Chapter II
CRACKS IN THE ADAMANT: IMAGES OF CONCEALMENT

It is by now an established fact that *Open House*, Roethke’s first book of poems, prefigures, in significant ways, the thematic preoccupations of the mature work. According to Ralph J. Mills, Jr., “the two subjects on which Roethke’s imagination most often fastens in *Open House* are the correspondence between the poet’s inner life and the life of nature, and the strengths or weaknesses of the individual psyche.”¹ Roethke’s epic struggle for identity, which takes the form of a perilous odyssey, begins here. In the first phase of the long journey, the self is seen lying paralysed in a stupor of despair, incapable of any initiative for regeneration. It cries out in rage against oppression by the overpowering ego; but its cry turns into “witless agony.” However, the spirit awakens to the pathos of its existence, and this awakening helps break the state of impasse. Buoyed up thus, it makes some bold forays out of the dungeon, and delights in the discoveries that it makes. The correspondence to which Mr. Mills refers, and other affinities which the self perceives it has with strange forms of life, result from these sallies. But Roethke’s arrangement of the poems obscures these desperate, outward venturings of the self. John Holmes in a review comments on the unity of the first volume:

The wholeness of *Open House* demands comment. Mr. Roethke has built it with infinite patience in five sections. The first is personal pronoun; the second the out-of-doors; the third is
premonition of darker things—death among them; the fourth is
the purest of metaphysical wit, something very rare in our time
and the fifth contains still another side of the poet's nature, the
human awareness of which he has become capable in his recent
development.²

Malkoff, following Holmes, contends that the self is viewed in this book from
different perspectives and that Roethke's classification corresponds to the
viewpoints adopted. He observes further: "Closer inspection will reveal that
together the individual parts form what "Open House," the first poem in the
volume, calls 'an epic of the eyes'."³ But such a rigid grouping of the poems
detracts attention from another kind of unity formed by suggestive images at a
different level.

Neal Bowers finds that the organization of Open House is based on
"two . . . related dichotomies: (1) between analysis and intuition; (2) between
flesh and spirit."⁴ His exclusive concentration on these dualities, however, has
the effect of restricting the scope of the book's rich symbolism. The
"wholeness" of the work needs to be studied in relation to the poet's artifice.
Current critical response tends to overlook the importance of artistry in the
interpretation of the poems. Almost all the book-length studies on Roethke
begin with a condemnation of such externals as the metrical stiffness of the
verse, its lyrical formalism, its end-stopped lines.⁵ However, early reviewers
had eulogized Roethke especially for these "faults." Yvor Winter's unqualified
praise of the technical virtuosity evident in the poems is typical of the
contemporary critical attitude: "... and he writes in a style that is good in our
time and will be good in any other."⁶
But these estimates of *Open House* are too general in character to notice the correlation between style and theme. The aspect of form, in particular, merits a close analysis. Roethke’s craftsmanship in these early years of apprenticeship reveals a dichotomy, which manifests itself in the unresolved tension between two kinds of form. The artificial form imposed on the poems from without finds expression in the evenness and inflexibility of the rhymed, iambic lines chiselled to perfection as well as in the language of emphatic assertions. The organic form which grows directly out of the chaos of experience operates independently of the poet’s control and expresses itself in the dynamic of the images. The arrangement of the poems is related to the conscious aspect of workmanship, and suggests a deliberate attempt to project a false self. His treatment of the self in this volume corroborates this assumption. The spontaneous form acts as a sub-text below the surface-level of conscious utterance. Here we find an intricate network of images. They communicate the voice of the true self. Thus, much of the significance of the early work lies in the conflict between statement and implication, pretence and genuineness, clothes and nakedness, confinement and release, structure and texture, chosen form and natural form, rawness and refinement of both language and emotion. The images of home, clothing, and cage emphasize the imprisonment of the inner self by the assumed, false self, while the archetype of regression and progression indicates the outward movements of the self.

An early reviewer, Elizabeth Drew, remarks in *The Atlantic Monthly*:

"Whether he is writing light satire or descriptions of natural scenes, his poems have a controlled grace of movement, and his images the utmost precision."
She recognizes the precision of the images but does not comment on their function, their recurrence, interplay, or metamorphoses. An overview of Roethke’s images will help us to understand the emergence of an unobtrusive symbolism.

Clothing in Roethke’s poems functions as a multiple symbol. Its burden of implications is made complex by the frequent shifts in the wearer. It is donned on occasions by both the inner and outer selves. At times it blends with the image of the cage. The regressive self, for example, views the human form as a garment. The poet’s assumption of a false self culminates in the imprisonment of the inner self. In moments of the keenest self-awareness the body appears as a soiled garment. The encrustations of civilization are sometimes seen as a restrictive garment. However, in Open House there is only a vague suggestion of this idea; in “The Bat,” these layers of accumulated dirt over the centuries are related to the human form. The nature of tension changes with the wearer. When the outer self is the wearer, the anguished self within is described as beating frantically against the walls of the cage. The human form thrust upon the inner self by the process of evolution seems to it cumbersome and loathsome, and its inward explorations are found equally abominable by the outer self.

“Home” figures in Open House no less frequently than clothing and, as pointed out earlier, in one instance coalesces with it. We hear of journeys and returns. It is peopled with the ghosts of the ancestors, and the two chief inhabitants, the selves, carry on a fierce war with them. At the same time they are locked in a ceaseless quarrel with each other. Roethke’s artifice metamorphoses the image from ancestral house to the cave, from a structure
of disorder and chaos to the slimy depths of the unconscious. There are many kinds of confinement which the image of home often connotes. The ego’s savage suppression enervates the self; the filthy body is sometimes looked upon as a prison; the conscious mind resembles a prison; attachment to home as property hinders the mystical quest of the self. Thus, it is a complex image whose referents keep on shifting. Moreover Roethke’s quest for a genuine selfhood is inextricably bound up with the search for home.

The poems of the symbolic landscapes where the self is seen, as Holmes puts it, “out-of-doors” are related to the archetype of regression and progression which appears in a crude form in this early work. It needs to be mentioned that the pattern does not come out in vivid outlines as in The Lost Son and Other Poems. Images like the swamp, marsh, pond, and pool refer to the hinterlands of the conscious mind, while the field refers to the progressive phase. The landscape paintings, in general, serve only to objectify the poet’s states of mind. However, regression up to a point is necessary for the perception of the correspondence. At this level the two selves are in harmony. The conflict arises with the next step beyond. The findings made after overstepping the tolerable limits of regression are disagreeable to the outerself. As such, the landscapes relate to the phase of progression. Despite the occurrence of the images mentioned above, the regressive state is implied more by the perceptions of the self.

