PART I

THE BACKGROUND OF POETIC TRADITIONS
CHAPTER : 1

RECOGNITION OF THE PROBLEM

Why, one may wonder, hasn't Theodore Roethke become a popular American poet even though some critics have thought he was a major American poet, next, in fact, only to Robert Lowell? It must be admitted that Roethke is a difficult poet to come to terms with; neither his admirers nor those unsympathetic to his poetry have found it quite easy to place it. James Dickey, who called him one of the greatest American poets of our time, attempts to understand the reason for such neglect of Roethke's poetry. Dickey writes: "During his life and after his death in 1963, people interested in poetry heard a great many rumours about Roethke. Most of these had to do with his eccentricities, his periodic insanity, his drinking, his outbursts of violence, his unpredictability. He came to be seen as a self-destructive American genius somewhat after the pattern of Dylan Thomas." ¹ This explanation, even though it comes from Roethke's most sympathetic and generous poet-friend, is not likely to carry conviction. All it does is to blame the poet's personal character for an inadequate appreciation of his poetry.

However, one would like to know if such neglect or prejudice could be explained on grounds of art alone—whether it has anything to do with the distinctive quality of Roethke's genius. Joseph Bennett offers a clue which is far more plausible
and important in this respect. He points out: "Peculiar, self-assured and separatist, he (Roethke) moves over an extraordinarily small range. He purposely works outside the mainstream of English verse. Mr. Roethke is an eccentric." Bennett's remark raises more important questions about Roethke's range and its relation to the American poetic tradition. Unlike Dickey, he speaks not of eccentricity in Roethke's character but in his poetry. In his opinion, "it is at the heart of Roethke's verse, eccentricity; the centre from which the poems spring." What is the nature of this eccentricity, if one accepts that his poetry is eccentric? Does Roethke's poetry really operate outside the American poetic tradition? These are some of the questions which will be investigated in this study. My principal interest is to explore how far Roethke's poetry is "separatist" and masks a scheme of traditional concepts with a disjointed, spectacular technique, to see how his individual talent makes its own kind of peace with the "American Poetic Tradition."

Roethke's poetry encourages the impression of being "separatist" as it explored the roots of the poet's individuality as if he were one of "the cuttings", a kind of sapling uprooted from its soil. Stephen Spender has observed that "separateness" is one of the recurring motifs in Roethke's poems. What troubled him (Roethke) more than the separateness of things from one another was his "separateness" from them.
This "separateness" of his world is more vividly expressed in his earlier poem "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" (CP. p.53). As a matter of fact, the development of his work as a whole can be seen in the light of separations, separation from the womb of his mother, from the physical nature around him, and the world of people and things; the sense of separateness from body at the time of death, and separation from God. He has expressed this anguish of separateness from God in two of his later poems, "In a Dark Time" (CP. p.239) and "The Marrow" (CP. p.246). He cried out to God:

Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day: From me to Thee's a long and terrible way.

This consciousness of disjointedness finds its expression in, to use the words of Bennett, Roethke's "disjointed, spectacular technique". Bennett refers here to Roethke's use of "interior monologue" to relate the adventures of the self. The surprising thing is that Roethke's concepts of nature, self and God are traditional while his poetic manner reminds us of the "Stream of Consciousness" method in fiction. Hyatt H. Waggoner also supports Bennett's opinion that Roethke was more traditional or "orthodox" than Emerson in his religion. He remarks: "In some degree, and in his own way, Roethke recovered certain aspects of the traditional faith that had been lost in Emerson." 6

Another opinion may see this question of poetic tradition in a slightly altered perspective. Denis Donoghue, while suggesting Roethke's poetic relationships with Louise Bogan, Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, the Elizabethan song-poets,
John Davies, Christopher Smart, T. S. Eliot, G. M. Hopkins and Wallace Stevens, goes on to remark: "One of the odd things in this list of relationships, however, is that it is quite possible to think of Roethke as one of the best modern poets without troubling about the fact that he was, after all, an American poet." 7 Donoghue also refers to "eccentricity" in Roethke's bearing "no special relation to either of the dominant traditions in American poetry - New England and the South." 8 His main point is that Roethke is very different from Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Lowell in that he is not, like them "insistently" an American poet and does not carry the burden of "the still complex Fate of Being an American." 9 The poetic tradition of New England was well represented by the Puritan poets of the Colonial Period and by Emerson. The whole Puritan way of life was centred upon one quest only: man must discover God's will and learn to submit his will to Him to achieve a sense of certitude in life on this earth by earning His grace. The Puritan poets looked upon their poetic activity as a kind of indulgence that they permitted themselves warily. The structure of Puritan life was moulded by the logical interpretation of the Scriptures. The New England Puritans were committed to the life of the mind and spirit and to the logic which shaped the pattern of this life. Emerson is certainly not a true representative of the New England Puritan poets, but there are a few poems of his which follow the structure described above. The "logical" in Emerson's case might be construed as "intellectual" or "given to reasoning." And very often, the
text in Emerson's poems is not the scriptural passage but a scene of nature. In one of his letters he wrote: "My quarrel with it (referring to a collection of verses a friend had sent him)... is what is almost a national quality, the inwardness or 'subjectiveness' as they call it of our lyrics." His poems, "Self-Reliance" (SWRWE. p.815) and "Hymn:" (SWRWE. p.811) exhibit the Puritanic strain in Emerson. The opening stanza of "Self-Reliance" runs:

Henceforth, please God, forever I forego The yoke of men's opinions. I will be Light-hearted as a bird, and live with God.

One notes the same earnest concern with God, the same independent spirit of mind and the same faith in right conduct as in the Puritans of New England. He says:

I only follow, when I act aright.

and asks:

O what is Heaven but the fellowship Of minds that each can stand against the world By its own meek and incorruptible will?

Inspite of his glorification of imagination, Emerson's poems have a firm intellectual structure. Poems like "The Snow-Storm" and "Sea-Shore" have two distinct sections: a rendering of the natural scene and an explicit interpretation of that rendering. The poem "Each and All" also conforms to this pattern of intellectual interpretation of a natural scene. This New England poetic tradition is characterized by Donoghue as "scholastic", "autocratic" and "logical" and Roethke, according
to him, cannot be placed there. Nor has he (Roethke) any resemblance with the poetic tradition of the South which in his (Donoghue's) opinion is "grammatical and rhetorical", the poetic tradition we associate with John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. The problem for the reader of Roethke's poetry is to decide its lineage and understand the nature of his poetic genius. One may add, parenthetically, that the critic (not, of course, Donoghue) who speaks of the American poetic traditions without indicating the place of Whitman there, is unlikely to be helpful to a student of that poetic tradition, and particularly to the student of Roethke.

While Donoghue suggests the distinction between the two traditions from a literary point of view, Philip Rahv as one who was committed to literature as a cultural expression, discerned a fatal weakness in the creative mind in America which he summed up in the phrase: "the blight of one-sidedness". He noted "a dissociation between life conceived as an opportunity and life conceived as a discipline" and his categorization of American writers as "redskin" and "paleface" helps place Roethke in the American literary tradition. Roethke's poetry is replete with the literary echoes of the great poets of England and America, but no one is likely to think of the Puritan poets of America while reading him. Rahv's mention of Whitman as a representative of "the redskin", indeed a sort of archetypal redskin, is a valuable hint to grasp the peculiar genius of Roethke. Like Whitman, Roethke cannot be related to either the "scholastic, autocratic and logical" tradition or to the "Ciceronian, grammatical and rhetorical" school of poetry.
Explaining the nature of the "redskin" American writer, Rahv observes: "The paleface continually hankers after religious norms, tending towards a refined estrangement from reality" whereas the redskin's "reactions are primarily emotional, spontaneous, and lacking in personal culture." The redskin often rails to relate himself significantly to the cultural legacy and is constrained to stand on his own. Rahv continues: "His work is ridden by compulsions that depress the literary tradition, because they are compulsions of a kind that put a strain on literature, that literature more often than not can neither assimilate nor sublimiate." Like Whitman, who is the best exemplar of the "redskin" in American literature, Roethke is anti-intellectual, lacking in sophistication and social grace. His distrust of human reason is writ large in his poetry as well as in his prose writings. In one of his note-books he wrote: "God robbed poets of their minds that they might be made expressions of His own." Like Whitman's, his way of knowing was that of an antinomian who discards creeds and dogmas sanctified by the Church.

Rahv has referred to "the compulsions that depress the literary tradition." For Whitman, these compulsions came from the Puritan poets' way of writing their poems and their view of poetry itself. The "compulsions" that we find expressed in the following lines of Whitman would have found no place in the poetry of the early Puritans of the Seventeenth century:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

(Whitman, p.40)
In *Song of Myself* Whitman articulates his compulsions that could not be contained in the poetic tradition of his predecessors. This compulsion for him was to embody his vision of myth of America in a poetic form which was to be the twin of his new way seeing. Roethke's compulsions are expressed in his "greenhouse" lyrics and later poetic sequences. For him, too, the literary form was to be "the shape of the psyche" of the poet under terrible stress. These compulsions make their demands on the poetic traditions.

But for this creative tension between the existing literary tradition and the pull of his poetic nature, how can one explain and appreciate Whitman's "babrbaric yawp"? Roethke's compulsions - his sense of separateness from his parents, his longing to be one with all things, his susceptibility to sensuality, his "foolishness with God" - evoked responses from him to the literary modes in vogue, especially the modes that were associated with the names of Eliot and Yeats. It would be interesting to study if Roethke stood apart from the mainstream of the American poetic tradition or tried to align himself with it. The problem of his relationship with the poetic traditions is not something already resolved but rather is a question that needs to be raised and investigated. This study is an attempt to see how Roethke responded to the poetic tradition of Eliot and sought to reclaim the poetic tradition of Whitman. It is not assumed, however, as a premise that Roethke composed his poems under the influence of Whitman nor is it intended to ignore the important differences between these
two poets. Hyatt H. Waggoner's word of caution is pertinent here: "To suppose that once we have located Roethke in the visionary and mystical tradition that begins with Vaughan, Traherne, and Blake and includes Emerson and Whitman, we have sufficiently accounted for his work, would be as serious a mistake as not recognising that he belongs in that tradition". 16

The most important difference between Roethke and Whitman was the difference of their milieu. Whitman was the bard of a new emerging nation, its maker and chronicler. Roethke had tasted the sour fruits of the new nation's myth of progress and success. Sometimes he reminds one of Hawthorne, being more fascinated by darkness than was Whitman. Roethke's work has a tragic dimension which is not so insistent in Whitman. Freud and Jung had published their interpretations of human nature and human destiny and he could not help being influenced by these masters of psychology. There were also Yeats and Eliot, whose influence modified Roethke's debt to Whitman. However, his concern with the self is more like Whitman's as it struggled to seek itself in the spirit's true centre.

II

Roethke's deeper affinity with Whitman is suggested by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. Commenting upon The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948), he remarks: "These poems remind us ... of Whitman's Leaves of Grass not so much in subject matter and not at all in technique but because they are an affront to our habitual forms of perceptions. We are forced to look at things differently or
reject the poetry altogether. Mills directs our attention to the difference of subject matter and technique between Whitman and Roethke, but what is of most significance to note here is the far-reaching impact of their poetry—a feature that goes some way to explain the nature of initial response from readers. Their poetry re-orient the ways of their reader's life and re-educates his sensibility. One remembers here great poets like Blake and Wordsworth who in a sense re-channelised the sensibility of their readers. It asks the reader to start afresh, begin anew like Adam in the Garden of Eden. This explains why people found difficult to accept Whitman in his age and why Roethke's poetry has not yet been very popular. The challenge of their poetry is a challenge of re-shaping one's self.

This challenge has to be faced in a more difficult way by a poet who wants to realise his poetic identity in relation to the poetic tradition. Poetic affiliation is not a simple choice of imitating one poet and ignoring others. It is, in fact, an act of discovering a poetic father. Nor need such a search be necessarily a deliberate one and vitiated by the kind of "anxiety of influence" Harold Bloom has called attention to, Roethke was not oppressed by such a sense but nor was he unaware of it. His essay, "How to Write like Somebody Else", is a statement of his views on the question of the poet's relationship to his literary ancestors. There he observed that "in any quest for identity today— or any day— we run up inevitably against this problem: What to do with our ancestors? I mean it as an ambiguity: both the literal or blood, and the spiritual
ancestors". This is his central poetic concern, and his poetic career is a story of the fierce struggle to discover and maintain his independent poetic identity by seeking ways of identification with them. In his opinion, imitation is a fruitful method for a beginner, a valuable discipline and apprenticeship. He believes that for a creative writer a poetic tradition is not an obstacle to achieve his poetic selfhood. He remarks in his article that "the very fact he has the support of a tradition, or an older writer, will enable him to be more himself - or more than himself." This relationship is not between a master and a slave nor has it to be "antithetical" or "a misprision". It has to act as a liberating force.

