Chapter IV
MINNOWS AND EELS: FISH SYMBOLISM

The previous chapter has shown how, in the Greenhouse sequence, images tend to polarize, how the poetic tension results from their dialectical interplay, and how Roethke's vegetal symbolism charts the dynamic of the self's evolution. Despite the pattern of regression and progression which underlies these poems, Roethke felt dissatisfied with his achievement as is clear from his letter to Kenneth Burke: "The poems done so far are not sufficiently related and do not show the full erotic and even religious significance that I sense in a big greenhouse: a kind of man-made Avalon, Eden or paradise." He adds that he is trying "to loosen up, to write poems of greater intensity and symbolic depth." These remarks have a bearing on the kind of poetry he was contemplating at this time. Presumably, he wanted to incorporate the specific experiences described separately in the Greenhouse poems into a general pattern in a series of long poems which would register "the history of the (protagonist's) psyche," defined as "a succession of experiences, similar, yet dissimilar." In other words, it is his intention to create a personal myth which at the same time would take him beyond the constraints of solipsism. The confessional poets, according to Hoffman, transformed the raw material of personal experience into poetry by sifting from it metaphors for the modern condition. Thus confessional autobiography becomes the cutting edge for a detailed examination of life in the post-war period, its characteristic anxieties, its multitudinous threats to psychic stability, and finally its ominous tendency to erode the very concept of viable human identity.
Roethke echoes this idea in the essay on identity: "The human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible. But how?" Thus Roethke could begin the journey of his hero in search of identity right from the early phase of phylogeny when "man is no more than a shape writhing from the old rock. . ." In "Bring the Day," Roethke sums up the evolutionary process: "Begin with the rock / End with water" (CP 73). In "The Far Field" the Protean hero glimpses in "the pure serene of memory" the entire process in the image of "A ripple widening from a single stone / Winding around the waters of the world" (CP 195). However, in the lost son sequence beginning with "The Lost Son," Roethke presents the struggle for "a slow, spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more." Such a narrative scheme could hold the potential for various levels of reading; such a mythical construct could accommodate the multi-layered significance, erotic and religious, that he hints at in the letter quoted earlier.

Roethke speaks of "symbolic intensity" in the letter. What he has in mind is a language of intuition, a language made up of words dripping with primeval associations. Burke writes in this context:

"However, our use of the Kantian pattern will deceive us, if we conclude that such intuitions really do remain on the level of 'sensation'. For not only do they require the 'concept' (as a name that clamps intellectual unity upon a given manifold of sensations); they also involve motives beyond both sense and understanding: we go from intuitions of a sensory sort to intuitions of a 'symbolic' sort (as with the motives of the 'unconscious' which make variously for fusion, confusion, diffusion)."
In the same essay Burke gives an example of Roethke’s method:

Thus, if in one context the image of a flower can stand for girlhood in general, and if in other contexts a fish can have similar connotations, in still other contexts flower and fish can be elliptically merged... producing what we might call a ‘symbolic intuition’ atop the purely sensory kind. Or we might consider such idealistic mergers a symbolist variant of the ‘aesthetic idea’ (as distinguished from ‘ideas of reason’ in the more strictly rationalist sense).  

Symbolism in the Greenhouse lyrics operates as a poetic device for unifying opposites like death and life, stillness and movement, participation in and withdrawal from organic processes. What strikes the reader in these longer poems is the associative richness of the images. Each of them sets up a baffling network of meanings in the course of the sequence. Don Bogen provides an example: “A worm... functions simultaneously as a literal creature used for fish bait, an archetype of mortality, a phallic symbol, and an image of regression and lowliness.” Roethke’s use of the image of the fish will illustrate the point. In “The Lost Son” the protagonist says:

    Fished in an old wound
    The soft pond of repose;
    Nothing nibbled my line,
    Not even the minnows came. (CP 50)

Later he begs “fish nerves” to “nibble again.” “The Long Alley” (CP 56) begins with the image of a fish floating “belly upward.” The quester wonders at the movement of the flowers: “What fishways you have.” In “The Shape of
the Fire" (CP61), "the silver fish ran in and out of my special bindings," the hero tells us. "My father is a fish," declares the lost son in "Where Knock is Open Wide" (CP67). Later he begs his father to "Fish" him "Out." In "Give Way, Ye Gates" (CP75), the adolescent hero realizes that he is a "cat after great milk and vasty fishes." In "O Lull Me, Lull Me," the protagonist says: "For you, my pond, / Rocking with small fish, / I'm an otter with only one nose" (CP80). Denis Donoghue writes about Roethke's images:

We think of Roethke in such images: stone, water, fish, dog, slime, lichen, worm, snake, greenhouse, pond, roses. The list is fragmentary. Indeed... it is remarkable the extent to which these images call to one another, setting up a network of analogies as they go along. We would do well to take them at their word, as we read Stevens, knitting the web, poem after poem. So the pattern would emerge.10

Roethke's strategy here is to load his images with the maximum evocative potential, so that they suggest a wide range of associations which reveal the full complexity of the experience. An examination of the following passage from "Praise to the End" will bear it out:

Can the bones breathe? This grave has an ear.
It is still enough for the knock of a worm.
I feel more than a fish.
Ghost come closer. (CP83)

The worm entering the grave suggests the male impregnating the womb. The phallic quality does not obscure its function as a symbol of regression. The
The juxtaposition of the ghost and the fish makes us recall: "My father is a fish." The line suggests that he is bold enough to confront his father. But the worm and the fish are at one level antithetically related. The implication at a deeper level is that he has progressed beyond the phase of the worm. Even as symbols of the phallus, the fish hierarchically occupies a place above the worm. Even on the phylogenetic graph, being "more than a fish" indicates a certain degree of progress. Thus, what is especially to be noted in symbolism of the intuitive kind is that the whole burden of suggestive meanings that an image is invested with is important for the understanding of the experience described.

M. L. Rosenthal touches upon another characteristic of the sequence when he writes:

This projection without comment of opposed psychological states is characteristic of Roethke's most interesting work. A desperate exuberance that seems at one moment unrepressed joy of life, at the next the pathetic hilarity of the unbearably burdened, makes the manic depressive mood-spectrum the law of life. Rosenthal is right when he observes that Roethke's poetry of this period presents a spectrum of shifting moods and attitudes between the extremes of self-loathing and joyous acceptance of self. The images also duplicate this polarity and tension. However, the general pattern that structures the individual poems as well as the entire sequence provides a sense of growth rather than of the chaotic passions unleashed by the attack of manic-depressive psychosis. Rosenthal's insight into the dramatic structure of
the poem is relevant. Roethke himself speaks about his technique: "All these states of mind were to be rendered dramatically, without comment, without allusion, the action often implied or indicated in the interior monologue or dialogue between the self and its mentor or conscience or sometimes another person." In the absence of comment and description the poet is compelled to rely heavily on the evocative power of the images. Thus, unlike the earlier lyrics where symbolism operates at a level beneath the surface, these poems make sense only through the effective functioning of the symbolism. Roethke wants his poems to be read on many levels; the elusiveness of his images dissolves the concreteness of his language into abstractions of a very unusual kind and makes for the various possibilities of reading.