Thus, we see how a subtle symbolism evolves out of the frequent transformations of images. It is central to an understanding of the verse as it functions as the primary source of the poetic tension. The violence of contending opposites energizes some of the poems, and saves them
from degenerating into cliches. For instance, in "Open House" the nakedness—clothing antithesis reflects the conflict between the inner and the outer selves: "I’m naked to the bone, / with nakedness my shield. / Myself is what I wear." The Jungian archetype of regression and progression illuminates the movement of the self in opposite directions. The landscapes and the bat represent the two poles of the fluctuating, outward forays of the self. Thus, the themes seem simple enough at first glance. The complexity appears only when the symbolism which operates below the surface is grasped. In his review of Open House, Babette Deutsch observes: "Most of the poems here deal . . . with the interior landscape. He is sensitive to its subtler aspects. He writes with particular awareness about the mind as awareness grows upon it." The patterns of images need to be scrutinized to realize the subtle dynamism of the self, or "the awareness that grows upon it."

Roethke took considerable pains to arrange his poems into groups. "It took me ten years to complete one little book," remarks the poet about the meticulous care that went into the designing of the book. If the verse draws attention to its admirable tidiness, immaculate finish, and flawless structure, the arrangement of the poems highlights an assumed, invulnerable self. Symbolism in Open House arises from the recurrence of similar images, and it is symbolism that unmasks the poet and reveals the true self. These images lie scattered, and do not appear conspicuous. Therefore, the reader is likely to overlook them and follow the poet's arrangement of the poems. An ordering based on the patterns of images would have destroyed Roethke's conscious purpose to project a false self. He appears to be unwilling to confront the inner self at this stage. Jay Parini traces this reluctance to the twin facts of his
father's death and his manic depressive psychosis: "It is one thing for a poet to recollect the past—this is easy; but the recreation of the past which occurs in the mature poetry meant re-living the experience, and this could not have been easy."^10 George Wolff also echoes the same attitude.^11 While this may be true, there is another reason for his refusal to face the true self. The self in its regressive fluctuations sometimes seeks its origins in the slime of the sea; sometimes establishes kinship with subhuman creatures; the ego cannot approve of such loathsome propensities. In a few instances hidden passions that obtrude into the conscious mind horrify the poet. The compelling drive for the ferocious conquest symbolized in "The Heron" cannot be acknowledged as coming from his own mind. Roethke's proneness to attacks of manic depression has something to do with his unwillingness to face himself. The rigidity of the verses is in keeping with the control he wanted to exercise on himself to safeguard his mind from total disintegration, to "keep his five wits warm." Any aberration from normalcy could disturb the stability of his mind.

Auden's praise of Open House appears legitimate in the light of this subtle symbolism in the book: "A good poet can be recognized by his tense awareness of both chaos and order, the arbitrary and the necessary, the fact and the pattern... By such a test Mr. Roethke is instantly recognizable as a good poet."^12 It is symbolism that transforms the poet's personal experience into themes of universal appeal. It imposes a "pattern" on the "chaos" of experience. The cumulative effect of the symbolism is an insistence on the sense of confinement of the self. The poet, thus, relates his work to the literature of mysticism in which the picture of the soul as a caged bird is a recurrent one.
Among the faults of *Open House* may be mentioned the imitation of contemporaries like Louise Bogan, Eleanor Whylie, and of influential predecessors like the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Further, the self-conscious, diffident and a rather self-deceivingly impersonal treatment of themes, and the artificial and awkward clothing of his ideas in conventional and highly formalized lyrical form are also serious defects. Yet these early poems contain seeds which germinate in the fertile soil of the greenhouse in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.

"Open House," the title poem of the volume is cited entire below as it epitomizes the nakedness-clothing dichotomy.

My secrets cry aloud
I have no need for tongue.
My heart keeps open house,
My doors are widely swung.
An epic of the eyes
My love, with no disguise.

My truths are all foreknown,
This anguish self-revealed.
I'm naked to the bone,
With nakedness my shield.
Myself is what I wear:
I keep the spirit spare.

The anger will endure,
The deed will speak the truth
In language strict and pure.
I stop the lying mouth:
Rage warps my clearest cry
To witless agony.

We are struck by the paradox of being naked and wearing clothes. We suspect the sincerity of Roethke’s confession. “The spare spirit” conflicts with the worn self, openness with closure, disguise with true identity. Despite the use of a language “strict and pure,” the self’s agonized cry remains choked in “witless agony.” The failure of language can be attributed to “the lying mouth.” The assumed self cannot communicate the anguish of the spirit. The loud cry in the first line is warped in the penultimate line. Something happens during the course of the poet’s emphatic assertions: the anguish turns into rage. The inner self protests violently in indignation. But its clamouring is smothered by the adopted self. The reinforcement of the theme of the self’s suffocation under oppression is found in “Silence:”

There is noise within the brow
That pulses undiminished now
In accents measured by the blood.
It breaks upon my solitude—
A hammer on the crystal walls
Of sense at rapid intervals.

The spirit crying in a cage
To build a complement to rage.
The second poem illuminates the interior of the Open House. When we enter the house, we are shocked by the awful sight of a monster-tyrant who vigilantly keeps watch over the building. We do not see the self as it lies imprisoned in some dungeon. Thus, home, clothing, and cage coalesce into a symbol of oppressive confinement. There is a reversal of attitude in “Silence,” in which the speaker is sympathetic towards the sufferings of the inner self. Richard Allen Blessing observes that a sense of trapped energy straining to be free is the real strength of Open House. But, in the present poem we see the dramatization of the encounter between the selves. Brian Swann comments on the contradiction between the title and the content: “Thus, “Open House,” the title and its suggestions, clashes with those implications contained in ‘I keep the spirit spare,’ so that the onrush of visitors is stemmed at the moment of the very invitation.” Neal Bowers approaches the poem in a different manner; he says that the speaker in this poem “is capable of crying out in rage and agony.”

“Prayer Before Study” offers a contrast to “Open House.” The poem is quoted entire:

Constricted by my tortured thought
I am too centred on this spot
So caged and cadged, so close within
A coat of unessential skin,
I would put off myself and flee
My inaccessibility.
A fool can play at being solemn
Revolving on his spinal column.
Deliver me, O Lord, from all
Activity centripetal.

