the second section do not suggest any improvement over the amorous poems of *Words for the Wind*. The poems of the third section entitled "Mixed Sequences," as also those of the last section "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" cannot be dismissed as merely "a re-examination of old concerns." In these poems Roethke directly contemplates on such fundamental riddles as God, mortality and the transcendental possibilities of human existence. In the "mixed sequence," however, those themes are not consistently explored. For instance, "The Abyss" which charts the progress of the speaker through what may be called the mystic's dark night of the soul to an experience of illumination is followed by a poem on his father, "Otto." "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," in contrast, has a monotone as it deals in poem after poem with the same ultimate questions.

In addition to these Roethke published two works primarily intended for children, *I Am! Says the Lamb* in 1961 and *Party at the Zoo* in 1963. After the poet's death the most complete edition of his verse *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* appeared in 1966.
After this overview of Roethke’s serious work may be considered certain prominent trends in the criticism of the poet. Harry Williams observes in his book *The Edge is What I Have* that criticism was slow to acknowledge the worth of Roethke’s work while the response of poets was quick and enthusiastic. The intense lyricism and the aboriginal quality of his verse appealed to the poets. Stanley Kunitz seems to be impressed by the raw, primitive and elemental voice of Roethke: “Underness is everywhere,” he says in his review of *The Lost Son and Other Poems.* James Wright praises Roethke for the music of his verse. John Berryman highlights Roethke’s uniqueness by contrasting him with Lowell. Lowell is “Latinate, formal, rhetorical massive, historical, religious, impersonal,” while Roethke is “Teutonic, irregular, colloquial, delicate, botanical and psychological, irreligious and personal.” He calls Lowell “a poet of completed states” and Roethke “a poet of process.” James Dickey stresses the anthropological aspect of Roethke’s verse. He praises those poems of Roethke in which there is a “mindless, elemental quality in the sound of his voice, something primitive and animistic, something with the wariness and inhuman grace of the wild beast, and with it another thing that could not be and never had been animal-like.”

In his review of Roethke’s career, “The Couch and Poetic Insight,” published in *The Reporter* in 1965, and later in that year developed for *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II,* M. L. Rosenthal accuses Roethke of two defects. One of these has to do with the resolutions in his poems. The conclusions, according to Rosenthal, appear willed and
unconvincing. Roethke, he contends, does not prepare the reader, by establishing the grounds, for the calm affirmations he makes at the end of his poems. Roethke repeatedly moves from “raw terror” to a final, calmly affirmative, but really uneared resolution. The second charge pertains to the absence in his work of any concern for the world around him. He writes about Roethke’s indifference to the epochal events of his time: “We have no other American poet of comparable reputation who has absorbed so little of the concerns of his age into his nerve-ends, in whom there is so little reference direct or remote to the incredible experiences of the age.”

Richard Eberhart, while acknowledging the merit and originality of Roethke’s work, observes on what he perceives to be a limitation of his talent: “His poetry is highly subjective rather than objective in the large sense of depicting the conflicts of people . . . his limitation would not let him sympathize with characters as such, to the point of communicable projection.”

Hilton Kramer is, perhaps, the first critic to account for Roethke’s neglect of historical circumstances. This narrowness of range is a direct consequence of Roethke’s innovative purpose and method. Roethke is preoccupied with prehistory and that necessitates the exclusion of all socio-political concerns. To illustrate the point Kramer compares Roethke with Lowell who is preoccupied with history, the happenings around him. Lowell’s openness to external influences offers him the whole range of life. Prehistory is inherently limited to “those stages by which the psyche seeks to free itself from the bondage (and the security) of its first dwelling place (the slime, the
womb).” By taking as his subject prehistory Roethke has only a “single episode in the human drama.”21

