PART II

CRITIQUE OF ROETHKE'S POEMS:

THE IMPLICIT DIRECTION
A wretch needs his wretchedness. Yes. But this shape
Sways me awake. What ho, and the field's my friend,
And the cyclamen leaves glisten like the backs
of baby turtles.
I've recovered my tenderness by long looking;
I'm a Socrates of small fury.

( CP. p.260 ).

These lines from "The Changeling", one of the poems
Roethke would not publish, express some of the important facts
about his poetry. What strikes one at once here is the image—
"a Socrates of small fury". It suggests the ruling passion of
Roethke's life for true knowledge and wisdom. Like Socrates
he was committed to the understanding of the self. The
philosopher's exhortation to mankind was: "know thyself" and
Roethke made it the principal burden of his poetic quest.
But then he could be "Socrates of small fury" only. The image
attracts our attention by its contrast between "Socrates" and
"small fury". In his important poems, this is Roethke's
peculiar characteristic: he belittles himself at the same time
as he exalts himself. This can also be seen in "Epidermal
Macabre" ( CP. p.19 ) and "In a Dark Time" ( CP. p.239 ). In
the latter he notes with anguish that he, "a lord of nature" (and a poet too,) was driven to weep "to a tree" (CP. p.239)—an image that presents the speaker in a posture of humiliation. In "Epidermal Macabre" he likens himself to "a most/Incarnadine and carnal ghost".

The "Socratic fury" kept Roethke awake and was one of the reasons of his wretchedness. The nature of this wretchedness can be gleaned from these poems; it is a conflict between the opposite pulls of his nature. But this conflict he needed for his growth as a poet and as a person. The Socratic rage was an aspect of his "wretchedness", the anguish for self-knowledge. An earlier poem, "Silence" (CP. p.22) speaks of his misery.

It breaks upon my solitude —
A hammer on the crystal walls
Of sense at rapid intervals.

The nature of his wretchedness here is not clarified perhaps because it was not clear to the poet himself at the time. He, however, gives vent to a Romantic poet's discontent and grief about "the wheels of circumstance that grind/so terribly with the mind", while his inability for poetic expression adds an edge to the monotony of his grief. His poetic growth is a story of his constant struggle to understand his wretchedness and master it.

Roethke was, then, a poet who immersed himself deeper and deeper into his "wretchedness" which he could ultimately transform into an asset. His way of understanding of the self was described by himself in one of his prose pieces: "The first
(i.e. a heightened consciousness) may be induced simply by intensity in the seeing, suggesting indirectly that concentration and intensity of "seeing" lead to heightened consciousness of one's self and one's world. He was to learn the art of "long looking" not by isolating himself from human concerns but by confronting them and trying to make sense of them, needing to assimilate them before he could transform them. Before he could assimilate and transform his wretchedness, "long looking" was necessary to enable him to recover his "tenderness", to still the violence within. He realised the value of "seeing" and had expressed it in an early poem:

Therefore, O Lord, let me preserve
The Sense that does so fitly serve,
Take Tongue, and Ear, -- all else I have --
Let Light attend me to the grave!

The "Changeling" expresses what is central to his poetry: his image of himself as "Socrates of small fury" and his way of envisioning reality.

Roethke's early poems express his confrontation with the experiences of his upbringing, and his struggle to make sense of them. There are a few poems which show that he suffered from an oppressive sense of "the taint in a blood". "Feud" (CP. p.4) conveys his dilemma with epigrammatic pointedness. There is a sense that the place where he was born was a trap, that he was hunted by "ancestral eyes":

There is canker at the root, your seed
Denies the blessing of the sun,
The light essential to your need.
Your hopes are murdered and undone.
He explores his own roots and digs deeper into his wretchedness. He senses a tainted legacy from the family and describes himself as a "darling of an infected brood". The image of disease is significant, and the tightly textured lyric expresses his anguish and anxiety to be free from the "corruption" of the "exhausted fathers". This is his confrontation with the "ancient feud". He had realised that the biological destiny had to be contended against and that there was no escape from it. There was always

the devouring mother cry, "Escape me? Never--"
And the honeymoon be spoiled by a father's ghost.

(CP. p.5)

Roethke could not be grateful to his parents; their world had denied him "personal fulfilments". The parents, he thought, were dedicated to "all the misery of manila folders and mucilage", "ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma, Endless duplication of lives and objects". (CP. p.46). The order that his parents' world represented was, "in human terms, a disorder, and as such must be resisted". 4 In indicting the world of the parents, he condemned the contemporary life of "organized man", "the trivia of the institution". Thus at the threshold of life, he was facing "the problem of identity in pursuit of personal fulfilments". 5

Two senses of order are represented in the poetry of Roethke-- order as represented by the industrialised mechanical civilisation and order in the sense of harmony born of the perception of the underlying unity of all things. One may ask:
What did "the greenhouses" mean to his father? Did he (i.e. Roethke's father) feel any kinship with them? There is a vivid portrait of his father at work in the poem, "Old Florist" (CP. p.42). He worked ceaselessly as a machine, but there is nothing to suggest that the "old florist" had established any personal relationship with the plants. The verbal forms of continuous activity imply the ideal of machine-like work and activity. "Transplanting" (CP. p.42) also describes to us a man who was always tirelessly at work. In such a world Roethke felt that he was like a lost son.

Where could he find true harmony and order? The secret of maintaining one's innocence, of guarding the purity of one's heart against the defilement of modern civilised life was to resort to a very different pattern and level of existence — to live as the primitives did. The difference between the world of "Transplanting" and "Long Live the Weeds" (CP. p.18) is too apparent to need elaboration. Roethke seems to be implying two types of heritage: one descending from human parents and another bequeathed by nature itself. Paradoxical as it might appear, the way to freedom for Roethke was to return to the world of the "weeds". With the confidence of the Eastern mentality, he remarked: "Everything that lives is holy", and added that "all living things, including the sub-human" are of equal value "in a quest for identity". In the greenhouses of his family Roethke could see life as it was burgeoning; the process of germination of life was like a miracle, and its birth, growth and extinction were matters for wonder and awe, which he noted with the eye of a poet and rendered with the
precision of a scientist. What fascinated him was the drama of renewal of life being perpetually acted out there.

For some reason Roethke had a feeling that the secret of his identity was hidden in the world of the glasshouses. Stanley Kunitz remarked: "What Roethke brings to us in these poems is news of the root, of the minimal, of the primordial. The sub-human is given tongue; and the tongue proclaims the agony of coming alive, the painful miracle of growth. Here is a poetry immersed in the destructive element." This emphasis on the mode of Roethke's exploration of the self is right. It states his chief preoccupation. The idea of using the world of plants as an emblem of human growth is of course traditional, but Roethke presented the development of the individual in terms of the imagery and symbolism of the natural world and the pre-rational consciousness from which it springs. There is a perception of the double nature of life, that it decays and regenerates itself. "The urge, wrestle, resurrection" of "sticks-in-a browse" is no less miraculous than that of Christ. By an oblique comparison of the "cuttings" to Christ, Roethke wished to convey that resurrection was a privilege not of the saints and martyrs only but also of the "dry sticks" and "one nub of growth". (CP. p.37). The world of physical phenomena is understood and interpreted in terms of spiritual experience. The juxtaposition of the resurrection of "dry sticks" and (the implied image) of Christ is a clever conceit embodying what Roethke had described as "socrates of small fury". The conceit also suggests the influence of the seventeenth century poets of England on Roethke in his early period. In the same poem, "Cuttings (later)", he employs an image suggesting the bond between the natural and human worlds.
I can hear, underground, the sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,

( CP. p.37 ).

The image conveys the relationship between a child and its mother. These two images, of a martyr straining for some kind of union with Heavenly Father and of the child, "sucking and sobbing", point to the two main drives of Roethke's poetry — one uniting him to the world of his father and another pulling him towards his Heavenly Father. These polarities are expressed in "Cuttings (later)". The conflict between the two pulls provides the centre of dramatic tension in his poetry, generating the image of a lost or forsaken child. Kenneth Burke shrewdly remarked that envagination was Roethke's mode of home coming. 9

In spite of these two drives in his poetry, the earlier poems carry out the quest of the self primarily in terms of biological roots.

Roethke himself explains what he was attempting in these short "greenhouse" lyrics. He said: "I have tried to transmute and purify my 'life', the sense of being defiled by it, in both small and formal and somewhat blunt lyrics." 10 The poetic act was a continuous exercise in exorcism or catharsis to him. The greenhouse for Roethke was a place where he had tasted evil. His poems, from the earliest phase of his career, express his awareness that there can be no growth in maturity without a knowledge of evil and its assimilation into life. The poem "Orchids" ( CP. p.39 ) depicts the greenhouse world infected to the core by evil. On one level, it is an "imagist" poem evoking
the sinister world of the greenhouse. Underneath is an implication that these plants, "adder-mouthed," Swaying close to the fact, Coming out, soft and deceptive are like serpents in the Garden of Eden. The emotional impact of the poem is charged with sense of menace lurking in the greenhouse. His "Moss-Gathering" (CP. p. 40) can be taken as a pastoral poem reminding one of Wordsworth. One may enjoy the poem as a nature lyric whose subject is not the life in nature, or its secret manifestation, but how the child's wilful consciousness matures into the sympathetic imagination. One must grant that the poem does treat of the moral awakening in the young boy and a profound realisation of the moral and natural order acting in harmony together. However, it also implies his awakening to puberty. As Karl Malkoff has remarked: "The 'gathering' itself takes place in a landscape with clearly sexual overtones; it is followed by a feeling of guilt at the onanistic action." There are words and phrases which suggest onanistic activities; the earlier part of the poem describes the boy as engaged in that activity. The boy has been defiling the virginity of the soil.

And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging back over the logging road,
As if I had broken the natural order of things in that swamp land;
Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,
By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration.

It is perhaps not right to separate the moral awakening and sexual coming of age in Roethke. The sequence Four For Sir John Davies (CP. p. 105-107) may be cited in support of this. Except in "Moss-Gathering" nowhere else in Roethke's poetry is sex linked with a sense of guilt. If "Moss-Gathering" deals
with sexual awakening in a young boy, "Big Wind" (CP. p.41)
treats of the same theme in a woman. "Big Wind", one may maintain,
stands for the sexual tumult in the greenhouse and Roethke describes
powerfully the disruption it causes in that world in the first part
of the poem. How did the men take this storm? What was her (i.e.
of the greenhouse) way of fighting it out?

She hove into the teeth of it,
The core and pith of that ugly storm,

The young boy was swept off his feet with a sense of violation of
the sacred; the "rose-house" resisted the storm and proved herself
the better of the two.

Roethke had remarked that his early poetry was born out of his
keen desire to "purify" his life. In what sense did he use this
word? Did he mean "purify" in the religious sense of the term? Or
did he imply that the making of poems was a therapeutic action to
him? It seems from the reading of his poems that the word was
probably not employed in either of these senses. The self in
Roethke's poems, as we saw earlier, is alienated from the roots --
filial, social and even from one's self. What he sought through
the making of his poems was some kind of lucidity of self or clari-
fication of his self to himself. In the earlier poems of Open House
(1941) and the introductory poems to The Lost Son (1946) sequence,
Roethke was making a series of poetic statements of his predicament.
He defined that career, in his essay "'On Identity!' " as seeking the
evolution of the self to the soul, implying a movement from nature
to God, from the Other to the One, transcending one's guilt and
one's past. It is his awareness of his identity, his awareness of
self, that reminds him almost obsessively of his distinctness from
everything beyond the limits of the identity.
"At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry" — this is how the first poem, "The Flight", of *The Lost Son* (CP. p. 53) sequence begins. The very first line echoes the world Roethke depicted in his early lyrics like "Feud" and "Dolor" (CP. p. 46), and the speaker has conjured up the bizarre world of his past in the first stanza. The image it projects is of a person haunted by his past and desperately struggling for liberation. He yearns for freedom as a guilty person does for release, and after embodying the inner turmoil in the image of a convict running away from his thraldom, he falls on his knees suing for freedom. However, the gods that are evoked are not the Christian saints and prophets but those same creatures of the greenhouses, the snail, the bird and the worm. The images speak for themselves and convey the basic situation of the sequence — something that links Roethke with Pound and Eliot. One notices how eminently concrete and physical Roethke's poetry is. In its use of the colloquial idiom and dramatic tone, the poem comes very near to the technique of the interior monologue we find in Pound and Eliot.

Roethke pointed out in his article "On Identity" that this sequence represented his "struggle to be born" and an "effort to get out of slime". This anxiety, however, was not limited only to this quest for personal identity. The problem was more complicated because for him the only way to realise his identity was through his poetry. "Being, not doing, is my first joy", he declared in "The Abyss" (CP. p. 222), and this joy of "Being" could exist for him only in the poetry he was making. But he
was no aesthete like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, or some of the French Symbolists though the "Symbolists" seem to have influenced him through Pound and Eliot. Having been born to the world of greenhouses and the Pound-Eliot tradition, he had to discover where he belonged. *The Lost Son* (CP. p.53) records his struggle to come alive both as an individual and as a poet, "the struggle of the poet to follow his genius" and "the struggle of the man to grow up". 14

The first poem, "The Flight" of the sequence presents in dramatic terms the situation of the protagonist who is haunted by the sense of futility of life.

Fished in an old wound,  
The soft pond of repose;  
Nothing nibbled my line,  
Not even the minnows came.  
Sat in an empty house  
Watching shadows crawl,  
Scratching.  
There was one fly.

The lines create a landscape with which the reader of "modernist" poetry is familiar: the landscape of the wasteland. The narrator also intimates the mode of his quest which is compared to "fishing in an old wound". The "glasshouse" poems deal with the making of an individual in a fundamental, biological sense. "Having emerged as an organism alive in the world, the protagonist must learn how to live harmoniously with the rest of creation; he must learn to transcend the apparent paradox of his dual (physical and spiritual) nature, and find his relation to reality as a unified being". 15 remarks Karl Malkoff. The sub-human, the human, and the divine — these were going to be the stages of Roethke's journey out of the self. *In The Lost Son* sequence it is
the sub-human world which is the centre of the self.

    All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
    I shook the softening chalk of my bones.

    (CP. p.53).

Roethke was so much obsessed with the secrets of the origins of life, and with his own origins that "he is hunting like a primitive, for... some clue to existence from the sub-human, ... he hangs in the balance between the human and the animal". The protagonist here is a harried person desperately fleeing from a vaguely sensed catastrophe. His dilemma is acute:

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

    (CP. p.54).

He finds himself "in the Kingdom of bang and blab" and the world he perceives is the world of death. The first section ends with the image of death under water.

    It's sleek as an otter
    With wide webby toes
    Just under the water
    It usually goes.

The poem describes a spiral of flight, and its images are charged with fear. "Fear" dominates the protagonist as he is filled with repulsion and awe at his origins, and the "return" becomes inevitable because "no reliable surrogates for 'papa' and 'mama'" are available. We are given no reason for this regressive flight: it might be that the speaker could not identify himself with the world of the Woodlawn. He has been isolated from the world of nature and "the relation to reality as a unified being" has remained impossible.
With the awareness that there was no possibility of escape from "the old wound" and that willy-nilly he must return to the world of his "underness" (Kenneth Burke's phrase), he meets the principles of 'mama' in the second section and of 'papa' in the third and fourth sections of the poem. In "The Pit" section (CP. p.55), the child-protagonist conveys the feeling of tasting "the Slime of a wet nest", how he felt as a growing embryo in the womb. One is reminded of Jung's theory of regression and progression of the self and the 'mama' principle. In parenthesis, one may also note that Roethke associates the generative process with the 'feminine' principle. The protagonist's regressive search has brought him to the image of the womb. The sexual implications of the whole section are clear in its images.

Who stunned the dirt into noise?
Ask the mole, he knows.

Similarly, the 'papa' principle is encountered in "The Gibber" and "The Return" sections of the poem. The young boy imagines himself to be bidding good-bye to the sub-human world:

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

(CP. p.56)

He also cries:

Ordung! Ordung!
Papa is coming!

The mother and father, as generative and shaping spirits, carry with them the associations of fear and mystery that will persist even when
Roethke comes to deal with woman and God. As Kenneth Burke pointed out in this sequence Roethke was "in search of essential parenthood" and for him the parents were represented by nature, woman and God.

Roethke advised his readers that the best way to make sense of The Lost Son was to approach it "as a child would, naively, with your whole being awake, your faculties loose and alert".  This is very true, for the method he employs attempts to capture the movement of a child's psyche and its way of viewing and representing experience. But the awareness of this experience and its impact are certainly not of a child; the verse is more sophisticated, and the protagonist seems to be probing the nature of his self and its relation to nature with the determination of a philosopher. He frantically struggles to relate his self to the world of his surroundings. It is not enough to have consciousness; it is the process of individuation the protagonist is concerned with. How far does his consciousness tally with the principle of life that he had observed in the glass-houses? — this is the burden of his seeking in these poems. However, the language and the mode of knowing in this sequence are very largely those of a child. "The Gibber" (CP. p.55) uses a child's mode of utterance and perplexity at the stirring of new experiences. The child-protagonist cannot leave behind the "dogs of the groin" that "barked and howled", and the voice of death to which the figure of the father adds dread. The child thus confronts the world of life and death. He perceives "substance flowing/That cold morning". This is ambiguous; it suggests the sprouting of new life in the greenhouses and also the awakening of sexual impulse in the young boy. The narrator faces the temptation of money also, and "the time-order" of these awakenings is reversed:

Money money money
Water Water Water
These awakenings are only dimly and intermittently felt before the protagonist retreats to his old world.

The protagonist learns painfully that the self cannot take a leap at one bound and that he has to remain tied to his roots. There is also the realisation that nature which may be looked as the womb where life germinates, also embodies the contrary process of birth and of death. The two processes exist simultaneously. Nature and sex seem to be mysteriously united while "fear" is still the motivating urge of the protagonist. There is a "return" to the greenhouse, but the self that comes back to it is not the same. It has been modified by its experiences. If the journey out of the self is a spatial metaphor, the course that has been travelled so far is not a spatial gain. The speaker re-experiences "all the stages of his growth by re-enacting all the transmutations of his being from seed to maturity". The self perpetually withdraws and moves forward. Roethke said that "to begin from the depths and come out — that is difficult; for few know where the depths are or can recognise them; or, if they do, are afraid". And this return of the self is always an enhanced retreat.

The "Return" (CP. p.57) re-creates the experience of the greenhouse. It is all about the child and his tyrannical father who cried out "Ordung! Ordung!". The narrator recalls an incident of his early life — he stayed out all night:

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.

In the earlier section of "The Gibber" the speaker identified the
"father" with "fear".

Fear was my father. Father Fear.