We observe two obvious paradoxes in this poem. The mask the speaker has intentionally put on, now seems suffocating. So he wishes to put it off. We would expect him to throw off the pretence, and in a spirit of sympathy release the "caged" self from the stifling imprisonment. But it is his decision not to turn inward and accept his true self, but to "flee my inaccessibility." The self is abandoned along with the "coat of unessential skin." In terms of the quest motif, the renunciation of the false self, egotism, should mark the first step towards purgation, and the harmonization of the selves. Here, however, the relinquishment of falsehood leads only to a terrified flight. Another paradox is his prayer to God "to deliver" him "from all activity centripetal." Flight is, of course, a centrifugal motion. But centrifugal motion is associated with destabilization and disintegration. We must assume, then, that the speaker is in such mortal fear of the spirit that he would rather court the disastrous fragmentation of the psyche than face the awesome reality within. The same situation, where, however, the dreaded confrontation does take place, occurs in a later poem "The Song." He cries and backs away and finally flees when he meets "a ragged man." But the encounter in that poem results in spiritual renewal.

"Cage" and "coat" are juxtaposed in this poem to symbolize the state of confinement. There is no explicit mention of the cage in "Open House."
But the house-image aligned with the wearing of a mask, gradually approximates to the image of the cage. The inmate of the cage in the present poem is not the inner self, but the speaker who feels ill at ease with himself behind the unnatural garment. A unique feature of the poem is the proliferation of words denoting ego-centricity.

"Reply to censure" is a spiteful invective directed against critics who have vengefully tried to damage his creations. Roethke has of necessity to brace himself to meet such onslaughts. This poem is special in that simulation is accepted as a defence against external threats. Randall Stiffler finds certain poems in *Open House* to be misanthropic in spirit, and relates them to the social poems of part two and three of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. He ascribes this hatred of man to Roethke's failure to achieve a meaningful interaction with other, especially other people. This distancing from man, he argues, is a measure of his identification with lower forms of life. Another critic has also drawn a distinction between two ways of reaching God: the way of the infinitely small and the way of the infinitely large. For some time, Roethke attempts the macrocosmic way, and ultimately realizing the futility of this endeavour turns to the kingdom of the minimals. This explains why "Reply to Censure," with its focus on the compelling reason for mask wearing and self-dissembling, appears an overt statement of his abhorrence for the human. The need for the assumption of a false self stems from the awareness of his painful inability to relate himself meaningfully to the other. In this poem the malicious critics represent "other people." So he comforts himself with the belief:
Though just men are reviled
When cravens cry them down,
The brave keep undefiled
A wisdom of their own.

The bold wear toughened skin
That keeps sufficient store
Of dignity within,
And quiet at the core.

We notice at once that the "toughened skin" cannot carry out the two functions assigned to it, viz. keeping "wisdom" "undefiled" and keeping "quiet at the core." The linking of wisdom with the core suggests a paradox. Wisdom is associated with reason, and it cannot ensure "quiet at the core." Bowers' first dichotomy, the one between analysis and intuition is in operation here. It is the rational faculty that recommends the wearing of the toughened skin to protect the serenity of the spirit. If "Open House" reveals tumult at the core, "Prayer Before Study" is a comment on the efficacy of the method. In this first volume, Roethke seems to believe that the best way of safeguarding the spirit is by sealing it up behind the iron façade of an assumed selfhood.

To see whether everything is "quiet at the core" we have to turn to another poem, "Silence." The mask in "Open House" and the cage in this poem carry much the same burden of signification. In both cases the spirit fails to communicate its tormenting grief. The impression we get is that of a feeble self being callously gagged by a tyrant: "The tight nerves leading to the throat / Would not release one riven note." However, the tonal difference between the poems is worth noting. Irony acts as a principle of structure in
"Open House:” irony between confident affirmations and abject helplessness. The second line of each of the three stanzas in that poem carries the assertive tone to the level of bragging: “I have no need for tongue,” “This anguish self-revealed,” “The deed will speak the truth.” In “Silence” much of the effect is produced by the cumulative force of the auditory images: “... a noise within the brow / That pulses...,” “accents measured by the blood,” “A hammer on the crystal walls,” “the melodic ring,” “the breaking of a string,” “the wheels of circumstance that grind / so terribly within the mind,” “The spirit crying in a cage,” “confusion’s core,” “A furious, dissembling din.” The images vividly convey the frenzied struggle of the inner self to escape from the cage. We learn about the sufferings of the inner self through the perceptions of the poet whose ears listen to the plea from within and to the emphatic refusals from the voice within the mask. Thus the personal voice of the poet lies sandwiched between the mutinous inner cries and the unsympathetic, unfeeling, and unauthoritative voice of the mask. The early bravado turns into despair, and neglect into sympathy: “what shakes my skull to disrepair / Shall never touch another ear.” It is also clear that quietness does not prevail at the core: “Confusion’s core set deep within / A furious, dissembling din.” The assumption of an alien selfhood neither brings tranquillity nor keeps the wisdom undefiled. It remains more as a cause of new problems than a solution of the existing ones, as the poet learns in "Prayer Before Study."

The impenetrability of the mask seems to provide a sense of security in “The Adamant.” The poet’s attitude to the façade never remains constant, and these frequent shifts in attitude reveal a deeper ambivalence. When the
threat from the external world appears immediate, the cover is embraced as a reliable shield. In this poem he extols gleefully the hard exterior in such a way as to equate the container with the content, the façade with the inner self, matter with form. The rocky fabric is “truth,” “the true substance,” “the core.” The iambic trimeter quatrains, each with a curtal fourth line, seems to imitate the action of the rock crusher. Thus Roethke’s artifice blends the rock and the self, the form and the destroyer. The rock-machine conflict reiterates the form-self antagonism. However, the poet’s craft should not mislead us into supposing that the poem’s burden is the reconciliation of the selves. The rock is still a cage; but the paradoxical union of the prison and the prisoner throws light on the protective aspect of the enclosure, as seen by the poet. “The Core,” we are told, “lies sealed.” Here, in the last line, despite the poet’s verbal sleight of hand, we perceive the opposition between the prison and the prisoner. Truth, the true substance, the core, still languishes in a dark dungeon. Moreover, the home-cage-clothing symbolism links the poem with “Reply to Censure” and “Silence.” We recall the desperate cries of the spirit for liberation from the cell. What the poet labels as protection is, in fact, imprisonment.

Yvor Winters considers “The Adamant,” “one of the best poems in recent American poetry.”18 Malkoff also singles it out for lavish praise. Of particular interest is his perception of a progression in the poem from the abstract through the concrete to symbolism. However, he too views the adamant to be a symbol of the ultimate, unbreakable particle of truth, which cannot be rationally analysed further.19 It is a paradox of the poet’s
imagination that presents the impregnable rock as Truth, the inner self which, in fact, lies imprisoned within. The practice of reading the poems as expressive of the flesh-spirit schism might account for the critical neglect of this paradox.