Roethke's advice is: "... take what you will with authority and see that you give it another, or even better life, in the new context." This is to enter into creative rivalry with one's poetic master.

Roethke cites many poets whom he tried to imitate in the early years of his poetic growth. There is not one poet whom he pledged allegiance to but many - Elinor Wylie, Vaughan, Leonie Adams, Raleigh, John Davies, Christopher Smart, Blake, Yeats and Eliot. Because there are echoes from several poets in his poetry, a recent critical study of his poetry by Jenijoy La Belle prefers to describe Roethke's poetry as "The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke". She argues that he conceived of the poetic tradition in a slightly different way from T.S. Eliot. Roethke has noted in one of his essays, "Certain writers called out to me: I believed them implicitly. I still do." His sense of poetic tradition encompassed not only a
conscious historical attitude but also a psychological state. He "saw his literary tradition not as a series of periods but as a community of selected individual writers" and "related his poems to specific works rather than to abstract concepts of style." What she seems to imply is that one cannot imagine such a statement as Eliot's coming from Roethke that he was a "classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an Anglo Catholic in religion." Such neat distinctions would do injustice to his poetic genius. His idea of a poetic tradition implied a deep sense of personal affinity, a sense of spiritual and psychological belonging. His approach was to go to a definite poetic model, a concretely realised poetic act, avoiding abstract or general principles. For Roethke, the question of poetic tradition was a part of his larger quest - his quest of the self and testing and tallying his poetic sensibility with those writers who "called out to" him. Jenijoy's contention that Roethke's concept of poetic tradition was not based upon any historical sense may be conceded, but her thesis that Roethke preferred "the community of selected writers" implies that Roethke did have his idea of poetic tradition. So, there is probably nothing wrong in speaking about Roethke's affiliations with Eliot's, Yeats's and Whitman's poetic traditions. It seems he himself did not clearly understand the nature of his poetic sensibility and the quest of the self, therefore, came to be inextricably bound up with that of the poetic identity.
III

It should be helpful to study Roethke's understanding of poetic tradition from his treatment of his poetic mentor or poetic model. One may take as an illustration his well-known poem - "The Dance" (CP. p.105) which begins the sequence, *Four for Sir John Davies*. As Roethke himself acknowledges, these poems are tributes to the memory of Sir John Davies and to the later W.B. Yeats. He perceives at once the continuing survival of the poetic payche from the Elizabethan to the modern period. The poem acts as a bridge between the two ends of time and is a framework to express and evaluate the experience embodied in the sequence. Jenijoy comments: "Roethke is continually referring the reader to a heritage of poetry that at once defines the cultural ambience in which the work must be understood and aids the poet in moving beyond 'solitary experience' to the creation of transpersonal experience." 32 Her remark implies that Roethke tried to measure his poetic talent by working in the framework of a certain poetic tradition and achieve what Eliot described as "impersonality" in poetry and present experience in more universal terms. The title is borrowed from Sir John Davies's *Orchestra*, and as we know, the image of dance conveyed in the Elizabethan age cosmic harmony and unity of being. But the speaker in Roethke’s poem, in the twentieth century, is understandably sceptical about this possibility:

Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
That made him think the universe could hum?

The rhetorical question with which the poem begins implies
the speaker's dilemma - the experience of music of the heavenly spheres is a lost experience now. The first stanza expresses the speaker's longing to re-create the lost tradition in his art, and in the last stanza the narrator refers to "a man named Yeats". Roethke relates the specific question of his attitude to poetic tradition to the larger issue of the cosmic dance to indicate that both the issues were part of his principal quest for the unity of being. Yeats's presence is strongly felt as a condition of his creative self along with that of others, but the tone in which Yeats is referred to in "a man named Yeats" envisages a relationship between him and Yeats hardly suggestive of discipleship. One remembers here what Roethke said: "One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with papa". This was not the spirit in which Hart Crane looked towards Whitman. Roethke approached his poetic masters in a different spirit; he thought that he was engaged in a kind of combat with his contemporaries. The point is that his involvement (or his poetic relationship) with the Yeatsian poetic mode was quite ambiguous. His own account relates that "The Dance" was composed by him after a long dry period of poetic creativity when he had been reading "not Yeats, but Raleigh and Sir John Davies." He adds "the line 'I take this cadence, etc.'; is, in a sense a fib". This poetic relationship, as was suggested earlier, is not so much a question of historical imagination for Roethke as that of a psychic possession, or even obsession. He suggests something to this effect in his remark: "... I had, as God is my witness, the actual sense of a Presence -
as if Yeats himself were in that room. The experience was in a way terrifying, for it lasted at least half an hour... He, they - the poets dead - were with me." 27

There is an element of ambiguity in Roethke's poetic relationship with Yeats, and the reasons for this (element of ambiguity) are not difficult to see. Stephen Spender's remark makes this clear: "He (Roethke) was not a free enough intellect to dominate the Yeatsian mode." 28 Spender's comment on Roethke's intellectual range and penetration points to the latter's limitation. Yeat's mind could deal with varied, far-ranging, complex problems while Roethke had a mind that was obsessed with just a few things. The complexity we find in his poems is primarily born out of his emotional entanglements, and his interest in death and God is not a philosophical inquiry but primarily a personal, psychological need. What, one may ask, was it that Yeats could offer Roethke at this stage of his development? He offered Roethke a physical mysticism of the dancing body and of the marriage-bed. Secondly, Roethke learnt the muscular, and often end-stopped pentameter line from Yeats.

Roethke's engagement with Yeats is deeper and much more earnest than one can imagine. He has a sequence, The Dying Man - In Memoriam: W.B. Yeats (CP. p.153) in which the narrator faces the impending threat of death. From a technical point of view, in both the sequences, Four for Sir John Davies and The Dying Man, Roethke employs the Yeatsian
mode as a persona. Besides learning the use of persona, he shares with Yeats the attitude of defiance towards death and old age, "a kind of ripeness in disillusion".

However, there is a difference in their modes of encountering death. Roethke seems to comment indirectly on Yeats when he writes:

Nor can imagination do it all
In this last place of light: he dares to live
who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings
Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things.

(CP. p.154)

He sees no haven to rest and can no longer entertain the faith of Yeats "that, being dead, we rise, Dream and so create Translunar Paradise." (W.B. Yeats. p.110). Nor has he any sages and saints to grant him grace. He is a lonely ranger against death in the dark. He relies more upon personal vision which promises him no "artifice of eternity". Yeats's "eternity" exists elsewhere in the world of classical myths; Roethke knows:

As the dying know,
Eternity is Now.

Of course, Yeats's rhetorical resources and his heroic defiance of death fascinated Roethke but the differences between the two are no less important. Roethke matured through his encounters with Yeats, once in the prime of his youth, and later in his advancing years.
Yeats was not the only major poetic voice that we hear in Roethke's poetry. Before he could speak in his voice and move into his cadence, he went to many a master whom he was compelled to finally reject. Karl Malkoff remarks that the great masters of the seventeenth century, especially the Metaphysical poets, were the presiding spirits of his first volume, *Open House* (1941). The publisher of this volume, introducing these poems, declared: "... these poems express ideas as hard and glittering as quartz". One may take, for instance, a poem like "The Adamant" (*CP*, p.9) and see how it resembles the Metaphysical mode. It is not difficult to recognise Emily Dickinson's influence behind such a poem.

"The Adamant" is concerned with the poet's bitter struggle and failure to find the right style to embody his truth. The principle which Roethke has employed to compose this lyric is to marry the idea and the image; and the thought, as with the Metaphysicals is experienced as a sensuous experience. The metaphors become powerful carriers of his controlling idea. The image of "a great sledge which drops in vain" exemplifies the abstract statement: "Thought does not crush to stone". The poem is remarkable for its compressed and epigrammatic style. The paradox is that Roethke has expressed the anguish of his creative urge with extraordinary success, even though he is complaining of his failure. The comparisons reiterate one principal image, conveying futile violence and persistence. The impact of the poem lies in the in-built tension. One endorses the verdict of Professor Blessing: "At his best, he (Roethke)
achieves an effect something like that rigidly controlled hysteria that one often feels in Emily Dickinson. 31

Roethke has a sequence, *Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical* (CP. p.239). Its first poem, "In a Dark Time", which has become a subject of lively discussion by Ransom, Kunitz and others including Roethke himself, is a Metaphysical poem both in subject and technique. It records the poet's struggle to reach as near to God as possible and its subject is the self's quest for mystical enlightenment. What is interesting here is the organizing principle of the poem. The speaker strives to bring together what is irreconcilable and the violence of contraries creates the tension. The first line:

In a dark time, the eye begins to see

expresses the mode of perception and the poetic technique employed throughout the poem. The mode of perception is based upon oxymoron and the line attracts our attention by its sharp, antithetical balance. The tension in the line is conveyed by the juxtaposition of "dark time" and "see", darkness and light. The experience which the poem wants to communicate - the moment of illumination born out of the darkest night of the hour - "converges the lines from the farthest possible distances", 32 bringing the contraries together. As Cleanth Brooks remarks elsewhere: "The comparison is the poem in a structural sense". 33

The vision of the speaker and the rhetoric of his language attain a kind of unity of being in the poem. And the poem is not without Yeatsian echoes.
Roethke was fascinated by the Yeatsian as well as the Metaphysical modes which deeply engaged the poets in the earlier part of this century and their presence is persistently felt in his poetry. His own mode is composed of many styles, and the quality which sets it apart from others is his sensibility. William Meredith points out that "there are lines and whole stanzas in which the rhetorical identity of Yeats... is stronger than the sensible identity, the identity of sensibility, of Roethke". 34 Yeats lived in many worlds, of arts, philosophical speculations, politics, theatre, and occult knowledge. Roethke's world was "enclosed". John Wain expresses this point very aptly: "when one thinks of the great poets whose accents are heard so insistently in Roethke's work, when one thinks of Yeats, of Eliot, of Blake - the difference leaps to the mind. They give one a sense of total participation in life, he does not... His vision, intense as it is, remains monocular". 35 Wain's comment on Roethke's limited range endorses Spender's observation (vide: p.17). Louis L. Marts adds that "the celebration of the naked bone, the spare spirit, and the sealed core is not the central mode of Roethke: it is indeed the very opposite of his true motion, which is to unseal, to let flow-forth, to nourish into growth". 36

V

The Metaphysical mode served to establish a kind of dialectic between the formal manner and the sensibility of Roethke. He knew that the battle he was fighting was "an ancient feud" and the only way to survive was to subdue
"the dead". If the presence of Yeats is a major influence to reckon with, Eliot's presence in his poetry is no less insistent. "In many ways the whole North American Sequence might be said to represent a sustained tribute to Eliot's fertilizing example; the sequence has, ... absorbed the meditative method of the Quartets". 37 Roy Harvey Pearce registers his dissent remarking that in The Lost Son, Roethke seems to be "fleeing from Eliot" and Meditations of an Old Woman "is surely a reply to Four Quartets". 38 That Eliot's poetry kindled Roethke's imagination as did Yeats's cannot be disputed; it was Roethke's poetic procedure to confront his great contemporary masters and immediate ancestors, but his mode of 'imitation' was assimilation, and eventually, transcendence. As he himself remarked, he over-acknowledged his debt to Yeats but Roethke and Eliot represent rather the opposite polarities in the twentieth century poetry. The distinction between these two can perhaps be stated more adequately by employing Philip Rahv's terms "redskin" and "paleface". Ralph J. Mills Jr. notes: "whatever generates the spiritual odyssey in Roethke's poem comes apparently from within, not from an external divine source". 39

One can fruitfully study the question of how far Eliot and Roethke adhered to the meditative mode by a comparison of Gerontion and Meditations of an Old Woman. "A meditative poem", explains Martz, "enacts the interior drama of the half reaching out to God or to the divine presence. It represents the efforts of the self to establish or to achieve oneness with
the divine power. This observation brings out the focal interest in the meditative poem — the struggle of the self in search of God — its failure or victory in this struggle is of no importance. It also implies that the action is dramatically presented. But more important than this is Martz's contention that a 'meditative' poem rehearses the different stages of the discipline of meditation as enunciated in Edward Lawson's book. The framework enfolding this poetry is the Christian tradition of religious experience.