The organization of the sequence presents certain problems of interpretation. One could follow the fourteen poems in the order in which they appear in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. They are arranged in this volume in the following order:

1. "The Lost Son"
2. "The Long Alley"
3. "A Field of Light"
4. "The Shape of the Fire"
5. "Where Knock is Open Wide"
6. "I Need, I Need"
7. "Bring the Day!"
8. "Give Way, Ye Gates"
9. "Sensibility! O La!"
10. “O Lull Me, Lull Me”
11. “Praise to the End!”
12. “Unfold! Unfold!”

The four-poem sequence which conclude the second volume were the first to be written. Chronologically the next was “Praise to the End!” Then he wrote a series of poems conceived as a single sequence in the order: “Where Knock is Open Wide”; “I Need, I Need”; “Bring the Day!”; “Give Way Ye Gates”; “Sensibility! O, La!”; “O, Lull Me, Lull Me”; “Unfold! Unfold!” and “I Cry, Love! Love!” . When, at last, the third volume *Praise to the End!* was published in 1951, it was divided into two parts: Part I included six of the eight-poem sequence written after “Praise to the End!” Part II began with the Lost Son sequence followed by “Praise to the End!” and the remaining two poems of the longer sequence.

The history and the reorganization of the sequence throw light on the cyclical nature of the progress that the protagonist makes. Hence it is necessary to consider the poems in the chronological order, and then, examine the effects produced by Roethke’s rearrangement. The four poems which appear at the end of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* represent the first phase of the composition, and follow a similar pattern. The struggle in these poems is “one from a lower state to a higher, a dark time to one of illumination, depression to joy, alienation from the father to reconciliation, atheism to religion.”13 Apparently, Roethke had no intention of adding more
poems to the narrative sequence as it appeared complete. All the harrowing problems that had destabilized and enervated his mind had been dealt with and finally overcome. This euphoria continued until he felt compelled to write another poem “Praise to the End!” wherein he takes up for closer inspection some of the problems resolved in the earlier poems. Thus, the movement is cyclical, each sequence beginning where the previous one ends. It is proposed here to devote some space to a detailed analysis of the title poem of the sequence “The Lost Son” as it is representative of the poet’s thematic preoccupations in the first phase of the ambitious project.

The first section “Flight” begins with the seductiveness of death which is seen as a relief from the oppressive stagnation indicated by the images of enclosure: “I was lulled by the slamming of iron, / A slow drip over stones, / Toads brooding wells.” The same image “the slamming of iron” is used to suggest the stifling sense of confinement as well as the lure of death. The predominance of the auditory images underscores the sense of being hemmed in while the visual aspect implied in “the slamming of iron” restricts the meaning to death. However, the protagonist does not yield to the tempting cries of the dead. Instead, he calls upon the lowly creatures to guide him out of the crisis:

Snail, snail, glisten me forward
Bird, soft-sigh me home,
Worn, be with me
This is my hard time.
Here we have an instance of what Burke calls personification where “imagism merges into symbolism.” The minimals do not have an existence independent of their symbolic function. Nor are the three creatures addressed by the lost son differentiated from one another in terms of biological realism. However they represent distinct spheres of the universe, and thus lend a cosmic dimension to the protagonist’s plea. The snail moves on the earth’s surface, the worm in the earth, and the bird in the air. Roethke’s own comments confirm this: “Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. One could even put this theologically. St. Thomas says, ‘God is above all things as causing the being of all things’. Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a way, upon God.” This kind of symbolism which produces the impression of an antiphonal exchange between the quester and the cosmos elevates the poet’s private quest to the level of a myth.

For sometime he receives no answer to his desperate plea. The appeal to the littles is followed by an image of fishing:

Fished in an old wound,
The soft pond of repose;
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even the minnows came.

In a way, it is paradoxical that the worm, seen as “a holy form of life” should be used as a bait in this passage. Then, it is also a symbol of regression. The very act of fishing is a regressive gesture. The shift from the worm to the fish reveals the movement from supplication for guidance to an understanding of the object of the quest. The fish could be a purely phallic image, it could
symbolize Christ or his father. All the three have relevance in the poem. But memory, both private and racial, in which the protagonist fishes fails him. Any invigorating memory would be fish-like for the child-hero. The reference to the empty house in the next stanza reinforces the theme of the quest for the father. It has been seen that the worm performs antithetical functions (of being of assistance to the forlorn son, and of being a bait). Antithesis of a similar kind appears when the son wants oral guidance to “Appear in the form of a spider / Or a moth beating the curtain.” As the image of the fish unites father and son (as an image of the phallus, the fish connotes the son’s desire to affirm his sexuality, and elsewhere Roethke identifies the fish with his father), the spider and the moth represent guilt feeling and affirmation respectively. The spider is associated with guilty sexuality. In “The Shape of the Fire,” “water recedes to the crying of spiders” (CP61). In “Bring the Day” the protagonist feels that he is prepared to begin his spiritual journey: “The spiders sail into summer. / It's time to begin! / To begin” (CP74). The child-hero repeats his plea for guidance:

Tell me:
Which is the way I take;
Out of what door do I go,
Where and to whom?

He gets in reply some puzzling, cryptic, oracular answers:

Dart hallows said, lee to the wind,
The moon said, back of an eel,
The salt said, look by the sea
Your tears are not enough praise,
You will find no comfort here,
In the kingdom of bang and blab.

These spynx-like riddles contain hints for renewal. Wind, water, and fish will
guide him on this epic journey. Roethke has already prepared us for the
complexity of the water-symbolism. In “The Waking” the speaker describes a
moment of epiphany thus:

And all the waters
Of all the streams
Sang in my veins
That summer day. (CP 104)

In “River Incident” the awareness of the speaker’s kinship with even inanimate
things results from an immersion in the primeval water: “And I knew that I had
been there before, / In that cold, granitic slime, / In the dark, in the rolling
water” (CP 47). The juxtaposition of the dark and the water implies the
collective unconscious in which the speaker’s baptism takes place. Roethke’s
comments on the first section of “The Lost Son” serve as a gloss on this
complex image although there is no explicit mention of water in them: “The
Flight” is “just what it says it is: a terrified running away” in which the son is
“hunting, like a primitive, for some animistic suggestion, some clue to
existence from the sub-human.” The son has to purge himself of all the
filthy accumulations that phylogenetic evolution has left on him. Only then,
after the purgative bath in the primordial water, can he sense the kinship with
the sub-human, and get the expected clue to existence. The water-symbolism
also serves as an ordering principle. The phenomenon described in "The Cycle" (CP 48) more or less repeats itself in this poem. Submergence in the water and the resulting incipience of re-birth are followed by a relapse into fear and guilt-feelings. Appropriately enough, water turns into ice. At the moment of the reconciliation with father, ice turns into steam, signifying an experience of transcendental bliss. Thus the symbolism operates parallel to the progression indicated by the titles.

Although less complex, the wind is closely associated with spiritual joy. In the final section of the poem the poet says in a tranquil mood of expectancy: "The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind." In the final section of "The Long Alley" the speaker expresses his wish: "Send down a rush of air, O torrential, / Make the sea flash in the dust" (CP 58). Later he says: "This wind brings many fish." Water, fish and wind are united in an amazing fashion in these lines. Hence, the answers the protagonist gets in reply to his query have the weight of an oracle. The analysis also shows the way in which symbolism of the intuitive kind operates. The other implications of these images could be more fruitfully examined in the context of the interpretation of "Praise to the End!"