One reason for Roethke's refusal to confront the inner self is found in "The Bat." The poem is quoted in full as it unmistakably foreshadows his obsessive minimalism:

By day the bat is cousin to the mouse.
He likes the attic of an ageing house.
His fingers make a hat about his head.
His pulse beat is so slow we think him dead.
He loops in crazy figures half the night
Among the trees that face the corner light.
But when he brushes up against a screen,
We are afraid of what our eyes have seen:
For something is amiss or out of place
When mice with wings can wear a human face.

The poem begins with the light-hearted description of the playful antics of the bat. But the referential plane shifts imperceptibly as the viewpoint changes from passive detachment to gradual identification, from nonchalant observation to empathetic oneness. But a violent regression down the trajectory of evolution to phylogenetic origins should precede the acknowledgement of the kinship. Randhall Stiffler notes that the identification
of the poet with the bat is total, and involves a proportionate distancing from
the world of human beings. The encrustations of civilization, the layer upon
layer of dirt left on the self by the inevitable process of evolution, and the final
human form appear as a loathsome garment. Here is a more sincere longing
for the primal purity of nakedness that we find in the title poem. The poet
who declares himself to be “naked to the bone” has in truth, to remove
several layers of clothes to become really naked.

The self is no longer a helpless sufferer. The stasis of confinement gives
way to a terrific violence of motion, and it reaches, through regressive voyage,
the slimy depths of the beginning. It is in this phase of the inception of
evolution that the primordial kinship with the subhuman is sensed. The outer
self separated from the inner self in the state of regression by ages of evolution
cannot welcome this primeval link. Hence it is afraid of what it has seen. The
disturbing discovery makes the rational mind conclude: “Something is amiss
or out of place.”

W. D. Snodgrass has drawn attention to Reothke’s tendency “to lose
his large human form” in an attempt to identify with the minimals. The poet
wants to divest himself of this deep, cumbersome, odious accretion, his
humanness, to cleanse himself of this dirt through baptism in the primal
waters, and thus to gather strength and spiritual orientation. For Malkoff
the bat is “a symbol of the dark and subterranean forces of the human
mind. . .” However, the bat does not symbolize the backward drive of the
mind. It is the clothing symbolism that discloses the implicit Jungian
archetype. This poem can be contrasted with “The Signals.” In that poem
also the poet gets a glimpse of a different order of reality from the one we are accustomed to. This is also an intuitive perception, which is not scowled at by the reasoning outer self. It is a privilege whereas the awareness of a link with the bat implies “something is amiss or out of place.” A comparison of both these poems with “Weed Puller,” a poem included in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* yields rich results. The poet in “Weed Puller” is under concrete benches “tugging all day at perverse life.” But he can see “everything blooming above him.” He is horrified by the knowledge of his kinship with the subhuman creatures. He would rather like to identify himself with the blooms. The bat in the poem of the title represents the world under the bench and the illuminating flashes in “The Signals” are related to the world of flowers above the bench.

In “Epidermal Macabre” we come to another instance of the spirit wearing clothes. But it feels defiled by the dress. The surprising thing is that it is reluctant to put it off although it knows that it is contaminated by it.

And willingly would I dispense
With false accoutrements of sense,
To sleep immodestly, a most
Incarnadine and carnal ghost.

As Denis Donoghue puts it, the speaker “wishes his body away in favour of a spirit remorselessly sensual.” W. H. Auden gives unstinted praise to Roethke for his success in this poem:

Many people have the experience of feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life; some quickly put it out of their mind, others
gloat narcissistically on its unimportant details; but both to remember and transform the humiliation into something beautiful as Mr. Roethke does, is rare.\

Although the image remains the same, the conflict, symbolized in the tension between the wearer and the garment, is not the between the self and the ego, but between the spirit and the body. Thus, as Mill, Malkoff, and Bowers have noted, there is some progress. The speaker having put off the mask has become aware of his goal, which is the mystical experience of oneness with the entire cosmos. If in the earlier poems the spirit felt smothered by the iron façade worn by the speaker, of his egotistic self, now it is aware of another encumbrance. He has to learn to overcome his desire for indulgence in gross sensualism. Only then will the spirit, released from all shackles, begin the long journey towards the attainment of oneness with all creation.

The process of purgation is dramatized in “The Auction.” The nakedness-clothing opposition is related in this poem to the antithesis between order and chaos in the house. The juxtaposition of these dichotomies emphasizes the coalescence of the images of clothing and house. The nakedness of body and harmony and order in the house are set against soiled dress and anarchy at home. The speaker feels that there is still some clothing on him. And he strips himself of that: “One coat of pride, perhaps a bit threadbare.” Cleansed of illusion and pride, stripped of other masks we have seen him wear on occasions, he is fully naked now. But the description applies to the house also. It has also been purified of the clutter of unwanted materials. This present nakedness can be contrasted with the proud claims of being “naked to the bone” in “Open House.”
The foregoing interpretation of the poems reveals three kinds of nakedness. In "Open House" the poet uses nakedness as a shield. What Roethke means is that he will draw strength from a ruthless exposition of himself in his poetry, that his poetry will be starkly confessional in nature. Indeed, one thing that critics agree on in the complex body of the published work is his obsessive preoccupation with himself. In poems like "The Auction" he seeks another kind of nakedness: purity of the spirit. This he achieves by purging himself of the taints of the flesh. In "The Bat" even the human form appears as a repulsive garment. Nakedness, here, means the attainment of the primordial purity. Thus, the clothing symbolism reveals the various phases of the spirit's gradual evolution towards unity of being.

It has been seen that the image of the house merges with those of clothing and cage to symbolize a stifling enclosure. Still, it is dealt with separately in this section, on account of its pervasiveness in the book and of its extensive range of implications. In this first book we see the solitary self engaged in a relentless battle against (1) the outer self, (2) tradition and family represented by the ghosts of the ancestors, (3) the other, especially other people, (4) its human identity, and (5) the contaminated flesh. The cage aspect of the house dominates in the poems, which deal with the clash between the selves. The sense of being cooped up in a haunted room appears also in the poems where the self rebels against the tainted legacy. Immurement affords protection from external menace in certain poems. Confinement within a polluted exterior suffocates the self in yet another class of poems. The house image, whether protective or oppressive, conflicts with the real home sought by the spirit.
The coveted home has two manifestations. In both cases homecoming follows regression and liberation from the prison. The vegetable kingdom appears as a wholesome home at a particular stage. In *Open House* the poems of the symbolic landscapes portray in a crude form the newly found abode. If home is a place of origin, further regression to what Freud calls "phylogenetic childhood" is required to discover the primeval home. It is to be noted that immediate ancestry or tradition thwarts the self's journey in "Feud" and "Prognosis." But in "The Bat" the self goes far beyond the family lineage, down the path of the race's evolution. However, the detailed examination of the archetypal journey is reserved for the final section. This section concerns itself with the enclosure-aspect of the house although brief references will have to be made to the outward sallies of the self.