Gerontion renders an acute spiritual crisis of a senile old man "in a dry month who is waiting for God". He embodies the modern man afflicted with inner sterility, spiritual vacuum and is desperately craving for rejuvenation of life. I think it is possible to look upon Gerontion as the archetypal Adam longing for redemption after the experiences of twenty centuries. The action of the poem is enacted in the mind of the speaker; his mind is the theatre of action of the poem. So far as the inner conflict of the self for its identity is the primary concern of the poem, it shares the tradition of a "meditative" poem as defined by Martz. But its framework of reference is evidently not the same. Gerontion himself seems to be conscious of this of his purpose and circumference of his perspective. Apparently he has lost connection. He says:

How could I use them for your closer contact? These with a thousand small deliberations Protract the profit of their chilled delirium, Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled, With pungent sauces, multiply variety In a wilderness of mirrors.

(T.S. Eliot. p.31)
"Wilderness of mirrors" - a very pointed phrase to describe Gerontion's referential gamut and Eliot's poetic technique. The ability to establish direct personal contact has been lost and so, the dependence on history has become inevitable. The poetic discourse moves more in the European literary traditions and its immediate cultural context—conditions its mood and spirit. The personal crisis of the speaker is not viewed specifically from a Christian tradition—it is only one of the traditions. Perhaps it is the tradition of history which is implied in the following lines:

Gives too late
What's not believed in, or still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion.

(T.S. Eliot. p.30)

This is what has happened to Christ "tiger" in the twentieth century. He is no longer a living transforming experience for modern man, and with the loss of faith in this tradition the hope for salvation too is lost for ever. The Christian symbols are "unable to speak a word, Swaddled with darkness."

Roethke had Eliot's poetic manner in mind when he wrote *Meditations of an Old Woman*. In fact in one of his letters to Ralph J. Mills, Jr., he said that he wanted to create "a dramatic figure, not just me", and claimed that his "Old lady" was full of vigour and zest for life while "Eliot in the *Quartets* is tired, old man", and that "in both instances, I was animated in considerable part by arrogance". Imitation was not, for
Roethke, an act of hero-worship - rather it was to be a kind of dialectic. As "mediative" poems, according to the description given by Martz, they have many things in common - introspection, self-dramatisation, personal crisis, but neither of them uses the details of the discipline of Christian meditation. In both it is the church of literary traditions - and not of Christ, that claims allegiance. Gerontion pines for the experience embodied in the Christian tradition, though he is incapable of attaining it. Roethke's sequence pursues a different path of meditation: his hero is not Christ but Whitman. He wrote to Mills that "Whitmanesque meditative rhythms are indigenous". Is Roethke suggesting that his poetic manner is a "meditative" mode, but that it is after Whitman's manner, and not Eliot's? Whitman had a strong religious sense, though, of course, he was not an orthodox Christian. It would be more accurate to describe him as an inspired pagan. The meditative poetry of poets of the seventeenth century in England and of Eliot in our age seek the mystical insight in the orthodox Christian tradition. Roethke indicates his affinity elsewhere.

Though Roethke could not have moved along Eliot's way to find answers to his religious questions, there was in him a strong desire to present his quest in dramatic terms, as Eliot did. Both have resorted to the use of "persona" as projections of the dramatised selves of their creators. Roethke, like Eliot, was anxious to avoid the subjectivity of "I" narrators in his poems; we note that in his sequence, the dramatised self is that of a woman, while Eliot in Gerontion, makes an old man the speaker of his narrative. It is not a "character" in
the sense in which Hamlet or Lear is a character. The focus of interest in Eliot and Roethke is on the stream of consciousness of these personae. Roethke insisted, as a point of important difference between his sequence and Eliot's Gerontion, that his old woman had more vitality than Eliot's old man, who was a representative of the diminished modern man. The difference in the sex of the personae is also significant. 

Gerontion, an old man, is represented as a man whose sexual creativity has dried up. Roethke's "Old lady" who identifies herself with nature stands for the universal feminine principle that perpetuates life and bears the torch of creativity against decay and death. She seeks personal destiny, her future as an individual. Gerontion that way, is more of an embodiment of the cultural milieu.

In Meditations of an Old Woman the narrator does not contemplate herself in terms of the cultural sterility of times; this self is linked with the process of nature as reflected in her body, as part of the cosmic self. Eliot's old man has neither "youth nor age"; Roethke's "old woman" celebrates her joy in the sheer act of living and the "wide expanse" of her spirit. She has been released from the dreary dance of opposites because she has learnt to accept life, to make peace with the flux of time, and this "knowing" fills her with supreme bliss. She achieves the freedom of her spirit in, what one may call, Whitmanesque terms. There is not only an affinity of vision with Whitman but also of poetic technique. In "The Abyss", Roethke invokes the memory of Whitman:
Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues,
For the world invades me again,
And once more the tongues begin babbling,
And the terrible hunger for objects quails me.

(CP. p. 220)

He follows the practice of Whitman's long catalogues which he felt was a necessity for the poets of the modern age. He fully realised that the secret of Whitman's catalogues was the secret of his empathy, his absorption in the things of life. The practice of cataloguing (for Whitman and Roethke) was a mode of affirmation and "attesting sympathy" with all forms of life. He learnt that out of the power of sympathy, is born the power to comprehend the full range of the other, that "chain of being" which moves from the minimal to God. He paid a very high price for transcending "the separatist" pull of his poetic nature and transforming alienation into identification. It is not true to maintain, as Pearce does, that Roethke "could not undertake the compulsive twentieth century quest for identity via route of alienation"; 43 on the contrary, each of Roethke's major poetic sequences embodies these two movements: from alienation to identification. Even his "old woman", who celebrates the Dionysian surrender to the life of nature and senses complained:

On love's worst ugly day,
The weeds hiss at the edge of the field,
The small winds make their chilly indictments.

The Lost Son is nothing if not a record of Roethke's "quest for identity via the route of alienation". The "separatist" tendency in his poetry embodies the paradox of growth, namely that a
regressive movement is essential for spiritual advancement. No poet had been so agonisingly alive to the angst of times as Roethke but his poetry, like Whitman's, opened itself to the self's uninhibited participation in the world of nature.

V

Roethke's poetry opens itself to diverse poetic currents, and while assimilating what is best in them moves in a direction that links it not with the Eliot - Pound tradition but the Whitman tradition. As Pearce remarks "All American poetry...is, in essence, if not in substance, a series of arguments with Whitman". 44

This study proposes to investigate how Roethke responded chiefly to the poetic modes of Yeats and Eliot and the ways in which his poetry broadly conforms to the Whitman tradition in American poetry. It also proposes to consider briefly the theoretical basis of the poetics of the Eliot - Pound tradition in order to understand the Roethkean mode which absorbed some of the salient characteristics of Eliot's poetic technique but has rather a dialectical relationship with it. The thesis is divided into three parts: the first part concerns itself with the issues of the poetic traditions represented by Eliot and Whitman. The second part is devoted to the study of Roethke's major poetic sequences and tries to understand his responses to Yeats and Eliot, and how he seeks his affinity with Whitman. The third part attempts to understand the Roethkean mode, and compares his (Roethke's) responses to the Whitman tradition with those of Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens who have also, in my understanding, inherited the Whitman tradition.


3. Ibid., p.305.

4. Ibid., p.305.


8. Ibid., p.163.

9. Ibid., p.164.


13. Ibid., p.2.


19. Ibid., p. 69.

20. Ibid., p. 62.

21. Ibid., p. 27.


23. Ibid., p. 4.


25. Ibid., p. 69.

26. Ibid., p. 69.

27. Ibid., p. 24.


33. Ibid., p. 15.


37. Ibid., p.17.

38. Ibid., p.183.


42. Ibid., p.119.


CHAPTER: 2

RELEVANT POETIC TRENDS

Theodore Roethke realised gradually that for him the way to freedom and growth both as poet and man lay in the direction of Whitman. Inspite of his determination to make his way independently, his poems do express his sense of the need to seek the true centre of belonging, whether it could be the childhood world of "greenhouses", or the woman he loved, or God or the poetic modes of his times. He unrelentingly kept up his search for this centre in terms of his roots, biological and poetic.

When he began his poetic career, the acknowledged legislator in the world of poetry was T.S. Eliot. Eliot, along with Ezra Pound, was determined to give a new direction to English poetry of the last decade of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century. This is how Pound put the crisis of his contemporary poetic practitioners:

For three years, out of key with his time,  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime'  
In the old sense . . . . . . .

(Ezra Pound: Selected Poems.  
London, Faber and Faber, 1961)  
P.173.

He and Eliot were conscious of what was wrong with the poetry of their age, -- "the obscure reveries of the inward gaze" -- the private, morbid musings of their contemporaries. The poetic
ideal: they held forth required a poem to be "the sculpture of rhyme", a concrete physical image of the artist's vision. There was indeed something of the puritan's obsession in their devotion to the poet's craft, and what distinguished them from Victorian romantics was this commitment to their craft and their crusade for their kind of poetry, which was to be dramatic and impersonal.

As a practising poet Roethke paid "a constant, unflagging attention to matters of craft and form"; however, the supreme value of writing verse for him was not the perfection of poetic technique. The ideal of "a driving sincerity" that he esteemed above that of "the sculpture of rhyme" indicates the direction in which his poetic genius was to find true fulfilment. A poem was to be valued not only for its technical excellence but for its human genuineness. It was rather a human document rather than a literary artifact. He therefore declared: "I write only what I believe to be the absolute truth, — even if I must ruin the theme in so doing ... Many an incoherent yet sincere piece of writing has outlived the polished product". Such statements reveal that he was as deeply committed to poetry as Pound and Eliot but that his prime interest as poet was not to cultivate poetic style as they did. Technique was not Roethke's "true Penelope".

Though his concern with poetic technique did not have the concentration and persistence of a critical theorist that we observe in Pound and Eliot, Roethke's poetic manner is profoundly affected by their poetic modes. His admiration for
"driving sincerity" and "absolute truth" suggests his affinity with great Romantic poets like Blake, Wordsworth and Whitman, but he also prized concreteness and precision in the presentation of details as much as Pound and Eliot did. Pound's famous statement that an accurate presentation of a single image should be valued higher than volumes of poetry which is vague, and has "resonance, resonance and sonority...like a goose" 4 seems to have been the guiding principle of Roethke's poetic technique. There is something of a scientist's passion for precision and accuracy in his descriptions of natural objects and his rendering of psychological states. He recognised that the need for the modern poet was to keep "the eye close on the subject". 5 How closely he followed his own counsel and how much he valued the precise rendering of concrete details is borne out by his early lyrics like "Night Journey" (CP. p.34), "Big Wind" (CP. p.41) and "Transplanting" (CP. p.42). Even in his later sequences where he is preoccupied with grave questions such as the fate of the self after death, his passion for physical concrete details persists. One may recall here "the old lady" looking at her geranium:

My geranium is dying, for all I can do,
Still leaning towards the last place the sun was.
I've tried I don't know how many times to replant it.
But these roses, I can wear them by looking away.

(CP. p.163).

The immediacy of the speaker and the geranium is conveyed as a focus of interest for the reader. The lines create the physical context for the reader and help him to visualise
the persona. "The Imagist" in Roethke links him with Pound and Eliot, though he would not have wholly subscribed to Pound's belief that "an artist's technique is a test of his personal validity".  

The "Imagist" ideal also emphasized the unity of a work of art, the closely-knit texture of a poem. Pound's "sculpturesque" ideal of poetry was one of the ways of asserting the organic unity of a poem. The stress on the organic unity of a work of art was a corollary of the "Imagist's" concern for poetic technique. By implication, the "Imagist" movement was nearer to the Roman poetic ideal than to the Greek insofar as it proclaimed the poet as a supreme maker, and not as a great seer or a prophet, whereas to Emerson, Whitman and even to Roethke, a poet was a seer. On the other hand there was nothing mystical in "Imagism". It was in a way an inevitable apotheosis of scientific positivism, and was materialistic in the sense that the materials of art and the process of shaping them came to be its focal point.