In accordance with the strange replies, the son flees from "the kingdom of bang and blab," the features of which are defined in the next stanza: "The pasture of flat stones, / The three elms, / The sheep strewn on a field." It is an attempt at divesting himself of the vestiges of civilization, a distinctive mark of which is an exploitative view of nature. Perhaps, in the reference to the three elms and the sheep may be found a veiled sarcastic barb at religion which
gives scriptural sanction to this commercial attitude. Later in the section titled “The Gibber” we find a startling juxtaposition of money and water. The contrast points to the dichotomy between civilization and primitivism. The quester, thus, moves in the direction of “the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.” The fisher-king of the earlier part undergoes a transformation into a primitive hunter. The swamp, the slime and the mud where he hunts concretize the plunge into the abysmal unconscious.

On the object of the quest, Burke writes:

The section ends on a riddle, in terms contradictory and symbolic, as befits such utterance. The connotations are spynx-like, oracular; the descriptions seem to touch upon an ultimate, wordless secret. What is the answer? Put all the disjunct details together, and, for our purposes, we need but note that the object of the quest is lubricitous (in the mode of furtive felicity).17

But, the lubricity appears only in the third segment of the description. Anyway, it is described in terms of an animal. The first part is concerned with its size. The contradictory connotations surface in the second section:

Is it soft like a mouse?
Can it wrinkle its nose?
Could it come in the house
On the tips of its toes?

The last two lines identify the strange creature with his father. In “Where Knock is Open Wide” the protagonist identifies his father with a fish. Here, its wrinkled nose and soft skin clubbed with the details given in the third section
unmistakably establish it as a phallic image. Seen in this light, the quest for father blends into an endeavour for the affirmation of sexuality. Father and son are united in this image as they are in the image of the fish. It could be that part of the son’s struggle is aimed at approximating towards the father. It is not the actual union that the image mirrors, but the desired union. The mouse, at another level, as a burrowing creature, is symbolic of the son’s regression. The otter disappearing into the water, described in the final part of the poem, also emphasizes the regressive journey of the protagonist. The mouse and the otter reflect the regressive instincts of the son. At this level, the mouse is not the object of the quest; the son wants to become it. House, in this context, suggests not the greenhouse supervised by his father, but the state in which he can feel a kinship with everything in nature. In the second section of the poem titled “The Pit” the protagonist does reach home: “I feel the slime of a wet nest.” Harry Williams finds in the final four stanzas of the first section the suggestion of “the image of a foetus.” But he does not explain how this image relates itself to the rest of the poem. He concludes his observation thus:

. . . Roethke writes a kind of ritualistic cataloguing that leaves the reader with the sense of rhythm as reality, and the fluid imagery describing these animals and parts of animals becomes the rhythm of change and flow that their watery, embryonic surroundings suggest.18

Before concluding the study of this section, it is worthwhile to examine another critic’s response to these stanzas. Brendan Galvin notices a hint at masturbation in the next to last stanza. He compares this passage with a
Greenhouse poem, "Moss Gathering" which, according to him, deals with the consequences of the act of onanism. The "desecration" is committed in that poem in a "swampy area" like the one presented at the end of "The Flight." He goes on: "Whether what happens here is furtively felicitous or not, the passage is full of subconscious (Just under the water, / It usually goes) sexual impulses."¹⁹ As has been seen in the foregoing analysis, it is possible to link the rise of libidinal urges with the quest-motif.

The second section is entitled "The Pit." The text reads as a kind of cosmic dialogue wherein the quester asks fundamental questions, and receives cryptic, but enlightening answers. The images emphasize the theme of "the deep-down, the submerged, the underground."²⁰ The oozy bottom of the pit is similar to the slippery grave in "Weed Puller" (CP37) and the moist interior of the root cellar. The entire passage is cited below:

Where do the roots go?
    Look down under the leaves.
Who put the moss there?
    These stones have been here too long.
Who stunned the dirt into noise?
    Ask the mole, he knows.
I feel the slime of a wet nest.
    Beware Mother Mildew
Nibble again, fish nerves.

Roethke's rhetorical device of pairing the problem with its answer breaks down in the last line: the imperative sentence remains unpaired. The previous
two lines also do not fit into the question-answer pattern. The first line of the couplet is a statement, and the second is in the subjunctive mood, and both are spoken by the son. The experience of the protagonist on descending into the pit is dramatized in this passage. The first six lines stress the need for plunging deeper into the abyss. As in “Root Cellar” (CP36) he sees decaying, inanimate matter quickened into life. Hence, he views the pit as a womb. “I feel the slime of a wet nest.” There is danger in this kind of regression. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. writes in this regard: “Yet, the protagonist’s route in the poems is anything but easy, for regressive instincts, desires to remain on the lowest plane of existence or to become a lump of inanimate matter, war upon the natural impulse to growth.”21 The son is aware of this danger inherent in this regressive retreat into the womb. He warns himself: “Beware Mother Mildew.” Mildew, we easily recognize, appears as a complex image which, at one level, suggests decay and discolouration and at another level, hints at the possibility of rebirth. By addressing Mildew as Mother Roethke emphasizes the potential for renewal borne by this image. Thus, “Beware Mother Mildew” could mean the desire of the son for re-emergence from the womb or the desire to “remain on the lowest plane of existence.” Perhaps, Roethke intends the reader to note the contradictory connotations of the image. It objectifies a conflict in the mind of the hero. Attention has already been drawn in connection with the Greenhouse poems to the ambivalence of the pit with its contradictory implications of the womb and the grave. Roethke speaks of the appearance of “other obsessions” in this section.22 The temptation to remain at this womb-like stage is closely related to a powerful death-wish. It is one of the obsessions referred to by the poet. However, the son overcomes the instinctive impulse for extinction, as he does at the beginning of the previous
section. The incipience of rebirth is indicated in the last line: “Nibble again, fish nerves.” It calls to mind the fishing scene in “The Flight.” The fishing has not been in vain after all. The nibbling symbolizes the awakening of life, vitality within him. The fish-nerves also anticipate the son’s identification of his father with the fish in “Where Knock is Open Wide.” The fish, here, stands for the child’s progenitor. It could be more accurately equated with the semen which causes his birth. Thus, the image is associated with the idea of birth. The boy’s request to the fish-nerves to nibble again reveals his wish to be reborn. But, along with this should be recalled the child’s hunt for the rat or the otter. The hunt, in a way, finds fulfilment in this image of the nibbling fish-nerves. On this level, release from the depth of the pit, and return to the stream of life are paralleled by the revival of sexual urges. This is another obsession Roethke speaks of in “Open Letter.” At the end of this section what strikes the reader is Roethke’s skilful manipulation of the images, and the consistent development of this layer upon layer of meaning that they are burdened with.

The slight progress achieved by the protagonist at the end of “The Pit” faces a set-back in the third section, “The Gibber.” The relapse into despair, guilt and doubt is underscored by the images of constriction with which the section opens. George Wolff gives an elaborate account of the ambivalence of Roethke’s container images. The son becomes aware of the upsurge of sexual passion: “I listened to something / I had heard before.” It is not just the stirring of libidinal urges that causes the backward slide. It has already been seen that such stirrings parallel and symbolize the incipience of spiritual regeneration. The second stanza makes clear the cause of the slipping back:
Dogs of the groin  
Barked and howled,  
The sun was against me,  
The moon would not have me.