"father" so far in Roethke's poem has stood for fear, tyranny and worldly mastery. Does he use the word "Father" only in its biological sense? Or, is there an implied hint of God, the Father who stands for light? One may mark here a transition that Roethke's poetry is likely to make: from fear to light. There is stagnation for a while, but that is a temporary phase only. The protagonist feels an assurance of a way out:

The rose, the chrysanthemum turned towards the light. Admittedly, it is only a faint ray of hope of light: there is yet no full emergence out of darkness. So, the last poem appropriately speaks of an "in-between time". The movement is there, however inconsiderable its degree. Roethke's remark that partial illumination occurs "to the nearly grown" man suggests that the protagonist has a long way to go. Neither physically nor spiritually, he is fully mature. The moment of realisation is still away; this is a period of longing, waiting and expecting. If the speaker has a few glimpses of light he is still uncertain about the nature of that light. What is achieved, however, is a sense of some relationship with nature, for it is from nature that light comes to the speaker. This note of paganism is struck again:

Light travelled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.

( CP. p.58)
Whatever may be the nature of light at this stage of the journey of the seeker, it may be observed that the regressive movement of the self has begun to expand. The rhythm of the verse reflects the movement of the self.

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

(CP. p. 58)

The series of questions, and the tone here reflect the modernity of the narrator's mind. He is still probing the "light that travelled over the field". At this point of his quest, his only solace is in the hope that the moments of light would visit him again:

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

In one of his later poems, "Journey to the Interior" (CP. p. 193), Roethke (through his persona) seems to be referring to the journey undertaken in the first part of The Lost Son sequence. The course of the journey in the first part of The Lost Son is marked by the movement of the self in the backward direction while "The Pit" section embodies the general movement of the entire poem. What we have here is the self exploring itself indirectly. Stanley Kunitz has noted that Roethke knew, if not Jung, at least Jung's disciple Maud Bodkin and he is right in suggesting that Roethke's modes of exploration of the self are Jungian. The self in
Roethke's poem is still entrenched in its roots, has just become aware of this and has begun to make efforts to discover itself.

"The vagueness of identity" Burke suggests, "is often symbolised by travel". This remark poses a question: how far is the poetic form related to the question of the self? "Travel" suggests a shifting landscape and a constant change in perspective. Thus, it implies that one has not arrived, and appropriately expresses the "quest" motif. Because the protagonist in Roethke's poem "plays all the parts"—flower, fish, reptile, amphibian, bird, he is compared to Proteus. The metaphor of journey is expressive of the vacillations of the self. The seeker has been searching for a way of regaining his childhood sense of union with nature, which he could achieve for a brief moment.

Explaining the organizing principle of The Lost Son Roethke says, "Each poem is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more". This states the recurring theme of his poetic sequences, first expressed in a vivid image in "Cuttings (later)". It is a spiritual quest for identity and the sequences would trace the growth of the self "to become something more". The stages of this quest are interrelated, which suggests that his method of poetic composition was organic. Some experiences, he noted, are "so powerful and so profound that they repeat themselves, ... with variation and change, each time bringing us closer to our most particular reality". This takes us to the heart of The Lost Son where the experiences are of those of the greenhouses, of the adolescent's growth, of the transition of the self to soul.
"The Long Alley" (CP. p.59) concerns itself with the same experience of the terrific knock within to gain more consciousness and a partial emergence out of the constricted self. The technique of rendering the experiences is also very similar to that of the first poem of the sequence; it evokes the inner landscape by establishing its correspondence with the external locale. But of course, the most remarkable quality of Roethke's poem is their fidelity to the physical landscape. The self may be uncertain of its identity but the landscape is rendered with something of the "imagistic" clarity and conciseness. The form the verse takes is determined by the perceptions of the protagonist. As in a journey, one perception leads to another and conditions this motion of the visualising self.

"The Flight" contains images drawn from the Woodlawn, while this section depicts more of the out of doors landscape. A river gliding like a serpent out of the grass, and a fish floating its belly upward, project the images of the self "striving to be born". Both link the growth of the self with sexuality — the same driving impulse noted in the earlier poem, where he had the sexual urge as one of the manifestations of the evolutionary appetite of the self.

The shaping of the first two stanzas emblematically suggests the envaginal tendency of the speaker's self. The father's ghost also pursues the protagonist here:

The dark flows on itself, A dead mouth sings under an old tree.
The ear hears only in low places.
Remember an old sound.
Remember Water.

The lines recreate the images of the world of underness, images from the earlier days of the narrator. Section I of The Long Alley
depicts the landscape of The Saginaw Valley, a fertile flat country in Michigan, what is now the central industrial area of the United States, the landscape of Roethke's boyhood.

This slag runs slow. What bleeds when metal breaks? Flesh, you offend this metal. How long need the bones mourn? Are those horns on top of the hills? Yesterday has a long look.

The protagonist re-lives his past as immediate experience, the past which cannot be buried easily. The stanza repeats the technique of rhetorical questions of The Pit section and combines with it observation and review of the landscape we find in the first poem of The Lost Son. One notices Roethke's irony in his description of the "sulphurous water" as proceeding "from the glory of God". The images from the earlier poem "The Flight" are telescoped with associational inevitability. For instance:

Can you name it? I can't name it
Let's not hurry. The dead don't hurry.
Who else breathes here? What does the grave say?
My gates are all caves.

(CP. p.59)

The protagonist is at the dead-end of his journey; he is a lost son. The course of the journey out of the self is fraught with dread and darkness. The "womb" image reappears as a "cave" image, which again fills the speaker with awe and mystery.

The second poem of "The Long Alley" (CP. p.59) section conjures up the images of the underworld, of fear and mystery, and they are linked with the sexual awakening in the boy and his
memories of the father. It reiterates the theme of alienation of the self from its surroundings. One reason for this alienation could be the desecration of nature by the industries. Another might be the inability of the narrator to comprehend the change coming over in his life. The sexual impulse seems to be regarded as an inevitable experience which the self must encounter in its transition to soul. It is the most vital experience in which the self can identify itself with the creative principle in nature. In fact, it could serve as a bridge between nature and God. It is a liberating experience forcing the self to move out of itself and establish relations with others, but the self of the protagonist is still narcissistic and suffers from a sense of imprisonment.

Come to me, milk-nose. I need a loan of the quick.
There's no joy in soft bones.
From whom were you made, sweetness I cannot touch?
Look what the larks do.
Luminous one, shall we meet on the bosom of God?
Return the gaze of a pond.

Here, the protagonist rehearses a part of his role in "The Gibber" (CP. p. 55) and "The Flight" (CP. p. 53). He entreats "milk-nose" for more consciousness, for growth, because the incipient self is a burden. The self craves for expansion; it would be as free as the larks. The secret of expansion is touch; it is through the sense of touch that the self can attain unity with its surroundings. Roethke evokes an erotic image in the line: "For whom were you made, sweetness I cannot touch?" He speaks of the longing of the self to move out of itself in erotic images which are also charged with religious implications.

The third poem, "Stay close. Must I kill something else?"
(CP. p.60) smacks somewhat of the Oedipus complex. The self has failed to discover "any" clue in the silt; the sense of isolation has been more acute. The connection between the self and its environment is not yet established. The self has relapsed into a regressive movement:

Can feathers eat me? There is no clue in the silt.
This wind gives me scales. Have mercy,
gristle;
It's my last waltz with an old itch.

The ghost of the father is still lurking and there is a pun on "feathers" and "fathers". The middle stanzas describe the sensual dance of the self and the erotic presence and the protagonist indulges in this dance without any feeling of guilt of the kind one finds in "Moss-Gathering" (CP. p.40). What one may note in this poem is the use of nursery rhymes.

Gilliflowers, ha,
Gilliflower, ho,
My love's locked in
The old Silo.

The poem ends with the images of onanism.

If we detach
The head of a match
What do we do
To the cat's wish?

The principle of life and the sexual urge are linked inseparably in Roethke.

After the erotic dance the self feels a little released or liberated in the fourth poem (CP. p.61). It can now feel one with nature.
Light airs! Light airs! A pierce of angels!
The leaves, the leaves become me!
The tendrils have me!

The lines express the intense excitement and joy of the protagonist. He sings a beautiful pastoral song recalling the happy spring in the greenhouses.

The last poem (CP. p.61) brings the protagonist to the greenhouses — the world of money-making. "Nuts are money; wherefore and what else?" The two aspects of the greenhouse world — the pastoral as described in the song, "Come littlest, Come tenderest" and the commercial as reflected here — are sharply contrasted. "The taking of the fires, with which the poems ends, is an acceptance of sexuality without guilt, uniting spiritual and material existence in a transcendent reality" remarks Karl Malkoff. The image of castration signals the protagonist's rejection of the world associated with his father:

Call off the dogs, my paws are gone.

At the same time he identifies himself with that aspect of the greenhouse which represents the creative cycle of nature. By accepting his sexuality, he could unite himself with nature.

The protagonist, as we remember, experienced a sense of liberation, a mystic sense of oneness with nature, at the end of The Lost Son (CP. p.58). At that point, however, it was merely a vague sense of unity with nature; he was "trying to ground his existence in the light of mystic perception".
This was a perception of a possibility of a way out for the incipient self. In "The Long Alley", the self of the protagonist makes a small advance; it joins a sensual dance by accepting sexuality without any sense of guilt. It is moving towards a Dionysian mode of its journey out of the self. The title of the third poem of the sequence "A Field of Light" (CP. p.62) reminds one of the ending of "The Flight". It describes a pagan's joy in nature. The first section of the poem partly re-creates the landscapes of "Woodlawn" and the river of the earlier poems. The memories of futility are re-echoed; to Roethke, the regressive journey to the slime is a descent into the depths of the unconscious. However, in the wasteland, there are signs of fertility:

A fine rain fell
On fat leaves;
I was there alone
In a watery drowse.

At this stage of this journey the seeker welcomes rain as a symbol of fertility but longs for the sun. He is troubled by the doubt whether he ever committed any offense against the father, against God.

Angel within me, I asked,
Did I ever curse the sun?
Speak and abide.

Why is the condemned to darkness and suffering? Why is light denied to him? The cry of the speaker reminds one of Job but his worship is a primitivist, animistic gesture:

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came near.
Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.
The revelation that follows is that of nature's independent kingdom of "the lovely diminutives". The narrator has a moment of mystical experience, which speaks not of the heaven above but of the glory of this world. It is a moment of rapture and light, in which there is a flow of affinity between the self and nature.

The lovely diminutives.
I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things!
My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
There were clouds making a rout of shapes
crossing a windbreak of cedars,
And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.
The worms were delighted as wrens,
And I walked, I walked through the light air;
I moved with the morning.

Roethke's comment on this passage is pertinent: "It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being — and in some instances, even an inanimate thing — brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe." The passage emphasizes the heightened awareness of the self which is filled with joy in the presence of "lovely diminutives"; the self at this stage has not merged with others, but there is communion with plant and animal life. The secret of communion, once again, is the sense of touch. The speaker has retained his separate identity, but feels at one with the natural world.

This, in fact, is Roethke's first step in his journey towards Whitman who had exhorted:
Roethke's protagonist has only glimpsed the secret which Whitman possessed from the beginning — the secret of "the flowing eternal identity"/To Nature", the secret of the afflatus establishing connections with others. It is a kind of natural religion with a strong pantheistic trait. Roethke's rhythms render the expansion of consciousness of the protagonist.

In "The Shape of the Fire" (CP. p.64) the concerns of the earlier three poems are brought together: the statement of the plight of the self, its entanglement with the womblike existence and the promise of rescue. The child-protagonist who signs a joyous hymn to the world of nature in "A Field of Light" is aware that it was not a moment of complete epiphany. He does not claim any spiritual validity for his ecstasy in the field; he has only arrived at "the edge of whiteness". He says:

Spirit, come near. This is only the edge of whiteness.
I can't laugh at a procession of dogs.

In a retrospective view of his journey, the landscapes of the river-side and wide barren regions are revived. Once again, the self begins to perform "a very slow and pirouetting dance, whilst pronouncing some very strange serious mock-word.".

(Whitman. p.43)
Where's the eye?
The eye's in the sty,
The ear's not here
Beneath the hair.
When I took off my clothes
To find a nose,
There was only one shoe
For the Waltz of To,
The pinch of where.

The world of "underness" is like a puzzle of the sphinx to the narrator:

Mother me out of here. What more will the bones allow?
Will the sea give the wind such? A toad folds into a stone.
These flowers are all fangs. Comfort me, fury.
Wake me, witch, we'll do the dance of rotten sticks.

These are the voices we heard at the "Woodlawn", the voices of dread and death. The brief lyric beginning with "The Wasp Waits" is replete with riddle-like statements and epigrammatic pointedness. It reiterates the strenuousness of the journey out of the self:

The grape glistens. The path tells little to the serpent.
The eye comes out of the wave.
The journey from flesh is longest.

(CP. p.66)

The long journey from flesh is both the act of being born, physically and being reborn, spiritually. However, there is a note of consolation.

A rose sways least
The redeemer comes a dark way.

The rose, which is a traditional symbol of the mystic, represents steadiness; it is its "still point", freedom from the flux of life. The dark path of the redeemer may be the regressive journey that
leads to self-understanding. The form of this section, however, enacts the dilemma of the protagonist — the two ends are yet to meet.

The fourth section (CP, p.66) is an appeal of the narrator to "morning fair" to take him back to the primordial mode of existence, "into the minnowy world of weeds and ditches", life of a "simple drowse". His early world was that of incipient life, of dormant potentiality. There was, however, a perception of mutual bond in the world of nature:

The flowers leaned on themselves,
the flowers in hollows;
And love, love sang toward.

The poem moves gradually from sexuality to the glimpses of spiritual light. These lines of Roethke echo those of Whitman (Vide: p.148) in which he (Whitman) speaks of "the afflatus surging and surging" in the world.

The last section, "To have the whole air" (CP, p.67) sings a lyric hymn of the self's awakening. Its progression and direction are emphatically clear:

The tendrils turning slowly,
A slow snail-lifting, liqueescent;
To be by the rose
Rising slowly out of its bed,
Still as a child in its first loneliness.

This is how the self of the protagonist would grow — the image represents the process. The alchemist is the sun — life-giver. And its secret is that it might come unawares.

To know that light falls and fills,
often without knowing.
The form of this section gradually opens itself out as the self wants to communicate its expansive movements. The flower of the self could blossom only in its soil, the world of the glasshouses of his father. That is its nourishing soil.

III

The self of the child-protagonist that emerges at the end of The Lost Son is perhaps best described in the image of the ape in the zoo that Ortega Y Gasset presents in his essay, "The Self and the Other". He notes how the beast lives in constant fear of the world, "looking and listening for all the signals that reach ... from surroundings, ... as if it feared some constant peril in it, to which it must automatically respond by flight or bite". 31

The analogy is appropriate if we remember Roethke's early life in the world of glasshouses, and especially that the protagonist of the sequence is "a hunted and harried man". Fear to him is personified in the figure of his father. "Fear was my father. Father Fear". (CP. p.56). The analogy is also appropriate because it refers to the quality of life presented in the poem which is in its incipient stage. Roethke is concerned with the self in its very biological roots.

The self of the protagonist is pushed and pulled by its surroundings; "it does not live from itself ... that its life is essential alteracion". 32 The plight of the self as reflected in the following verses from "The Gibber" (CP. p.55) bears out how it responds to its environment by claustrophobia.
At the wood's mouth,
By the cave's door,
I listened to something
I had heard before.
Dogs of the groin
Barked and howled,
The sun was against me,
The moon would not have me.

The image of the "harried man" expresses here the level of existence Ortega Y Gasset describes in his passage. The protagonist is threatened for his survival. His problem, which is the retreat of the self in the presence of others, is also stated by Ortega Y Gasset. He has remarked in one of his essays, "something is a problem to me not because I am ignorant about it, ...; but when I search within myself and do not know what my genuine attitude toward it is." 33 This may be one of the reasons for the hiatus between the self and others; the protagonist of The Lost Son recoils from the world of the glasshouses because he has yet to find out his "genuine attitude" (not intellectual, necessarily) toward the earlier world. The writing of these poems might help him to form and understand his "attitude" toward the world of his parents. As Ortega Y Gasset added, "Solution of a problem" may mean, "only being clear with myself about the thing that was a problem to me". 34 Roethke's quest (or rather the quest of his protagonist) is aimed at such an understanding of the self and its surroundings. Without this kind of understanding, the self is doomed to disintegration. The crucial point about it is the way it achieves "clarity" with itself and the world. The absence of such an understanding makes the protagonist "The Lost Son", biologically, socially and spiritually.
While the analogy of the self as a frightened animal in a zoo helps one to understand the self in Roethke's sequence, it overlooks the other aspects of the self. The self might have failed to enter into a proper personal relationship with its surroundings and might, out of fear, withdraw into itself. An animal in a zoo is filled with dread of its environment since it is not related to its surroundings in a meaningful personal relationship. The self in Roethke's sequence feels lost because its relation with the surroundings, to use Martin Buber's terms, is not converted into "I - Thou" relation. It would move in this direction by slow degrees inspite of its many detours, as the self learns the secret of spontaneous empathy with others.

IV

The image of the "lost son" links Roethke's The Lost Son with Eliot's The Waste Land. Roethke said that his aim as a poet was to explore the chaos of modern life and "the faculty for producing order out of disorder... particularly in poetry." Both of them felt like "lost sons" in the cultural situation of their times.

The malaise of their protagonists is the same: the loss of connection with the world. A more helpful way to understand how Roethke responds to Eliot is to study the images in their various sequences. To take one from The Waste Land.

I can connect
Nothing with nothing
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.

(T.S. Eliot; Penguin Poets; p.60).
Eliot's narrator articulates the predicament which is also the nightmare of the protagonist in *The Lost Son*. The protagonists of these sequences struggle to run away from a death-like existence, in search of links with their origins. Roethke's seeker is so much beside himself with confusion and fear that his perceptions have become hazy.

What's this? A dish for fat lips.
Who says? A nameless stranger.
Is he a bird or a tree? Not everyone can tell.

( CP: p.64 )

The questions of the narrator reveal that his connections with the physical objects and persons have been severed, and that he cannot recognise the object before his eyes and even the person who answers him. The device of catechism acutely conveys the loss of connection.

In *The Lost Son* there are several images which bear resemblance to some of those in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's poem, as we know, uses an image of a fisherman fishing in a barren land.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
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.66 )

The image conveys the deadness of the place, and sterility and dread predominate the situation. This atmosphere of the situation and especially the colloquial tone are captured in Roethke:
Fished in an old wound,
The soft pond of repose;
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even the minnows came

The "rat", "the bones" that we read about in Eliot's stanza also figure in Roethke's poem.

Running lightly over spongy ground,
Past the pasture of flat stones,
The three elms,
The sheep strewn on a field,
Over a rickety bridge
Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.

Hunting along the river,
Down among the rubbish, the bug-ridden foliage,
By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,
By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.

The shape of a rat?
It's bigger than that.
It's less than a leg
And more than a nose,
Just under the water
It usually goes.

( CP. p.54 )

Most of the details in Roethke here evoke the same locale as we find in Eliot's lines. Roethke seems to be writing with the awareness of *The Waste Land* "in his bones". The landscapes of the modern river one finds in these poems are smeared with signs of modern culture. The river in *The Fire Sermon* (T.S. Eliot) "bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends". While the picture of *Sweet Thames* is an ironical version of the pastoral idyl, the river in *The Long Alley* (CP. p.59) is a symbol of commercial transactions and expansion. The irony here is obvious.