Roethke's ideal of organic unity was not confined only to the formal architectonic of a poem. He said: "When I was young, to make something in language, a poem that was all of a piece, a poem that could stand for what I was at the time — that seemed to be the most miraculous thing in the world". He wanted to unite the structure of his feelings with the verbal structure of the poem. It will be helpful to compare how T. E. Hulme and Roethke present an image. We may take, as examples, Hulme's "Autumn" and Roethke's "Root Cellar". Hulme's poem registers the poet's observation of a landscape "in the Autumn night". He is concerned with the objective rendering
of the scene - a touch of cold in the night, the ruddy moon leaning over a hedge and the white stars in the sky. In a way, it is a realistic poem. The poet seems to be looking for analogies for the moon and the stars, and surprisingly enough, they come from the human world. These images point towards concrete referents only; they do not signify or imply anything else, anything transcendental besides what they indicate, and the poem is free from any emotional slither. Nor has the poem do with the private feelings of Hulme. Its unity emerges from the propriety of the images: "the ruddy moon, in the autumn night" is appropriately compared to a "red-faced farmer"; "the wistful stars" are likened to the "white faces" of "town children". The pattern of images is dictated by the sense of colour. It is, one might say, a painter's poem. Now, Roethke's, "Root Cellar" (CP. p.38) describes life as the poet saw in the "root cellar". It is, like Hulme's poem, remarkable for its close observation and objective rendering of details. Details like "bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark", "shoots dangled and dropped", "roots ripe as old bait", "pulpy stems" are nothing if not concrete. Analogies like "dank as a ditch", "tropical snakes" are meant to convey physical sensations and visual similarities. But there is also something more; "Root Cellar" finally emerges as a metaphor for the struggle of life, as a symbol of life that strives to survive and grow. The concluding lines sum up the principal point of the poem:

Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

The "imagist" poem, of course, eschews such comment. The life
that struggles to survive in the root cellar is felt as more of a psychic image of the poet himself, a poem that could stand for what I was at the time.

II

If we examine the image of "the Imagists" such as Pound and of the Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Whitman a little more closely, perhaps we may be able to explain the polarities of the Eliot and Whitman traditions. This, however, is not to deny important resemblances between the two. As Tony Tanner has observed, "both movements encouraged the incorporation of carefully contoured, objectively observed particulars into literature. This is to say, quite simply that the Imagist and the Transcendentalist took up a similar visual stance in front of the external world". 8 This is true, so far as "the visual stance" of the Imagists and the Transcendentalists is concerned, but it is truer still to insist that there is a difference in their ways of seeing. Emerson's poems, "The Rhodora" and "The Snow-Storm" might help us understand the distinction between the two movements. The first two stanzas of "The Rhodora" render the physical image of the tree, standing resolutely and bravely against the tempestuous winds. The particulars of the landscape are carefully observed and the description is accurate and precise. In the words of Pound there is an attempt "to reproduce exactly the thing which has been clearly seen". 9 It begins:

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitude,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.

(Emerson : p.412)
The "leafless blooms", "the purple petals fallen in the pool", "the red-bird" going to cool its feathers, are details that fix the physical image of the tree in mind, and Emerson's assertion that "Beauty is its own excuse for being" would have been welcomed by the "Imagists". "The Snow-Storm" is Emerson's vortex image. Besides being a concrete, precise presentation of a phenomenon, it communicates to the reader its fury and violence, its irresistible energy and movement:

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and driving o'er the fields,
 Seems no where to alight ...  
( Emerson: p.414 )

The stance of Hulme and Emerson, as noted by Tanner, is visual in the presence of the external world. Emerson's poems, however, are not "imagistic" in the sense in which Hulme's is. The important difference is in the texture of these poems. Hulme's "Autumn" has a closely woven texture and registers an associative chain of memories in the poet's mind. Its language is "hard and clear" and presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. Emerson's "Rhodora", it may be noted, does not present an image as an instantaneous flash of illumination; it is employed more as an exemplar of the poet's idea.

Roethke's poems, as has been suggested earlier, evince a strong affinity with, those of the "Imagists". His "Orchids" (CP. p.39) and "Big Wind" (CP. p.41) are "imagistic" in the sense that they record the observations of the poet "without any interpretation or comment" by the poet. There is not a word that can be described as superfluous, and the images are
"intellectual and emotional complexes in an instant of time". These poems are more successful as "imagistic" poems than Emerson’s, but the recording of observation is not a completely objective, nonpurposive process. Roethke’s eye is not confined only to the physical surface of objects but regards them as something more than what they appear to be. The sexual implications in "Orchids" and "Big Wind" are unmistakable, and the images represent the sexual awakening in the poet. The elaborate descriptions we find in The Lost Son (CP. p.53) and "Journey to the Interior" (CP. p.193) are faithful renderings of the natural landscapes in the manner of the "Imagists", clear and precise, and remarkable for their dramatic effect, but they are all instances of a "journey out of the self". The "Imagist" movement aimed at this "journey out of the self"; the poet, it was implied, "intends nothing, chooses nothing, is responsible for nothing". 10 This was a strong antidote to the ills of nineteenth century "Romanticism". Randall Jarrell shrewdly observed that in the "Imagist" theory "the subject of poetry... changed from the actions of men to the reactions of poets". 11 The poet, according to this view, was a mere receptor or an automatic reactor. Now Roethke’s "The Flight" describes a natural landscape without any touch of vagueness or sentimentality, but there is always a suggestion of implied personal relationship between the persona (who bears close resemblance to the poet) and his surroundings:

At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
A slow drip over stones,
Toads brooding wells.
All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
Saying,
Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home,
Worm, be with me,
This is my hard time.

The situation described here is very like those in the poems of the Romantic poets. The speaker is assailed with inner conflict and is seeking solace from "the dead" in the woodlands. However, the tone is not that of a rhapsodist it often is in the Romantic poets; it is dramatic and colloquial. There is a sharpness about the descriptive details. One may say, the description evokes the atmosphere of silence and loneliness, and in spite of the "visual stance" of the narrator, it is not neutral. The attitude is one of a petitioner asking for guidance and aid from nature. The "lost son" craves for identification with nature in times of his bitter need. The texture of the verse-paragraph here closely resembles that of an "imagistic" poem but the attitude of the speaker is very different. "An image" to Roethke was a way to unite objective and precise descriptions with the subjective state of the poet's mind. To Pound and Hulme, an image was not a mode of access to the divine, but "a strategy consciously adopted." 12

Tony Tanner has summed up the distinction between "Imagism" and "Transcendentalism": "The scattered objects of the world no longer form God's palimpsest, but are available for anchoring and delineating the poet's mood." 13 That is to say, the "image" was, to the "Imagists", a recourse to find some stability and orientation in a world which had lost its ancient religious certainties. This was not how Emerson and Whitman
employed the image. The "Rhodora" and "The Snow-Storm" convey Emerson's faith that a creative act, however successful it may be in its expression, will not tally with its original; it will be but an imperfect transcript. Had he not said in "The Poet" ... "the poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature with which they ought to be made to tally"? 14

Roethke's interest in the poetic image was not born out of his faith in the existence of some Transcendent reality or Oversoul as in Emerson and Whitman. It was a means of finding some stability and orientation in the world which found the old values irrelevant. His "imagistic" rendering of his experience in the glasshouse might illustrate this:

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.
Pipe-knock.

(Cp. p.57)

The glasshouse, to the "lost son", was "heaven and hell", as Roethke notes in one of his articles. By recreating the poetic image of the glasshouse and his experience on that night, he was "anchoring" the self in his world. And although he could not share the Transcendentalist's faith in the Oversoul, he did realise that "all finite things reveal infinitude". (CP. p.201). The poetic image for him was not solely a verbal construct; it was a way to establish some contact with the "Infinite". His interest in the image was not merely that of a professional in his craft for its own sake, as was
propagated by Pound and Hulme.

The guiding principles of the "Imagists" — that a poet is a recorder of observations, that these impressions of physical objects should be rendered objectively, that a poet's prime concern should be technical skill — these were all expressed by T.S. Eliot in his famous theory of impersonal poetry. The poet's mind, he remarked, is like the filament of platinum which, when it is immersed in two gases, can produce a new gas, without being itself in any way affected. This theory of "impersonal" poetry separated the poet as person from the poet as craftsman. In fact, Eliot's theory of "impersonal" poetry is more "anti-personal", which Emerson and Whitman would have found it difficult to accept. For Emerson, "all form is an effect of character; all condition, of the quality of the life; all harmony, of health, and for this reason a perception of beauty should be sympathetic, or proper only to the good".15 His poetic ideal stressed a deeper "organic beauty" between the poem and the poet, and the separation between the two would for him have been something unthinkable. The link between the poem and the poet stressed by the Transcendentalists was restated by Roethke, though in different terms. As said earlier, he insisted upon "driving sincerity" and "the absolute truth".

One must clarify that the "I" in Roethke's poems does not refer to the poet in his private life but figures as an archetypal representative or a universalised embodiment.
However, his poetry is not "impersonal" in the way Eliot's poetry is — at least as "impersonal" as Eliot's poetry written before *Ash-Wednesday*. Nor are his poems personal in the sense in which the lyrics of the Romantics are personal. From the concrete particularity of things which he depicted in his early poems, he gradually moved to represent these objects as "a stream of correspondences", and he expressed something of this dilemma of the shadowy line between "the anguish of concreteness" and "all natural shapes" becoming "symbolical" in the following lines:

> The visible observes. But who knows when?  
> Things have their thought: they are  
> the shards of me.  

*(CP. p.107)*

It is this awareness of things as concrete universals that distinguishes him from the "Imagists", who tend to reduce the poet to "the Pavlovian dog whose mouth waters when a bell rings". 16 Roethke did not make his poems sentimental, melancholic and vague, but his poetry was "a means of bringing in some of the emotions that are grouped around the word infinite". 17

The dividing line between "Imagists" like Hulme and Transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman was their world view, their "angle of vision". Tanner has a pertinent point to make, while explaining the distinction between these two groups: "For the Transcendentalists the central question was: how should a man look at the world to recover and retain a sense of its glory? And for many of them the answer
was — behold it with wonder, like a child. Roethke’s attachment to the concrete particular was a part of his effort to recover and retain a sense of the glory of the world and behold it with wonder, like a child. It had become necessary because traditional Christianity had no value for him. Like the Transcendentalists, he wanted to enjoy an original relation to the universe. The relation was to be original in the sense that its origin was to be inside the individual himself. This does not come by study but by a very high sort of seeing by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucid to others. The secret of this high sort of seeing is full participation in the circuit of things, the secret embodied in Whitman’s idea of organic form in poetry. "The Principle of organic form," remarks Herbert Read, "rests on one of the most fundamental distinctions to philosophy — variously expressed as the distinction between essence and existence, universal and particulars, nature naturans and nature naturata. ... How does a man, a mere specimen of nature naturata, become aware of and make evident the process of nature naturans: the realm of essence? It is done, said Schelling, through the medium of art — art is the active bond between the soul and nature, between essence and existence. This succinctly expresses Roethke’s main concern as well — the process of becoming aware of and making evident the process of nature naturans. At the same time, it refers to Roethke’s idea of his art as an active bond between the soul and nature. To him, as to the Transcendentalists, a poem was a coalescence of man with
nature in a union that guarantees the participation of both man and nature in something transcendental. The Lost Son explores how a man can become aware of nature naturans, and it bears witness to his faith that "art is the active bond between the soul and nature". The pantheistic attitude to nature which lies behind the sequence would have been congenial to the Transcendentalists but repugnant to Pound, Hulme and Eliot; they regarded it as "spilt religion". The point has been well made by Lawrence Buell: "The method of poetry is nature; the method of nature, is poetry". 22

III

Buell's remark emphasizes the principle of analogy between the world of nature and that of art, a flow of correspondences celebrated in Baudelaire's famous poem:

Nature's temple where the pilasters
Speak sometimes in their mystic languages;
Man reaches it through symbols dense as trees,
That watch him with a gaze familiar.

The principle of universal analogy, which was Platonic in its origin, Baudelaire owed to Swedenborg, who exercised a deep influence on the Symbolists as well as the Transcendentalists. Edmund Wilson perceptibly remarked that "by the middle of the century, the Romantic writers in the United States — Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman and even Emerson — were ... developing in the direction of Symbolism". 23 The principle of analogy between the world of nature and that of art, which describes the poetic technique of Roethke,
suggests how sensitive he was to the Symbolist technique. The question is whether he was nearer to the Symbolism of the Transcendentalists or to that of the French Symbolists.

One may ask: In what respects does French symbolism correspond to the Transcendentalist movement? The French Symbolist Movement which was in its spirit a revolt against the positivism of science and which glorified the inwardness of man was, however, obsessively concerned with the tool it was using — viz. language. Ethical considerations and principles were pushed to the background; the new approach to the making of a poem and judging it can be described as "instrumental". Josephine Miles comments: "The words goodness, truth, and beauty are of heavy poetic value... at the moment they have gone out of poetry in favour of more concreteness, more imagery, more connotative suggestion", and the newly added critical terms "are the terms of human constructed scene". In a world where no meaning could be found, technique was the only source of salvation for the Symbolist poet. He is essentially an explorer but explores principally the possibilities of imagination and the poetic language.