The image of the dog is associated with sexuality. In “The Long Alley” the protagonist feels inspired to purify himself. He says in this context: “Call off the dogs, my paws are gone” (CP 58). In “The Shape of the Fire” the hero speaks about his rank sensualism: “Up over a via-duct I came, to the snakes and sticks of another winter, / A two-legged dog hunting a new horizon of howls” (CP 62). Sexuality, here, is mixed with fear and guilt-feelings, and consequently leads to alienation from the parents. The feeble attempt at confident assertion noticed in the previous section ends up in frustration. The crisis is summed up in the third stanza:

The weeds whined,  
The snakes cried,  
The cows and briars  
Said to me: Die.

The passage reminds us of how “All the leaves stuck out their tongues” at the beginning of “Flight.” The idea of death also shows that the son has slipped back to the initial state. Roethke has said that in journeys of this kind “there is a perpetual slipping back; but there is some progress.” But, the progress, paradoxically, is an intensification of the crisis: death as a fascinating allurement as perceived in the first section becomes a threatening urgency. Mills feels that “the tension between the protagonist and his surroundings”
reaches a climax here. In the next stanza we “realize that the protagonist has survived the worst of his trials.”

Song, clouds and water are all interlocked in the son’s retrospective view of the fragile beginning made in the previous section. The repetition of these images in a similar grammatical pattern (“What a small song. What slow clouds. What dark water”) suggests the transience of that experience. In another series of associated images cloud, rain and father come together. The quotation from the Bible, “Hath the rain a father?” links the two image clusters. The memory of father at this critical juncture is appropriately followed by images of frigidity: “All the caves are ice. Only the snow’s here.” Malkoff finds the allusion to Job very significant: “The alienation of Job from his father is an important symbol of the poem’s meaning: the protagonist’s father appears here in his most frightening aspect.”26 In “Open Letter” Roethke speaks of the blending of “papa on earth and in heaven.”27 It is an angry father that the young man confronts: “Fear was my father, Father Fear. / His look drained the stones.”

About the three stanzas that follow Roethke says:

I sometimes use that technique of dream, for instance
‘gliding shape / Beckoning through halls; / Fell dreamily dawn . . .’
and so on. It’s a combination of dream and even, you know, sexual—‘my own tongue kissed / My lips awake’ (“The Lost Son”). I mean, it’s obviously onanistic, sweet myself.28

In his outline of “The Lost Son” in “Open Letter” Roethke equates onanism with death.29 Thus, death as physical annihilation as indicated earlier
reappears in a different form here. The son is undergoing a kind of spiritual death as a consequence of the masturbatory act. In a way, the cosmic injunction to die given in the third stanza of this section is materialized. In the following stanza of longer lines is found the climax of the feelings of guilt, frustration and isolation created by the repulsive, suicidal auto-eroticism:

Is this the storm’s heart? The ground is unstilling itself.
My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast out their fire?
Is the seed leaving the old bed? These buds are live as birds

.................................
Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time order is going,
I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,
I run, I run to the whistle of money
money, money, money
water, water, water.

In this passage, “the rising agitation is rendered in terms of a balked sexual experience.” It could be seen that this “Elizabethan rant,” in keeping with the turbulent state of the hero’s mind, is full of contradictions. On the one hand, the passage is replete with images of rebirth. On the other, the overt sexual overtones reinforce the suicide motif. Death and life battle for supremacy in the son’s mind. The “unstilling” ground harks back to the question in “The Pit:” “Who stunned the dirt into noise?” and is indicative of the incipience of regeneration. The image of the fire contrasts with that of ice. The germinating seed emphasizes the theme of resurrection. It is repeated in the image of the buds “live as birds.” The revival of life and growth indicated by these images
is followed by revulsion and hate: "Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher's palm; / Let the gestures freeze, our doom is already decided. / All the windows are burning! What is left of my life?" The self-loathing returns when he becomes aware of these faint stirrings of life. The onanistic act amounts to a violation of the natural order. It leaves some contaminating residue in the mind. The "primordial milk" that he wants can be contrasted with the "perpetual agitation" of his hands and his running after money. The contrast is repeated in the couplet bringing together money and water. The agitating hands and the commercial pursuits represent an order opposite to the one he wants to return to. Thus, bidding goodbye to the stones suggests a desire to escape from the self-destructive indulgence in masturbation and suicidal fantasies. Rosemary Sullivan looks at the entire passage as a notation of the masturbatory process, and ignores the conflict which lies at the heart of the storm.31

The tranquillity of the next stanza is short-lived. Mild surprise gives way to interrogation followed by an affirmative answer. "How cool the grass is. / Has the bird left? / The stalk still sways." That the bird has been on the stalk, and that, by association, his vague sense of a quickening of the spirit (the bird is related to the "live buds") in the preceding stanza was real, reassure the son. But the redoubling of the crisis occurs with the questions posed at the end of the stanza. As Burke notes, the section "ends on a world of white flashes."32 However, "these sweeps of light" make the son fall "through a dark swirl." This dazzling white light is, paradoxically, nothing more than sheer darkness. The key word that unfolds the meaning is "ashes," described by Burke as "the
essence of cinder.” In “The Long Alley” Roethke links cinder with rampant, repulsive sexuality: “There is no filth on a plateau of cinders.” The tone in this line is sarcastic. The protagonist in “The Lost Son” sees not just a plateau of cinders but the whole world reduced to cinders. The cause of the self-detestation that transforms the world in the son’s mind in this weird manner is the return of that paralysing crisis which is the consequence of auto-eroticism. In the second onslaught the positive signs of renewal are absent. Hence, the son is unable to protect himself from the terror of guilt and death. This is the poem’s “abysmal moment.”

The fourth section, “The Return,” as Malkoff observes, “sums up the movement of the entire poem.” It recapitulates the themes of the previous sections, and modifies the same images to form a new pattern. The image of ashes reappears in the form of “slippery” cinders, thus uniting the slimy pit with the theme of suicide. The pit itself is telescoped with fire: “There was always a single light / swinging by the fire-pit.” Moreover, the son identifies “the big bloody clinkers” with roses suggesting both the fertility of the pit and the purifying function of fire. On top of all this there is the collation of the flower and the protagonist. The darkness emphasized in the first two stanzas is related to the fire image through the breathing rose. In the second stanza, “the roses kept breathing in the dark.” In the third, “... the fire-man pulled out roses” from the fire-pit. It is the perspective of the quester that determines whether the pit is enveloped by darkness or flooded with light. Burke draws attention to the shift from white light to fire and steam. We also recall the son’s plea to be rubbed in “father and mother.” The ice and snow and
frozenness give way to warmth. "Father fear," the cause of the chaotic tumult in the mind of the child becomes a benevolent father, a symbol of order. The fourth stanza specifically deals with the transformation of snow into steam:

Once I stayed all night
The light in the morning came slowly over the white
Snow
There were many kinds of cool
Air.
Then came steam

The weeds moving "in a slow up-sway" recalls their unsympathetic whining in "The Gibber."