It is ideal to begin the discussions of the house-symbolism with the title poem "Open House" as it embodies the prisoner-guard conflict. Despite Roethke's invitation, one will be wary of entering the open house. It is like a gothic structure from where passers-by hear long, piercing cries. One also gets the impression of someone being imprisoned in some dark dungeon. As Blessing puts it: "... an open house suggests informality, a kind of unstructured, free-floating gathering in which guests come and go much as they please." But Roethke's *Open House* bears no resemblance to this description. It is a house where lies appear to be Truth, where deed, far from expressing "the truth" cleverly suppresses it, where we see an angry giant-like man keeping watch. All the details put together, we feel that the ominous house, instead of welcoming visitors, scares them off.
The gothic picture of home is continued in "Feud." The sinister atmosphere of doom, curse and inheritance of sin, and the spiritual paralysis of the young descendant add to the impression of horror. Ghosts lying in wait to "leap at the throat" make life in the house unbearable. If, in "Open House," Roethke acts the monster-tyrant, here he is the victim. Roethke wants to learn to reconcile himself with the ancestors both literary and biological. "The spirit starves" because it despairs of ever purging the blood of the inherited taint. Jay Parini notes: "His attempt to escape or suppress the past, points to Roethke's fundamental early mistake. Nobody can run away from home; the mature man makes his peace with old ghosts."26 Jenijoy La Belle attributes Roethke's agonized revulsion to the oppressive burden of the influence of the literary ancestors.27 The poet's sympathy for the "spare" spirit's "starvation" sets this poem in contrast to "Open House." The sense of defilement occurs in Roethke's first book as a leitmotif. The forefathers make the blood impure; the body defiles the spirit; the poet vilifies the spirit through suppression; the external world contaminates the self.

The incurable malaise of inherited impurity is the thematic burden of "Prognosis." "Flesh behind steel and glass is unprotected / From enemies that whisper to the blood." Both mother and father vie with each other in tormenting the son.

Though the devouring mothers cry, "Escape me? Never--"
And the honeymoon be spoilt by a father's ghost,
Chill depths of the spirit are flushed to a fever,
The nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost.
The optimistic belief is not convincing, especially in the light of the later poems. The father's ghost appears repeatedly bringing the chill of guilt to the son's excited mind. The mother appears in "Bring the Day!!" (CP73), where the poet's attitude to her borders on Oedipal attachment.

We see a little drama enacted in "The Auction." The speaker returns home. He sees "his choice possessions" lying on the lawn for sale. At the end of the auction "I left my home with unencumbered will / And all the rubbish of confusion sold." Neal Bowers notes that "the choice possessions" at the beginning becomes "all the rubbish of confusion" at the end. It reflects a change in the speaker's attitude. He returns home because of attachment; and leaves it at the end, having been able to rid himself of the tie. So far we have considered it in the literal sense. The things auctioned off—pride, illusion, and fear—make us see that the speaker is referring to his mind. Leaving home is a symbolic act. In fact it is a paradoxical movement from the house in the direction of the true home. As long as the mind was littered with the clogging feelings of fear, pride and illusion, he felt himself penned up inside the enclosure. Only the removal of this clutter can release him. The arrival and the departure are not so much physical as symbolic.

The wholesome results of such a release are described in "The Signals." The opening lines are significant: "Often I meet, on walking from a door, / A flash of objects never seen before." Such tail-flicks from another world appear only when the speaker is out of the house. They are intimations of a home vastly different from the one he leaves. Such paradoxical juxtapositions of contrary aspects of the house highlight the nature of the
speaker's quest. On the mystical level it can be argued that house is a form of property which must be renounced by the true mystic. Absolute detachment is a precondition for the fulfilment of the mystic quest. “The Bat” begins with the lines: “By day the bat is cousin to the mouse. / He likes the attic of an ageing house.” In “Open House” we are aware of a dungeon, although there is no explicit mention; in “The Bat” the gothic character of the house is mentioned, with a dusty attic inhabited by a bat. It frightens us by “brushing up against a screen.” This bat occupies the part of the house where there is no human presence. The eerie attic symbolizes the collective unconscious.

In “Against Disaster,” the poet, confronted with the violence of a psychic disorder, finds himself in a pit.

This flat land has become a pit
Wherein I am beset by harm,
The heart must rally to my with
And rout the spectre of alarm

Roethke will use the image to greater advantage in “The Lost Son” poems. Descent into the pit is the only way out of the trauma. The pit stands for the subconscious. A plunge into the deeper regions of the mind will strengthen the hero, and he can emerge victorious. His struggle for psychic reintegration can be equated with his search for meaning and enlightenment. Bowers has shown the relationship between mystical visions and attacks of manic depression. For a mystic, “the way back is the way forward.” The mystic quest involves regression.
In “The Reminder,” the poet is reminded of mortality. The remembered person was associated with order and arrangement:

The handkerchief tucked in the left-hand pocket
Of a man-tailored blouse; the list of shopping done;
You wound the watch in an old-fashioned locket
And pulled the green shade against morning sun.

“In the dirt and disorder” of the house, the poet thinks of chaos and mortality. As Blessing observes, “all of the ordered gestures, the tucking and listing, and winding . . ., fail to ward off chaos.” Usually a house stands for order, and if disorder prevails in a house, the implication is ominous. A disordered house is an empty house, an image which will figure prominently in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. An empty house, was, for Roethke, one devoid of his father. Thus, the presence of dirt and disorder, the sense of mortality and the emptiness of the house accentuate the loss of his father. His mystical quest takes the form of a search for father; his progress is marked by his shift from an empty house to the green house where he finds his father. The poem is, thus, significant as the pre-figuration of a major image.

The literal sense of the house operates in “Sale” also. The self now wants to assert itself, freed of the influences of the dead. Although the description is realistic, the sale of the house is a symbolic act. The rejection of the ancestral home at one stroke releases the self from the shackles of influence. Liberated thus, it can now embark on its epic odyssey.