How far would Roethke go with the Symbolists? How far would Emerson and Whitman go with them? Roethke, like the Symbolist poets, suffered from a profound sense of alienation and isolation in life. The nature of his alienation was different: it was deeply affected, as remarked earlier, by his painful awareness of the biological separation from his parents. Throughout his life he struggled to seek the modes of affiliation and union with others. Now, the Transcendentalists, though
they were discontented and even disillusioned with the contemporary American life, were never outsiders or strangers to their society. They yearned for human bond and love. Emerson remarked: "These persons (i.e. the Transcendentalists) are not by nature sour and unsocial. ... but they are joyous, susceptible and affectionate; they have even more than others a great wish to be loved." 25 They were not committed to cultivating sensibility or imagination and valued action in life. Emerson had declared that without action, "man is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth." 26 Whitman also welcomed the common man on equal terms. In his 1855 Preface he said, "The message of great poets to each man and woman is, come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us. We are no better than you. What we enclose you enclose." 27 The interest in human beings, the desire for action and the awareness of human equality between the poet and his readers is something we do not find in the Symbolists. The Symbolists, and the Transcendentalists descended from the same ancestry — the German Idealists and the Romantics — but the milieu in which they lived coloured their view points. The Symbolists, one may say, were like paralysed children of the Industrial Revolution.

Roethke sympathised with the Symbolists in their protest against the highly organised industrial life of today. But protest against the social milieu was not the driving creative impulse of his poetry. His discontent with the bourgeois world was rooted in the circumstances of his early upbringing and his longing to realise his identity. Like the
Symbolists, he valued the cultivation of poetic sensibility but he did not make a religion of it. Stephen Mallarme defined "Symbolism" as the art of "evoking an object little by little so as to reveal a mood" and added, "everything, in the world, exists in order to culminate in a book. Yes, indeed, literature exists, and if you like, literature alone exists, to the exclusion of everything else". 28 Roethke's poetic art, inspite of its attachment to the concrete, was not wedded to evoking "an object little by little"; it is a confrontation with the objects to make them a part of the poet's being. He did not aim at "the subtlety of notation" in his poems. Nor did he have the Transcendentalists's interest in human action or craving for fellow-feeling. So, one notes that Roethke's restlessness grew out of his desire to find the true centre of his poetic art and his identity.

Like the Transcendentalists and the Symbolists, Roethke was anxious to reaffirm the supremacy of imagination and intuition in a world of logic and reason. The Transcendentalists and the Symbolists faced a similar crisis of faith and had realised that "Reason" was inadequate to reveal the ultimate mystery of the universe. They believed that whatever the "Imagination" seized as truth was the final truth. The scientific approach emphasized the analytical method, pointing out the value of each separate component of an object; imagination works for integration and the poet's way — which is that of "Imagination" itself — is more valid and authentic for knowing the world. It insists that no part by itself makes any meaning or value out off from its whole structure. It was this faith in the "imagination"
I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. 29 Roethke was in sympathy with the Imagination's way of knowing things in the world. The world of facts did not present itself as a world of symbols to him; he was too much of a child of the post-Darwinian era to become "a transparent eyeball". His struggle was, however, to convert the world of facts into one of symbols with the help of imagination. His problem was one of a total fusion of existence and reality.

IV

Thus, the "Imagists" and the "Symbolists" were primarily concerned with the dilemma which the Transcendentalists and the Romantics faced — the dichotomy between the knower and the object to be known. The subjective vision of a poet or his emotional world is the seed of his creative activity, but how does he translate his private universe into language? What is the relation of the poet's mind to the objective medium with which it works to produce poetry? Coleridge could only posit the imagination as a mental faculty, an independent power which somehow seems able to exercise itself without a medium. Ernst Cassirer remarks: "Man lives with objects only in so far as he lives with these forms; he reveals reality to himself, and himself to reality, in that he lets himself and the environment enter into his plastic medium, in which the two do not merely make contact, but fuse with each other." 30
"Imagists", we saw earlier, were preoccupied with the forms of objects; the "Symbolists" let themselves and the environment enter into their language; the Symbolist poem works out a fusion between the poet and his materials. Indirectly, Symbolist poetry was a plea for a unified sensibility, an antidote to what Eliot called the "dissociation of Sensibility". Eliot's view of "unified sensibility" refers to the integration of intellectual and emotional elements through the poetic medium. It does not seem to refer to the poet's sense of cosmic unity. The Transcendentalists and the Symbolists strove for not only poetic integration as defined by Eliot but cosmic unity through a symbol, a literary image which was an embodiment of the unified sensibility.

Roethke continued his search and struggle for total integration of existence by fusing two halves of his self - the subjective world of emotion and the objective world of facts. In the beginning of his poetic career he was influenced by some of Eliot's views. He said, "we think by feeling. What is there to know? This, in its essence, is a description of the metaphysical poet who thinks with his body". 31 This obviously echoes Eliot on the "Metaphysical Poets". But does it not also echo D.H. Lawrence? Lawrence and Roethke would not have subscribed to Eliot's view that the poet has not "a personality to express but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality". 32 This emphasis on the poet's medium which was a significant departure from the Romantics, was meant to achieve objectivity in representation, and the chief problem
of the artist almost became a problem of technical expertise. But the problem of a poet like Roethke was a question of depth, not of expertise. The idea of art as an expression of the poet's personality was a standard romantic assumption which encouraged the view that the true poem is not that which the public read: "Life is the Poem, Man is the poet". The American poet like Whitman, who conforms to this faith, constantly sings "a song of myself". He is acutely aware of living in "the age of the first person singular". Eliot, on other hand, propounded the theory of "objective correlative" and maintained that the poet reveals himself through his personae and that he must learn the art of playing roles, of successful masquerades.

The persona is offered by Eliot as an instance of the poet's attempt to achieve unified sensibility. Emerson also remarked: "A writer's use of the 'I' is to be welcomed or censured according to whether his work leads us to Nature, or to the person of the writer. The great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us to themselves. The great man, even while he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from him to an universal experience." Eliot's method of achieving "impersonality" was by his favourite device of speaking through a mask — whereas the Transcendentalist's 'I' was not the private self, but the cosmic self.

Roethke as a poet was exposed to both these ways of transcendence of "the first person singular": Eliot's way of talking through the personae, and the Transcendentalist's way of lifting the private self to the universal self. Eliot's
way, in Roethke's understanding, entailed denial of the self; the way of the Transcendentalists was that of transforming the private self into the universal one. Roethke attempted both these modes but he constantly yearned to assert the principle of the self. It is this assertion of the principle of the self that perhaps more than anything else brings Roethke and Whitman together. Whitman could teach a poet the secret of converting the 'I' into the universal self. William Carlos Williams rightly said that the central issue of twentieth-century American poetry—the continuity of American poetic tradition—became more acute when it ran against the counter-current set in motion by Pound and Eliot. This central issue of poetic tradition—the native American poetic tradition running against the counter-current set in motion by Pound and Eliot—presents itself in Roethke's poetry. "...from Whitman, we draw out—what we have to do today. We don't have to discover it from Whitman but we may discover it from Whitman if we want to." 34 What Williams and Roethke learned from Whitman was the supreme value of discovering and expressing the self in the concrete material world. Eliot's and Pound's mode may be described as the mythic; Whitman's as the Adamic. The mythic mode relies for its sanctions, codes and insights on authorities and sources outside itself; the Adamic mode derives its authority of the self, from itself. This would mean that the personae in poems in the Adamic mode would be basically different from those in the mythic mode. As Roy Harvey Pearce said, "In the former, the protagonist must learn to take off his masks; in the latter, he must learn to put it on." 35 Roethke puts on and takes off his mask in his poems, and he finally returns to the Adamic principle which places him squarely in the Whitman tradition.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

CHAPTER : 2


2. Ibid., p.4.

3. Ibid., p.6. cf: "I'm either going to be a good writer or a poor fool".


13. Ibid., p.92.


15. Ibid., p.325.


20. Ibid., p.332.


26. Ibid., p.95.


One may ask how far the "mythic" poetic mode is different from the "Adamic" poetic mode. Is the "Adamic" mode also not mythic in a sense? It can be maintained that the America that Whitman celebrated was itself a poetic myth, the projection of the poet's dream of the future of his country rather than a statement of geographical and historical entity. Whitman suggests what "mythical" meant to him. In his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* he scorned the idea that the ancient civilizations like the Greek and the Roman should alone be looked upon as sacrosanct. He exclaimed: "As if the beauty and sacredness of the demonstrable must fall behind that of the mythical" (Whitman, p.442). Here the word "mythical" seems to have been used in two senses: one suggesting the super-natural world as contrasted with the "demonstrable" world. Whitman is referring to the supposed superiority of the spiritual to the material, of the invisible to the visible. He disapproved of the Puritan's faith in the superiority of the invisible to the visible and declared: "... and the unseen is proved by the seen, till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn". (Whitman, p.26). Another meaning refers to the "mythical" civilizations of ancient times. Whitman's poetry is not mythical in the sense that it is not rooted in the myths of great ancient civilizations.

Yet, as F.C. Prescott remarks in *Poetry and Myth*, "The myth-maker's mind is the prototype; and the mind of the poet
is... still essentially mythopoetic." 1 As Prescott points out, the poet's mind conceived of and comprehended reality not as the civilised and scientific-minded moderns do; it depends upon a definite mode of perception. The real substratum of myth is not rational but emotional; its world is pre-logical and mystical, subjective and dynamic. Ernst Cassirer has remarked: "In order to grasp and describe this difference we may say that what myth primarily perceives are not objective but physiognomic characters". 2 Myth is non-theoretical in its very meaning and essence, and eludes all our ideas of empirical or scientific truth. Its world is much more fluid than our theoretical world of things and properties. Science conceives of nature as being governed by certain fixed laws acting mechanically, while myth conceives of it in dramatic terms, "as a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers". 3 "Mythical" view colours the world of nature with human emotions — of love, of fear, of hatred. The world of nature is not neutral, objective and fixed to the "mythical" imagination.

If, then we, consider the "mythic" mode as a way of apprehending reality in a non-discursive, subjective, synthetic and empathic manner, Whitman and Roethke are "mythic" poets in this sense of the word. Whitman exemplified the "mythic" mode in such lines as these:

Every existence has its idiom, everything has idiom and tongue,
He resolves all tongues into his own and bestows it upon men, and any man translates, and any man translates himself also,
One part does not counteract another part, he is the joiner, he sees how they join.

(Whitman. p.135)
This is from "Song of the Answerer" in which Whitman embodies his ideal of the poet-seer. The lines sum up the nature of mythic perception as explained by Cassirer. The way of a mythic poet is transformative: "he resolves all tongues into his own". Mythical perception is a mode of unification. The objects of the world may appear to us as separate, but the poet has an intuitive perception of their inter-relatedness. Once the principle of unity of all life is realised as the central fact of existence, it leads to the power of "translation", of metamorphosis. "If there is any characteristic and outstanding feature of the mythical world, any law by which it is governed - it is this law of metamorphosis", says Cassirer. In Whitman's poetic world, it is this law of metamorphosis or translation that is the governing principle. He says:

We become plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark,
We are bedded in the ground, we are rocks,
We are oaks, we grow in the openings side by side.

(Whitman. p.90)

The whole section is a striking example of the translating power of the mythical mode of perception.

Roethke's poetry is "mythical" in the sense that its world is pre-logical and suffused with a profound sense of mystical unity. For Whitman, (in a sense different than was meant by T.S. Eliot) the beginning was the end and the end was the beginning. Roethke could not have said that in his beginning was his end. If he had said it, it would have been true in an ironical sense. He began with an acute awareness of the Cartesian dualism between the inner world of feelings and the external world of physical objects. "The humanistic way", 
writes M.L. Rosenthal, "has already been defeated and is now no more than a ghost. It is that feeling which Robert Lowell in one of his poems calls, 'our universal Angst'. Roethke's poetry has its birth in the consciousness of "universal Angst" which finds expression in many of his poems like The Lost Son and other Poems, Meditations of an Old Woman and The Dying Man. From the beginning of his career he seems to have felt that his ancestors, "the devouring mother and the furious papa", and "the supreme masters" stood as great obstacles in his quest for identity. The source of his "angst" is private as well as the public ethos that he saw symbolised in the greenhouses. He explored the "connotations of the masters" (Pearce's phrase) in his poetry. The "greenhouse" assumes something of a mythic dimension in his poetry and the "Lost Son" becomes a central myth woven in the texture of his poetry.

The word "myth" in its original meaning meant that it is narrative or poetic literature. One ought not to assume that myth is philosophy, that it is a system of metaphysical or symbolic thought. "Poetry", remarks Richard Chase, "becomes myth when it performs a certain function... Myth must always discover and accept preternatural forces". The "greenhouse", as remarked earlier, becomes a poetic myth in Roethke's poetry. Chase explained the sense in which he used the word "myth". The word "preternatural" means for him the same thing as conveyed by the Melanesian word "mana": whatever has impersonal magic force or potency and is therefore extraordinarily beautiful, terrible, dangerous, awful, wonderful, uncanny or marvellous has mana...". The "rose" in Roethke's North American Sequence (CP. p.205) becomes a mythic flower in the sense described by Chase. It has a potency to make the poet-narrator
feel a different human being. He says:

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas, Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of myself, As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being, And I stood outside myself, Beyond becoming and perishing, A something wholly other, As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive, And yet was still.