Loo, loo, said the sulphurous water,
There's no filth on a plateau of cinders.
This smoke's from the glory of God.
The figure of the father looms ominously over *The Lost Son*, and it marks an ambiguous relationship between the protagonist and his father. Roethke's poetic relation with Eliot is similarly characterised by love and hate. It was not easy for him to exercise the ghost of his literary ancestor. He recognised that Yeats and Eliot were the major poets of his generation; they had a special power of language, a special feeling for the connections of words in sound and meaning. This quality and use of language, Eliot described as "auditory imagination". It is, he explains, "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; ... It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality". 36 It is evident that "auditory imagination" should not be confused with Carlyle's dictum of poetry as musical thought. The gift of incantatory rhythms is not exploited for its own sake. As F.O. Matthiessen annotates Eliot's idea: "He knows that a word is not a fixed counter, that it brings with it varying colours from all its previous stages, ... that its connotation is extended or shifted according to its relation to the moving procession of other words which precede and come after". 37 From one point of view, it appears that Eliot's "auditory imagination" extends his idea of a poetic tradition even to the dynamic evolution of words through centuries. Its meaning is determined by the context in which it occurs. This is, one would recall, a part of the organic theory of poetry. One is also tempted to surmise that Eliot in his enunciation of "auditory imagination" was transmitting the
influence of French Symbolists. His belief was that "poetry can communicate before it is understood."

Roethke, in his essay, "Some Remarks on Rhythm," says: "We must keep in mind that rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature. It involves certainly stress, time, pitch, the texture of the words, the total meaning of the poem." 38 Both these poets reiterate that poetic rhythm appeals to what is deepest in human nature from the primitive to the civilized man.

The Lost Son sequence which was published in 1948 announces Roethke's coming-of-age. While he echoes Eliot in the poetic rhythms of lines, in the use of colloquial idiom, and in the conversational manner, his poetic voice is distinct, more agitated and passionate. Its violence is less controlled and more desperately urgent than in Eliot. But Roethke's poem also exhibits the rhythmical flexibility and range Eliot displays in The Waste Land.

Where do the roots go?
Look down under the leaves.
Who put the moss there?
These stones have been here too long.

( CP. p. 55 )

The stresses here are almost regularly distributed, only the last line has an extra-syllable. The conversational rhythm and the colloquial idiom strike our attention at once. If the question, in the lines quoted, suggests a rising rhythm, the answer to it follows in a low key. The repetition of rising and falling rhythms throughout the larger part of this section has something of a quiz about it. The rhetorical questions create the sense
Similarly, though the situations in "The Pit" and "A Game of Chess" sections are different, Roethke's poem echoes the rhetorical questions and conversational rhythm of Eliot's poem.

What is that noise?
The wind under the door.
What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?
Nothing again nothing.
'You know nothing? Do you see nothing?
Do you remember
Nothing?'

(T.S.Eliot: p.53)

Thematically, Roethke's and Eliot's lines express the perplexity, the loss of the sense of direction and awe-someness of the situation in which the protagonists are caught. There is a feeling of dead-end which both the protagonists experience. However, Eliot's lines evoke a nightmare of cultural sterility which has also dried up the springs of sexual vitality whereas Roethke's lines evoke images of infantile sexuality.

But our interest is in their poetic styles. In both the poets there is no tie, no sense of bond between a questioner and an answerer; this is indicated by the absence of conjunctions between one rhetorical statement and another. There is the same conversational rhythm and the language is colloquial, even though the emotional situation is extremely tense. The prose order is strictly retained, the spoken word being the governing principle of the rhythm in both.

One can work out some more parallels between The Waste Land and The Lost Son on the basis of similar images and echoes of sound patterns. "The Shape of the Fire" (CP. p.64) demonstrates
Roethke's ability to blend several difficult harmonies in the same poem. The first part reproduces the rhetorical devices and the conversational rhythm of The Waste Land. Immediately thereafter the poet switches over to a form of the primitive songs or adopts the nonsense verses. Roethke explores here "far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, ... returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end." 39

Who, careless, slips
In coiling coze
Is trapped to the lips,
Leaves more than shoes;
Mist pull off clothes
To jerk like a frog
On belly and nose
From the sucking bog.

Then there is an immediate transition from the nursery rhythm of the earlier stanzas to the conversational and colloquial style; it mixes "the most ancient and the most civilized mentality".

My meat eats me. Who waits at the gate?
Mother of quartz, your words writhe into my ear.
Renew the light, lewd whisper.

The Lost Son reveals Roethke as a poet who makes his reckonings with his roots. John Wain observes: "Perhaps because of the spontaneous outflowing of his imagination into anything he contemplated, he was one of those poets who find it almost impossible not to reproduce the sound of verse by other poets that they have admired -- admired, that is, deeply enough to make it part of their very being." 40 One may modify this to say that Roethke imitated the rhythms of those poets whom he wanted to rival. An act of poetic imitation was to him a subtle form
of combat and purification. If one finds in Roethke's poetry rhythmical patterns which remind one of Eliot, it is not because he loved or admired Eliot deeply; it is because he was ambitious to over-throw Eliot on his own ground. Besides being combative, it is an act of purgation. Roethke wrote about this sequence:

"Recently while on a Guggenheim fellowship, I wrote a sequence of three longer poems called The Lost Son, The Long Alley, The Shape of the Fire, which dealt with a spiritual crisis. But I have not exhausted the theme; I wish to go beyond these poems. This means going into myself more deeply and objectifying more fully what I find, probably in a dramatic poem that could be staged." 41 The references to Eliot we find in Selected Letters edited by Ralph J. Mills, Jr., reveal, to say the least, Roethke's strong dislike for Eliot; yet, the remark quoted above indicates that Roethke was inclined to adopt some of Eliot's poetic devices; for instance, his dramatic mode of representing emotions. The quest myth acts as an objective-correlative in both sequences.