“The Envenomed,” an early poem not included in *Open House*, is significant in that it gives another dimension to the house image.
Like whales, we gather all that comes
Too near our mouths; we spoil our homes.
We vainly wash but never cleanse
The increment of tainted sense.

Here the body is viewed as the house of the spirit. As such it needs to be kept clean and pure. But the speaker thinks:

No degradation is more foul
Than what is suffered by the soul
Impounded in a carnal sty,
Too root and wallow till we die.

As Neal Bowers puts it, here the self “is reduced to the status of a pig by the filthy flesh.”

II

In a group of poems which form the second section of this volume Roethke describes landscapes which are symbolic externalizations of states of mind. “The observation,” says Mills, “and description are quite accurate and undoubtedly derive from the poet’s childhood experience of the Michigan countryside. But as in the poetry of Leonie Adams, which Roethke always admired, nature yields a secret analogy with human existence, . . .” These poems of natural description with implications are the earliest examples in Roethke’s poetry of what may be called poems of “symbolic landscape, a type of writing he developed more highly in each succeeding book he published.” These remarks from George Wolff point to the thematic connections between
Superficially, then, these poems deal with the resemblance between the fluctuations of the spirit in its evolution and the vicissitudes of the seasons to which organic life is subjected. On another level, these "nature poems" seem to share with the poems of "intuition" (poems which are unified by the leitmotif of "blood") a concern with the archetypal pattern of regression and progression. As has already been mentioned, this group of poems is related to the phase of spiritual ascent in the sense that the perception of the parallel between nature and the protagonist gives rise to a sense of exhilaration. The outer self (in the context of *Open House* one cannot do away with the distinction) is not unsettled by the sensing of this kinship. It needs to be remembered that the awareness of this profound affinity has been made possible by the daring forays of the self from the dungeon of the confinement. As long as the discoveries made by it are acceptable to the outer self, harmonious coexistence is possible. But, the findings are not always "wholesome" as is evidenced by some of the "blood" poems. The poems of intuition fall into two groups: one deals with the progressive phase, the other with the regressive phase. "The Signals," for example, belongs to the first category, and "The Bat" to the second. Thus, although for practical convenience a division has been made between the poems of symbolic landscapes and those of intuition, they form a homogenous group as the principle of organization in all these verses is the archetypal image of ascent and descent.

In "The Light Comes Brighter" the analogy between the world of phenomena and the inner world of the poet's mind is complete. The renewal
of life in nature with the arrival of spring reflects the gladdening revival of hope in the poet.

The sun cuts deep into the heavy drift

Though still the guarded snow is winter-sealed,

At bridgeheads buckled ice begins to shift,

The river overflows the level field.

No hint is given in the course of the description that the landscape lit-up with the radiance of the spring sun is meant to indicate the stirring of buoyant hope in the mind of the poet. Instead of that he makes us observe the changes in nature: “branches loose, last vestiges of snow / The water stored in narrow pools escapes / In rivulets.” The revelation that the natural imagery only concretizes a state of the poet’s mind is made unobtrusively in the last stanza:

And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,

The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled

Will turn its private substance into green,

And young shoots spread upon our inner world

As Karl Malkoff has said, “this final image draws the entire poem into focus. By withholding it until the end, Roethke has avoided the impression of a contrived and artificial metaphor, and allows his reader to share his own sense of sudden insight.”34 The insight into the correspondence between inner and outer worlds enables the poet to know himself more clearly. Malkoff further observes that this poem “combines a far more personalized sense of the illumination Roethke has learned to appreciate through Wylie and Vaughan with a less mechanised version of metaphysical correspondences.”35
George Wolff cites the following passage from Thoreau's *Walden* to emphasize the influence of the American transcendentalist on Roethke: “They were the pleasant spring days, in which the winter of man's discontent was thawing as well as the earth, and the life that had lain torpid began to stretch itself.” The similarity between this passage and Roethke’s poem is conspicuous, the knowledge that the natural world implies more than meets the eye, might have been derived from Thoreau. The awareness of a oneness with nature, the disappearance of the subject-object dichotomy, not only provides him with a fundamental theme but marks an important stage in the poet's journey towards what he calls the unity of being. Roethke’s imagery, even in this first volume, reinforces and reveals at a deeper level the trajectory of the poet's evolution.

An examination of the images used in the poem is a necessary corollary of any study of *Open House*. “The walker at the river's edge” is treated to a grand new vision in this poem. Intimations, not exactly of a similar kind, but akin to it, move the poet in “The Premonition.” The river is certainly not of the kind described in “Orders for the Days,” where it is a river of “hatred.” So also, “the river” overflowing “the level field” is unlike “the dangerous flooded plain.” “The cold roots stirring below” takes on an unexpected meaning when it is placed alongside the poet’s anguished cry in “The Lost Son:” “Where do the roots go?”

In “Mid-Country Blow” a raging storm is described in terms of the surging waves in a sea.
At night and all day the wind roared in the trees,
Until I could think there were waves rolling high
As my bedroom floor.

When I stood at the window, an elm bough swept
To my knees,
The blue spruce lashed like a surf at the door.

It is in the clear dawn the following day that the poet realizes that the external tumult represented an equally fierce storm in his mind. As in the earlier poem, the glimpse of analogy is reserved for dramatic effect for the last line: "But my ear still kept the sound of the sea like a shell."

A careful consideration of the imagery would reveal that the poem does more than establish a correspondence. First the boisterous wind is likened to the violent waves in a sea. The central images of the sea and the shell are significant, especially in the light of a poem like "The River Incident" (CP 47).

A shell arched under my toes,
Stirred up a whirl of silt
That rifled around my knees
What ever I owed to time
Slowed in my human form;
Seawater stood in my veins,
The elements I kept warm
Crumbled and flowed away,
And I knew I had been there before,
In that cold, granitic slime,
In the dark, in the rolling water.
The unusual external violence activates the regressive tendencies in the poet. We have evidences of the poet’s vague guessing of hidden forces in “The Bat.” Not only this, belief in the inexorable flux of life involving endless metamorphoses will be seen to inform the poems of the last collection. Thus going backward in time the poet gets an intimation of his origins in the sea. That is why, although “the eye is undeceived,” the ear still keeps “the sound of the sea like a shell.”