Here, the "rose" does not become mythical simply because it is the controlling image. "The poetical imagination", as Chase points out, "when it attains any consistent fire and efficacy is always displacing the texture of the mind into the external world so that it becomes a theatre of preternatural forces". 8

It should be clear why the categorization suggested by Pearce is unsatisfactory. It has this obvious weakness that the term "mythic" can be employed for Eliot's as well as for Whitman's poetic modes. In which case, how is this distinction helpful? Eliot commented upon the value of the mythic motif when he was commenting on James Joyce's Ulysses. He said: it was "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history". 9 It is important to remember that to writers like Joyce and Eliot, "mythic" is more of a literary technique consciously manipulated to work out a framework in terms of which experience can be judged and understood. It acts as a touchstone to evaluate the present with reference to the past. There is a historical point, a point of time in the past which is fixed and deemed superior to the present. This is conceived more in its historical aspect rather than its cosmic dimension. This is an intellectual attitude born out of the sense of futility of civilisation
which has lost its connections with the past. Literature is seen as the use of mythic forms, not as the recreation of mythic sensibility. The "mythic" mode for Eliot is a kind of literary context; it is not a part of the structure of his sensibility. Eliot himself, it is well known, has used ancient myths and rituals brought to light by the anthropological studies of Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston.

The use of the myth of the Fisher King and the Grail Legend in *The Waste Land* is more as a historical and analogical framework to convey the contemporary experience in an ironic perspective. Indirectly, such a mythic (or mythological) mode makes one sharply aware of the historical discontinuity between the past and the present and is very different from the recreation of mythic sensibility we find in Whitman, Lawrence and Roethke.

> While I was fishing in the dull canal  
> On a winter evening round behind the gashouse  
> Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck  
> And on the king my father’s death before him.

*(T. S. Eliot, p.56).*

The use of ancient myths in Eliot's poem does not denote a trust in pre-civilised and instinctual modes of feeling and thought one finds in Whitman and Roethke. Eliot's nostalgia is, on the contrary, for the high points of civilised life. In a word, his use of ancient myths is "academic" in the non-pejorative sense.

Compared with Eliot's, Whitman's mythic mode functions in a diametrically antithetical manner. One may compare his way of projecting the image of a culture hero in his elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln and Milton's or Shelley's poetic methods in their great elegies. Whitman's poem is singularly free from
mythological allusions. He doesn't even mention the name of his hero. His imagination is especially quickened by the elements of nature - the flowers, the stars and the singing bird. The whole poem enacts the myth of death and rebirth in life, which makes Chase's remark pertinent here: "Literature becomes mythical by suffusing the natural with preternatural force towards certain ends, by capturing the impersonal forces of the world and directing them towards the fulfilment of certain emotional needs." The flowers, the singing bird and the star show us what is more than ordinarily natural. Here, mythic is not resorted to as a literary device to expose the sordid present; it is Whitman's very mode of feeling his subject.

Roethke's poetry is free from classical and mythological allusions in a similar way. He creates his own myth of "greenhouse Eden" in his poetry - the myth of a lost and bedevilled soul in the contemporary society, and unlike Eliot, Roethke uses his myth as an end in itself. As he remarks in one of his prose pieces: "It was a universe, several worlds, which, even as a child one worried about, and struggled to keep alive, as in the poem 'Big Wind'." The "greenhouse" in this poem is projected as a myth of nature which protects and sustains itself in the wildest storm. It embodies the myth of life against death as does Whitman's elegy on Lincoln.

One may say, then, that the word "mythic", as applied to the Pound-Eliot tradition, cannot be severed from the cultural context of the past. "The issue in twentieth-century American poetry, as in the twentieth-century American life in general, has centred on the nature, worth, and limits of the human. What are we that we no longer find communitas guaranteed in the nature of things?"
- these words of Pearce put the dilemma of Roethke succinctly.

The problem was not one of reconciling "a simple separate person" and "the word Democratic, the word En-Masse". In Section 50 of Song of Myself, Whitman claims:

There is that in me - I do not know what
it is but I know it is in me

I do not know it - it is without name
it is a word unsaid
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
it is not chaos or death - it is form, union,
plan - it is eternal life -
it is Happiness

(Whitman. p.74)

This is also the destination Roethke would like to reach - "the pungent sense of effective reality", "a blaze of reality", the unique awareness of cosmic unity and harmony that Whitman claimed as his natural possession. The "greenhouse" in his poetry can be said to represent the contemporary civilisation, as it is natural and artificial at the same time; it combines two worlds - of nature and of human culture. It is for Roethke the world of "en-masse".

The "greenhouse" can have many unassigned meanings. It can also stand for the world of art. Louis Martz remarks: "A greenhouse is not nature itself, but nature sophisticated by art". Since Roethke takes the greenhouses as forming his whole universe, he is very much in the position of the Symbolists who too were alienated from the society. He is also like them because the greenhouse world is self-sufficient to him. It is in the world of art, cut off from the human world, that he finds meaning in his life. This is not to imply that Roethke went to
school to the French Symbolists directly as did T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme. There are other important differences too between Roethke's poetic practice and that of the French Symbolists; yet, perhaps indirectly through W. B. Yeats and Eliot, the Symbolists's influence percolated into his poetry.

How far could Roethke align himself with the Pound-Eliot vogue of his era? What is the difference, if any, between the Symbolist practice of the Eliot school and that of Roethke? One may consider how Roethke deploys the central image of his poetry - the greenhouse. In one of his earlier poems, "Moss-Gathering" (CP. p.40), the world of the greenhouses, where he moved freely and sometimes worked as a young boy, occurs as an archetypal image of the Garden of Eden untouched by the evils of the human world. The boy's moss-gathering in such a place was an act of "desecration", disturbing "some rhythm, old and of vast importance". The "greenhouse" may be taken as an image of the pre-lapsarian world and the boy's act as emblematic of his initiation into violence - loss of innocence in life. Here also we have Roethke's customary occupation with concrete details of the scene. Another such picture of the greenhouse is offered in "Fra Bauman, Fra Schmidt, and Fra Schwartzze" (CP. p.44). Roethke evinces almost a naturalist's interest in and eye for the minute detail even while he evokes the symbolic implications of the landscape. "These ancient leathery crones", as he calls the old women workers in the greenhouses, are embodiments of destiny; the greenhouse in both these poems stands for the lost world of childhood. The point of these instances is that the "Symbolic" mode is an important trait of
his poetic imagination and that it is a part of Roethke's feeling, thinking and living. The relationship between the poet and the symbol is immediate, intimate and personal.

A comparison between the world of greenhouses and the following lines from *The Waste Land* may serve the purpose.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the Sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket
no relief
And the dry stone no sound of water.

(T.S. Eliot. p.49)

This does evoke a landscape of the sterile country but the image is rooted in the memories of the historical past; it is as a literary or cultural analogue that the speaker resorts to it; it is more of a response of a sophisticated mind to the wasteland of the contemporary times. A. Alvarez shrewdly comments, "The images, as Eliot uses them, are inevitable...

Their relations with the outside, observed world are highly formal. Eliot's, I think, is a formal imagination ... Even in the most intense moments of feeling, there is never any sense of immediate and living response from another person." 14

There seems to be no direct, intimate contact with the physical world; inspite of its references to the world of phenomena, Eliot's imagination was withdrawn from it. The passage does not convey the impression that the speaker emotionally participates in the world he describes here; the Biblical allusions are a powerful tool to provide an ironic perspective.

Roethke's poetic technique, in spite of its early
I have gone into the waste lonely places
Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge
of smoky cities.
What is beyond never crumbles like an
embankment,
Explodes like a rose, or thrusts wings over
the Caribbean.
There are no pursuing forms, faces on walls;
Only the motes of dust in the immaculate hallways.
The darkness offalling hair, the warnings from
lint and spiders,
The vines graying to a fine power.
There is no riven tree, or lamb-dropped
by an eagle.

The poem describes the chequered journey of the spirit towards
"another life/Another way and place in which to continue" — a
theme with which Eliot is also concerned in many of his poems.
Besides the obvious distinction that Roethke's passage is
devoid of any literary and religious allusions, it conveys the
pressure of an imagination operating on a physical landscape
not only for its symbolic value but also for the very physiognomy
of the place. Its physicality is actually felt and communicated.
Eliot's passage moves in an abstracted world in which the place
has little actuality. In Roethke's poetry the relation with the
phenomenal world is not "formal"; he establishes the "I —
Thou" relationship for which Eliot does not seem to care.
Eliot's images lack the biological and psychological roots which
give vitality to Roethke's poetry.

Roethke's poetry, then, has many important formal
dissimilarities and resemblances of poetic technique with Eliot's,
but it is not mythic in the sense in which Eliot's poetry is.
Pearce's description of Whitman's and Pound-Eliot's poetic modes as "Adamic" and "mythic" respectively may not be very precise, but it is helpful for this study. For the "mythic" poet, according to him, the crucial test is that of communitas. "In this light" he remarks, "the strength of a poem (i.e. mythic poem), whatever the genius of its maker, registers the potential for communitas in the culture out of which it comes". For Eliot, this potential for communitas, is the religious and literary heritage of ancient times; for Roethke, it is the individual's self. The "Adamic" impulse, Pearce suggests, stands for the principle of "personality" and the "mythic" impulse for "culture". The Eliotian "mythic" poem seeks its authority in the powers beyond man and his works. In an "Adamic" poem the emphasis is always upon the self, the first person singular. The Eliot tradition demanded self-effacement, and self-surrender to some authority and institution outside one's self. The poetic tradition which considers man strictly in terms of those inward potentialities which define him without reference to any external guiding and controlling destiny may be categorised as "the Adamic" mode which was the basic American poetic style established by Whitman.

II

The word "Adamic" suggests the delineation of man and his life in the primordial condition. The "Adamic" poem primarily deals with man's relation to nature and his own self, and enacts man's struggle to discover and realise himself with help from no one except himself or his latent powers. By implication, it concerns itself with man's efforts to regain the lost paradise not existing somewhere beyond but within
one's self. Whitman's instinct was right when he realised that he could not have spoken of the world or God without celebrating and singing himself. He declared "... nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" (Whitman, p.72). The "Adamic" poet "sinks God and nature in man" and is ever conscious of the centrality of the self as receiver of divine and natural influences. His basic faith is that if only he looks deep enough inward, or merges himself with the worldsoul through nature, he would reach the unconscious or universal.

The first section of Song of Myself denotes this "Adamic" mode.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

(Whitman, p.23).

It is a celebration of the self which is the focus and radiating centre of the poet's imagination. This interest in the self is not self-centredness in its pejorative sense but, on the other hand, encompasses all, the whole universe. Whitman remarked emphatically that "the greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small, it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe" (Whitman, p.445). The poet, in this view, distinguishes himself by his power of empathy and identification with the universe. The "Adamic" poem is not only a song of a single private self; that it certainly is, but besides being that, it is an archetypal poem, which treats man as from "a new plane of existence" of universality. There is, one notices, a
paradoxical combination of the self and universal consciousness in such a poem. Nevertheless, the power of empathy and identification with the vast cosmos is one of its chief attributes. The high aim of an "Adamic" poet is a complete awakening of consciousness without in any way ignoring the immediate situation; "to enter into awakening without exterminating the defilements". There is a full acceptance of everything because such a poet participates in life with all its counterparts.

"Divine am I inside and out", Whitman proclaimed, and yet he could call Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the Son, Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding". (Whitman. p.43).

Thus concern with the self and cosmic consciousness are the prominent characteristics of the "Adamic" mode. If we go back to Section I of Song of Myself, we read:

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak
at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

(Whitman. p.23).

What should be noted here is, the first line: "creeds and schools in abeyance". The attitude of an "Adamic" poet to self, to nature and universe, to men and women is free; that is, it is free from any dogmas. He will not surrender the truth of his experience and insight to that of any inherited tradition. Whitman expressed this in the lines:

All truths wait in all things,
They neither hasten their own delivery
nor resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps
of surgeon,
The insignificant is as big to me as any,
(What is less or more than a touch?)
Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper
into my soul.

(Whitman. pp.48-49).