Another point of contention is related to Roethke’s portrayal of the woman in the love poems. The whole controversy arises from Burke’s distinction between personification and personalization. In the narrative poems of The Lost Son and Other Poems, Roethke uses the technique of personification. His “imagism merges into symbolism, his flowers and fishes become woman in the Absolute.” He advises Roethke to personalize his poetry through an individualizing of human relations.22 Some critics have since elaborated on Burke’s observation and believe that the love poems of Words for the Wind do not represent a significant departure from the egocentrism of the Lost Son poems. The woman portrayed in the love poems is a vague, indefinite, unparticularized and composite other. W. D. Snodrgass argues: “. . . the woman was not affirmed as herself, a person in her own right, but rather as a symbol for all being.”23 John Lucas and Denis Donoghue echo this view.24 Roy Harvey Pearce relates the problem to the cultural decadence of the age. He says that our world “is inhabited by third persons, fearing to be the first, therefore, unable to reach toward the second.”25 Ralph J. Mills, however, views the love poems as unmistakably marking a major stage in Roethke’s quest for the self. Mills notices a “change from consideration of self to fascination with the other.” On another occasion Mills says that sometimes the woman is “frankly sexual and physical.” At other times she is “a creature of spiritual and mythological proportions.”26
A third debate centres on Roethke’s appropriation of Yeats’ voice and style. Roethke himself acknowledges a debt to the Irish poet in the first part of “Four for Sir John Davies”: “I take this cadence from a man named Yeats.” Besides this confession, Roethke’s return to traditional verse form in *Words for the Wind* argues the intrusion of an alien voice in the volume. Snodgrass is distressed that “Roethke, who had invented the most raw and original voice of all our period, was now writing in the voice of another man. . . .”27 The controversial issue of style, however, does not give rise to any negative criticism of the poet. The question is whether Roethke’s imitation damages his work or not. John Wain is sympathetic, but considers the borrowed style a weakness of the poems. He thinks that Roethke’s imagination is of a special kind; it overflows “into anything he contemplates.” Roethke, therefore, was always in danger of “becoming the voice of the poems he admired.” In short, John Wain is of the view that the imitation is an unconscious act.26 In contrast Ralph J. Mills considers these echoes of Yeats’s work “intentional effects on Roethke’s part.”29 Such a view is based on the assumption that Roethke’s effort is to draw attention to the dissimilarities rather than the similarities. Mills also suggests that Roethke adopted Yeats’s manner to avoid “replication, boredom, and stultification.” Kunitz’s reaction is similar to that of Mills: “It would seem that Roethke has reached the limits of exploration in this direction (he means Roethke’s experimentation in *Praise to the End*), that the next step beyond must be either silence or gibberish.”30 The most comprehensive discussion of poetic influences on Roethke appears in Jenijoy La Belle’s book *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke*. She establishes the point that Roethke was not an allusive poet. At the beginning of his career Roethke consciously borrowed from his poetic predecessors. Later his use of
literary sources became subconscious. She argues that "the techniques and images learned over many years of reading became as much a part of his memory as his personal, non-literary experience, so that eventually there was no division in his mind between the two." Richard Eberhart suggests a different approach to the question of the Yeatsean influence. After the experimentation in the poems of Praise to the End Roethke needed the control of a fixed form. The movement back to an established form, whether it implied imitation or not was necessary for Roethke to achieve a "unified sensibility."

Besides the views cited above regarding the three contentious issues, we have book-length studies of Roethke's work. In 1966 Karl Malkoff published the first comprehensive study of Roethke's poems. In his book Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry Malkoff interprets Roethke's poetry from a psychoanalytic point of view. Malkoff is aware that a certain degree of caution is necessary while applying the findings of psychological studies to Roethke's work. For instance, while positing guilt as the force activating the regressive instincts of the protagonist in "The Lost Son," he acknowledges that the need for sexual affirmation is not ultimately separable from the longing for mystical illumination. Towards the end of his analysis of "The Lost Son" he goes so far as to suggest that the progress from guilt and frustration to assertion and fulfilment provides a "biological symbolism" for the lost son's reconciliation with his father, or for his sense of oneness with the universe. Malkoff's contribution to Roethke criticism consists in his logical explication of the poems. Roethke himself supports Malkoff's approach by stating that onanism is death and by making his character indulge in the act.
Richard Allen Blessing's approach is based on the assumption that Roethke's poetry captures the essentially kinetic character of life in the universe. He thinks that Roethke's villanelle "The Waking" sums up the poet's vision. Roethke says in that poem: "This motion keeps me steady." Hence Blessing refuses to attach any great significance to the moments of epiphany in Roethke's poems. These moments are transient, and similar experiences of transcendence recur in the verse. It is a critical error to suppose that the instant of illumination is static or permanent. In "North American Sequence," for example, the vision of the rose does not represent the culmination of the protagonist's search. Blessing refuses to privilege the experience recorded in this section over a similar experience described in a previous section of the sequence.34

Rosemary Sullivan centres her argument on the theory that when consciousness is rid of the numerous cluttering ideas which obstruct the functioning of the intuitive power, man can penetrate nature and experience a rapport with it. This heightened state of consciousness makes possible the perception of "a coherence of interior being and exterior world."35 Roethke's quest, according to Rosemary Sullivan, is for the recovery of this primal, pure state of consciousness.

In his book Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic, Jay Parini is concerned to relate Roethke to the American romantic tradition. Some of Roethke's assumptions and methods justify Parini's reading of Roethke's poems. His love of the lyric mode, his contemptuous dismissal of reason as something worthless, and his view that poetry should not merely imitate reality
but embody it prove beyond doubt his romantic bias. However, Parini hits wide off the mark when he discusses the role of the poet and throws on Roethke the mantle of a secular prophet. That Roethke’s work exhibits certain similarities to the vast body of romantic poetry does not warrant a critic to invest him with all the qualities of a typical romantic poet.