The differences between The Waste Land and The Lost Son are significant. As a mythic poem Roethke's sequence differs from Eliot's. Eliot deplored that Blake had not been controlled by a respect for impersonal reason, and remarked that "the concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius". 42 Eliot and his poetry showed a high regard for impersonal reason and hardly deviated from "the framework of mythology and theology and philosophy". The Waste Land is embedded in such a mythological framework, while Roethke's poem creates its own private myth. The "angst" of the protagonist in The Waste Land is born out of loss of religious and spiritual values in the
early decades of the modern era; whereas that of Roethke's protagonist in *The Lost Son* springs from his alienation from biological roots. Eliot's speaker expresses the general malaise of the cultural situation; Roethke's narrator suffers from personal malaise. His poem is not suffused with religious overtones. This can be demonstrated easily by referring to the image of the "roots" in these poems. For example, we have in Eliot:

```
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.
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( T.S. Eliot: p.49 )

One may note that the religious context here provides the ironic comment. In Roethke's "The Pit",

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Where do the roots go?
Look down under the leaves.
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( CP. p.55 )

there is no Biblical echo. This is an "excursion into the under-world of nature". The world explored in *The Lost Son* is the subliminal world. Even though Roethke maintains that "I" of his poems is not himself, the experience rendered is peculiar to his nature and background.

There is a remark of Roethke which brings to light another difference between him and Eliot. "I believe that, in this kind of poem, the poet, in order to be true to what is most universal
in himself, should not rely on allusion; ... He must scorn being "mysterious" or loosely oracular, but be willing to face up the genuine mystery." 44 The Waste Land cannot be thought of apart from its allusions; it is the private work of an individual.

One suspects that, without mentioning the name of the poet, he was having a sly dig at Eliot's technique in The Waste Land. The mystery that is evoked in Eliot's poem rests upon Christian dogma; Roethke faces the mystery of his private experience without help from the authority of the church. To Eliot, "the allusive" technique was a part of "impersonal" poetry, a training for the extinction of personality. Helen Gardner remarks: "The Waste Land moves, if it moves at all, towards some moment which is outside the poem and may never come, which we are still waiting for at the close". 45 The "allusive" technique of Eliot makes the reader feel sometimes that the protagonist's experience has not been a part of his personal seeing. The narrator of Roethke's sequence is filled with a sense of union with nature, "knowing that light falls and fills, often without our knowing". (CP. p.67). Eliot could not conceive of anything immanent in life which might give him the experience of transcendence that is hinted at in Roethke's poem.

What did he, then, do with Eliot and The Waste Land in The Lost Son? Did Roethke feel about the "form" of The Waste Land that Karl Shapiro remarked about it in his essay, "The Death of Literary Judgement"? Shapiro's contention, we may recall, was that Eliot's celebrated poem was a dead end for the poets of future and even for Eliot himself? 46 Eliot did not write the same kind of poem after The Waste Land. Roethke, one might suggest, has used Eliot's poem to project the wasteland of his personal life.
Eliot and Roethke both depict their world through the images they use. But Eliot's images do not carry the conviction of their birth in the poet's direct sensuous perceptions of the actual world. Despite many references to physical details in The Waste Land Eliot's poetry is not "physical poetry" of the kind Roethke liked to write. What distinguishes The Lost Son from Eliot's poem is this absence of interest in abstract ideas in Roethke's poem.

Despite his tendency to represent things symbolically, Roethke does not abstract his images from the physical objects. In the fifth section of "The Shape of Fire" (CP. p.67) the protagonist wants to communicate his expansive consciousness through the image of an opaque vase. The reader feels that the vase exists for its physical appeal and the experience is directly and sensuously realised in this image. Here, too, one notes that Roethke's symbolism differs from Eliot's practice, and he seems to be moving towards that kind of poetry which unites the physicality of things with their symbolic connotation. In fact, he is looking towards Whitman. The rhythmical movements of his lines and the mode of perception suggest that he is seeking his affinity with Whitman.

V

The Lost Son possesses what James A. Wright has described as Whitman's "delicacy". For Roethke, as he seems to be discovering in "A Field of Light" and "The Shape of Fire", Whitman was the exemplar of a significant attitude or an outlook on the disorder he (Roethke) saw everywhere. He had referred to the
relevance of Whitman and Lawrence as poets in his essay, "Some Remarks on Rhythm", already referred to in an earlier section of this chapter. In addition to using some of the rhetorical devices such as enumeration, apposition, absolute construction, etc., Roethke conceives of the poetic form as Whitman did. Like Whitman, he was determined not to allow anything to stand in the way, "not even the richest curtains". Eliot's mythological framework and the "allusive" techniques were like the "richest curtains" that he would discard, and would rather cultivate Whitman's "delicacy". This "delicacy" is a deep spiritual inwardness, that fertile strength which (I take to be) is the most beautiful power of Whitman's poetry, and the most readily available to the poetry, and indeed the civilization, of our own moment in American history. Here is revealed to us the secret of Whitman's strength that makes his poetry relevant and significant to the modern reader. Eliot's spiritual yearning sought its nourishment from the Christian Church; Roethke's from the intensity of his feelings and the quality of poetic vision. The first stanza of "The Pure Fury" (CP. p.133) bears out "the fertile strength", the sustaining power of the Whitmanesque "delicacy":

Stupor of knowledge lacking inwardness —
What book, O learned man, will set me right?
Once I read nothing through a fearful night.
For every meaning had grown meaningless.
Morning, I saw the world with second sight.
As if all things had died, and rose again.
I touch the stones, and they had my own skin.

The stanza illustrates Wright's observation about Whitman's "delicacy". Knowledge without "inwardness" is meaningless. In fact, the first four lines epitomise the crisis of the protagonist
in *The Lost Son*. The last three lines of the stanza reflect the magic of the "delicacy": it is "second sight". Whitman's "delicacy" is the secret of his ability to establish oneness with all things of the world, of harmony with one's self and with others. This "delicacy" also includes "power of retaining sensivity right in the face of realities that would certainly excuse coarseness, for the sake of self defense if for no other reason". To Roethke, the poetic sensivity was a kind of spiritual inwardness, as it was for Whitman. Whitman encountered the coarseness of reality — *Drum-Taps, Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, testify to this — but his poetic sensivity was sharpened by them without resort to external aids. Roethke would have a full look at the worst of life — this is what he attempted to do in *The Lost Son* — but like Whitman, he responds to the harshness with a tremendous effort of the imagination. The same point is made by Roy Harvey Pearce when he suggests a paradigm for Roethke's poetry — "violence transformed into power through order". Roethke's way of putting the same thing is to say: "I've recovered my tenderness by long looking". Wright speaks of Whitman's delicacy; Roethke speaks of his tenderness, both meaning roughly the same thing.

There is perhaps no more striking illustration of Whitman's "delicacy" than his *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. The young boy experiences the most acute form of violence in life: the death of loved one. The protagonist listens to the heart-wrenching song of the bereaved partner:
Lo hangs the moon, it rose late,
It is lagging - O I think it is heavy with
love, with love.
O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
with love, with love.
O night! do I not see my love fluttering out
among the breakers?
What is that little black thing I see there
in the white?

(Whitman. p. 200)

Whitman's "delicacy" can be seen in the images through which he projects the experience of death. The moon, "lagging" and "heavy with love, with love" communicates the despondency of a sunken heart; the dulling effect of the experience, which is acutely felt, is conveyed through a rhythm suggesting slow and heavy movement while the rhetorical questions convey the spectre of a dead person and the impossibility of finding a solution to the mystery of death. Each image, by itself, is expressive of anguish in the presence of death. But the secret of Whitman's "delicacy" is not a cluster of images which he projects as embodiments of some "emotional complex" but in their harmony and cumulative impact. The images employed here are common enough in the Romantic poets; what is remarkable is the atmospheric effect of these images, which culminates in the emotional shock expressed in the lines: "What is that little black thing I see there in the white?" The first two images create eager moments of expected fulfilment but the contrast between the "white" and "black" is the contrast between life and death. It sunders the possibility of reunion by conveying the feeling of irrevocable deprivation. The violence of death is packed in the final image.
Roethke’s "delicacy" can be discerned in "The Gibber" section of The Lost Son. The protagonist faces the most excruciating experience of life when he hears the voices of death summoning him. As in Whitman’s poem, the situation is presented through images. The Satanic figure of Father who personifies death, has "a look that drained the stones" (CP. p. 56). Death has severed the father and the son; his image is conjured up as in a dream.

What gliding shape
Beckoning through halls,
Stood poised on the stair,
Fell dreamily down?
Perched on many shelves,
I saw substance flowing
That cold morning.

The first image communicates the phantasmagoric vision of the protagonist's early years, and embodies the experience of arrest of growth through the image of a "gliding shape" which "stood poised on the stair". The second image of life germinating in "the mouths of jugs" reinforces the first one by suggesting stasis and movement at the same time. This is conveyed by the use of verbs in the past tense while the "-ing" forms of verbs express the continuity of action. Wright's term suggests that "delicacy" is a principle of affirmation of life through poetic sensivity.

How does Eliot assimilate and represent violent experiences in The Waste Land? Whitman, Eliot and Roethke speak through their protagonists, but in Eliot the voice is that of a role, "its design grounded in an order of being beyond any poet's shape-shifting powers". His poem is presented as a vision of Tiresias whose "role" could not have been completely determined
by Eliot as Tiresias was already a mythological figure. The role had to be fixed as in a historical work. The way in which he reacted to the scene of sexual promiscuity indicates his mode of viewing experience that suggests involvement with detachment. It is a recollection of violent experience in Tiresias' life and there is an implication that such experiences recur in the contemporary society. Eliot's persona is born out of his need to discover himself as somebody else; Whitman's and Roethke's out of their need to discover everyone else as ultimately projections of themselves. Eliot generally looks outward, not inward, behind the personae. Tiresias explores the wasteland outside of himself. Whitman would explore the meaning of the loss of love and of death by not going out of himself. The young boy standing spellbound at the song of the bird is an extension of Whitman's self. Roethke's protagonist does not stand outside the action of the poem; he looks more into himself than to others. Whitman's and Roethke's manner of projecting "I" is a part of their "delicacy" which springs from spiritual strength within and not without. The point has been made more forcefully by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. when he says: "The illumination which occurs in *The Lost Son* may be a divine visitation or a gift of grace; however, it lacks any explicit theological structure. For Roethke this moment of light appears to be given as a matter of course and is accepted as completely natural." 52 This brings out the distinction between the mythic tradition as represented by Eliot and the Adamic mode represented by Whitman and Roethke.

Wright has emphasized that Whitman's "delicacy" is related to the quality of his poetic sensibility and imagination, his
character and his poetic form. It is not to be adjudged only in terms of technical detail. Form, in Whitman, is a part of his whole idea of organic growth; it is not to be confused with conventional classifications such as epic, tragedy, elegy etc., and one cannot imagine Whitman working by the canons of these genres. As was suggested earlier, Whitman's and Roethke's ways of organising poems can be taken to be the Projectivist way: the form is a discovery both for the reader as well as for the poet. As Wright remarks, "Form, in Whitman, is a principle of growth: one image or scene or sound grows out of another. The general device is parallelism, not of grammar but of action or some other meaning". 53 As an example of parallelism of grammatical construction, one may take the following from section 19 of Song of Myself:

This is the press of a bashful hand,
this the float and odor of hair,
This is the touch of my lips to yours,
this the murmur of yearning,
This the far-off depth and height reflecting
my own face,
This is the thoughtful merge of myself,
and the cutlet again.

(Whitman, p.38)

These lines express Whitman's "delicacy": "the merge of myself and the outlet again". He uses repetition of a part of sentence for emphasis, as evidence of the value of empathy he wants to establish with the life around him. But the rhetorical device of repetition also partly repeats the action. "The press of a bashful hand" and "the touch of my lips" convey the very sensation of amorous touch -- the rhetoric reinforces the action. The climax is reached in the "thoughtful" merge of the speaker with the other, followed by the "outlet" again. The rhetorical device immediately
points to the parallel action. Section 15 of Song of Myself beginning with "The pure contralto sings in the organ loft" (Whitman, p. 34) is a striking example of parallelism of action and meaning. It also helps to understand how "form" comes into being in Whitman's poetry. To quote again from Wright: "Form in Whitman is a principle of imagination: the proliferation of images out of one unifying vision." 54 "The proliferation of images one finds in this poem leads to the statement of an ordering principle of the poem:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

This is Whitman's statement of the secret of his unifying vision which unfolds itself as a blossom out of seed. It is the principle of universal empathy. The secret of Whitman's "delicacy" is explained by Denis Donoghue in different words: "The defining 'figure' of Whitman's mind is the equals sign — equals, not plus or minus. ... he needs all those words that are themselves equals: signs, terms, that denote the intersection of subject and object, the Me and the Not-me. In a long list the central term is contact." 55

This is another way of making the same point already made by Wright that "the unifying vision" binds together the multiplying images in Whitman's poems.

"Form", in Roethke too, as in Whitman, "is a principle of imagination". In the "Open Letter", he stressed the importance of the final form of his poem being imaginatively right, being "a kind of psychic shorthand." 56 More persistently than Whitman, Roethke embodies his vision through images, being sceptical of
general statements. He set out to explore the human problem "to find out what one really is" by reviving the images of his past life; the image of "The Lost Son" unifies the protagonist's vision of the world of childhood. That "The Lost Son" will return to the two anchors of his life, the greenhouse and the father, is suggested in "The Return" (CP. p.57). Again parallelism here is used as a rhetorical device as much as a principle of thematic development. "The form being intuitively right" is borne out by "The Shape of Fire" (CP. p.64). Section I of the poem, as remarked earlier, is concerned with the regressive movement of the self, which is conveyed through stanzas of varying lengths. They attempt to create the 'as if' of the child's world. The nonsense songs in Section II mark the protagonist's Dionysian urge born out of his sexual awakening. Section III has a form that indicates the absence of contact between the self and others. Section IV depicts the self gradually coming out of itself.

Death was not. I live in a simple drowse;
Hands and hair moved through a dream
of wakening blossoms.
Rain sweetened the cage and the dove
still called;

( CP. p.66 )

The parallelism of the last stanza is a stylistic device as well as a principle of imagination. Parallelism, one might say, in Roethke extends not only to the repetition of some rhetorical devices, but also acts as a principle of structural unity. In fact the structure of his major poetic sequences is built upon his conviction that a regressive movement is essential in a spiritual quest, before any progress could be achieved. This
principle of enhanced retreat is a structural device, recurring like a motif in his poems.

VI

There are, as has been noted in this chapter, many points of contact in The Lost Son with the Eliot tradition and that of Whitman also, though the differences one notices in Roethke's poem are equally distinct and important. The aim of this study is not to prove that Roethke is a twentieth century Whitman. It is to discover the deeper levels of Roethke's affinity, of vision and sensibility, with Whitman, despite his (Roethke's) strong and perhaps inevitable links with the Eliot poetic tradition. The poems of Roethke examined in this chapter reveal his sense of curiosity, wonder and mystery at the process of the germination and growth of life and embody his urge to "identify himself, to participate in the naked processes of life".  57 This is an aspect of Whitman's "delicacy" that Roethke shares with him. However, such participation was a part of Whitman's way; it was his second nature. With Roethke, it remained till the end an insistent yearning. He aspired to such gifts as Whitman possessed by birth.

Both The Lost Son and Song of Myself are concerned with the same theme; viz., the realisation of the meaning of self or selfhood. They explore what it means — and how it feels — to be "a human identity" in the eternal cycle of being. Even if a reader does not accept the psychoanalytic approach of Edwin H. Miller in his Walt Whitman's Poetry: a Psychological Journey, he will find a great deal of truth in the following comments of Edwin Miller: "The scene is a startling, audacious portrait of
an artist who has retreated from the artificialities of society
to contemplate 'a spear of Summer grass'. Alone, searching for
a 'reality' that is true to the self, not a cultural imposition
upon the self, he opens his atrophied senses to the natural
rhythms of the universe. As in Song of Myself the protagonist
in The Lost Son has similarly discarded all cultural impositions
on the self, faces nature in the Adamic way, and strives for the
opening of his self to "the natural rhythms of the universe".
The "spear of grass" in Whitman is the symbol of perpetual growth;
Roethke's protagonist contemplates life in the glasshouses. What
is important is the central situation in both the poems: the self
struggling to get out of itself to merge with nature. The aspirations
of the protagonists in both are the same: cosmic consciousness and
"the participation in the naked processes of life". They are
concerned with their roots; Whitman reckoned his private world and
his own milieu in his poem. Roethke did the same, discovering that
"ancestors", literary and spiritual — had to be reckoned with for
the growth of the self.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES
CHAPTER 4


3. Ralph J. Mills Jr., ed., On the Poet and his Craft: Op. cit., p. 22. (The words used by Roethke are different but the meaning of his statements is the same)

4. Ibid., p. 20.


17. Ibid., p.37.


22. "Before 'a renewal of life' can come about, there must be an acceptance of the possibilities that lie in the unconscious contents of the mind 'activated through regression... and disfigured by the slime of the deep'. Stanley Kunitz quoted by Richard Allen Blessing in Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1974), p.87.


27. Ibid., p.7.


28. Ibid., p.91.


32. Ibid., p.165.


34. Ibid., p.109.

48. Ibid., p. 165.
49. Ibid., p. 175.
54. Ibid., p. 182.


CHAPTER 5
CROSSING THE WOOD LAND
THE EROTIC PRINCIPLE IN ROETHKE

The Lost Son makes a poetic reckoning of the crisis which the self confronts in its encounters with others. The threat to the protagonist there is that his essential self was denied him in the greenhouses of his family and his self cannot accept the "others" on account of its "alteracion", its estrangement with the world without. However, there is also the realisation that the self is not to be attained by estrangement and retreat; the return to "others" is no less important as a complementary need. As contemporary psychologists like R.D. Laing point out, "all identities require an other: some other in and through a relationship with whom self-identity is achieved." 1 Roethke seems to have shared this view. In The Lost Son the first step for the self is taken. There is a recognition of the truth that the self cannot flower in isolation. It must relate itself to other for growth.

Nonetheless, Roethke seems to have felt that a brief recapitulation of the world of greenhouses would reinforce the self in its journey towards others. His usual practice was to traverse again the path he had himself once trodden, before making into a new direction. The series of poems beginning with "Where Knock is Open Wide" and comprising Part I of Praise to the End (1951) rehearse the world of the formative years of the
child-protagonist of *The Lost Son*. In his letter to Kenneth Burke, Roethke wrote: "I've just finished a long poem, the last probably from the dark world. The tone of some of the passages is somewhat the same; but what is said (dramatically) is different." What is said here concerns the growing awareness of the protagonist's sexual awakening. Roethke's remark hints that his technique in his new sequence was basically the same: the interior monologue expressing the speaker's stream of consciousness, "the spring and rush of the child" as in *The Lost Son*. In *Praise to the End* the tone of anxiety and anguish is subdued to that of joy and celebration through the discovery of the erotic instinct.

**II**

The title of the first poem, "Where Knock is Open Wide" (CP. p.71) is replete with multiple meanings. The image carries with it religious as well as sexual reverberations. Christopher Smart's *A Song to David* (1763), from where Roethke borrowed the title of his poem, is an exalted hymn to God, and the stanza from which the line is taken reiterates the promise of the Bible that to a truly devout man the doors of Heaven are always open. Roethke's poem looks askance at the Biblical assurance and treats it rather ironically. The poem ends with the child's painful realisation that:

> May be God has a house.  
> But not here.  

( CP. p.74 )
the image of a forced breakthrough (conveyed by “where knock is Open Wide”) expresses a child’s push to get out of its mother’s womb. In the blending of the sexual and religious connotations, the poem reminds one of Dylan Thomas’s “Before I Knocked”. Though Roethke denied having been influenced by Thomas, the poem has affinity with Thomas’s poem. “Before I Knocked” describes the experience of what it means to be born as a mortal human in the world. Jesus (as from the mother’s womb) says:

And time cast forth my mortal creature  
To drift or drawn upon the seas  
Acquainted with the salt adventure  
Of tides that never touch the shores.

The poem communicates the experience of Jesus from inside the mother’s womb; the narrator’s attitude is fixed. Roethke’s poem traces the lineaments of the protagonist’s awareness after emergence out of the womb. Besides, Thomas’s poem belongs to his later phase of religious experience, whereas the dominant phase of Roethke’s protagonist at this stage is biological. What both the poems stress is that the first experience of alienation is birth. Just as Thomas’s poem refers to Jesus’s birth as alienation from the Father, Roethke’s poem ends with the loss of his father, the death of his biological begetter and the loss of faith in God. However, Roethke’s insistence that Thomas must not be regarded as his master is substantially true. Like Eliot, he (i.e. Roethke) used his sources ironically. “Where Knock is Open Wide” renders dramatically the protagonist’s way of knowing reality through perception and touch which is characterized by lack of
coherence and conceptualisation. Here it is that Roethke's affinities with the "Imagists" and the Pound-Eliot tradition can be seen. The protagonist's confused sense of identity is expressed in its use of "he" and "I" in the following lines:

His ears haven't time.
Sing me a sleep-song, please.
A real hurt is soft.

(CP. p. 71)