This can be regarded as the "Adamic" poet's mode of envisioning
truth or God. Truth is here imagined as not a mystery absolute
and hidden in the religious and theological dogmas, but is
dependent upon the testimony of personal experience. These
lines express the freedom of an "Adamic" poet who does not see
"any more heaven or hell than there is now". (Whitman. p.73).

R.W.B. Lewis is of the opinion that Whitman, "instead of going
to far forward, had gone too far backward: for he did go back,
all the way back, to a primitive condition, to the beginning of
time". 18 This seems to support Pearce's categorisation of a
"mythic" poet who seeks his inspiration in different patterns of
culture and periods of civilisation. The "Adamic" poet would
seem to hold that the soul of a cultured man is lost and even
if it exists, it is not his. D.H. Lawrence expressed a view
about Whitman similar to Lewis's, when he said: "He (i.e. Whitman)
is the first white aboriginal". 19

Since the trappings of culture are not congenial to the
"Adamic" poet and as he is committed to the life of "the Open
Road", the motif of journey runs throughout his poetry.
Perhaps it would not be too far fetched to suggest that an
"Adamic" poem is picaresque. The "picaro", though "rogue",
could also be said to represent a way of life which is not
circumscribed either by space or time. His life is marked by freedom of spirit, constant movement and a readiness to establish new relations, wherever he happens to be. The motif of journey that we find in Whitman and Roethke is not merely a literary metaphor but a mode of their vision itself. In Section 46 of *Song of Myself*, Whitman (or the speaker) says:

I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all)  
My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes  
and a staff cut from the woods,  
No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,  
I lead no man to dinner-table, library, exchange,  
But each man and woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right, hand pointing to landscape of continents and the public road.

(Whitman. p.69).

Is this not a portrait of the poet as picaro? The metaphor of journey which it employs is also a principal motif in Roethke's poetry. For instance:

I dream of journeys repeatedly:  
Of flying like a bat deep into a narrow tunnel,  
Of driving alone, without luggage out of a long peninsula.

(CP. p.199)

The Lost Son sequence too makes use of the journey-motif which recurs in *North American Sequence*. These journeys (of Whitman and of Roethke) are undertaken in the spirit of a quest which is also the quest for cosmic consciousness and harmony.

One may sum up by stating that the primary concern of
the poet working in the "Adamic" mode is to concentrate on the self which is expansive, adhesive and representative of the universal self. It takes note of the material world, appreciates the beauty of the natural world but it strives for transcendence. It expands itself into cosmic consciousness. There is complete identification with nature in its myriad manifestations. Empathy is the essence of this tradition, and the analogy between the self and nature is one of its important poetic devices. The "Adamic" poet rejects the inherited cultural myths and seeks the primeval way of life. He notes the flux of life and its growth, and relates it to his own self. The motif of the quest -- the metaphor of journey -- is a distinguishing feature of the "Adamic" poem which rests upon the poet's faith in Mystic Evolution. The poetic act is a way of direct participation in the mystical evolution of the universe.

III

In his essay "On 'Identity'" Roethke says: "I take it that we are faced with at least four principal themes: (1) The multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) The nature of creation, that faculty for producing order out of disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) The nature of God Himself."  The most crucial problem for him was the question of his identity, its mystery and enigma, its relation with others, and how it could face and subdue the threats of modern life. Like Whitman, Roethke was preoccupied with the self; he was aware that the quest of the self was a great challenge and the journey too arduous.
In Section 2 of "What can I tell my Bones?" which forms part of *Meditations of an Old Woman*, the narrator is faced with the same dilemma which Roethke mentions in his article "On 'Identity'. The "Old Woman" is depicted as preparing herself for death and struggling to comprehend the mystery of the self:

The self says, I am;  
The heart says, I am less;  
The spirit says, you are nothing.

(CP. p.172)

Roethke remarked in his article that "the human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible. But how? Am I but nothing, leaning towards a thing?" His major poetic sequences have only one theme: the nature of the self. In Section I of "The Flight" (CP. p.53), the speaker makes a fervent appeal to the mysterious voice to guide him out of the underworld:

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

What one marks in most of Roethke's poems is that the self is a source of anguish and perplexity; it is something of a trap which enmeshes an individual. This almost self-disintegrating obsession with the self becomes the subject of his well-known poem, "In a Dark Time" (CP. p.239). The speaker in the poem explores the relations between "I" and "Not-Me" and passes through the dark night of the soul:

A man goes far to find out what he is —  
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.
Whitman's engagement with the self is equally intense and persistent, but the spirit of his quest differs from that of Roethke. Whitman joyously accepts the self as a divine gift and declares:

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and
sweet is all that is not my soul.

(Whitman. p.25).

Because he takes the self as a driving force which goes out of itself to merge with others, Whitman finds,

I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the
universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what
the writing means.

(Whitman. p.39).

The self in Whitman moves out of itself to assimilate and absorb others; this movement is centrifugal. The self in Roethke is more introspective, and its movement is vertical rather than horizontal.

Yet, Roethke's self somehow seeks its direction towards Whitman. Commenting on the technique he employed in The Lost Son sequence he pointed out that "the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward. The way is circuitous, and sometimes lost, but invariably returned too". 22 The movement of the self that is suggested here follows the pattern of regression and progression. The poetic patterns of "regression" and "progression" follow the dynamics of the self in his sequences. For instance, after describing the underworld journey of the self in the second poem of Praise to the End (CP. p.88) the boy-narrator bursts out:
Arch of air, my heart's original knock,
I'm awake all over;
I've crawled from the mire, alert as a
saint or a dog;
I know the back-stream's joy, and the stone's
eternal pulseless longing,
Pelicity, I cannot hoard.
My friend, the rat in the wall, brings me,
the clearest messages;
I bask in the bower of change.

These lines express what one may call Roethke's scientific temper - his awareness of the evolutionary appetite of the life-force (Cf: I know the back-stream's joy, and the stone's eternal pulseless longing) and his faith in Mystic Evolution. This onward movement is "impelled by the mystic life-force, primal, elemental, inexplicable, inexorable; man's and the world's body constitute a mystical materialism, the paradoxical infusion of the material by the spiritual". 23 Whitman's poem "This Compost" (Whitman, pp.290-92) celebrates the same evolutionary appetite of the Earth - the cycle of death and life in nature:

Behold this compost! behold it well!
Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of
a sick person - yet behold!
The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk,
the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

Both Whitman and Roethke have noted in their poems the miracle of Mystic Evolution. However, Roethke's search for the self is more painful because there is always a descent into hell before
the ascent to heaven can be achieved. The initial movement of the self in his poems is of a strategic retreat calculated to push itself out to the farthest possible limit and review the position it has arrived at that particular point. His encounter with the self apparently differs from Whitman's in being more intensely private and anchored in itself. Whitman could confidently proclaim: "I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I am encloser of things to be." (Whitman, p.67). Nonetheless, there is a great deal of truth in R.W.B. Lewis's remark that the later poetry of Whitman "gives voice to genuine desolation. In it, the self appears as shrunken, indeed as fragmented; the psyche as dying". 24 One thinks of, As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life. (Whitman, pp.203-05). He confessed in his first poem, Song of Myself, that he knew the sea of torment, doubt, despair and unbelief". (Whitman, p.66). He also said in another poem that he "too knitted the old knot of contrariety". (Whitman, p.130). In Whitman, too, the self had moments of retreat and withdrawal, of "the abysses of doubt, self-distrust, and the death-consciousness". 25 Yet, it would of course be difficult to maintain that withdrawl was Whitman's habitual mode. It is a transient phase: this can be confirmed from the same poem in which he refers to "the sea of torment, doubt, despair and unbelief". The final note in his poems is one of hope, joy and confidence:

Be at peace bloody flukes of doubters and sullen mopers,
I take my place among you as much as among any,
The past is the push of you, me, all precisely the same,
And what is yet untried and afterward is for you, me, all, precisely the same.
I do not know what is untried and afterwards,
But I know it will in its turn prove sufficient and cannot fail.

(Whitman, p.66).
Thus the nature of the self and its mode of functioning differed in Whitman and Roethke. The self in Roethke's poetry has lost its centre in the world outside and is also fully immersed in the "destructive" element. (Stephen Spender's phrase). However, despite the differences that we notice on the surface, its inner polarity and movement towards Whitman are unmistakable. The "Symbolist" self which he inherited as a poet writing in the mid-twentieth century and a man who could not own any allegiance to society was "naked to the bone". This "naked self" which makes regressive movements in its struggle to connect things always moves out of itself and achieves, at least, a partial identification with the world outside. Roethke's "old lady" exactly describes the self's mode of functioning in his poems: "the movement is forward, after a few wavers". (CP. p.158). However, the forward thrust of the self in Roethke's poems, the point towards which the self aspires - is to reach Whitman's destination. Both Whitman and Roethke had this faith in the creative individuality of the self. This is perhaps best illustrated in Roethke's very beautiful lyric:

The spirit moves,
Yet stays:
Stirs as a blossom stirs,
Still wet from its bud-sheath;
Slowly unfolding,
Twining in the light with its tendrils;

(CP. p.101).

The creative urge of the self in Roethke is united with the evolutionary appetite of nature: the narrator in "Unfold!
Unfold!" says:
By snails, by leaps of frog, I came here, spirit,
Tell me, body without skin, does a fish sweat?
I can't crawl back through those veins,
I ache for another choice.
The cliffs! The cliffs! They fling me back
Eternity howls in the last crags,
The field is no longer simple.

(CP. p.89)

The "Adamic" poet's faith in Mystic Evolution needs to be underlined. In Song of Myself Whitman had said:

Urge and urge and urge
Always the procreant urge of the world.

(Whitman. p.25)

In Roethke too, the self advances towards "the procreant urge of the world" to be identified with the procreant urge of the self. This procreant urge of nature finds expression in many of Roethke's short nature lyrics like "Cuttings", "Cuttings (later)", "Root Cellar" and "Weed Puller". The "Procreant urge" that we find in Whitman is reflected in "Cuttings":

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.

(CP. p.37)

Roethke's image embodies the "procreant urge" celebrated by Whitman: it has also all the sexual implications of Whitman's image.

This procreant urge in Whitman and Roethke seeks to establish or achieve a balanced relationship between the inner world and Nature. For Whitman, who was an heir to the
tradition of the Romantics in the nineteenth century, of
Wordsworth and Shelley in particular, it was not difficult to be
"a pagan suckled in creed outworn". Whitman could follow the
direction pointed by Rousseau and Wordsworth:

I will go to the bank by the wood and
become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

(Whitman. p.24)

Such moments when Whitman would completely surrender himself to
nature are instances of his instantaneous empathy with the world
of nature, of his firm faith that one is a part of nature and
that the spirit of nature and of the self are in harmony with
each other. In section 5 of Song of Myself he has expressed
the ecstasy of union with God through nature:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent
summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips
and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and
plunged your tongue to my bare-
stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd
till you held my feet.

(Whitman. p.27)

These lines express the rapture of union between the self and nature
in the image of erotic intimacy. One can see what Denis Donoghue
means when he says. "In Whitman's heaven we communicate by touch".25a

Now, Roethke too longed for such ecstatic union with nature.
But, as he confessed in "Infirmity" (CP. p.244), it was difficult
for him to forget his self.
I love myself: that's my one constancy.

In the same poem he said: "Eternity's not easily come by". Roethke's self, as can be easily seen, suffered from a terrible sense of separateness. The narrator in one of his poems exclaimed:

I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things.

(CP. p. 63)

It is this almost unbearable burden of "separateness of all things" that provides the motive for the quest to his self. He also suggests the reason for such a sense of alienation and isolation:

I have seen my father's face before
Deep in the belly of a thing to be.
The Devil isn't dead; he's just away.

(CP. p. 97).

Roethke's memory of his father was obviously a terrible experience to him. In spite of this note of alienation and isolation, the self in his poetry strives for a Whitmanesque identification with things and people. The self in his poetry does not rejoice in its separateness; its inner hidden drive is for cosmic unity. The thrust of Roethke's self is towards a Whitmanesque communion with nature and it experiences freedom and release from the bondage of its past only when it reaches the Whitmanesque height of empathy and love.
IV

Roethke himself has given some valuable clues to understand what nature meant to him. He condemned J.P.C. Cooper as a fraud and knew that "Muir and Thoreau and Burroughs speak the truth". He was as irresistibly drawn to nature as Wordsworth and could sense and render the moods of nature "almost instinctively". He remarked "A perception of nature -- no matter how delicate, how evanescent, -- remains with me forever". His sensibility and imagination are saturated with nature which is like an all-pervading and enveloping atmosphere apart from which existence was not possible. His poem "The Signals" (CP. p.8) speaks of the ancient primordial heritage of nature's prodigality and recognises the relationship of blood with the objects of nature, suggesting that these objects and the self came into existence at the same time. We have:

They slip between the fingers of my sight.
I cannot put my glance upon them tight.
Sometimes the blood is privileged to guess:
The things the eye or hand cannot guess.