Thus, the fisher catches a big fish; the child reconciles itself with papa who merges with the father in heaven and the sun in the sky; the hunt for sexual identity materializes in the sense that the hero overcomes his fear of asserting it; the slimy pit, the icy caves of guilt, the fire-pit and finally the greenhouse of his childhood represent the stages in the arduous progress of the son. Rebirth is emphasized in the movement from the white light of symbolic death to the warm light of the sun. This section is particularly useful as an illustration of the operation of intuitive symbolism. The complex network created by the images and their manifold associations appears in a transparent form here. The dominant images could even be presented in the form of a diagram in the following way:
The fifth section entitled "It was beginning winter" describes an in-between time, a period of patient, hopeful waiting. It is an anticipation of the experience of transcendental joy described in "The Return." The poet considers, in retrospect, the significance of his reunion with father. The repetition of the image of the bones of weeds "Swinging in the wind" relates
the rebirth motif to both the vegetation myth and the seasonal cycle. We are
reminded of "the seed leaving the old bed" in the rant passage in "The
Gibber." Roethke's equation of papa on earth with papa in heaven together
with the pervasive image of light in this passage underscores the mystical
nature of the experience. However, the poet is himself not certain about it.
The questions in the penultimate stanza bear it out:

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

The symmetrical structure of the passage is suggestive. The lines gradually
increase in length corresponding to the gradual spread of light. Along with
light, almost implicit in it, is found the paradox of stillness and movement. In
the second half the lines decrease in length. But, the symmetry allows us to
consider it backward. Moreover, the light is not separate from the dynamic
stillness. Thus, what we have is a passage of expanding lines which
corresponds to the expansion of consciousness associated with the experience
of beatitude. Whether it is pure epiphany or not, the poet is hopeful of
attaining this kind of joy again.

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.
"The Lost Son" serves as a paradigm for the three other poems of the sequence, as they neatly fit into the formula which is found to emerge from the title poem. They are crafted also in much the same way. "The Long Alley," for instance, begins with the theme of stagnation and death caused by rank sensuality. "A fish floats belly upward" in a filthy river that looks like a serpent. The death of the fish could be attributed to the presence of the snake which is associated with sin and fall. It is later related to the death of the protagonist: "... What does the grave say? / My gates are all caves." Death is related to "filth on a plateau of cinders." Water, as a principle of regeneration, is mentioned: "Remember an old sound. / Remember / Water." In the second section the hero climbs out of the sty of carnal desire: "The fiend is far away." He begs his soul, "kitten-limp sister," residing "in the horse barn" for "a loan of the quick." He wants to be reborn from the death-like guilt resulting from immersion in rampant sexuality. His increasing revulsion from base physicality and desire for renewal are revealed in the qualitative degradation of the images of the body: horse-barn, trough, and soft bones. The last of these hints at death and decay. There is no sign of reanimation, and he becomes desperate, and the section ends with a narcissistic image ("Return the gaze of a pond") indicating relapse into the sty. In the third section the snake image reappears: "This wind gives me scales." It connotes the identification of the protagonist with the snake. Later he says: "I'm happy with my paws" identifying himself with the dog. "Failed sexuality," observes Robert Philips, "permeates the poem, which appropriately lapses into unmanly nursery rhyming and culminates in the emasculation symbol of a decapitated match." The death of the fish is repeated in the last stanza:
“Do we rout the fish?” The hero feels that we are more concerned about fulfilling “the cat’s wish” which is the capture and murder of the fish. The question at the beginning of the section, “Must I kill something else?” makes sense now.

A few lines in the opening stanza of the fourth section prepare us for the protagonist’s exultation in the rest of this section. “This air could flesh a dead stick” reminds us of the heroic resurrection of the green martyrs in “Cuttings (later).” The prayer to Jesus to make him sweat reveals his readiness to undergo penance for the desired rebirth. The invocation of the flowers ends up in an experience of oneness with them. It is significant that the fish along with the fleshed stick resurrects in the image of the flowers: “What fish-ways you have, little flowers.”

It has already been shown how the wind, sea and fish are united in the image of the sea flashing in the dust. What the hero seeks is a fusion of the finite and the infinite, a goal he despairs of ever attaining in the second section: “For whom were you made, sweetness I cannot touch?” The wind that brings scales in third section now brings “many fish.” The agitating hands are entrusted with a nobler function: “Give me my hands: / I’ll take the fire.” He is no longer happy with his paws as he declares in the third section. Thus, at the centre of the poem’s tension one finds the serpent-fish dichotomy giving rise to what may be called a religious symbolism.

“A Field of Light” is organized on a more simplified version of this pattern. Death and stagnation are connected with submergence and renewal: “Come to lakes; came to dead water, / Ponds with moss and leaves floating, /
Planks sunk in the sand.” This link between the grave and the womb, given in the opening stanza, reveals that the crisis is not as intense as it is in “The Lost Son.” The tilting eye recalls the protagonist’s father in the title poem whose look “drained the stones.” The strange transformation that takes place in nature is significant:

Reached for a grape
And the leaves changed;
A stone’s shape
Became a clam.

In the fourth section of “The Long Alley” leaves are associated with the hero’s exhilaration at becoming one with the demunitives in nature: “The leaves, the leaves become me! / The tendrils have me.” Thus, the metamorphosis of the leaves reversely discloses the spiritual sterility of the quester. The image of the clam appears in a clearer form in “Praise to the End:” “Arch my back, pretty-bones, I’m dead at both ends: / Softly, softly, you’ll wake the clams.” The image of the ghost and the hands coming immediately afterwards relates the clam to a sense of guilt and to the theme of death. The presence of the stone in Roethke’s poetry indicates spiritual joy. In “The Waking” the speaker says:

The stones sang,
The little ones did,
And flowers jumped
Like small goats.
In "The Song" the union of the mature man with the child within, of the outer self with the inner is expressed thus: "Mouth upon mouth, we sang, / My lips pressed upon stone." The stone and the clam, it is seen, represent the two poles of the wide range of experiences undergone by the protagonist. The rain falling on the leaves symbolizes the incipience of life; "I was there alone / In a watery drowse." The second section records a penitential act:

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came far.
Alone I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.

Rosemary Sullivan writes on this middle-section: "He turns to the deep, dark, underness, the root sources, and in a ritualistic, penitential act, embraces life at its core." Repentance and atonement lead to rebirth: the floating weeds resurrect ("The weeds believed me"), and the stones regain their natural shape ("The salt laughed and the stones"). Delighted thus, the protagonist moves "with the morning."

Intended to be the last poem in the sequence, "The Shape of the Fire" "possesses a wholeness and finality which the three other poems . . . only approach. . . ." It also exploits to better advantage the strategies noticed in the previous poems. For instance, instead of the images of decay and dissolution, the first section of this poem begins with a cryptic interchange between two voices: "What's this? A dish for fat lips. / Who says? A nameless stranger. / Is he a bird or a tree? Not everyone can tell." This triad of questions might represent an infant's first reaction to its surroundings on being
born into the world or the reaction of an adult trapped in a state of torpidity to
a dimly recognized presence within. The regressive symbolism operates at
two levels in this section. The second and third stanzas corroborate the second
reading. The ebbing of water, as in Arnold's "Dover Beach" and the
consequent bumping of the scow "over black rocks" coincide with the cry of
spiders. The water-spider contrast is a variant of the antithesis between the
bird and the tree in the first stanza. There is a clear hint at the central theme
of the poem: the tension between rootedness and release, stasis and
movement, body and spirit. Hence the protagonist wants to be mothered out
of the constricting womb or the oppressive stagnation. The familiar stone and
flowers, seen usually as dancing, here image nature's hostility. The fourth
stanza with its images of stretching and expansion suggests the fulfilment of
the hero's wish of being reborn. The receding water of the second stanza
flows in, and the dance of the "rotten sticks" is relinquished (the latter act is
symbolized in the rejection of the "fond worm").