How does a child become aware of the flux of time? It cannot, of course, conceive of time prenatally. The protagonist regards his pre-natal experience as something not belonging to his present state, but to the other. An adult's time-consciousness is conditioned among other things by the ticking of clock to which the unborn child is yet to be exposed. Time ticks away and the rhythmical ticking helps the poet to link it with the rhythmical "sleep-song". Does this juxtaposition imply that a child first becomes aware of time by the rhythmical rise and fall of its mother's lullabies? Apparently, there is no logical connection between the first and the second line; but the rhythmical movement as a measurement of time brings the images together. "A real hurt is soft" is charged with sexual overtones implying both a knock a baby has to give to come out of the mother's womb, and also perhaps, to a "hurt" before sexual union. Its colloquial tone gives a piquacy to the sexual suggestions.

This point may be illustrated by considering one more stanza. For instance,
I know it's an owl. He's making it darker.
Eat where you are at. I'm not a mouse.
Some stones are still warm.
I like soft paws.
May be I'm lost,
Or asleep.

( CP. p.72 )

The first line suggests that the child-protagonist has yet to learn to reason correctly from its perceptions. He has become conscious that he is growing, that his breast-feeding period is over; and so, he will not like to eat like "a mouse." One appreciates the wit that perceives an analogy between a baby's way of sucking its mother's nipple and a mouse nibbling its food, while "Some stones are still warm" conveys a child's way of knowing reality through its senses. A grown up person associates hardness with stones, the child warmth or heat. The confused sensations suggest that the identity of the speaker is unclear. The experience is presented through direct sensations of reality; there is intuitive rather than rational perception of reality. The poem is organised after Eliot's manner, "dramatically, without any comment." 3

"Where Knock is Open Wide" deals with, through the technique of an interior monologue, a child's world and its principal mode of knowing reality (the sense of touch in this particular poem) and its consciousness as being affected by the parents. The poem begins with the protagonist experiencing the world as if he were a child again and ends with the first major experience of deprivation in life — the father's death. The two crucial experiences of life — birth and death — are introduced in the poem, and the process of growing-up is linked with the consciousness
of time and the experiences of birth and death. The speaker asks:

What's the time, papa-seed?
Everything has been twice.
My father is a fish.

(CP. p. 72)

How is one to measure time? From the moment papa's seed creates life in mama's womb? From the moment the child becomes aware of time? The implication that real birth occurs at the moment of one's awareness of things is expressed in the middle line "Everything has been twice". The comparison of the "father" to a fish suggests the speaker's link in an evolutionary process which is also connected with time—consciousness. The protagonist probes into the world of the collective unconscious; "in any case, whether by means of Jungian collective unconscious, or eastern mysticism, the protagonist of Roethke's poem envisions his own begetting, associating it with a tenderly aggressive form of sexuality". 4 With the "father" as a symbol of life-giver and time-consciousness, the narrator moves to a different kind of experience which is conveyed in a boy's song about his uncle's death. The song:

I sing a small sing,
My uncle's away,
He's gone for always,
I don't care either.

(CP. p. 72)

refers to the speaker's experience of death; it speaks of his uncle's death in terms suggesting indifference. This acquaintance with the death of some one who meant nothing in the protagonist's
life is a dramatic preparation for his initiation to the experience of death, which would rob him (i.e. the child-protagonist) of the meaning of life. The light banter of the tone intensifies the experience of deprivation. After such a negative experience, the narrator wants to assure himself of the reality of things by sensing them through eating, touching and seeing. Significantly each line is a short sentence — rather like the speech of a child. Indirectly, the child's idea of death is conveyed. Then the protagonist recollects his fishing trip with his father who is projected as a tough man devoted to the greenhouses.

He watered the roses.
His thumb had a rainbow.
The stems said, Thank you.
Dark came early.

(CP. p.73)

This happiness did not last long and it appears the narrator lost the protection of the father. It was a terrible loss:

That was before. I fell ! I fell !
The worm has moved away.
My tears are tired.

The knowledge of the uncle's death, described in a sing-song manner, was an impersonal experience. The narrator's mode of experiencing different things in the earlier three sections of the poem denotes, the world as experience, belonging to the "I" — "it" pattern of relationship. The protagonist has not cultivated the principle of the first person pronoun in establishing relations with the things of the world. The father's death introduces a personal principle in his mode of experiencing reality.
"I'm somebody else now. 
Don't tell my hands. 
Have I come to always? Not yet. 
One father is enough.

( CP. p. 74 )

The narrator could not remain his older self — he has matured through the experience of his father's death. Would the child's way of knowing reality work now? He has begun to feel apprehensive about his existence. As yet, the protagonist could not see any way out of mortality.

The poem "I Need, I Need" (CP. p. 74) expresses the boy's "terrible hunger for affection," and the sense of emptiness at the mother's death. Again, this is not conveyed directly; the images are allowed to speak for themselves, as they do in Eliot. A child associates the mother with food; she is, in fact, the principle of sustenance in life. This is vividly represented in an image:

A deep dish. Lumps in it.  
I can't taste my mother.  
Hoo, I know the spoon.  
Sit in my mouth.

There are lumps of meat in the dish but there is no mother in it. Malkoff's remarks are pertinent here. "The child is ... in What Freudian would call the 'oral' phase, ... Roethke is probably not consciously following Freud's stages of development; but his imagery, like Freud's stages, comes from the observation of universal aspects of experience." This "oedipal" aspect of erotic experience is an important stage in the growth of the protagonist. When he comes to establish
relations with a woman in his later life, he would be conditioned by this "oedipal" aspect of his experience. The primacy given to the experience of touch might also be noted. The protagonist is beside himself with grief and runs to nature for answer.

Stretched the wind with a stick
The leaves liked it.
Do the dead bite?
Mama, she is a sad fat.

(CP. p.74)

He learns that his mother's death has meant nothing to the world outside; the love continued to coo as usual. He has lost both the life-givers. Where will he find another?

Then follows the jump-rope section, recreating the "as if" world of the child, its playfulness makes the experience of death more poignant. This, one remembers, is a Shakespearean device which often intensifies the tragic experience by some kind of buffoonery.

I wish I was a pipplebol,
I wish I was a funny
I wish I had ten thousand hats,
And made a lot of money.

(CP. p.75)

The boy was looking for a partner "ready for pink and frisk" with him. The image evokes "May-day dancing" of spring, suggesting that the speaker is now an adolescent. He declares: "My hoe eats like a goat". This is, ostensibly, a sexual image. The protagonist has discovered a new principle in his life, eros. The general movement that one notices is the growth of the speaker — from infant perception to adolescene. Somehow
the protagonist has come to associate the principle of life with the sexual urge. The erotic principle may heal the wounds of death and loneliness and lead him to create the patterns of "I-Thou" relationship with "others". The speaker now no longer looks at nature as a dark force as he did in the earlier section of *The Lost Son*.

"Bring the Day" (CP. p. 77) is like a hymn to new awakenings of life in nature. Its rhythm communicates the irresistible youthful joy of the body at the renewed landscape of nature.

Bees and lilies there were,
Bees and lilies there were,
Either to other, —
Which would you rather?
Bees and lilies there were.

The whole poem is like a nuptial celebration of self and nature together in a newly won relation. It bespeaks the quickening of the sensibility of the narrator and "hints in symbols...the pattern of his journey from confinement to fluidity." The protagonist is filled with a sense of concord between him and nature.

I've listened into the least waves.
The grass says what the wind says:
Begin with the rock;
End with water.
When I stand, I'm almost a tree.

The union that is described in this and subsequent sections may be called "symbiotic union." The speaker says:

Leaves do you like me any?
A swan needs a pond.
The worm and the rose
Both love
Rain.

( CP. p. 78 )
The whole poem, "Bring the day", is remarkable for its lyrical delicacy and Roethke's unique sensitiveness to nature and its human correspondence. The protagonist experiences a more self-conscious awareness of sexuality in the... world of nature: ... this corresponds to the child's growing awareness of his own expanding sexual capacities". Thus the development of the individual self would seem to be bound up with the biological and erotic urges of nature.

The next poem, "Give Way, Ye Gates" (CP. p.79), is strongly reminiscent of an Elizabethan lover's passionate appeal to his mistress to accompany him so that they could lose themselves in pastoral luxuriance. Throughout the poem nature is sought out as an erotic companion or partner.

I've let my nose out;  
I could melt down a stone, --  
How is it with the long birds?  
May I look too, loved eye?  
It's a wink beyond the world,  
In the slow rain, who's afraid?  
We're king and queen of the right ground.  
I'll risk the winter for you.

(CP. p.79)

The narrator seeks the same kind of gratification from nature as a lover from his mistress or beloved. In "Where Knock is Open Wide" the protagonist enjoys the symbiotic union with the mother; the same relationship in this poem exists even with the partner (nature as mistress).

In the high-noon of things,  
In the springtime of stones,  
We'll stretch with the great stems.  
We'll be at the business of what might be  
Looking toward what we are

(CP. p.79)
The narrator seems to be connecting the evolutionary process of nature, the process of his growing-up and the erotic drive as a universal principle of the creative urge. The poem embodies in several sensuous images the passionate yearning of the protagonist to unite with the "other"; the terrible experience of loneliness is followed by sexual awakening seeking erotic union with the different forms of nature. But, after the wave of physical excitement he slips back into his former self; there is an ebbing movement. He recalls his symbiotic relation with nature:

The deep stream remembers.
Once I was a pond.
What slides away
Provides.

( CP. p.80 )

"The diminishing rhythms", as Malkoff points out, "pay tribute to the now distant origins of the self, the barely remembered pond at the depths of the mind". 10

In "Sensibility ! O La !" ( CP. p.81 ), we have recapitulation and review of his past and present conditions. He continues his posture of a passionate lover and addresses nature in a vein which reminds one of pastoral lovers. The first section of the poem recalls many of the images we find in "The Long Alley" (CP. p.59) where the 'river-serpent' image is evoked. But what links the movements of these two poems is the retrospective mood of the narrator which recognises his need to feel some affinity with the roots. In the poems prefacing The Lost Son and even in the main
sequence, the narrator has conveyed his sense of symbiotic relationship with nature, the relationship which is biologically interdependent and conduces to mutual growth. In "The Long Alley", the protagonist likens the river to a serpent; in "Sensibility 0 La!" he compares himself to a serpent. The image signifies the evolutionary growth of the protagonist. The serpent evokes the image of a wayward movement and sensuality. The narrator, one would like to surmise, refers to the awakening of his sensual self in the serpent image and blends the image of river with the mistress.

I name thee: wench of things,  
A true zephyr-haunted woodie.

( CP. p.81 )

He also reiterates the primordial kinship with nature as he did in "The River Incident". ( CP. p.49 )

Thy soft albino gaze  
Spoke to my spirit.

The lines are beautifully ambiguous conveying an erotic appeal as well as the speaker's awareness of his link in the evolutionary process. He has already gone beyond the incipient stage; as the title of this poem suggests, he hails the quickening of his self, his sensual awakening. The poem represents something of a climax in the first movement of the narrator's psychic growth from vague feeling of link with nature to an intense and passionate yearning for nature as erotic partner. Nonetheless, the protagonist has come to feel that his anchorage in nature, both as source of his origin and as symbol of eros, is not sufficiently gratifying.
This could not be the final home for his self. He is aware that a long journey awaits him and that his self is distinct from nature. This is expressed in the lines

> It's queer enough here, perhaps.  
> Some rare new tedium's taking shape.  
> I smell the jumps ahead.  
> Can a cat milk a hen?

( CP. p.81 )

The protagonist has his own moments of scepticism — "Can a cat milk a hen?" He has realised that the symbiotic relationship with nature has not revealed the mystery of self to him; the gain of his journey has been the experience of the sensual transport with nature. He hears a strange voice beckoning him to move further:

> It's a long way to somewhere else. (CP. p.82)

The sexual awakening has pushed the self a little further, has given him a sense of movement but the feeling of alienation persists. What he could do under the pressure of sexual awakening was to assert his awareness of self, of his enhanced power.

> "O Lull Me, Lull Me" ( CP. p.83 ) speaks of the protagonist's sense of erotic longing which is, however, not for a particular woman. He reiterates its driving force and potentiality as a creative principle.

> One sigh stretches heaven.  
> In this, the diocese of mice,  
> Who's bishop of breathing?

( CP. p.83 )
The first line emphatically articulates the sense of enormous vitality the sexual awakening has conferred upon the protagonist; the hyperbole conveys an exaggerated sense of his new powers. The sexual image has clearly a religious connotation. A bishop breathes a new sense of life into his followers; the sexual urge which is a manifestation of the creative instinct, breathes life into the lower worlds. To the speaker, the world of nature and animals is yet not fully alive. The spectacle it presents is that of a still life. All this is conveyed imagistically.

How still she keeps herself. 
Blessed be torpor.

The regressive tendency in the movement of the self asserts itself here; the image presents nature in its dual aspects of woodland setting and erotic partner. His lady love exists more in fancy than in reality and he is more obsessed with the birth of eros in him. Despite this, it is a valuable experience leading to "another grace", of redemption to come through the experience of true love. At the moment he identifies himself with the manifestations of sub-human life:

I see my heart in the seed; 
I breathe into a dream; 
And the ground cries; 
I'm crazed and graceless; 
A winter-leaping frog.

But the poem ends on a note of "tentative triumph over the persistent ghost". The boy protagonist says:

I'm more than when I was born; 
I could say hello to things; 
I could talk to a snail; 
I see what sings! 
What sings!

(CF. p.84)
These poems, which constitute a kind of interlude between The Lost Son sequence and Praise to the End, make an especially revealing statement of the protagonist's new role. The earlier sequence created the image of the protagonist as of a self which was stifled almost to extinction by the world in which it was born. Its involvement with its roots -- the world of greenhouses and of parents -- was explored in The Lost Son, and though they have been projected from the protagonist's angle, he was dominated and conditioned by them. In these poems of interlude the earlier worlds, especially that of the greenhouses, comparatively recede into the background. The point is that the earlier sequence projects the greenhouses as its hero; in this sequence it is the protagonist. "He is involved in his maturing and in his finding another person whose love will illuminate his own identity. His Dante must also know a Beatrice." Whether Roethke, like Dante, comes to meet his Beatrice in his poems remains to be seen. The name of Roethke's wife is, incidentally, Beatrice. The protagonist continues his quest for her "who is still in her cave."

What is striking about the quest of self in this series is Roethke's modern temper. This is evinced in the way the protagonist has undertaken the quest of his self. In The Lost Son, nature is observed with the minuteness and precision of a scientist. Even in these poems of the interlude, we notice the same closeness of attention to nature and the perception of the evolutionary urge in nature. Besides, there are Freudian Overtones in the treatment of the erotic theme in this series.
The protagonist's sexual awakening follows some of the stages mentioned by Freud as, it can be seen, in "I Need, I Need" and "Give way, Ye Gates".

IV

Roethke's note tells us that the series of poems comprising Praise to the End! Part-II (CP. p.85), and the poems in 'O, Thou Opening, O' form really a part of his longer sequence, The Lost Son and Other Poems. His intention was perhaps to suggest and stress the thematic unity which binds all these poems, to emphasize the point of view and context of these poems. They are all concerned with the process of growing up as a manifestation of the evolutionary urge in nature and in man. They represent dramatically a man's evolution from infancy to adolescence, from the state of innocence to one of experience. In Praise to the End!, the world of nature acts as a witness to his sexual passion.

"These are poems," writes John Wain who has praised this sequence as "Paradiso", "that establish and define Roethke's central concerns. The subject matter of Praise to the End! is, quite simply, those things that stir him into being a poet in the first place. ... I think that any criticism of Roethke's work must radiate outward from this natural centre." While one may not accept Wain's estimate of the sequence as the "natural centre" of Roethke's poetic achievement, it is obvious his involvement with eros was a phase in his growth as poet and as man, and erotic awakening in the protagonist will be enhanced in Four for Sir John Davies (CP. p.105). Wain, however, rightly points out that it is concerned with those things that remained at the
centre of Roethke's poetry: the meaning of the greenhouses and the quest of identity.

The title of this sequence, *Praise to the End*, as Roethke himself said, comes from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Where the phrase occurs in Wordsworth, it is uttered by the poet in the spirit of thanksgiving to nature which works out the harmony, "the calm existence" in him, in spite of "early miseries, regrets, vexations". Wordsworth hails nature as a tranquillizing spirit. Roethke, however, chose the title, as Hoffman warns us "not so much to call our attention to Wordsworth's view of nature as to emphasize his own uniquely separate position". This position lies in his bold treatment of nature as a phallic symbol; and his joy differs from Wordsworth's in that it is utterly sensual, even sexual.

The first poem of the sequence, "It's dark in this wood, soft mocker" (CP. p.85) introduces the boy-protagonist in the critical hour of his ordeal. The crisis he faced at the beginning of his quest was marked by a sense of uncertainty about his self, by a threat of destruction from the alien world. Here, the crisis is exclusively sexual, dealing with the anxiety of the adolescent who would desire to relieve his sexual tension. He expresses his excitement:

*It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.*
*For whom have I swelled like a seed?*
*What a bone-ache I have.*
*Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last.*

This is his address to his own sexually roused self and in its
rendering of details comes closer to Lawrence, being the expression of body speech rather than of feelings. Its tone too, unlike in Wordsworth's poem, is dramatic and confessional. In the absence of a human partner, he can only go to the subhuman world for his gratification or indulge in auto-erotic activities.

Bumpkin, he can dance alone.
Ooh, Ooh, I'm a duke of eels.
.... ... ... ... ... ...
I'll feed the ghost alone.
Father, forgive my hands.

All this is foreign to Wordsworth and reveals Roethke's modern temper. The narrator feels no shame in exhibiting and rejoicing in his sexual obsessions. Hoffman remarks: "In one sense, Roethke's use of the phrase suggests a stage in his growth, though his sense of nature strikes us as far more 'intimate', direct, and imagistic than Wordsworth's." He indulged in masturbation and confesses his sexual vulnerability almost with the gesture of a hero.

It's necessary, among the flies and bananas, to keep a constant vigil,
For the attacks of false humility take sudden turn for the worse.
Lacking the candor of dogs, I kiss the departing air;
I'm untrue to my excesses.

( CP. p.86 )

The protagonist then indulges in an orgiastic carolling and dancing which reminds the reader of ancient rituals of phallus worship. The refrain of the dance-song, "What footie does is final", is a celebration of a new god, the phallus, he has discovered. One may remember that Whitman similarly greeted the beauty and power of the stallion.
A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh
and responsive to my caresses,

... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,
Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears
finely cut, flexibly moving.

(Whitman, p. 50).

Lawrence has said somewhere: "And the dream of the phallos
reaches the great I know Not." Whitman, Lawrence and Roethke
seem to be committed to the primitive instinctual life and the
worship of the phallus is the most natural and glorious
expression of the worship of life. The narrator, however, cannot
continue in this phallic ecstasy indefinitely and there is a
realisation that "an exact fall of waters has rendered him
important" (CP. p. 86), that he cannot impregnate nature.

This experience with "nature" does not engender the sense
of "fall" in him; on the contrary, there is a sense of rejuvenation
which fills him with joy:

The Sun came out;
The lake turned green;
Romped upon the goldy grass,
Aged thirteen.
The sky cracked open
The world I knew;
Lay like the cats do
Sniffing the dew.

(CP. p. 87)

It is an apocalyptic moment for the boy of thirteen, but Roethke's
technique seems to imitate the religious apocalypse. The earlier
section, where the narrator indulges in an orgiastic dance,
parallels the traditional practice of the ancient prophet retiring
to a forest and establishing communion with it.
A similar exaltation of a new vision of nature and life is expressed in the poem, "Arch of air, my heart's original knock". (CP. p.88). There is a note of celebration which justifies the title of the sequence, Praise to the End! The speaker is now in a different kind of trance, feeling a sense of mystical communion with nature.

I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a frog;
...
Felicity I cannot hoard.

(CP. p.88)

Here is an experience of pure sensuous joy and harmony with nature. It is a pagan's moment of epiphany and one can see why Wain is tempted to speak of the whole sequence as Roethke's "Paradiso". What he says about "Unfold, Unfold" is also true about this poem. "The whole poem is luminous with humility and joy; it makes no claim to understand, only to take part and thank". 14 "To take part and to thank" -- this is also a way of characterizing Whitman's poetic stance. Roethke, one can see, was moving towards Whitman:

I believe! I believe! --
In the sparrow, happy on gravel;
...
I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing,
Lighter than bells,
Softer than water.

It is this movement in Roethke's poetry which links him with the Whitman tradition.

The second section of the sequence, "Unfold, Unfold" (CP. p.89), marks once again the moment of reckoning when the protagonist reviews his situation. This critical awareness on
the narrator's part takes away any suspicion about his sensibility or his being a victim of his illusions. He must know where he is and how he has reached there. After the moment of epiphany in the last poem, he seems to contrast his present self with its past and observes a sharp distinction between its two states. He discerns both his affinity with and distinction from nature.

By snails, by leaps of frog, I came here, spirit.

This is a re-statement of his link with the evolutionary chain but he is distinct from the snails, frogs, fish and cliffs. It is a soul's "crossing time" for the narrator growing into an adult. He is obsessed with his place in the evolutionary process:

I was privy to oily fungus and the algae of standing waters;
Honored, on my return, by the ancient fellowship of rotten stems.

The whole poem is a summing up of the stages the protagonist has passed through so far. What it insists upon is that the adolescent stage is not its dead-end. However, its comparatively regressive movement adds to the dramatic impact of the sections preceding and following it. Praise to the End! projects the speaker who surrenders himself to the transport of erotic awakening, regarding nature as a phallic symbol and experiencing mystic unity with it. He is aware of what has been happening to his body whose demands are purely physical. However, he has not yet fully grasped the nature of his discovery. "Unfold, Unfold" dramatically renders a pause in the progressive movement of the narrator.

The third poem, "I cry, Love!" (CP. p.92) discovers "love" as a "vital, ontologic altogetherness"15 and at the end of the section the narrator says:
Who untied the tree? I remember now.
We met in a nest. Before I lived.
The dark hair sighed.
We never enter
Alone.

( CP. p.93 )