In his poems the reader observes this constant urge to go back to the roots and link the self with these primordial origins. The speaker in "The Flight" (CP. p.53) notes:

From the mouths of jugs
Perched on many shelves,
I saw substance flowing
That cold morning.
Like a slither of eels
That watery cheek
As my own tongue kissed
My lips awake.

Writing as he was in an era when America was at the peak of
materialistic and technological triumphs, he could not be a pagan and a pantheist in the orthodox sense of the terms. He was a pagan, who approached the mystery of nature and life with the sensibility of primitive man. The narrator in The Lost Son (CP. p.56) cries:

Let the gestures freeze; our doom is already decided.
All the windows are burning! What's left of my life?
I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!

This interest in one's biological roots and their exploration without the aid of religion makes Roethke a new kind of pagan. The poem "Genesis" (CP. p.18) expresses the significance of the roots, the potentialities of the seed. The wisdom and insight of organic emergence of life have come neither as a consequence of logical and rational analysis nor as fruits of Christian light; they are instinctual and intuitive perceptions. As Pearce remarked, "Roethke had to begin at the beginning — with primitive things. For him, understanding the natural order of primitive things came to be a means to and model for understanding all in the natural order, himself included, which is beyond". Roethke had to start at the beginning with primitive things, as he would not take anything for granted. He adopted Darwin's procedure in order to understand the present stage he had arrived at; he closely observed and explored the primeval state of nature. The approach is tentative and undogmatic. One has to remember that it is all a poet's exploration of the "Origin of Species" — not a scientist's. He said in "Long live the Weeds" (CP. p.18):
The rough, the wicked, and the wild
That keep the spirit undefiled.
With these I match my little wit
And earn the right to stand or sit,
Hope, love, create, or drink and die:
These shape the creature that is I.

This is the perception of the same evolutionary principle binding the human and natural worlds; there is awareness that to understand the self, one must examine and understand one's roots.

Roethke could envisage his existence in the primordial past:

Whatever I owed to time
Slowed in my human form;
Sea water stood in my veins,
The elements I kept warm
Crumbled and flowed away,
And I know I had been there before,
In that cold, granite slime,
In the dark, in the rolling water.

(CP. p.49)

He could not conceive of the self as an entity as existing independently of its natural environment. In "Some Self-analysis", he writes: "I am influenced too much, perhaps, by natural objects. I seem bound by the very room I'm in.

... When I get alone under an open sky where man isn't too evident, — then I'm tremendously exalted and a thousand vivid ideas and sweet visions flood my consciousness". 29 His self feels engaged in an enclosed room; it expands out-of-doors. This may be one of the reasons why human society figures so marginally in his poetry.

Whitman experienced the same feeling of liberation and exaltation in the presence of nature. Section 22 of Song of Myself describes the magic spell of the sea on the poet-speaker of the poem:
You sea! I resign myself to you also —
I guess what you mean,
I behold from the beach your crooked
inviting fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without
feeling of me,
We must have a turn together, I undress,
hurry me out of sight of the land.
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.

(Whitman, p.41)

He became the "partaker of influx and efflux", and proclaimed:

Dazzling and tremendous how the sun-rise
would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise
out of me.
We also ascend dazzling and tremendous the sun,
We found our own O my soul in the calm and
cool of the daybreak

(Whitman, p.45)

Whitman, too, had the sense of "roots" of existence one marks
in Roethke but it is not so insistent. His quest of the self
is not always carried out in the context of his "roots". The
title of his poems, *Leaves of Grass*, however, indicates that
he had realised the wonder of the chemistry of the earth and
his indissoluble bond with it. He declares:

After down I see the huge first Nothing,
I know I was even there,
I waited unseen and always, and slept
through the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from
the fetid carbon.

(Whitman, p.67).

One marks a close resemblance between these lines of Whitman,
and those of Roethke quoted earlier. (Vide p.35). Both saw
that their origin lay far back into the ages.
But Whitman was not concerned with his personal biological roots: his perception of his link with the evolutionary appetite of nature is a generalised version of the natural process. Roethke's bond cannot be divorced from his personal experiences in the greenhouses of his family. Whitman could count scores or hundreds of years as nothing; neither time nor distance mattered to him. Roethke, on the other hand, had quite often to move backward before he could go a little forward. The image of Whitman one has is that of a climber who mounts higher and higher, without stepping backward, as when he said:

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs,
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps,
All below duly travel'd, and still I mount and mount.

The response of these two poets to nature is that of a primitive mind which feels that it is bound to the surrounding world of nature by "natural piety". Describing some of the important characteristics of primitive sensibility, Michael Bell points out that it does not make a firm and rational distinction, from a modern scientific point of view, between the inner world of feeling and the external order of existence. The inner world finds its projection in the external world of objects and living beings. There is full rapport between the self and others; there is "no dissociation of the separate factors of objective perception and subjective feeling". This vision of integrated sensibility appears in its fullness in Whitman. While all this comes naturally to him, Roethke has to painfully strive for it. What serves as a given premise to Whitman is
"an apex of the apices of the stairs" to Roethke. Harmony between the objective and subjective words was an arduous achievement for Roethke. He knew his dilemma and stated it emphatically:

So caged and cadged, so close within
A coat of unessential skin
I would put off myself and flee
My inaccessibility.

(CP. p.24)

His self finds it difficult to go out of itself and be one with others. It has here turned its face away from others. In spite of this cleavage between these two worlds, Roethke does succeed in coming to terms with his environment by appealing to the animistic powers. He dramatised this struggle in his famous poem "In a Dark Time" (CP. p.239).

My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I ?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is one, free in the tearing wind.

His "once more, the Round" (CP. 251) communicates the ecstasy of a poet who has joined the cosmic dance or who has found the same rhythm of life in the outside world and in his inner life.

Some may feel that one of the ways to understand the organising principle in the poetry of Whitman and Roethke is to approach them through the theory of "Projective Verse". Whitman and Roethke have already been spoken of in our discussion as
poets of the open-road; the picaresque element (in its modified sense) in their poetry was also emphasized, and the organic view of their poetry has also been referred to. Charles Olson's theory enables us to unite these components. He remarks that the "Projectivist" technique can be called "Composition by Field". Explaining his theory he has stressed three important points. First, the kinetics of the thing. This principle holds poetry to be a dynamo of energy. As he puts it, "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it, by way of the poem itself, all the way over to the reader". This view conceives of a poem as inherently capable of generating energy, as a verbal construct full of potentiality for the poet as well as reader. It links the poet, the reader and the genesis of a poem. The poet works as a transferring medium. Whitman uses similar language when he writes:

You shall not look through my eyes either,  
nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter  
them from yourself.

(Whitman, p.26)

This is probably what Olson meant when he remarked that a poem is something of a kinetic conductor which puts the reader in contact with the source of energy. Roethke also shares this view of a poem as a high energy-construct. He said in one of his note-books: "Puts his thought in motion — the poet. ... One of the hardest things a beginner (an honest one) has to learn is how to sustain the energy of a poem; ... He may have a variety of fresh subject matter, slick imagery, sharp epithets, but if he can't make the words move, he has nothing."
The main argument of Richard Allen Blessing in his book on Roethke is that Roethke "experienced life in terms of speed, energy, whirl — as unceasing and often violent motion" and that "the key words, repeated in varying forms and combinations, are energy, intensity, speed, movement, flow". There are many remarks of Roethke which indicate how highly he valued "energy" in poetry. For there are repeated references by him to the effect that "energy is the soul of poetry". As Blessing notes this "energy" is mainly expressed through the "-ing" verbal forms. Roethke's poem "Transplanting" (CP, p. 42) illustrates this observation. His other poems like "Cuttings", "Big Wind"; "My Papa's Waltz" celebrate energy and transfer it to the reader. His well-known "My Papa's Waltz" has for its theme the wild dance of energy, dance representing physical and rhythmical energy. The poem "The Dance" which opens the sequence Four for Sir John Davies is again a hymn to energy. The speaker declares:

And I have made a promise to my ears
I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears.

(CP, p.105)

The rhythm gives us "the very psychic energy of the speaker, in one emotional situation at least".

Whitman connects the process of nature and that of language itself, and equates their power of growth. This habit of thinking was a legacy of Coleridge who had influenced Emerson and Whitman in forming their poetic views. Emerson had said that "in good writing, words become one with things". The idea that the energy and vitality of language spring from its roots in objects of reality links Emerson and Olson. His first principle that a poem is a reservoir of energy is in fact something of a restatement of
the Emerson-Whitman poetic tradition.

The second important point of "projective verse" as enunciated by Olson is: "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception." This implies that a poetic act is for a poet as well as for a reader a continuous process of discovery. A poem cannot be pre-meditated or pre-planned. As James E. Miller, Jr. observes "a true poem is not made but creates itself." This is different from the way the poets of the Pound-Eliot tradition liked to speak of a poem as a "well-wrought urn". Whitman and Roethke, as has already been noted, use the image of journey as a motif in their poems. As against the contemplative mind that we have in Eliot to the voyaging self in Whitman and Roethke there is a very significant shift from substance to process. It is this principle of rendering the fluid reality as it is being experienced that distinguishes Whitman's and Roethke's poetry from Eliot's.

Gay Wilson Allen has found the term "organic" quite inappropriate to describe the poetic technique of Whitman; his recommended term is: "expressive form". He remarked that "Whitman began (usually) not with a predetermined rhythmical and linguistic pattern but with an indefinite striving to discover a form in the very process of giving expression to his idea or intuition." A more striking illustration of Whitman discovering "a form in the very process of giving expression to his idea or intuition" is his use of catalogues. One has to read Section 33 of Song of Myself (Whitman, p.51) in which the poet's "ties and ballasts leave" him and he is "afoot with" his vision. Roethke's "Journey to the Interior" (CP, p.193) or, as a matter of fact, any of his major poetic sequences helps us to realise how central this principle
is in the organization of his poems.

It was perhaps this principle of "the process of the thing" that D.H. Lawrence writes about in his Preface to the American edition of New Poems. He talks about the poetry of the sheer present, "whose very permanency lies in its wind-like transit". He remarked about Whitman's poetry: "The clue to all his utterance lies in the sheer appreciation of the instant moment, ... Eternity is only an abstraction from the actual present. ... This quivering nimble hour of the present, this is the quick of time. This is the immanence". 39 No one could have more perceptibly discerned the secret of the catalogues in Whitman and even in Roethke. The emphasis on "one perception leading to another" suggests that the poem's unity will not be conceptual; it will depend upon the poet's sensations of the moment.

The third principle of the "Projective verse" is: "Form is never more than extension of content." 40 This sounds almost like a summary statement of what Whitman said in his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Robert Greeley, in his interview with Linda Wagner, comments, "Form is what happens. It's the fact of things in the world, however, they are". 41 Whitman and Roethke seem to have realised this secret of the poetic form. Roethke quotes his own poem, "I Need, I Need" (CP. p.74) and the "jump-rope section in which two children chant in alternate aggressive dialogue". 42 The rhythm recaptures the movements of a child's consciousness in a style that is plain and playful:

I wish I was a pifflebob
I wish I was a funny
I wish I had ten thousand hats
And made a lot of money.
But the poems which recapture the movements of his mind with great success are his *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End* sequences. The poetic line here is constructed on "the breath unit, the language that is natural to the immediate thing, the particular emotion"; 43 these words of Roethke echo Olson.

It would thus seem that Whitman anticipated many of the modern poetic notions such as "organic poetry" or "Projective Verse" as practised by Olson, Lawrence and Roethke. Roethke who inherited the legacy of Eliot and Yeats takes upon himself the task of exploring the quality and form of the "mythic" mode as practised by Eliot, and finally discovers that for his growth as poet and perhaps even as man he must reclaim the heritage of Walt Whitman. His poetic encounters with the "mythic" and the "Adamic" modes will be the principal focus of this study. It is interesting to see how Roethke, an important American poet of the mid-twentieth century, recreates the poetic tradition of his immediate past and fuses it with the native American poetic tradition coming down from the nineteenth century.

2. Ibid., p.84.

3. Ibid., p.84.

4. Ibid., p.89.


7. Ibid., p.247.

8. Ibid., p.251.


21. Ibid., p.20.

22. Ibid., p.39.


25. Ibid., pp.450-57.


27. Ibid., p.4.


32. Theodore Roethke, Northwest Review (Summer, 1971), p.34.


34. Ibid., p.3.


40. Ibid., p.148.

41. Ibid., p.286.


43. Ibid., p.83.