The spynx-like antiphonal exchange is resumed at the beginning of the
second section. The meaning of the colloquy also depends on the puns. For
example, "the eye is in the sty" could be read as "I am in the sty." The last
five lines of this passage are significant:

When I took off my clothes
To find a nose,
There was only one shoe
For the waltz of To,
The pinch of where.
It is noteworthy that the senses do not perform their usual functions: their
dislocation proves this. In “the waltz of To” there is a pun on “two.” “Where”
and “To” clubbed together emphasize the lack of direction in this lonely dance
in the sty. From the vision of “the edge of whiteness” there is a backward
slide. Sticks are collated with snakes in the next stanza: “Up over a viaduct I
came, to the snakes and sticks of another winter.” The two are then linked
with the image of the dog: “A two-legged dog hunting a new horizon of
howls.” The familiar image of the fish also finds a place in this passage: “The
silver fish ran in and out of my special bindings.” This cluster of images
emphasize sexual guilt. The protagonist addresses his father who is associated
with platitudes, rationality and exhortation: “My nerves knew you, dear boy.”
With the recognition of father guilt feelings resurface in his mind. A prophetic
voice sings of the consequences of uncurbed sensuality. An awareness of the
need for purgation dawns upon him; after listening to the oracular warning, he
asks the cosmic voice to show him the way.

What little knowledge the protagonist has gained from his manifold
experiences is condensed into a series of adages in the third
section. The use
of this antiphonal technique of the wise sayings is a novel feature. Cosmic
voices and proverbial utterance invest the hero’s quest with mythical
overtones. The wasp, serpent, fruit, warning eye, flesh and redemption
reiterate the basic conflict in the poem. The first lines of the four couplets
show a kind of progression: the waiting wasp and the glistening grape imply
temptation and the possibility of a fall; the warning eye rising out of the wave
leads through logical progression to the steadiness symbolized by the rose.
The second lines stress the journey motif. The edge swallowing the centre, and the serpent’s guidance of the quester to the fruit form a unit. The reversal of this journey is revealed in the second unit: the journey from the flesh and the dark way traversed by the quester.

Of the antithetical options presented in the fourth section the protagonist chooses the dark way of the redeemer. He desires to get back into the prelapsarian world of innocence and joy, “the minnowy world of weeds and ditches,” of birds and crabs and trembling buds where “love sang toward.” The wish is fulfilled in the fifth section. The two images with which the section ends deserve close scrutiny:

To follow the drops sliding from a lifted oar,
Hold up, while therower breathes, and the small boat
drifts quietly shoreward;
To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing,
As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick pouring,
Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,
Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.

The passage, according to Susan R. Van Dyne, is an expression of a “moment of beatitude” in which “the self is as secure as the cut flower contained and fed by the completely full vase.” For a moment the protagonist is released from the struggle of becoming, and enjoys the fullness of being. The images focus on an instant of perfect ease, poise and harmony, an instant “suspended from the cycle of growth and decay.” Roethke makes use of paradox here. What is described is an experience in time of timelessness, of peace and
stability in the midst of process. In the flux and fluidity of phenomena is perceived permanence and stasis. Roethke's vision fastens upon the drops as they remain suspended between the oar and the water, upon the boat that moves on its own accord shoreward, and upon the water trembling at the brim of the vase.

Thus, at the end of the four-poem sequence Roethke gains an equipoise, the final result of his arduous struggle, which results from this mystical experience of illumination. But in the light of "Praise to the End" and the second sequence it should be presumed that the buoyancy and euphoria described at the end of "The Shape of the Fire" are so evanescent that the protagonist feels impelled to set out on the same quest again or that in retrospect he feels that some of the problems dealt with in the sequence have not been satisfactorily solved. He has of necessity to confront them again. This kind of reconsideration of solutions arrived at earlier is in accord with Roethke's cyclical theory of progression. The retrospective evaluation does not invalidate the solutions, but modifies them. For instance, we notice a certain naivete in the way the body-spirit dichotomy is resolved in the first sequence. Water and fire lead to the epiphany in the last poem while the serpent and the tree keep him confined in the sty. The speaker's abnegation of the flesh and the consequent attainment of the spiritual vision appear a bit too simple. As Lucas contends, up to a point each of the four poems deals at length with the sexual crisis (with stagnation, guilt, death), but then leaves it abruptly, and celebrates some sort of transcendental exultation. The poet, while reviewing the experience realizes that he has to face the problem again. Thus, "Praise to
the End!” reveals a reversion to the same old concerns. This time, however, the poet can look at the problem from the vantage ground of the experience of the beatitude described in the first sequence.

What engages the reader’s attention in “Praise to the End!” is the baffling maze of associations that the image of the fish creates. In the Collected Poems it seems to be carried over from the concluding stanza of “O Lull Me, Lull Me” where the protagonist speaks of his pride and buoyancy at the attainment of sexual growth. He feels that he is an otter ready to plunge into a pond “rocking with small fish.” Here, the pond containing the fish, or the fish itself connotes the female phallus. The image has the same significance in the opening stanza of “Give Way, Ye Gates,” where the speaker says that he is a “cat after great milk and vasty fishes.” Among fishes, he is “a duke of eels.” In the first section of “Praise to the End” pride and guilt intermingle in the youngman’s attitude to his emerging sexuality. The exhilaration is short-lived and not unmixed with the fear of paternal chastisement: “Softly, softly, you’ll wake the clams / I’ll feed the ghost alone / Father, forgive my hands.” The hero unites the clam and the ghost with the father, and associates all the three with guilt. The autoeroticism implicit in the last line has its beginning in the desperate cry in the first stanza: “. . . soft-mocker / For whom have I swelled like a seed?” As Don Bogen notes, the lonely river with its waters symbolizes the state of his mind. The river needs to enter the sea, or some kind of enclosure. The pond has phallic connotations, and the absence of rings indicates stagnation and inertia. The meaning seems to be that he does not find a responsive partner. But, the
water anticipates the “ultimate waters” of the concluding stanza. The emphasis in the opening section is on the vacuity, loneliness and despair arising from the suicidal act of onanism. “... Onanism represents the solipsistic withdrawal from genuine eros, which by definition involves another person.”

The protagonist remembers a time when he was innocent and pure: “Once I fished from the banks, leaf-light and happy: / I romped, lithe as a child, down the summery streets of my veins / Strict as a seed, nippy and twiggy.” The seed recalls the swelling mentioned in the previous section. The “nippy and twiggy” seed contrasts with the swollen seed. By association the seed is identified with the duke of eels and the soft-mocker. In “The Lost Son” the protagonist fishes in a stagnant pond, in “the soft pond of repose”; here, by contrast fishing in the flowing water signifies the happiness experienced in childhood. “Now the water’s low. The weeds exceed me.” Now he feels contaminated by the growing sexual urges. “Lacking the candor of dogs, I kiss the departing air; / I’m untrue to my own excesses.” The section ends with a series of images which suggest that mere indulgence in sensuality will starve the spirit.

I’ve been asleep in a bower of dead skin
It’s a piece of a prince I ate.
This salt can’t warm a stone.
These lazy ashes.

As if in consequence of the realization he is blessed with a kind of epiphany. The fish symbolism becomes a little more complex. Just before the
vision of resurrection he walks along the highway “mincing like a cat.” While on the edge of the illumination, he “lay like the cats do / sniffing the dew.” In the dream Jesus tosses him back granting him a new life. The image of Jesus tossing him back calls up before us the scene of the protagonist’s father tossing back a fish in “Where Knock is Open Wide.” Paradoxically, the cat is transformed into a fish. In “Give Way, Ye Gates” he declares himself to be a cat after vasty fishes. So, if the cat gets metamorphosed into a fish, it has serious implications for the young man. It reveals that he is yet not able to go beyond himself, that he cannot yet accept a partner, and that he has to start anew the journey from I to the other. It accounts, in part, for the outcry at the beginning of the poem: “... soft-mocker, for whom have I swelled like a seed?” However, at present he is not aware of the problems thrown up by the experience. Instead, he feels exhilarated by this quickening of life. He feels buoyed up and reassured. Physicality doesn’t repel him. Nor does it generate any guilt-feeling. He can dare his father.