Harry Williams’ book *The Edge Is What I Have* is divided into two sections. In the first section, Williams concentrates on Roethke’s work; in the second he considers Roethke’s influence on later poets. He chooses for detailed analysis only three of Roethke’s long poems. He discusses all the parts of “Meditations of an Old Woman” and “North American Sequence.” But of the longest sequence, “The Lost Son” narratives, he limits himself to the poem “The Lost Son.” His rationale for the isolation of this poem for close examination is that some of the poems of this sequence are “opaque to analysis.”36 Williams’ observation on the conclusion of “North American Sequence” is typical of his approach. He argues that Roethke “perfects a sense of stasis, that is, a mystical sense of stillness for its own sake.”37 In the second section Williams is surprised to find that Roethke has been given “little or no credit . . . for initiating in this country, largely on his own, a poetry of the deep image, especially its innovative beginnings in The Lost Son sequence.”38 He shows how Roethke’s poetry influences the work of James Dickey, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, James Wright, and Robert Bly.

The views of major critics on Roethke have been summarised chiefly to highlight the fact that Roethke criticism has hardly progressed beyond the stage of controversy regarding the achievement of the poet. Consequently
critical attention is for the most part directed toward the thematic content of his work. Aside from incidental observations and brief papers, we do not have a single comprehensive study of Roethke’s technique and method. It has, therefore, appeared relevant to devote some attention to Roethke’s artistry. However, the present dissertation does not discuss all the elements, which constitute Roethke’s aesthetics. The Roethkean brand of symbolism is complex enough to be the subject of an elaborate study. Hence in the following chapters an attempt is made to examine the origin and evolution of what may be called Roethke’s intuitive symbolism.

The argument of the second chapter is that Roethke’s first volume of poems Open House reveals two levels of poetic discourse. The conscious, declarative tone is governed by reason. We also hear the submerged voice of intuition from beneath the surface. The grammar of the subtext seems to subvert the syntax of conscious utterance. By and large this chapter explores the tension created by the simultaneity of these two contradictory layers of meaning. Roethke does not seem to be aware of this symbolic undercurrent of meaning. It is also sought to account for the presence of this dual voice. Roethke does not dare to confront his true self, and projects a false self. The unconscious symbolism springs from the clash of the selves. This chapter focuses on the preponderance of the images of clothing, home, cave and mask in Open House. Attention is also drawn to the fact that these apparently dissimilar images blend into one another and take on identical connotations.

The third chapter examines the dialectic that informs the poems of the first section of The Lost Son and Other Poems. Roethke’s conscious use of the
vegetal symbolism coincides with his acceptance of the longings of the self. Still, the reason-intuition dichotomy is operative. From now onward his conscious desire to relate himself to another is discernible. In these poems the minimal of the garden constitute the other. In this chapter Roethke's attempt at aligning himself with the other is linked with the mechanics of regression. Reason accepts backslide of this kind up to a point. Further ventures beyond are looked upon with horror. Hence, a tension characterizes Roethke's greenhouse perspective. The tension is between empathetic identification with the small subhuman forms of life and instinctive withdrawal from them. The polarization of the images parallels these swings in Roethke's attitude towards the other. The womb-grave dichotomy provides a paradigm for Roethke's cyclical progression towards a state of equanimity.

The fourth chapter interprets the sequence in *Praise to the End* with a view to illustrating the functioning of intuitive symbolism. It is hoped that such an interpretation will, to a large extent, dissipate the baffling mystery that is generally supposed to envelop the poems. Some of these poems are analysed in detail and others are briefly touched upon in passing. As Roethke's strategy consists in winding layers of meaning around his key images and in interlocking them through the associative technique, the method adopted in this chapter is to reveal these folds of suggestive significance, and as far as possible rationally explain the connection of the central images with one another. It is contended that in the first poem "The Lost Son" pit, grave, womb, swamp and water (the last of these does not always go with the rest of the group) form an image cluster. The rat burrowing in the earth, the otter
diving into the water, the protagonist fishing in stagnant and flowing waters, the seeds struggling to germinate are then linked with the "pit" images. The fish, the worm and the otter have obvious phallic connotations. Roethke also plays upon the religious implications of the fish and establishes a connection between the fish, his father and Christ. It needs only a short step to relate all these images with the themes of death and resurrection. There are three kinds of death—physical annihilation longed for at the beginning, the dangerous desire to stay at the bottom of the pit, and masturbation which is equated with death. The image of water is particularly significant as it links the first cluster with another—wind, sea and fish. It is from these that the lost son gets some clues regarding the direction to be taken. At the centre of the poem, the "pit" images are transformed into caves of ice. The cave and ice together connote frigidity, guilt, frustration and fear. Roethke, then, associates cave and ice with cinders (which in Roethke's poetry suggests rampant sexuality) and later on with white ashes. Towards the end of the poem the pit-icy cave is connected positively with the fire-pit, light, warmth, father, and God. A similar method is followed in the discussion of the other poems of the sequence. It may be noted that the other in this sequence is his own father who blends with God and with all kinds of creatures.