This "love" is a cognitive act the knowledge of which does not come in an abstract impersonal manner. Roethke rejects the positivist or scientific epistemology of "Rationalists" and would be one of the company of "Visionaries". The speaker's dilemma is expressed in a vivid image: "Wasps come when I ask for pigeons". When he seeks peace, or a Christian way of life (as symbolised by the pigeons), he is attacked by "wasp" images of anguish. He presents a Kierkegaardian paradox. There is a violent conflict between the pull of the senses and of the "White Spirit", between experience and theory. The Kierkegaardian riddle is offered: "What's a thick? Two-by-two's a shape".

( CP. p.92 ). A philosopher is more concerned with abstract questions. "Two-by-two" does not merely give an idea of thickness but also carries with it a suggestion of some shape. This is rather like a child's way of naming or describing objects; the narrator parodies conventional modes of knowing or judging things. The images he juxtaposes recall pagan joy and Christian bliss.

I hear a most lovely huzza;
I'm king of the boops.

( CP. p.92 )

"The most lovely huzza" suggests Christian, hymnal music. In fact, what he celebrates here is a sensuous abandonment, and the stanza works out the tension between Puritan restraint and pagan sensuousness, the control of reason and the intensity of passion. "Reason"
must be abjured because it contradicts the experience of concrete things, because it creates barriers between the material and the spiritual. The narrator wants to greet "the thingy spirit" and claim the unity of matter and spirit, hailing joy as the principle of life. It is this experience of joy which leads him to the perception of "Love". How are we to take this "Love"? If one follows the dialectic of the poem in its earlier parts, a distinct pattern of "purpose, passion and perception" (Francis Fergusson's phrase) emerges. The first part of the poem deals with the plight of the protagonist who constrained by his sexual awakening "seeks" his "own meekness". (CP. p.91). The Christian kind of meekness is not possible for him; all the Christian props "slipper soft away" under violent sexual passion. The second part demonstrates the power of passion and the rejection of "reason" leading to the perception of "love". The third part reiterates and extends the moment of perception illustrating what is implied by "love" in the earlier section.

"I cry, Love! Love" takes its title, Roethke himself points out, from Blake in whose "Visions of the Daughters of Albion", oothoon stands for the voice of free and spontaneous expression of passion. She is a virgin "open to joy and to delight wherever beauty appears", worshipping their manifestations in every form. In Roethke's poem, "love" is used in the Blakean sense, passion being regarded as an expression of vitality and joy of life pervading the cosmos. Also there is much resemblance in the way Blake's and Roethke's poems end. Blake's poem closes with oothoon's passionate celebration of life:
The sea fowl takes the wintry blast
for a covering to her limbs,
And the wild snake the pestilence to
adjourn him with gems and gold,
And trees and birds and beasts and men
behold their eternal joy.
Arise, you little glancing wings, and
sing your infant joy!
Arise and drink your bliss, for
everything that lives is holy.

("Visions of Daughters of Albion:")
Oxford University Press; pp.211-215)

This is the meaning of love — which resolves the dialectic of contraries; "the ceaseless dialectic of daily appearance" that undoes the subtlety of reason.

The last poem, "O, Thou Opening, O" (CP. p.97) which, according to Roethke, closes his The Lost Son sequence and is placed at the beginning of The Waking (1953) is concerned with the protagonist's anxiety for transcendence. The earlier section ended with his realisation that "love" pervades the cosmos, that it is the vital principle of life uniting its varied manifestations. This movement which proclaims 'joy' as a condition of life brings Roethke closer to Whitman. One marks here an important polarity in Roethke's poetry -- something that links him with Wordsworth, Blake and Whitman. It is this deep urge, the irresistible inner drive -- to merge with nature, to establish oneness with it, to realise joy and serenity of spirit that helps us to fix Roethke in the Whitman tradition. The "meekness", "grace" and "love" which he has achieved in earlier sections are not the conventional virtues preached by Christianity. "Love", as has been suggested, means the energy and vitality of life binding all its various manifestations. This insight of Whitman is reflected in Roethke.
The perception of love is born out of grace, not meaning God's special favour to a person in its Christian sense, but insight which assured him that We never enter Alone. The poem O, Thou Opening, O illustrates Roethke's meekness. As a poet, he has a habit of calling in question what had been affirmed in the earlier section. This technique of ironic modification or juxtaposition appears even in The Lost Son sequence. For instance, in the famous stanza already quoted:

Was it light?
Was it light within?

( CP. p.58 )

The protagonist does not rhapsodise over his experience of oneness with nature; he is sceptical about it. The section Unfold, Unfold (CP. p.89) is another striking illustration. This ironic modification becomes a structural device in Roethke's poetic sequences. Irony, used in this sense, illustrates Roethke's meekness.

The first part opens with the narrator's meekness, which is a lapse from the Whitmanesque movement of I cry, Love! Love!

He is distracted by doubts of his powers of transcendence and appeals for guidance to a dizzy aphorist, a priest who is adept at making pithy statements. The whole scene is a brilliant ironic portraiture of a conversion scene.

Dazzle me, dizzy aphorist.
Fling me a precept.
I'm a draft sleeping by a stick;
I'm lost in what I have.

( CP. p.97 )
The protagonist is still haunted by a sense of his limitations which deprive him of his real self. He is subjected to the pulls of sensuality and spirituality. Can he somehow marry these two? The protagonist prises "ease", the sense of harmony and oneness, but the memory of the father darkens his future, and he retreats to a primordial mode of existence.

The prose passage that follows these lines presents an argument between the priest and the protagonist. How are we to take the abrupt transition from verse to prose? Is it simply because the protagonist enters into argument with the priest? That it is making a parody of a religious ceremony is obvious enough. Roethke changes to prose probably because he wishes to imply that the priest who is a representative of institutionalised religion lacks the intimacy of a personal vision. The narrator's response to his exhortation is: "I'm tired of all that, Bag-foot. I can hear small angels any time. ... who ever said God sang in your fat shape? ... A leaf could drag you". (CP. p.98). In fact, the protagonist runs away from the church as he would from the father. If he rejects the asceticism of religion it is because its vision excludes the reality of contraries which his vision reveals to him. Like Blake, Roethke seems to have believed: "Without contraries is no progression". He parodies the priest's aphoristic pronouncements.

The dark has its own light.
A son has many fathers.

The protagonist, then, holds up for ridicule the rhetoric of sermonizing, and the gospel he teaches is:

Waking's
Kissing.
Yes.
In a way, this is a Blakean message which rejects the Christian distinction between body and soul. Revelation comes through the senses, through intimate physical relationship. As the orthodox would say, the protagonist is anti-Christ, and a true follower of Whitman and Lawrence.

But the protagonist has still a long way to go. Can he "leap, .../In the lily's sovereign right?" (CP. p.98). This Lawrentian image has sexual and religious overtones. The third part of the poem builds up a series of images that convey the early youth of the protagonist, being concerned with his body. He exclaims:

The ground's beating like flame!
You fat unnecessary hags,
You enemies of skin,
A dolphin's at my door

(CP. p.99)

There is an awakening, but it is of the body. Though he is "King of another condition", he knows that:

Going is knowing,
I see, I seek;
I am near.

But at this stage of his journey, the way is through the body and its gates are open now.

The question that raises itself is: how far has Roethke advanced in his journey out of the self? His "circularity" prevents the reader from forming a clear picture of the movements and the changing self of the protagonist — a complaint which the
protagonist himself seems to admit:

Some errand, obscure as the winds circuit,
A secret to jerk from the lips of a fish.
Is circularity such a shame?
A cat goes wider. 

( CP. p.92 )

It is this persistence of the circuitous movement of the self that prompts the conclusion that there is very little progression of self in Roethke's poems. J.D. McClatchy complains that the struggle of the protagonist is less "intense" and that he is still held back by his restrictive world. "Though they (i.e. the restricting images in Roethke) may modulate and shift, reverse and reject any rigid values assigned them, they remain the poles of his vision, the extremes within which and towards which his narrow range of other images cluster". This emphasizes that Roethke's poetry is firmly rooted in the experiences of his childhood world, which is the source of his poetic images. Roethke has also partly fostered such an impression by making his protagonist more self-introspective, more vacillating and more "close to the ground". But these regressive images form one polarity of the self's movement in Roethke; it is this regressive movement of the self that links him with the modernist poets. But to conclude from the preponderance of "restricting" images that Roethke fails to resolve the dilemma of the "self" and "soul" is to be unfair to him. The other polarity of poetic movement in Roethke is also strong--the movement towards Whitman. The self begins to expand when it succeeds in establishing empathy with nature through sensuous abandonment and discovers joy in the cosmos. As in Whitman, it is through the sense of touch that the self can experience unity and harmony with the universe. And Whitman and Roethke found "reason" inadequate for a proper realisation of the self. They
relied on the light that comes from the self than on any religious
dogma. In Whitman, the self can establish equations with others
without any barriers. In Roethke, the range is narrower, as Mc
Me Clatchy notes, but it is compensated by the intensity of
passion. Although Praise to the End! continues The Lost Son the
poet has moved from a sense of profound despair to an awareness
of the possibility of redemption:

I sing the green, and things to come,
I'm king of another condition,
So alive I could die!

( CP. p.99 )

These lines point to the other pole of Roethke's poetic vision—
the pole that brings to memory Whitman's boy who "went forth
every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth everyday".
One also recalls Whitman's lines:

O take my hand Walt Whitman!
Sun gliding wonder! such sights and sounds!
Such join'd unended links, each hook'd to the next,
Each answering all, each sharing the
earth with all.

( Whitman. p.109 )

Roethke's protagonist here is celebrating his joy at his oneness
with nature achieved through his newly awakened sexuality. And
"the effect is that of a man finding and piecing together his
knowledge of himself, which is a product of his knowledge of the
natural order". 17 Roy Harvey Pearce is nearer the heart of the
matter because the "restricting images" furnish a fulcrum for
the movement of the self in Roethke's poetry. The progress that
the self attains in Praise to the End is not linear; it is
reflected in the protagonist's increased complexity of the modes of consciousness.

This change in the modes of consciousness is indicated in the titles of these sequences. Though Praise to the End and "O Thou Opening O" extend, according to Roethke, The Lost Son sequence, the protagonist's self is more enlarged and enriched in the later sequence. He continues to strive for transcendence, to crawl "from the mire". Also the experience of seeking and seeing is as valuable to him as the transcendental feat. The lesson that he has learnt is that he must learn to trust his senses; the medium of insight for him will be the body.

The "body" is an obsessive image of the sequence; it is, in fact, the hero of Praise to the End sequence. The sequence begins with the protagonist's existence in his mother's womb and ends with the hunt of another body for sexual union. This is a new "grace" that the narrator has won as the fruit of his "going". The "grace" of the body rejects the "Jesus--Shimmer over all things" (CP. p.98), the repressive puritan morality of the church, and "Reason".

The protagonist's quest is not influenced by one master for

A soul has many fathers. (CP. p.98).

This awareness of multiple lineage had haunted the protagonist even in The Lost Son sequence. In Praise to the End the presence of "spiritual ancestors" is suggested in the titles of the different sections of the sequence, the entire sequence being (to borrow the phrase of Jenijoy La Belle) "the echoing wood of Theodore Roethke".
What could Roethke mean by the title, Praise to the End! and by the note that the second part of the sequence is a continuation of The Lost Son sequence? As a part of The Lost Son sequence Praise to the End! continues to explore the plight of the self and its struggle to attain inner poise after the death of the protagonist's parents. Thematicallv, its link is with the earlier sequence as the self is yet alienated and longs for harmony with others. It is still fragmented and the unity of being is a distant ideal. The theme of "the lost self" points to the presence of Eliot in Roethke's poetry. According to Pearce "The poet himself seems to be fleeing from Eliot"; and he adds in a footnote that "the poem constitutes a kind of reply to Eliot, or an alternative." In what sense does Roethke seem to be "fleeing from Eliot?" We may remember that Roethke never tired of boasting that Eliot's poetic position would be esteemed lower than this. The poetry of Eliot and Roethke both wrestle with the problem of the modern man — his fragmented self, or the loss of self in the modern age. The seeds of this fragmentation, however, in Eliot and Roethke, do not germinate in the same soil. Eliot's Prufrock has put it pointedly:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute
will reverse.

The poem renders the torn, pathetic self of Prufrock who lacks the courage to make advances to the woman in a cheap hotel. He is "a divided self". There is a witty assertion which juxtaposes the self of the narrator and the world of the values he has so far
cherished. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" — this is how the narrator is fixed "in a formulated phrase". No self-mockery could have been so unsparing as Prufrock's. The cultural context which destroys the wholeness of his self limits his vision. It is this cultural context which is envisioned as Prufrock's hell in the poem. Now, in Roethke, the self is perhaps more agonisingly conscious of its malaise than in Eliot but that self is more concerned with its private obsessions. The cultural situation in Roethke is implied and has not received so direct and insistent a configuration as in Eliot's poem. The self in Roethke's poetry is more burdened with its biological inhibitions. The sense of crisis that marks his poetry is more private and self-destructive than in Eliot.

In spite of the differences in the orientations of the self in Eliot and Roethke, Roethke employs many poetic devices which are distinctly Eliotean. For instance, Eliot's unique gift of fixing the self in "a formulated phrase". Prufrock says:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.


Roethke's narrator employs similar images:

I'm crazed and graceless,
A winter-leaping frog.

(CF. p.83)

and,

Ooh, ooh, I'm a duke of eels.

(CF. p.85)
Far more important is the way in which both poets render the situation of the protagonist. Eliot evokes Prufrock's social world in:

Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or
warp about a shawl.

(T.S. Eliot, p. 11).

The scene is dramatically presented; the image communicates what Prufrock seeks from "them all", the women who pose to be cultivated and sophisticated. It is an "objective-correlative" of Prufrock's world; to him love means nothing beyond sexual titillation.

This Prufrockian situation occurs in some of the sections of Praise to the End! One notices how deftly Roethke catches the tone of Prufrock's speech:

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.
For whom have I swelled like a seed?
What a bone-ache I have.
Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last.

(CP, p. 85)

Prufrock and Roethke's protagonist suffer from the same kind of "bone-ache", which they are not in a position to gratify. The tone in both suggests that they are lost souls plagued by their sexual frustrations, and both narrators wield irony at their own expense. Prufrock can mock at himself:
I grow old... I grow old...
I shall wear the bottoms of
my trousers rolled.

( T. S. Eliot, p.13 )

In Roethke we have:

Later, I did and danced in the simple wood.
A mouse taught me how, I was a happy asker:
Quite-by-chance brought me many cookies
I jumped in butter.
Hair had kisses.

(CP, p.90)

These and similar devices in Roethke indicate his poetic affinity with Eliot's poetic practice. The conversational tone, the use of colloquial idiom and the stream of consciousness method, the protagonist's self-directed irony and the incisive wit call to mind Eliot's early poetry. Eliot has a stanza which summarises what Roethke does very frequently in his poetry.

The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things
.......
As if the world gave up
The secret of its skeleton,
Stiff and White.

(T.S. Eliot, p.24).

The "imagistic" technique that Roethke employed from the very beginning of his career to its end is a part of the poetic legacy that he shared with Eliot.

Nevertheless, the differences between the two are as significant as the resemblances. The sexual impulse, in Eliot's early poetry, is "rubbed and questioned in the concert room" (Eliot, p.15)
evoking "an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb" and lacks vitality and joy, bringing to surface the inability to establish personal relationships. As the speaker in "Portrait of a Lady" admits:

I have been wondering frequently of late
(But our beginnings never know our ends!)
Why we have not developed into friends.

(Eliot, p.18)

The sexual impulse in Roethke on the other hand is imbued with deeper significance of symbiotic relationship and ontological altogetherness. It is a flowering of irresistible creative instinct that pervades the cosmos. In the section, "Unfold, Unfold!" (CP. p.90) the narrator observes:

The eye perishes in the small room.

The vision of the protagonists in Eliot's early poetry does not extend beyond "a heap of broken images" or "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season". To the protagonists of Eliot's dramatic monologues, sex is not primarily a symbiotic and ontological experience; it is a kind of itch for social conquest. In Roethke sex is a symbol of the feminine principle which is the secret of the creative instinct in man and nature, and this perception of eros as a creative principle unites the human and the subhuman world in this world. Sex in his poetry, stands for fecundity, a part of the evolutionary process. It is in some such sense that Pearce seems to regard Roethke's sequence as a reply to Eliot, especially of Gerontion and The Waste Land.

Among earlier English poets of our century it is Lawrence who seems to have the kind of sexual craving we find in Roethke. In one of his poems we have:
Mine was the love of a growing flower
For the sunshine.
You had the power to explore me,
Blossom me stalk by stalk;
You woke my spirit, you bore me
To consciousness, you gave me the dour
Awareness -- then I suffered a balk.

( D.H. Lawrence, p. 24 )

Lawrence, of course, talks of his first sexual experience with Miriam and does not speak of her as a feminine principle; in Lawrence, the woman has always a strong, separate individuality that is lacking in Roethke's sequence. However, the lines from Lawrence convey an experience similar to the impact of erotic awakening in Roethke's protagonist—the experience of flowering and baulking. The point of recalling Lawrence at this stage is simply to stress that in Roethke's poetry, as in Lawrence's, "the feelings are happening to the poet in all their conflict."¹⁹ In Lawrence, love is not a complete surrender of individual's identity to the other partners as can be borne out by his novels; otherness is never sacrificed for the sake of togetherness. Roethke's protagonist craves for unity with the other, but he has to struggle fiercely to achieve that unity. A Alvarez's remark about Lawrence's poetry substantiates an impression that Lawrence's as well as Roethke's power and originality as poets depend on the way they keep close to their feelings. Roethke's poems "are the inner flow of a man in the act of becoming aware—aware not only of his feelings and cause, but of their full implications." ²⁰

The remark of Alvarez can help us to understand how Lawrence and Roethke composed their poems. Their primary concern was with immediate sensations and feelings; the quick pulse of the moment.
Like Whitman and Lawrence, Roethke held that "the quick of the universe is the pulsating carnal self, mysterious and palpable" and loved the "forms, the power of motion, the least insect or animal, the senses, eye-sight, love that his sole desire was to stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs." He responded intensely to things physical as can be seen from the poems in Praise to the End. An early poem, "Love on the farm" illustrates how persistently Lawrence endeavoured to catch the flow of the moment and render the pulsating, carnal self. The country girl expresses her joy at the new awakening:

...With his hand he turns my face to him
And caresses me with his fingers that still smell grim
Of the rabbit's fur! God! I am caught in a snare!
I know not what fine wire is round my throat;
I only know I let him finger there
My pulse of life, and let him nose like a stoat
Who sniffs with joy before he drinks the blood.

(D.H.Lawrence; p.13)

There is here a full surrender to the physical experience of love-making, awakened through the sense of touch. It is as if all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking." It is a time-honoured way of communication between one body and another. As in Lawrence, the sense of touch is of prime importance in the erotic experience in Roethke's poetry.

Roethke captures the inner flow of his protagonist, and fidelity to feelings is one of the highest poetic values to him. To quote from one of the poems of the sequence:

Easy the life of the mouth.
What a lust for ripeness!
All openings praise us, even oily holes.
The bulb unravels. Who's floating? Not me.
The eye perishes in the small vision.  
What else has the vine loosened?  
I hear a dead tongue hallo.

( CP. p.90 )

The stanza conveys the sexual awakening in the narrator as an experience which overwhelms him every moment of life. "The life of the man", "the bulb unravels", "the vine loosened" evoke powerful erotic sensations and the speaker is impatient to give an outlet to his excitement. Both Lawrence and Roethke aimed "to get an emotion out in its own course, without altering it." 24 They have their literary ancestor in Whitman. All the three believed "in the purity and the truth of the primal impulses, in the instinctual, spontaneous man of the senses as a being superior to the idealised, abstracted man of cerebration." 25 Roethke, like the other two, believed there was nothing sinful in sex and that the naked human body does not necessarily imply moral depravity. "In Sensibility! O La!" ( CP. p.82 ) the narrator boastfully exhibits a narcissistic interest in his naked body:

You've seen me, prince of stinks,  
Naked and entire.  
Exalted? yes --

Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a song of the attainment of selfhood through development of the sexual identity. His "I Sing the Body Electric" (Whitman. p.78) declares a divinity of the body stirred to new life through phallic consciousness. What links Whitman, Roethke and Lawrence is the way in which they look upon sex in relation to or vis a vis the Christian doctrine of the Fall. They invert "the deeply imbedded" Christian myth. As James E. Miller, Jr. says: "... to regain paradise, man must purge not the physical
but the sense of the physical as sinful; he must be born again not through spiritual denial of the flesh but through spiritual transfiguration of the flesh. It is this sense of sexual awakening not as man's fall but as his re-birth which distinguishes Whitman, Lawrence and Roethke from some one like Eliot. In a note which Whitman prepared for writing the "Children of Adam" poems, he said:

"Theory of a cluster of poems the same to the passion of woman-love ... full of animal fire, tender, burning, -- the tremulous ache, delicious, yet such a torment. The swelling elate and vehement, that will not be denied. Adam, as a central figure and type. This describes very well what Roethke attempted in his Praise to the End! His protagonist like the narrator in Whitman's sequence, frankly acknowledges and accepts the Adamic in his nature, "the mystic deliria, the madness amorous, the utter abandonment" (Whitman. p.77).

In the "invocation" to the "Children of Adam" Whitman states the intent and argument of the whole poem which is to restore the lost paradise to man, to regain the lost Garden of Eden. But this regeneration is to be accomplished through "the life of their bodies" which gives "meaning and being" to men. As the speaker in his poem asks:

Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves? ...  ...  ...  ...  ...  ...  ...  ...  ...
As if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

The point is that sexual awakening is a kind of "resurrection after slumber", a kind of rebirth. As Whitman says:
This the nucleus — after the child is born of woman, man is born of woman.
This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and the outlet again!

This description of erotic experience evokes the ritual of baptism. In the words of James E. Miller, Jr., "Paradoxically, it is through the sex experience, not by suppression of it, that man is reborn, that he is to find way back to the lost state of innocence of the Garden of Eden." The bath of birth suggests the rebirth of man after he has received the grace of baptism; "the merge of small and large" suggests union with the transcendent. The mission of woman is that of a chosen one; she gives both body and soul to man. The poet assures her:

Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exist of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.

This view of sex — woman as the begetter and redeemer — reminds one of Whitman's "children of Adam" while reading Roethke's Praise to the End!

Roethke's poem, "Where Knock is Open Wide" embodies this woman's privilege of enclosing "the rest", and "the exist of the rest", as Whitman's narrator puts it. The narrator in Roethke's poem wishes to communicate his awareness when he was "enclosed in the rest".

His ears haven't time.
Sing me a sleep-song, please.
A real hurt is soft.
For Roethke and Whitman sexual experience is a gateway to transcendental union, and they hail the Feminine principle permeating the cosmos. Whitman’s narrator says:

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, one with inexpressible, completeness, sanity, beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast the Female I see.

(Whitman. p.81)

Roethke’s protagonist, too, like Whitman’s, looks upon sex as a symbiotic relationship leading to “the mystic deliria, the madness amorous, the utter abandonment” and his Four For Sir John Davies (CP. p.105) dramatically embodies this.

VI

In his very useful essay on Roethke’s love poetry Coburn Freer contends that Roethke’s central image of the “lost son” continues to function as a governing and organising principle in The Waking (1953) and Words for the Wind (1958). “Quite simply, the metaphor is that of the Lost Son, the Prodigal Son, developed to successfully higher and more metaphysical levels,” he remarks. This is a valuable hint. In what sense, one may wonder, is Roethke’s narrator, like a Prodigal Son? The Biblical character is an erring human figure who returns to his parents after paying heavily for his early mistakes. It is a story of guilt and repentance demonstrating a Christian sense of sin and forgiveness. The parable tells the reader of the Prodigal Son’s peace with his parents. Roethke’s protagonist is very unlike the Biblical prototype in that nowhere does he suffer from the sense of guilt for “the ancient feud” with his father. The pattern of sin and
expiation hardly exists in Roethke's sequence. Is it quite legitimate to say that the role that Roethke's narrator plays in Four for Sir John Davies is that of a Prodigal Son? These poems certainly celebrate the ecstasy of sexual surrender but to consider their actors as "Prodigals" is to see them in a light different from the original context. Mr. Freer also suggests that the Biblical parable should be understood as interpreted by Rainer Maria Rilke in The Notebooks of Malte Lauridige Brigue. Rilke's interpretation is that "the person who is loved must bear the burden of being forgiven and receiving. Malte discovers that love necessarily endows the beloved with a great and weary sense of responsibility." Roethke inverts the role of man and woman in his love poetry as woman initiates him into sexual experience. But how far does she look upon this as her burden, or her special "responsibility"? It is the element of "play" which they (i.e. the lover and the beloved) have emphasized in their sexual relationship. Neither partner in love seems to be obsessed with the awareness of "the weary sense of responsibility of forgiving or being forgiven."

It is difficult to accept Freer's interpretation of Roethke's love poetry but he makes a remark which opens a way for a fresh inquiry. He says: "Perhaps if we could see better where Roethke's love poems come from, we could see better where they go." Where do Roethke's love poems come from? Strictly speaking, his "greenhouse" poems are not love poetry but they do contain seeds of his love poetry. The self in these poems "stands apart"; the protagonist experienced the want of true love in his world which was dominated by the parents, longing for relating himself to something even subhuman in the vegetable
and animal worlds. This kind of longing is love which seeks anchorage in personal relationships. Love in the sense of meaningful and fulfilling personal relationship has a negative origin in the greenhouse world. After the loss of parents, the protagonist speaks of another "fire" in him — sexual awakening that occurs at puberty. Even the world of nature around him then becomes an incarnation of eros. It is this new dawn, of erotic awakening that is celebrated in *Praise to the End!* No intensely felt love with a particular woman is communicated in this sequence. "It is necessary to understand," as Ralph J. Mills, Jr. says, "first of all that Roethke's love poems are not just evocations of the beloved or descriptions of his aroused emotions with regard to her, ... this group of poems brings to a certain measure of fulfillment the evolution of the self begun with the childhood and adolescence poems." The point seems to be that Roethke's prime interest in his love poetry was not a particular woman; it was the self as it is being transformed by that experience. In a sense, the self was looking for a principle of harmony and unity to be discovered through personal relationships with others. The act of loving was a way of seeking that principle of order in the personal and cosmic spheres. Since the evolution of the self through its early phases was the principal concern of the sequences before *Four for Sir John Davies*, there is no woman to respond to the protagonist's need for love. The earlier sequences contain the genesis of love poetry which was to follow; it is born out of the need to conquer chaos felt in one's body and in the world around. It is perhaps in the
role of a kind of mediator for the journey out of the self that woman appears as "She" in Roethke's love poetry. In a beautiful lyric, the protagonist declares:

I feel her presence in the common day,
In that slow dark that widens every eye.
She moves as water moves, and comes to me,
Stayed by what was, and pulled by what would be.

( CP. p.129 )

"Throughout The Collected Poems", remarks James McCMichael, "she is characterised as being closer to the soil than her lover, and it is implied that her value is accordingly the greater". Because she is nearer to the soil, to the source of life itself, the secret of creation, woman is the leading spirit in Roethke's love-poetry. This has been expressed most beautifully in the following lines:

The breath of a long root,
The shy perimeter
Of the unfolding rose,
The green, the altered leaf,
The oyster's weeping foot,
And the incipient star —
Are part of what she is.
She wakes the ends of life.

( CP. p.125 )

She shares the secret of nature and creation — of the cosmic spirit — that confers primacy upon her in the cosmic scheme. The stanza sums up the genesis and direction of Roethke's love poetry, its biological and spiritual dimensions, its symbiotic and ontological aspects.

For Roethke, woman's greatest mystery is the way in which she fulfils her function. It is the mystery of a woman's being and her role that fascinate Roethke in his love poetry. If she is to
create order and harmony, acting as a mediator in the journey out of the self, what is her way of achieving order in life?

**Four For Sir John Davies** deals with the theme of order as conceived and accomplished by woman in life. Pearce aptly remarks: "For Roethke order is cosmic because sexual, and sexual because cosmic." This fusion of cosmic order and sexual union inspires **Four For Sir John Davies**.

The idea of order had always been Roethke's concern but he was seeking order as a personal experience, and not as a philosophical concept. At the stage of evolution of the self, the protagonist has not so far consciously felt order as an authentic experience. He explores the order "in the mind of man" and in "the universe" by juxtaposing two ways — the intellectual system as represented by Plato and neo-Platonists and the Dionysian way which teaches surrender to instinct and impulse. Roethke's four poems rest upon the structure which suggests a dialectic between "the conceptual order" and "the instinctual order", the Appollonian and the Dionysian.

The dedication of these poems to Sir John Davies which refers to his *Orchestra* (1763) suggests the juxtaposition of the seventeenth century and the twentieth. The idea of cosmic music which Davies's poem celebrates was something shared by all men in the earlier century. The universe for them was instinct with meaning. Now, if this sense of "Orchestra" is lost in the twentieth century, how can it be recovered? It was the "mind of man" which realised the cosmic harmony in the earlier century. The intellectual tradition which nourished
that faith is no longer valid in a scientific age. Will woman's body accomplish what man's mind can't do? The contrast between man's way, which is of reason, and woman's way, which is of instinct, divides their world, and the bipolarities between their distinct worlds provide the dramatic tension in these poems. And "the symbol of the solved antinomy", as implied in the poems, is the sexual union between man and woman. It is to W.B. Yeats that Roethke turns as the exemplar who was as deeply concerned as he himself was with the question of harmony between soul and body.

One may refer to two or three poems of Yeats which treat this theme. In "chosen" (W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry. Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1962, p.169), love is treated as a turn of one's destiny; to love or to be loved is to be "chosen". The title of Yeats's poem evokes the religious context of being "elected" by God for a special purpose, vaguely identifying divine and sexual love. What connects the two senses of love is the conviction that love is meant to fulfil one's destiny, to serve the "ends of life". This can possibly be attained by participating in the music of the spheres. "Chosen" begins with a cryptic statement: "The lot of love is chosen", suggesting that love is not a conscious act of will. This idea of love as a mediator between the lower and higher, as an emblem of one's own destiny, is shared by Roethke. He expresses this in "The Vigil" (CP. p.107).

Who rise flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.
Roethke’s "The vigil" as Yeat’s "Chosen" depicts love as an embrace of one’s fate. In both these poems, it is the woman who controls and shapes man’s destiny. The speaker, in Yeat’s poem, is a woman who describes sexual union as a dance of destiny. She declares

I struggled with the horror of daybreak
I chose it for my lot! If questioned on
My utmost pleasure with a man.
By some new-married bride, I take
That stillness for a theme
Where his heart my heart did seem
And both adrift on the miraculous stream
Where—wrote a learned astrologer—
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.

( W. B. Yeats, p.169 ).

The experience which this celebrates is the profound sense of unity of being, the miraculous transformation love brings about in the loved one. The experience of unity of being is born out of the union of two opposites or contraries; this ecstatic dance of opposites creates cosmic harmony.

Roethke grapples with this Yeatsian theme in the first poem of the sequence, "The Dance". It opens with a sceptical reminder that the "dance" as it was conceived by Davies could hardly sustain the faith in the modern age. It was more of an Apollonian concept fostered by the idealistic thinkers of the classical ages and revived by the neo-Platonists in the Elizabethan times. In an age when no one can hold fast to this ancient faith, and when "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world", a new way has to be discovered and adopted. That way can be of the "romping bears", of the ecstasy of body rather than of the mind. The whole poem is organized around the
antinomy between the mind of man and his body. The protagonist announces his pledge in keeping with the spirit of the times.

The great wheel turns its axle when it can;
I need a place to sing, and dancing-room,
And I have made a promise to my ears
I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears.

The narrator attempts to connect himself with the tradition of "Orchestra" by using "bears" in its astronomical as well as biological sense. Perhaps this is deliberate as it enables him to refer to his double heritage—heavenly and physical. He vacillates between the two poles of seeing and thinking "with pride", realising that slaves of tradition could hardly act meaningfully. He seems to recall his commitment to the animal in him and also his early struggle to master the art of dancing. Although there was no one to initiate him into this art, the experience he gained was valuable for it gave him an insight into the true meaning of dance. "Dance" he learnt, was not a mechanical and uniform movement of the body. It represented nothing less than spiritual and cosmic harmony. "Insipite of the elation accompanying this joyous, willed activity" remarks Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "there is an incompleteness in what he does that can only be corrected by the appearance of the beloved". 35 The tone of "Though dancing needs a master, I had none / To teach my toes to listen to my tongue" (CP. p.105) suggests that the protagonist missed the sense of complete fulfilment as his dance failed to marry music and word. The narrator of the monologue acknowledges his debt to Yeats who had understood the secret of the art of dancing.
The dance which the protagonist celebrates is not a performance of a lonely dancer, who is lost in his art, but one which achieves harmony of the self with others. It is not merely self-expression; it is more an act of participation and it is his sense of participation that prompts him to mention the other great masters of the past. This memory in turn brings him to a woman through whom he can experience dance as an aesthetic act and also as a biological union.

"The Partner" embodies the mystery of sexual union that overwhelms and confounds the narrator. He is no longer alone; his "woman" partner is such as "would set sodden straw fire". (CP. p.105). The narrator is seized with anxiety and impatience to understand the crisis in which he is caught and he dares the question:

... What is desire? —
The impulse to make some one else complete?

He is restless, curious and inquisitive, and what consumes him at the moment is his intellectual passion. The question that worries him is: What is the meaning of sexual passion? How far does it help man and woman complete each other as Plato thought? The protagonist when he meets his partner, reflects the excitement of mind and body. But this intellectual thrust is relieved after his dance with the partner. The moment of revelation occurs:

I'd say it to my horse: we live beyond Our outer skin...

He has learned it the right way; by surrendering his self to experience. The right way to understand the mystery of sex
is not to ask questions about it, but to yield fully to it.
He comes to discern that "the living all assemble". The
sexual urge governs all living things, and the sexual ecstasy
transcends the physical.

I gave her kisses back, and woke a ghost.

The protagonist feels initiated into a new mystery of body
and mind, a mystery which remains unfathomed by gods and men
so far.

The third poem, "The Wraith", concerns itself with the
identity of a partner in such a dance. The experience fills
both with profound joy but the protagonist wants to know how
far each of the partners could enter into the "I-Thou"
relationship with each other. Perhaps the true test of
such relationship is to be able to perform such a dance on
a spiritual level. In "The Wraith", the plane shifts from
physical to spiritual; the dance of lovers that is described
is more of imagination than of bodies. This transition to
a spiritual plane is dramatically necessary because the poem
would convey a new truth:

There was a body, and it cast a spell—
God pity those but wanton to the kness,—
The flesh can make the spirit visible;
We woke to find the moonlight on our toes.

Roethke's female partner hovers between two worlds, the
physical and the spiritual, signifying her dual role of
uniting the earth and heaven, the symbiotic and ontological
levels of relationship. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., remarks: "he
wishes to reveal the spiritual transcendence emerging from
carnal love in the poem. "The Wraith" is a reply to the questions raised earlier concerning the nature and function of sexual passion: it embodies the experience of completeness in and through the act itself: "She laughed me out, and then she laughed me in." Just because man is troubled by such questions of completeness and identity in his sexual relationship, he has to surrender himself to woman. She seems to be a born commander in the erotic play. There is "the impulse to make someone else complete"; each might become the other in the play, but this is not only in the Platonic sense of the term.

The protagonist's partner, who was and was not she, is associated with Dante's Beatrice in "The Vigil." The title indicates the nature of the experience it embodies—visionary moments glimpsed by the narrator through physical union. Dante's Beatrice was "a shape alone, ..., whirling slowly down", confirming what Dante saw. "The Vigil" is a very important moment of life, a moment when one keeps awake for a spiritual vision. The moment of sexual ecstasy can be such a moment of spiritual revelation. Roethke who begins his Four For Sir John Davies with Plato's myth of heavenly music and of love bringing two halves together, ends the poem with woman as a divine guardian angel. As a modern, he finds it difficult to separate the body from the spirit in the way Plato did. Did Dante lose his separateness with Beatrice when he accepted her as guide? To Roethke, Plato and Dante stand for different ideals of love; Plato representing the ideal which seeks completeness and merger of self in the beloved. Dante seeks this but the final object of love is God and woman is a mediator of such transcendence. The last stanza of the poem blends the sexual and religious overtones:
We dared the dark to reach the white and warm,
She was the wind when wind was in my way;
Alive at noon, I perished in her form.
Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.

(C.P. p.107)

Woman plays the role of redeemer; she is the bridge uniting the sensual and the spiritual. Roethke’s protagonist is reborn through his death in a woman’s body and this experience has brought home to him the meaning of fall and redemption. The line "I perished in her form" suggests the sexual intimacy recalling the symbiotic relationship between a child and its mother. Without this experience, the "fall", "the spirit", "the redemption" will have remained empty words; the experience has united the word and the idea. After the experience the word transcends the idea and transcendence is the source of light.

Coburn Freer’s questions about the sequence can now be taken up after this analysis of Four For Sir John Davies. He asks: "How did he make the transcendence?... What did he learn that he didn't know before, and that enabled him to make the leap now?" and adds, "the consciousness of the fall to the flesh does not seem to be a sufficient premise. The closing couplet is ... weak in terms of the structure of the sequence... The contradictions are not so much the issue as that Roethke does not show how he finally came to embrace them". If one considers the structure of the sequence carefully, it is possible to maintain that it works out the dialectic of opposites as inhering in philosophical and poetic traditions. The first poem, "The Dance", states the two traditions very unambiguously:
the first tradition of the Orchestra which embodied the Platonic concept of universal harmony, and the second of "romping bears", glorifying the Dionysian abandonment and rapture. This can't be unfamiliar to readers of Donne and Yeats. The point to stress is that the opening and closing lines state the two polarities of the action which the sequence would try to bring together. The conflict is not stated; it is worked out in dramatic terms. The second poem, "The Partner" relates this conflict intimately to the speaker. He confesses that he is a prey to "animal" and "human" heat; he shares his "animal" heat with the bears and knows "human" heat in his mind. The rhetorical questions in the first stanza are a testimony to the "human heat" in his mind; and the line, "my marrow beat as widely as my pulse" reveals the "animal" heat of the narrator. "The Partner" conveys the conflict between the physical and the spiritual by the suggestive device of catechism and represents the action, the sexual dance of the partners, as a narration in retrospect, by the protagonist. However, it is the physical polarity that receives the emphasis in this section of the sequence. There is a progression in the action — from the enunciation of a theme to its enactment. "The Wraith" takes the action of the sequence to crisis and represents the partner as a solvent of the antinomy between the two opposites—body and soul. In the end the antithesis between the "dance of the mind" and "the animal remembering to be gay" vanishes. "The Vigil" works out the transition from the purgatorial state of the protagonist to the moment of full illumination.

The structure of the poem has a well-marked beginning, middle, and end. Roethke has achieved in the sequence a remarkable dramatic unity. The protagonist has moved a long
way from his initial position of confusion and achieved "peace", "insight", and he is reborn. All the contradictions are resolved in the experience of the dance itself. "At the conclusion of Four For Sir John Davies, as noted by Jenijoy La Belle, " as at the conclusion of the Paradiso (Canto xxxiii), the image of the idealised woman ends and the image of pure spiritual light filling all space begins. There is a final absorption of all contraries into a single, completely whole, completely perfect being — God as imaged light". 38 "The dance of the mind" which was a living faith with Davies can be once again a vital experience of the moderns but this can be recovered through the dance of the body. In this way the structure of the sequence embodies its theme of the reconciliation of contraries.

The sequence, as the title indicates, is also concerned with the poetic tradition and if there is only one "She", there are at least three poets who direct Roethke in his poetic dance. "Roethke's response to the woman he loves is simultaneously a response to the poets he loves". 39 La Belle's remark has been reinforced by Roethke's own statement. He writes: "He, they — the dead poets were with me". 40 Yeats would seem to Roethke what Beatrice was to Dante, the controlling master of his poetic destiny. Dante, the visionary, was also beckoning Roethke to transform the physical experience into a spiritual one and Davies represented the Platonic tradition. There are many poetic voices in this group of poems, but Yeats is the most important of them.

The poem of Yeats that comes to mind while one is reading Roethke's sequence is "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes".
In both, it is the double vision of the protagonist that constitutes the tension of the poems. As the narrator of Yeats's poem puts it, it is

Being caught between the pull
Of the dark moon and the full.

The theme of both these poems is the same: the conflict and reconciliation between contraries. And the way they suggest to achieve harmony is that of dance. Yeats and Roethke, of course, do not work in the same framework; Yeats's was more of his private making and rather esoteric; Roethke works strictly in the framework of the English poetic traditions. Both poems are visions, though Roethke's vision is not identical with Yeats's. The difference between the two dancers lies in their attitudes to dance. Yeats's dancer is more self-absorbed and her art is an end in itself. She is an isolated artist who finds fulfillment in her art alone. As the narrator declares:

O little did they care who danced between,
And little did she by whom her dance was seen.

Her art creates for her an autonomous world. To Roethke, the dance was not complete without a partner, so much so one hears a note of regret that his earlier dance was "dancing alone". "For Roethke, writing poetry was like making love; it was an activity requiring a partner". 41 It is the shared experience with the other that enhances the self and its artefact.
Inspite of the differences, Yeats's poem has a spiritual affinity with Roethke's sequence. Roethke's protagonist is lost between "animal" and "human heat"; he is "dancing-mad". Yeats's narrator is no less excited and complains of his loss of will.

When had I my own will?
O not since life began.

Both protagonists are seized with demonic frenzy, "constrained, arraigned, baffled", feeling lost. Yeats's Robartes is a passive observer of "a girl at play" for whom her life did not exist apart from her dancing. She has fused antithetical movements; the division of soul and body, form and matter, life and death, artist and audience. As Frank Kermode points out, "She is the image of unified body and soul, in which

All thought becomes an image, and the soul
Becomes a body. (42)

The dancing girl in Yeats's poem achieves the unity of body and mind through her complete identification with her art. Robartes puts it memorably:

So she had outdanced thought.
Body perfection brought.

Roethke's protagonist would claim the same for his "partner" for in any creative act, the mind and the body must become one. For him, too, she has transcended the dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Yeats's "dancing girl", it may be argued, is an emblem of a work of art or a Poetic Image.

Roethke's Beatrice can be similarly regarded as a poetic image
Evoked from Dante's *The Paradiso*. Despite the religious echoes in "The Vigil", it is the aesthetic contemplation that transcends the boundaries between these contraries. Jenijoy La Belle remarks that "Roethke's final statement suggests that even if the Dantean experience is found only in poetry, the imaginative act of literary creation is itself a means by which we are lifted up from physical existence into a realisation of spiritual life". 43