... This grave has an ear
It's still enough for the knock of a worm
I feel more than a fish
Ghost, come closer.

He feels more than a fish in more than one sense. By being transformed into a fish by Christ he feels elevated to a higher plane than that of a fish. There is a contradiction in this. But the contradiction vanishes when we realize that by fish he means his father. Familiarity with Roethke’s poetry shows that both Christ and his father are sometimes seen as fishes. In this sense what the
speaker says is that he is prepared to confront the ghost. On the phylogenetic scale he has passed two stages, those of the worm and the fish (“more than a fish”). In the context of the poem the claim appears true. Christ has breathed new life into him. Thus, the fish as a symbol of the phallus, and of a higher form of life than the worm obliterates the old divide between the body and the spirit. The fish with overtones of divinity still can enter the grave which is a complex symbol with implications of mortality and the female phallus. A peculiarity of this passage is that it accomplishes a union of opposites: death and life, the physical and the spiritual, and lower and higher forms of life on the scale of being.

In the final section the protagonist speculates on the outcome of his journey. He realizes that the equipoise and exultation he experienced in the wake of the transcendental vision was evanescent, and that he had not succeeded in solving the problems permanently. The dichotomies and the guilt-feeling have returned.

His self-awareness only perplexes him. He is neither a saint nor a dog, that is, he has neither willingly renounced the pleasures of the body nor learnt to enjoy them freely as a dog. He is still the slave of passion, but the oppressive sense of guilt torments him. Malkoff’s observation on this passage is significant: “... sexual guilt has been the protagonist’s major problem, but neither saint nor dog has solved it in human terms. The dog lacks the will to sin and the self-consciousness necessary for guilt; the saint does not come to terms with sexual desires, but suppresses them entirely.” Along with this guilt-feeling, almost counterbalancing it, is the joy of being in harmony with
nature. There is obviously an incompatibility between the pleasure of autoeroticism and feelings of oneness with nature. The hero says: "My palm-sweat flashes gold." Yet he knows "... the back-stream's joy, and the stone's eternal pulseless longing." Thus, his relationship with nature is peculiar. The description of his relationship with nature takes on a symbolic significance. We are made aware of the regressive instincts of the speaker, of his desire "to remain on the lowest plane of existence, or to become a lump of inanimate matter..."47 The harmony is achieved not by the empathetic extension of the self but by the total loss of his individual identity. He says later: "I lost my identity to a pebble." That his union with nature is indicative not of a healthy response but of a negative drive to flee from reality is corroborated by the next stanza: "I have been somewhere else; I remember the sea-faced uncles / I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing." The last stanza makes it explicit:

Wherefore, O birds and small fish, surround me.
Lave me, ultimate waters
The dark showed me a face
My ghosts are all gay
The light becomes me.

What demands special attention is the subtle operation of Roethke's minimal symbolism. He reaches out in empathy towards the demunitives: the stone, the rat, the minnows, the plants, the fish, and the bird. But he does so after violating the natural order through the repulsive act of onanism. Roethke comments thus on this passage:
Is the protagonist ‘happy’ in his death-wish? Is he a mindless euphoric jigger who goes blithering into oblivion? No. In terms of the whole sequence, he survives: this is a dead-end explored. His self consciousness, his very will to live saves him from the annihilation of the ecstasy.48

Even Roethke’s defence of the young man does not sound convincing. When the protagonist says in “O, Thou Opening O:” “Walking’s / Kissing” we believe in his honesty. But, the simultaneity of auto-erotic pleasure and quasi-mystical rapture in the present phase of his evolution does not strike us as being true. Hence, notwithstanding Roethke’s gloss, the quester does seem to be longing for extinction. Malkoff observes that the final section “ends with emphasis on regression rather than progression.”49 Ann T. Foster goes further than the poet and finds in the passage a positive affirmation of faith in life: “... the death-wish ... may also function as purgation, a cleansing by eternal waters.”50 So, whatever rapport he establishes with the littles of the universe is not of the kind felt by mystics in moments of enlightenment. Usually Roethke’s speakers feel alienated from nature after the gratification of perverse desires. It is this difference that alerts us to the possibility of hidden meanings in the poem. A close examination would reveal that all this talk of harmony is meant to symbolize a state of mind, in this case, the regressive instincts of the protagonist. In the final section of “Praise to the End!” water symbolism provides the context for the interpretation of the poem. Otherwise, it will be difficult for the reader to know whether the speaker means real mystical union with the whole of nature or loss of personal identity. In the first case there is an expansion of the self; in the second a diminution and loss. In Roethke’s poetry one comes across both kinds of harmony.
The water symbolism also deserves some attention. It is also complex, and operates more or less in the same way, that is, by creating a confusing network of associations. It would at first appear preposterous if someone were to point out that the pond in the first section of the poem is synonymous with the grave in the third section. Each of the four sections deals with this image in a conspicuous way. The first section ends with the following passage:

The rings have gone from the pond.
The river is alone with its water.
All risings
Fall.

Obviously, the loneliness of the river, the fall and the masturbatory act of the previous stanza seem to be logically related. In the second stanza the young man remembers fishing in the flowing water of the river. His degeneration is reflected in the statement: “Now the water’s low.” It is reiterated in more specific terms in the concluding stanza: “An exact fall of waters has rendered me impotent.” The impotence implied in the sterile act of autoeroticism is the cause of his lament in the first section: “For whom have I swelled like a seed?” The idea is reinforced in the third section where the cat blends into the fish. Immediately after the description of the epiphany, the image of the river reappears slightly modified: “The several sounds were low; / The river ebbed and flowed.” The ebb and flow suggest the eternal flux in which everything is caught up in this world. It is against the view of process that his changed attitude to sexuality must be understood. It is in the fifth section that the fish and the water unite. Guilt and ecstasy so overwhelm the hero that he
deliberately seeks oblivion, an escape into the collective unconscious. The

guilt-laden phallus which is by extension the protagonist, wants to get back to
the beginning when he had no individual identity.

It is apparent even at first glance that in spite of his bold confrontation
with sex and guilt the conclusion of this poem is far from being satisfactory.
It is useful to compare the ending of this poem with that of “I cry, Love, Love!”
which was supposed to have been the last poem of the sequence. At first we
are struck by the resemblance. The water symbolism is operative here also.
The bats dip into the motionless water, moving upward and downward. They
also “weave in and out of the willows.” That is, they shuttle between the
willows and the water. “The shine on the face of the lake / Tilts, backward
and forward.” This back and forth movement of the lake’s shine as well as of
the bats reflects the oscillation of the poet’s mind between his longing for
death and the instinct for existence. However, death in this poem is not an
end in itself as it is in “Praise to the End!” It is viewed instead as a medium
for mergence with something else. The poem begins with the desire for the
other. But the other happens not to be a woman, but something strange and
unexpected. In the last stanza the speaker tries to suggest what he dimly
perceives to be the other:

Who untied the tree? I remember now.
We met in a nest. Before I lived
The dark hair sighed
We never enter
Alone.
Evidently, what he wants to achieve is a resolution of the conflict between the body and the spirit. We understand that the tree got untied from the other at birth. He remembers meeting it in the nest. The severance is the result of birth. Hence, the route to the womb and to a reunion with the other is through the grave. It has already been seen how the womb and the grave blend into each other in Reotheke's poetry. We realize, then, that death or entry into the inviting lake does not mean physical annihilation. It symbolizes the regressive withdrawal into the womb where the tree remained in constant contact with the soul. The motive for regression is not any unbearable sense of guilt, but a clear intuitive realization of the need for reintegration of the contending halves of the self. It can be noted that there are two kinds of regression. One is related to escapism. In this case, as Burke observes, the instincts "dip him in the river who loves water." The other is purgative and regenerative. In this kind of regression the individual does not lose himself in the mire of the collective unconscious, but returns strengthened and rejuvenated. The conclusion of "Praise to the End!" illustrates the dangerous and destructive kind, while that of "I Cry, Love, Love!" is of the wholesome kind.