The fifth chapter examines Roethke's portrayal of the woman in the love poems of *Words for the Wind*. By not personalizing her Roethke intentionally leaves the character of the woman ambiguous. She does not have a concrete existence as an independent other. This chapter emphasises the dual function she performs in the poems. She leads him through the
consummation of erotic love to experiences of beatitude. The reverse is also true. The love-act symbolizes his mergence with the Absolute. Her elusive and fluid form (she undergoes frequent metamorphoses) and the nature of the problems over which the lover ponders in these poems compel us to consider in some detail the symbolic value of the lover’s partner. The woman becomes a vehicle for communicating his speculations on being and non-being, permanence and process and the possibilities of transcending finitude. Such a view does not wholly exclude the frank celebration of sexual love that some of these poems contain. She partakes of the qualities of Roethke’s father in the Lost Son poems, and the minimals in the greenhouse poems.

The fifth chapter concentrates on the symbolic implications of Roethke’s exposure of the protected space of the greenhouse to the larger world outside. This encounter of the self with history provides a paradigm for the union of the finite with the infinite. “North American Sequence” is rich with infinite variations of this central equation. Roethke’s intuitive symbolism blends the American landscape variously with the sea, the wind, the poet’s father and even God. However, land itself stands for constriction and confinement and is identical with the greenhouse. The floral world itself appears in such forms as the poet’s self, the interior of the continent, the stone, the rose and sometimes the poet’s father. The object of Roethke’s quest in “North American Sequence” is a delightful participation in the world of process. Process in its ultimate form is symbolized by the sea and the field. Hence, symbolically, what the protagonist longs for is immersion in water. But, the fear of self-dissolution makes him hesitant. He desires a submergence
which does not require or imply the loss of his selfhood, that is, of his grip on
the land. The image of the rose floating in the wind, but firmly rooted in the
rocks, represents the desired condition. The father is linked with both the
poles of the polarized world of Roethke's images. The father, sometimes,
represents Roethke's anchorage in the greenhouse. He is, at other times, part
of the infinite other with which the poet wants to achieve oneness.
Notes


8 An instance of La Belle’s method is seen in the discussion of Roethke’s greenhouse poems. According to her, the literary figure who exerts the most influence on Roethke at this stage is William Wordsworth. Roethke’s relationship with the romantic poet is not restricted to the specifics of a particular situation. La Belle contends that Roethke’s poems do more than allude to the works of the illustrious ancestor; they create a poetic tradition in which both these poets participate. Wordsworth and Roethke undergo profound experiences in nature and attempt to transmute these experiences into poetry. La Belle points out, for example, that Wordsworth’s “Nutting”
resembles Roethke's "Moss-Gathering." Both poets deal with a sense of guilt arising from their violation of the natural order. Moreover, they awaken to a new awareness of the bond between man and nature.


10 W. H. Auden, Babette Deutsch, John Holmes, Rolfe Humphries and Yvor Winters received the poems favourably. Relevant passages from their reviews are quoted in the second chapter.

11 Malkoff 112.


13 Malkoff 195.


16 James Wright praises Roethke in these lines: "And Sweet Ted Roethke, / A canary and a bear." Later, he directly refers to Roethke's music: "These are the songs that Roethke told of, / The curious music loved by few." The lines are taken from Wright's Collected Poems (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1971) 146, 194.

17 "From the Middle and Senior Generations," American Scholar 28 (1959) 384.


Burke 281.


Denis Donoghue and John Lucas argue that Roethke does not establish a personal relationship with the woman. Donoghue is of the view that Roethke’s love “does not establish itself as a relationship beyond the bedroom” [“Theodore Roethke’s Broken Music,” *Essays on the Poetry* 149]. Lucas attributes Roethke’s reluctance to respond to love wholeheartedly to his “fear of involvement which he saw that love demanded” [“The Poetry of Theodore Roethke,” *Oxford Review* 8 (1968): 54].


Snodgrass 82.


Kunitz 86.

La Belle 165.

33 Malkoff 88.


35 Sullivan 74.

36 Williams 45.

37 Williams 66.

38 Williams 153.