In “Slow Season” corresponding to the lethargy in nature the speaker feels that “the blood slows trance-like in the altered vein;” the verbs “drifts,” “thickens,” “trudges,” “obscure,” and “slows” symbolically represent the diminishing of motion in the external world. The cumulative effect of the imagery is soporific. “The haze of harvest drifts along the field / Until clear eyes put on the look of sleep.” “The garden spider weaves a silken pear.” “The walker trudges ankle-deep in leaves.” “Buds long unsealed, obscure the narrow lane.” The language and imagery objectify the inert passivity of the poet’s mind.

The landscape in “The Coming of the Cold” implies death-like stillness and sterility of the poet’s mind:

That late autumnal blood is dead
All summer green is now undone;
The hills are grey; the trees are bare,
The mould upon the branch is dry.

There is no explicit analogy in the poem. However, “the leafy branch” of “The Light Comes Brighter” helps us guess the implication of “the mould upon the branch is dry.”
The term "blood" operates almost as a symbol in *Open House*. The way it functions indicates the condition of the spirit. Randhall Stifler restricts the significance of the word to only two meanings:

In opposition to the primacy of the 'eyes', Roethke puts the dysteleological 'rage' he associates with 'blood' and 'confusion'. 'Blood' has two separable but connected meanings in Roethke's early verse. On the one hand, it indicates, rather explicitly, his family relationships and inheritances. On the other, it alludes to an intuitive means of sensing the world around one.37

That "blood" is also associated with passion and flesh is clear from an early poem published in *Commonweal* (7 Oct. 1931), but not chosen for inclusion in *Open House*: "Constrain the willing blood / To virtue's platitude." Here the self is oppressed by two kinds of constraint: the willing blood in the sense of the fascination of sensualism and reason which, while curbing the unruly passions, also represses the inner self. In fact defilement itself is a recurring leitmotif in the early work. Elsewhere Roethke speaks of the filthy flesh converting the temple of God into a sty:

We vainly wash but never cleanse
The increment of tainted sense.
No degradation is more foul
Than what is suffered by the soul
Impounded in a carnal sty.

Thus, the self has deteriorated to the level of a pig by succumbing to the pressures of the blood. In "The Cure," an early unpublished poem, Roethke stresses the need for escaping from blood:
So bleed yourself of love, the blood
That melancholy feeds upon,
And learn the marrow's fortitude,
The hatred burning in the bone.

In another unpublished poem, entitled “Conscience,” he describes the havoc caused by over-indulgence in sensualism:

I grew a bawdy eye,
A slack, licentious tongue.
My sinews were unstrung
In bestial gluttony.
I have a gosling's pride,
A wit that worshipped sense.
The blood within my side
Rejoiced in violence.

“Epidermal Macabre” echoes the same hatred of the blood:

The veil long violated by
Caresses of the hand and eye.
I hate my epidermal dress,
The savage blood's obscenity.

But “blood” is also capable of being purified and of becoming a source of strength, a means of glimpsing a higher and rare kind of reality. A confident acceptance of “blood” as a source of strength is found in “Statement,” published in Commonweal on December 31, 1937: “Discord shall not
prevail / while blood beats in my side.” This poem is one of renewal and newly acquired strength.

If “blood” is condemned as a defiler of the spirit in the poems discussed so far, it is accepted as an epistemological principle in some of the poems in *Open House*. The self’s awareness of the origins deep in the slime of the ocean, of its kinship with the minimals of the world, of its relationship with nature, or of a transcendental order of reality which, it partakes of comes through the blood. Such perceptions as these are not so much seen as intuitively grasped. Hence in this class of poems we see an opposition between reason and intuition or, in other words, between the eyes and the blood. In “Prayers” Roethke prays that if he should lose all the senses but one, he be allowed to retain his eyes:

In truth, the Eye’s the abettor of
The holiest Platonic love:
Lip, breast and thigh cannot possess
So singular a blessedness.

Yet, in the very next poem Roethke raises the intuitive mode of perception above that of the eyes. In a flash he gets glimpses of a supernatural order of reality: “Often I meet, on walking from a door, / A flash of objects never seen before.” That the poet intends a distinction between sight and vision is clear from the lines: “They slip between the fingers of my sight. / I cannot put my glance upon them tight.” Even while the sight is active, the special view fades away; the eyesight is powerless to fasten on it. The poet who began with the promise of “an epic of the eyes,” in fact, gives us a different kind of epic.
It is poems like these that give us a clue to the direction that his mature poetry will take. The important point to be taken note of is that such knowledge is felt through the blood. "Sometimes the blood is privileged to guess / The things the eye or hand cannot possess."

But all the insights brought by intuition are not wholesome to the ego. Walter B. Kalaidjian observes that "Roethke's 'secular religion' often leads to insights that are not so much beatific as demonic."38 "The Bat," for instance, brings an unsettling discovery. The mask-symbolism discussed in the first section helps us understand the poem clearly. According to Randhal Stiffler, it is one of the misanthropic poems of Open House. His contention is that as his efforts to relate himself to other people fail, he chooses to follow "the way of the infinitely small" to reach God. "By bidding temporary farewell to humanity, . . ., Roethke constructs his relationship to the minimal creatures."39 Again, concerning this particular poem, he remarks: "In order to identify as closely as he does with the bat, of course, Roethke must distance himself from the human perspective." It is not necessary to postulate a revulsion from humanity to account for the identification with the bat. The perception of the kinship is not a conscious act, as the fleeting visions of "The Signals" are not the result of any deliberate act. It is when "he brushes up against a screen" that we are afraid of what our eyes have seen." It symbolizes the intrusion of hidden forces from the subconscious to the conscious mind. As has already been suggested, the self views itself as a bat in this poem. The human form is a mask that it wears. Bowers in his eagerness to establish Roethke as a mystic, thinks that the experience recorded in the poem reveals his awareness of a
transcendental order. "The embodiment," says he, "of three different animals in one form bespeaks a close relationship among apparently unrelated things, a kind of universal kinship that is central to much of Roethke's later poetry, in which he sees himself reflected in a variety of beings." These various readings of the poem evidences its rich ambiguity. Few other poems in the volume give rise to such multiple interpretations. An important fact not to be missed is that Roethke's mystical quest involves a descent into the subconscious, sometimes into the collective unconscious. "The Bat" presents the poet's intimations of affinities with lower forms of life. The conscious mind, however, refuses to acknowledge these affinities. Hence, "something is amiss or out of place."