It remains to be pointed out that it is difficult to miss the sexual implications of entering the water, which is by association an entering into the womb or the grave. Entering the woman is also a kind of dying which might result in the union of the body and the soul. Indeed, in "Four for Sir John Davies" the lover declares: "We dared the dark to reach the white and warm" (CP 103).
In his study of Roethke's poems Neal Bowers seems to ignore the gloss offered by the poet as well as the significance of the organization of the sequence. He feels that the protagonist "is able to sustain his illumination" at the end of "Praise to the End!" where "the light that falls and fills in 'The Shape of the Fire' . . . illuminates him to the point that he and the light are one." In "I Cry, Love, Love!" he finds "something ominous about the owls in the hemlocks and the bats among the willows, almost a death wish, a desire to perish in the euphoria of illumination." It is difficult to explain why he finds the ending of "Praise to the End!" positive but that of "I Cry, Love, Love!" negative. However, Roethke himself does not seem to be fully satisfied with the ending of the final poem of the sequence in spite of the declaration of "once more a condition of joy," of the celebration of sexual love, and of the possibility of the reunion of body and soul. So, he adds one more poem to the sequence. As Rosemary Sullivan remarks, "O Thou Opening O" is offered "as a kind of coda or synopsis of the progress that the poet feels has been made in the sequence as a whole."

The first section of "O Thou Opening O" begins and ends with images of burrowing creatures: the rat, the mole and the worm. As usual, they connote indulgence in sensuality. There is also the suggestion of the resurfacing of the repressive instincts of the protagonist. The guilt-feelings that drive him backward into himself appear in the penultimate stanza: "I have seen my father's eyes before / Deep in the belly of a thing to be. / The devil isn't dead; he is just away." But, this retrogression is offset by an awareness that there is after all a link between this physicality that causes him to
backslide in disgust and fear and the spark of divinity that he thinks is defiled by his rank sensualism:

The Depth calls to the Height
- Neither knows it
Those close to the ground
Only stay out of the wind.

In the same stanza where he mourns over his not being able to go beyond the phase of the rat, he is conscious of the value of the stream’s message: “Read me the stream.” In fact, this last poem of the sequence is built upon the polarity between height and depth, the rat and the stream, guilt and affirmation, and stagnation and dynamism. Dynamism is implied in the moving air (wind), and stagnation in the embrace of the ground. But the dichotomy is only superficial; at a deeper level one glimpses, as the speaker in the poem does, the union of the opposites. The speaker has gained this knowledge from his previous experiences. That is why he is able to maintain his poise and serenity. His disgust with the denial of the body finds expression in the stinging mockery of the dance of the spirit in illumination. “Who cares about the dance of dead underwear, or the sad waltz of paperbags?” Here, in the second section, the dialectic of Roethke’s images reach its culmination in the synthesis of a vision wherein the tension of opposition is released unfolding the underlying unity:

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

One instantly notices the blend of the apparently irreconcilable things: dark and light, rock and water, son and fathers, and waking and kissing. If waking means enlightenment, kissing means sexual enjoyment.

In the third section, as if in response to his own injunction, he leaps out into the field. He asks himself to “Be a body lighted with love.” Spoken aloud, we hear the word “delighted.” Thus, being lighted is equated with being delighted. There is a strong suggestion that sexual love can “light” as well as “delight,” even lead to illumination. He has no patience with those who grieve in the midst of the pleasure over the possible degeneration, or feel excessively happy in being “correct as a hat,” that is, with the repudiation of the flesh. In the second stanza, he wonders at the strange way in which he pleases “a cloud” which by association (“I saw a beard in a cloud” in “I Need, I Need”) means the father in heaven: It is through an erotic dance that he seeks to please Him:

Oh, what a webby wonder I am!
Swaying, would you believe,
Like a sapling tree,
Enough to please a cloud!
The communication between the height and the depth is reinforced in the image of “the holy root” wagging “the tail of a hill.” He gets into an ecstasy over the perception of this unbreakable tie between body and soul. In his exhilaration he declares himself to be “king of another condition.” He is so “alive” that he could “die.” But he does not yield to this temptation as he does in “Praise to the End!” Neal Bowers writes in this regard:

Although illumination holds great joy and beauty for those who attain it, it is also poses a danger, for, like the diver who experiences rapture of the deep, the mystic often feels an overpowering urge to surrender himself to the perception. If he is to continue upon the mystic quest, he must resist that attraction and, as Roethke does, make a conscious effort to continue seeking ultimate reality, to continue learning by going where he has to go.54

Bowers is referring to the concluding stanza of the poem wherein the protagonist says “going is knowing.” He does not want to stay put in this state of ecstasy. He is aware of the danger inherent in abandoning himself to the rapture. The stanza is quoted entire as it epitomizes the knowledge that he has gained:

I keep dreaming of bees.
This flesh has airy bones.
Going is knowing.
I seek; I seek;
I'm near
Be true,
Skin.
In “The Waking,” “I learn by going where I have to go” is a refrain. What Roethke tries to convey is the inseparability of stability and process, perpetuity and flux, stillness and motion, and eternity and time. In “The Waking” the speaker says: “This shaking keeps me steady. I should know. / What falls away is always. And is near.” He perceives in this world of phenomena not merely the spectacle of change; but fixity and permanence beneath the mutable surface. Hence, the manifold experiences one undergoes in life are valuable as they reflect the co-existence of the contraries. If the protagonist sets out initially to solve the most fundamental of his problems, namely sexual guilt, he has accomplished much more than that. He has attained the mystical vision of the eternal in time and the immutable in flux.
Notes


4 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 20.

5 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 40.

6 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 37.


8 Burke 228.


14 Burke 227.

15 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 25.

16 Roethke 38.
17 Burke 267.


19 "Kenneth Burke and Theodore Roethke's 'Lost Son' Poems," *Northwest Review* 2.3 (Summer 1971): 73.

20 Burke 268.


22 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 38.


24 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 39.


27 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 39.


29 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 38.

30 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 38.


32 Burke 269.

33 Burke 269.

34 Burke 269.

35 Malkoff 88.

36 Burke 270.

38 Philips 123.

39 Sullivan 49.


41 Van Dyne 133.

42 Van Dyne 133.


44 Bogen 66.


46 Malkoff 98-99.

47 Mills 17.

48 Roethke, *Selected Prose* 40-41.

49 Malkoff 99.


51 Burke 266.


53 Sullivan 76.

54 Bowers 116.