Another poem in which intuition provides a "demonic" insight is "The Heron." This poem is, in a sense, a complement to "The Bat." In the latter awareness of hidden, suppressed motives and passions are hinted at, whereas "The Heron" presents a concretization of the feared instincts. The poem images the stirring of aggressiveness in the poet. Malkoff considers the act of the bird as symbolic of "a predatory kind of sexuality." This poem strikes the misanthropic note more clearly than "The Bat." The image of the swamp occurs in "Orders of the Day" also. Clearly, it represents the subconscious mind of the poet wherefrom dormant savage instincts intrude in the guise of a heron into his consciousness. It indicates a desire for a ferocious conquest akin to sexual domination.

The "ripple" relates the poem to both "The Premonition" and "The Bat." In the former it implies death; the implication is present in the latter also
in the carnivorous bird's murderous act. Activation of the instincts for brutal self-assertion sets in motion the tranquil pool of memory. The bat is also symbolic of awakenings within the deep.

In "Orders for the Day" Roethke requests the various organs to be on the alert and protect him from defilement as he is about to leave the pre-lapsarian world of childhood and innocence. In fact, contamination of the spirit as an inevitable consequence of growing up is a recurring theme in *Open House*. In the second stanza of the poem the poet says:

Feet, bear the thin bones over  
The stile of innocence,  
Skirt hatred's raging river,  
The dangerous flooded plain  
Where snakes and vulture hover,  
And, stalking like a crane,  
Cross-marshland into clover.

Except for the stiffness of the verse, the poet of this stanza resembles the Roethke of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. Quite naturally and with ease he expresses the fears attending growth through symbols. The "marshland with the vulture and snake" represents the poet's sense of danger. The field of "clover," evidently, is the place of safety. As Rosemary Sullivan remarks, "the long-legged crane is offered as an image of the self seeking to escape contamination; hatred is a bog-land; moral peace is clover."\(^{42}\)

It is clear that Roethke is speaking not only of physical growth, but of spiritual growth as well. Necessarily, the poet has to traverse a dangerous
terrain before arriving safely at the field of revelation. The pattern of descent into the abyss and the victorious emergence is prefigured in the poem. The swamp, as in "The Heron" is symbolic of the dangerous sub-conscious regions in the psyche which the quester has to plumb before gaining the mystical vision of oneness with the universe. For Roethke the greenhouse meant innocence and protection. He rarely strayed into the field behind the glasshouses. Growth, both physical and spiritual, demands a bold journey out of the greenhouse into the field, which the poet-quester accomplishes in The Far Field.

Incidentally, some of the symbols used in this poem denote different things from the ones suggested in the mature poems. For example, the snake is one of the pure sensuous forms that the poet desires to become in a later poem. Sometimes it connotes the fall from innocence. "River" has a different connotation in "The Premonition." "The plain" which is dangerously flooded in this poem becomes the scene of a new awareness in "In Praise of Prairie."

The title of the poem "Against Disaster" denotes some kind of a conscious resistance against the attack of psychic depression, which results in the disintegration of the self. Confronted with the disaster he "moves beneath an evil sky." But it is not on level ground that he walks:

This flat land has become a pit
Wherein I am beset by harm,
The heart must rally to my wit
And rout the specter of alarm.
He is down in a pit, an image that will be exploited to greater advantage in *The Lost Son* poems. Descent into the pit is the only way out of the traumatic illness. His struggle for psychic reintegration can be equated with his search for identity and enlightenment.

The foregoing account of the functioning of the key symbols establishes beyond doubt the thematic links between *Open House* and the subsequent volume, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. Some of these gather more complexity, and assume more prominence in the later work. For instance, the Jungian archetype of regression and progression serves as an ordering principle for the poet's quest for father. In the context of a search for father, the importance of the house is too obvious to deserve mention. Mask-wearing is out of place in the second book, as the quester leaves the empty house, and is ready to confront any kind of reality. The famous greenhouse poems have their roots in the poems of the symbolic landscape.

The study of the symbols also reveals an important aspect of Roethke's craftsmanship, his way of handling imagery. His images are not static; they undergo perpetual metamorphoses. We have seen the multiplicity of associations that the image of the house is burdened with. The dynamism of the images is of a piece with the endless motions of the self. In *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision*, Richard Allen Blessing argues that Roethke views life as a ceaseless flux and the role of the individual as one of experiencing a kind of stillness in motion, when through "the pure serene of memory" the past and the future blend in an experience of beatitude. However, the transformations of the images have led critics to call in question the
concreteness of his language. Denis Donoghue thinks that in Roethke’s poems “things become emblems before they have well become themselves.”

The problem can be traced to the theory of correspondences. If the external world objectifies the internal landscape, every change in the mind will alter the signification of the external objects. Thus, his imagery is basically symbolic, and reveals the changes coming over the self. Even in *Open House*, his habit of overburdening his images with conflicting significations is apparent, and becomes a settled trademark of his craft. How various shades of meaning attach themselves to the simple term “blood” illustrates the practice. “Blood” implies passion in certain poems. In poems like “Feud,” it refers to the legacy of sin bequeathed by ancestors. In “The Slow Season,” “blood slows down” in sympathetic response to the lethargy in nature. Intuitive awareness is felt through the blood. “Sometimes the blood is privileged to guess / The things the eye or hand cannot possess.”
Notes


3 Malkoff 23.


5 Jay Parini, in his book, Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1979) feels that Open House "fails on many counts." Only a few poems "suggest that Roethke was a potentially important poet" (p. 39). Richard Allen Blessing, in Theodore Roethke’s Dynamic Vision (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974) observes that the first volume "buzzes with promises, most of them misleading" (p. 40). According to Neal Bowers, Open House "contains much weak verse." To him some of the poems appear to be "neat to the point of triteness" (p. 46). Walter B. Kalaidjian, in his book, Understanding Theodore Roethke (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1987) thinks that many of Roethke’s "first virtuoso pieces, as his critics have detailed, border on poetic exercises in crafted imitation" (p. 31).


7 Qtd. in Allan Seager 127.


10 Parini 18.


12 Qtd. in Seager 127.

13 Blessing 45.


15 Bowers 61.


18 Qtd. in Seager 127.

19 Malkoff 35-36.

20 Stiffler 15.


22 Malkoff 28.


24 Qtd. in Seager 127.

25 Blessing 40.

26 Parini 40.

Bowers contends that there is a connection between the attacks of manic-depression to which Roethke was subject and the mystical experience dealt with in his poetry.

Blessing 52.

Bowers 68 (The lines cited are taken from Bowers' book where the poem is quoted in full).

Mills 10.

Wolff 25.

Malkoff 26.

Malkoff 26.

Wolff 25.

Stiffler 18.


Stiffler 21.

Bowers, 57-58.

Malkoff 27.


Blessing 154.