One cannot forget that the central image of the sequence is "the dance" which communicates principally through gestures and rhythmical movements. Roethke's engagement with Yeats in this sequence is not only thematic, it extends also to the technical accomplishments of Yeats. What one marks in Roethke's sequence is its tonal affinity with Yeats's later poetry. He was, at the time he wrote *Four For Sir John Davies*, engaged in teaching the five-beat line to his students. "I knew quite a bit about it, but write it myself — no; I felt myself a fraud". 44 Thus he was as deeply infatuated with the craft of verse as with the Yeatsian theme. It was in the spirit of a challenge or rather in the spirit of sincerity as a teacher and a practising writer that he undertook to write *Four For Sir John Davies*. He has succeeded amazingly even in his use of five-beat lines. Yeats was anxious, in his later age, to write poetry which was nearer to the bone and whose rhythm echoed the conversational tone. In short, speech-rhythm became a high poetic ideal. Now, it is this tone which Roethke wanted to reproduce in his sequence. His is a style distinguished for its passionate thinking, the style which was once eminently practised by the "Metaphysical poets" of the seventeenth-century in England.
The controlling impulse in "metaphysical" love poetry is a passionate interpenetration of body and mind, the sensual and the spiritual. The lover's mind is as agile as his passion is consuming. This conflict forms the subject of one of Yeats's poems, "Michael Robartes and the Dancer". "She" is being educated by "He" in the true nature of a woman. "She" shares the popular superstition that a woman's body is an abode of evil:

She: I have heard said
There is great danger in the body.

He: Did God in portioning wine and bread
Give man His thought or His mere body?

(W.B. Yeats: p.90)

Roethke was waging a similar war in his life and in his poetry. Jenijoy La Belle comments: "Although we do not usually think of Yeats as essentially in the Donne tradition of love poetry, Roethke responds to him in a way that does point out the sympathies between the love poems of Yeats and the tradition of Donne." 45

What prompted Roethke to write his love poetry? What is the presiding deity of his love poems? The biographical details of his life tell us that Roethke wrote his major love poems in *Words for the Wind* (1958) after his marriage to Beatrice O'connell, and he himself remarked that his love poetry in this volume was in the manner of an epithalamium. The first poem, "The Dream" (CP. p.119) depicts the beloved "as a blossom on a stem, "as a shape of change", as an etherealised being. In truth, these early poems represent the female principle, what Jung called the
Anima. The poem that embodies the spirit of nuptial joy is "Words for the Wind" (CP. p.123). The speaker is overflowing with joy of love and cannot entertain any other thought but that of love.

Love, love, a lily's my care,

Loving, I use the air
Most lovingly; I breathe;
Mad in the wind I wear
Myself as I should be,
All's even with the odd,
My brother, the vine is glad.

This love transforms his vision; "a garden stone", the "field", "the wind" are reflections of his beloved. The whole of nature radiates joy and light because of her presence. This love creates in the speaker a sense of oneness with nature and also helps him to achieve inner harmony. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., points out: "In the intensified perception of the poem we see her continual metamorphosis, her changing roles, but at the same time she remains a constant image within the poet himself." 46 His love poetry was born out of his personal experience but very few readers are likely to be convinced of the urgency and intensity of personal passion behind these poems as behind the love poems of Donne or Yeats. The portrait of woman emerging out of Roethke's love poems is, as he puts it in "Memory" (CP. p. 141) "half-bird", "half-animal", never a fully realised woman. She is, on the other hand, an image of a beloved or mistress as enshrined in the tradition of pastoral and courtly love poetry. By presenting the beloved "in literary terms, Roethke describes the rhythm of love as a movement in poetry". 47 This is less so in the love poems of his masters, Donne, Yeats and Lawrence, who realised, however, that loving a woman can be a precarious experience as
these two beings — the woman-body and the man-mind-come
together. Roethke's *Four For Sir John Davies* represents
this conflict and there is a stanza in "The Pure Fury," CP. p.133)
which expresses this pointedly:

The pure admire the pure, and live alone;  
I love a woman with an empty face.  
Parmenides put Nothingness in place;  
She tries to think, and it flies loose again.  
How slow the changes of a golden mean;  
Great Boehme rooted all in Yes and No;  
At times my darling squeaks in pure Plato.

In his love poetry, the woman embodies the wisdom of the body.

Wisdom, where is it found?  
Those who embrace, believe.

( CP. p.125 )

Lawrence would have found no difficulty in accepting this.  
Perhaps more sharply than Lawrence Roethke could see and express
the basic conflict between man's and woman's ways,

How terrible the need for solitude;  
That appetite for life so ravenous  
A man's beast prowling in his own house,  
A beast with fangs, and out for his own blood  
Until he finds the thing he almost was  
When the pure fury first raved in his head  
And trees came closer with a denser shade.

( CP. p.133 )

Just as the recognition of the conflict between man's rage and
her appetite is fundamental in Roethke's love poetry, so is his
faith in the redemptive power of woman. The narrator who in
"The Renewal" ( CP. p.135 ) is for a moment filled with doubts
and questions:
Will the Self, lost, be found again? In form?
I walk the night to keep my five wits warm.
immediately comes to:

Dry bones! Dry bones! I find my loving heart,
Illumination brought to such a pitch,
I see the rubblestones begin to stretch
As if reality had split apart
And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
I find that love, and I am everywhere.

This is an image of the beloved as we find it in "The Vigil". The beloved has not only one manifestation; she is, as it is recognized in "The Dream" (CP, p.119), "a shape of change, encircled by its fire.

Roethke's love poems are born out of the cross-fertilization of his personal experience of love with the tradition of love poetry. In the earlier sequences like Praise to the End! the beloved is more of an emblem of nature; in Four For Sir John Davies, she is like a mistress initiating the lover into the mystery of body and heaven. Malkoff remarks: "... the anima-like figure is both source of protection against the forces of darkness, and key to a vision of transcendental reality". The poet is able to "see and suffer myself/In other being" (CP, p.126). The line is richly ambiguous carrying the implications of relationship which can be physical and spiritual, symbiotic and ontological togetherness. This is the faith Roethke shared with Whitman and Lawrence, looking upon woman as the gate of the body and the gate of the soul. The celebration of the love relationship in Roethke is a kind of religious experience. The poet lived with deep roots once; he longs for the embrace of subhuman reality, for the deep sleep of death. He experiences aloneness in the context of human death; the aloneness, one might say, is produced by death, the ultimate separation that love seems powerless to overcome.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

CHAPTER 5


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"WHAT CAN I TELL MY BONES?":
PREPARING FOR THE END.

I

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay;
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
What's freedom for? To know eternity.

(CP. p.127)

From the very beginning, love, in Roethke's poetry, is connected with a man's deepening sense of life. This may be the import of the rhetorical question in "The Vigil":

Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?

(CP. p.107)

Love is expressed as motion, as "a violent dislocation". It is a process, "a motion", which is not of one's own making, and one has to be a "martyr" to it. Living is a reckoning with time and loving is a part of this process. Roethke links love with the flux of time and the changes it brings in life. The right way to "measure time" may be to study "how a body sways", to realize how one's body can keep pace with the dance of time. Roethke's concern with love is, in a way, an aspect of his involvement with time. Even in "Where Knock is Open Wind" (CP. p.71), the protagonist asks:

What's the time, papa-seed?
These two concerns — of love and time are fused together of which "dance" is a symbol. While he was dancing, he dreamt not only of a woman but also of death. As he put it:

Dream of a woman, and a dream of death;
The light air takes my being's breath away;
I look on white, and it turns into gray —

( CP. p.134 )

What he now seeks is "the knowledge that could bring" him to God. ( CP. p.139 ).

"Maturing as a poet", Eliot remarked, "means maturing as the whole man, experiencing new emotions appropriate to one's age and with the same intensity as the emotions of youth". 

The concern of the protagonist in Roethke has been a process of growth from childhood to adolescence, and this accompanied by increasing awareness of the rhythm of nature as reflected in the body. The protagonist saw the irresistible urge of the "cuttings" straining for a new life. This evolutionary appetite of nature was reflected in the growth of the (protagonist's) body. The surge of erotic passion in his growth was linked with the feminine principle in nature. The cycle of germination and growth is completed by decay. Now, if W.B. Yeats could be Roethke's "dancing-master" in his erotic dance, he (i.e. Yeats) could also be his guide when he wanted to measure time from its effect on body. For Yeats was troubled by the same questions as Roethke, and in The Dying Man: In Memoriam: W.B. Yeats ( CP. p.153 ), he uses his poetry as Yeats did, "to probe the extremes of perception and knowledge which the self may attain." 

This became more
necessary when Roethke realised that he was ageing, and that the next stage in the rhythm was decay and death. He went to Yeats who explored this theme — how could one prepare for the final end? How could one give meaning to life in one's old age? The bitter truth comes home to an ageing man that a part of his world is dead, that he has arrived at the stage of life when he must assess what he has made of life and find out what awaits him.

The speaker of Yeats's poem, "The Tower", expresses the perplexity and shock at his situation in terms that remind one of King Lear:

What shall I do with this absurdity —
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decreptic age that has been tied to me,
As to a dog's tail?

(W.B. Yeats: pp.104-105).

The narrator of "The Tower" knows his problem as well as its answer. He must achieve the unity of being in his life, the kind of unity a circle possesses.

Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul.

There is for him a way to recover the unity of his being. It is the path of "sages standing in God's holy fire" who can "be the singing—masters" of his soul. What is most essential is that the soul must use this time, old age, for its purgation before death comes. In "The Man and the Echo", we find:
... There is no release
In a bodkin or disease,
Nor can there be work so great
As that which cleans man's dirty state.

( W.B. Yeats, p.204 )

To quote Richard Ellmann, it is "the final stage of the purgative process for the man who has dared to face himself". The way of purgation also lies, besides, through the path of the holy sages, in the art of "Grecian goldsmiths" who created such beautiful forms as would sing:

To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

( W.B. Yeats, p.105 )

The aesthetic experience, in Yeats, becomes analogous to the religious experience. "What is important to notice" Ellmann observes, "is that the process of life and death is like the process of making a poem; that too must begin with a series of sensuous images, which are dissolved at the critical moment by analysis, and the whole of image and idea formed as pure unified experience". This fairly sums up the secret of "making up the whole", the secret of achieving organic unity in life. Unless a man learns to put together the different parts of his life in the way an artist composes the different parts of his work into a unified whole, he will find no meaning in life. There is no essential difference between the art of living and that of a poet. At the same time, however, "nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent". ( W.B. Yeats p.161 ). Old age is the right time to put together the broken ends of one's life.
Yeats faced the problem of "decrepit age" heroically, and as his body grew older his imagination became more inflamed. The source of rejuvenation, if one may call it that, was his own imagination. It was this testament of dreaming and creating "translunar paradise" that attracted Roethke to Yeats. The kinship he was trying to establish with Yeats was spiritual. It was also related to Yeats's later poetic manner which was characterized by an attempt to unite the spiritual and sensual modes of experience in the most surprising or sometimes most startling ways. However, Roethke's situation was different, and the warning sounded by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. is here pertinent: "... the fact that it (The Dying Man) is both an elegy for Yeats and a utilisation of some of his language and techniques should not prevent us from seeing how Roethke is really examining himself and his own situation." 5

II

Roethke knew well that one of the most effective ways to establish and work out a love relationship with another poet was through his poetic rhythms. It is through the reverberations of Yeats's poetic rhythms that Roethke would absorb the influence of his master. This rhythm is distinguished by its dramatic tone, colloquial idiom and stark, simple poetic diction. It is a dramatic presentation of personal emotions which enables the poet to achieve "distance" and "perspective" towards his theme. In his essay on Yeats, T.S. Eliot explains that there are two kinds of impersonality — "that which is natural to the mere skilful craftsman, and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist." 6 The "impersonality" that Eliot valued was not merely
a virtue of the poet's craft, an excellence one may find in an "anthology piece" but a higher impersonality which is an act of marrying personal and universal, particular and general. "Impersonality" is not a form of anonymity; on the contrary, the dramatic form is a witness to the poet's struggle to transcend his personal experience, "retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol". It is this higher form of impersonality that Roethke aims at by speaking through the persona of Yeats. To love another poet or woman "is finally to desire to merge with that person, and this can be accomplished linguistically by speaking as if one were the other".

"His words", the opening poem of *The Dying Man*, declares the faith and testament of the speaker. In Yeats's poem, "The Tower", the narrator says:

It is time that I wrote my will

and continues:

I mock Plotinus's thought
And cry in Plato's teeth,
...  ...  ...  ...  ...
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise.

Both the narrators, of Yeats's poem and Roethke's, recognise the crisis of the situation and the need to make peace with the facts of life. Just as Section III of "The Tower" writes out the speaker's "will", Roethke's first poem of the sequence is a testament of the narrator's faith and suggests the soul's crossing-time. The whole scene is dramatically rendered. The tone carries with it a ring of passionate anxiety and breathlessness
which can also be heard in Yeats's poem. It is also in the way in which the rhythm of "His words" corresponds to that of Section III of "The Tower" that a reader marks the affinity between these poets. Roethke manipulates the cadences of his poem as deftly as Yeats.

How far does Roethke's narrator share the faith of Yeats's speaker? The latter asserts as an article of faith that even after death, "we rise, /Dream and so create/Translunar Paradise". Yeats did not believe in the immortality or survival of the soul in the orthodox sense, but the general tenor of his poetry would hardly substantiate that he was, like Roethke's speaker, "doubtful to use it again". When his narrator "mocks Plotinus' thought/And cry in Plato's teeth", he derides the metaphysical abstractions of these philosophers. As Ellmann observes: "His subjectivism is a dramatic cry of defiance against those who would denigrate man or subject him to abstractions like death, life, heaven or hell, God, Plotinus' One, Plato's Good or eternal ideas". 9 It is conceivable that when the speaker of The Dying man attributes the poem to Yeats, he wished to indicate the gulf between his world and that of Yeats. The analogy between a human soul and a piece of hide "hung out to dry" suggests purgation, but it is also ironical. The image mocks the very idea of purgation. The irony implied in the image seems to be double-edged as it could be aimed at the belief in purgation and even by the speaker at himself. The first stanza suggests that Roethke's narrator works out an ironic perspective between his world and that of the narrator in "The Tower".

The "dying man" has to face the future, the hour of his death,
and he is aware of the organic chain of being, the cyclic motion of time. "What's done is yet to come". His cryptic observation implies that death, "which is yet to come" is a consequence of "what is done". Just as a tree is hidden in its seed, death is hidden in birth. Besides this realisation, "the dying man" has also understood another important truth that love, even sexual love, leads to spiritual experience; that sexual union leads to union with God. He says:

The flesh deserts the bone,
But a kiss widens the rose;

(CP. p.153)

These two lines brilliantly sum up Crazy Jane's belief:

"Fair and foul are near of kin,
And fair needs foul", I cried.

(W.B. Yeats, p.161)

Like Roethke's narrator, she regards physical love as a necessary step to God's love. Roethke's image "a kiss widens the rose" evokes erotic and religious connotations, suggesting the merger of the self and God and also the sexual act. A kiss breaks down the barriers; it helps transcendence, and the simple word "widens" is charged with both the senses.

Both Roethke and Yeats believed that "religion must embrace sexuality or be an empty dogmatism, life-destroying instead of life-furtheing". 10 If Yeats is his immediate master here, Blake and Whitman were his beckoning stars. In the celebration of the body and what is physical Yeats serves as a half-way house to
Roethke in his journey towards the Whitmanesque ideal. "The pulsating, carnal self" that Whitman celebrated in his poems was again celebrated in Yeats. Roethke felt imprisoned and constricted in the world of greenhouses; Eliot's kind of faith and his poetic ideals did not release him (i.e. Roethke) from his sense of constriction. Through Yeats, Roethke's self was seeking an expansion which Eliot could not offer. Yeats taught the joy of dancing "bears" to Roethke. What also links him with Yeats is his belief that "Eternity is Now". Paradoxically, eternity is immanent in the present moment; it does not exist apart from the evanescent. Therefore, the distinction between the temporal and the eternal does not exist any more for Roethke's dying man. His vision, at the moment of death, is transformed and what is fleeting itself becomes a symbol of eternity. As he is dying, he finds that his doors of perception are being cleansed and everything appears to him "as it is, infinite". The vision of "death's possibilities" does not conjure up pictures of heavenly abode after death, for his paradise is not Dante's — it is not religious in the ordinary sense of the term. "The dying man" feels more attached to life, to the world. Even on his deathbed he is not otherworldly. The word "sways" suggests how sensitive he is to the slightest movement in the world. He sees that he is "that final thing" — the highest in creation — beyond which nothing exists. It could also imply that the impending death has quickened the poetic fire in him. Similarly, Roethke's "A man learning to sing" recalls "Sailing to Byzantium".
An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress, ...

( W.B. Yeats, p.104 )

Both Roethke's and Yeats's poems hold forth the same ideal — not to submit to death passively but face it by being more and more creative.

Being a tribute to Yeats, "His Words" reproduces as closely as possible Yeats's mode of preparing for and meeting life's end. It is not a religious way; it is the poet-hero's way of facing death. In both men we hear the identical tone filled with passionate intensity, as also the note of heroic defiance and zest for life. There is also a great deal of similarity in the formal structure of the stanzas in both, particularly in the third section of the poem.

The next poem of the cycle, "What Now?" ( CP. p.154 ) illustrates what "the dying man" observed in "His Words":

What's done is yet to come.

The way of his death could not be different from his way of living earlier — there is the organic interrelatedness between the beginning and the end. Sharing this faith in the chain of being with Yeats, Roethke re-lives in imagination the world of his early life, the world of greenhouses and the period of adolescent passion. Yeats, too, in "The Tower" revived the world of his youth by remembering how the beauty of one made the farmers jostle at the fair and how one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone. ( W.B. Yeats, p.107 ), how he delighted himself by creating
such characters as Hanrahn, and how he made peace with "Italian things",

And memories of love,
Memories of the words of women,
All things whereof
Man makes a superhuman
Mirror resembling dream.

(W.B. Yeats, p.111)

Retrospection becomes inevitable for grasping the organic growth of life, and this device of retrospection also links Roethke and Yeats.

"What Now" begins with a strong affirmation of life even when it is about to be extinguished, a paradox that restates the narrator's yearning for more and more of life in the first poem. It is this paradox as a poetic device and as an experience of life in old age that associates Roethke with Yeats:

Caught in the dying light,
I thought myself reborn.

He thus reaffirms his faith in life as Yeats did in his "Byzantium" poems and "The Tower". But, of course, the world of Roethke was not that of Yeats. When one compares these two worlds, Roethke's strikes one as a shrunken, a more limited demesne than Yeats's. The legacy of ancient civilizations and mythologies which enriched Yeats's world is unfamiliar to Roethke. Yeats hardly complains, as Roethke does, of "the leaden weight/Of what I did not do". He could be as passionate and intense as Yeats but Yeats's interests are wider. Roethke, as the image in his poem suggests, was a prisoner of his past:
My hands twin into hooves,
I wear the laden weight
Of what I did not do.

In fact, he lived with the dead. Roethke (or his mouth-piece) remembers the world of his formative years, "the places great with their dead,/The mire, the sodden wood". Even when living with the dead, the message he heard was "to stay alive". Roethke, like Yeats, remains a worshipper of life. Then he recapitulates the period of erotic awakening of inner turmoil and rash courage:

In the worst night of my will,
I dared to question all;

Struggle and defiance were part of his formative training; he would do the same when he is nearing the end. He would receive the visitor at the door rather indifferently.

With this attitude of heroic defiance that reflects the "dying man's" mood of questioning and confrontation, the narrator recreates the world of the past where death lurked behind the show of things. The reader cannot forget the world from which the speaker has emerged: the memories of the world of The Lost Son:

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

( CP. p.55 )

It is partly this world which is revived in "The Wall" (CP. p.154), in which "the dying man" makes a full reckoning with his past and confronts it with a defiant gesture. It states the crisis of the protagonist:
The wall has entered: I must love the wall,
A mad man staring at perpetual night,
A spirit raging at the visible.

The "Wall" is perhaps a symbol of a shadowy line between the physical and spiritual, the light and the dark, the visible and the invisible. It suggests, as Ralph J. Mills, Jr. remarks, "the limit of what can be known." The narrator is not capable of taking a leap beyond, and is true to his word that he would question all again.

Roethke always seems to have been haunted by his personal past which had obstructed the self in its quest for identity. The dilemma persists: this growth is too tardy: "A slow growth is a hard thing to endure". It is at this point, that one notices an important difference between Roethke and Yeats. The past in Yeats's poetry is never so insistently and obsessively personal as in Roethke's, and transcending the past was not so torturous to him. Roethke's narrator thinks of his father as if he were the embodiment of death and holds him responsible for his plight:

I found my father when I did my work,
Only to lose myself in this small dark.

This experience of the father and his world was a decisive one in his journey out of the self. Another such experience was of sexual awakening. It may be recalled that the beloved was represented as "the wraith" in one of the poems of Four for Sir John Davies. Even in "The Wall", she remains a shadowy inhabitant of two worlds.

What sensual eye can keep an image pure
Learning across a sill to greet the dawn?

The images of the father and the beloved spring from the same root,
sensual love. But for this passion, there would have been no
death. It is this world of shadowy lines that is represented
by "the wall". The crisis is of transcendence: the hour of the
soul's darkest night. The speaker is doubtful whether there
is anything beyond the wall.

"The Wall", notwithstanding some differences between Yeats's
and Roethke's attitudes toward their past, is not without Yeatsian
echoes. In "The Tower", Yeats had posed the question whether old
men and women raged against old age. It is this fury against old
age that Roethke celebrates and embodies in his poem. Both Roethke
and Yeats link sensual love with death. For instance, against,

Old lecher with a love on every wind
Bring up out of that deep considering mind
All that you have discovered in the grave.

( W. B. Yeats, p.109 )

in the "The Tower," "The Exulting" (CP, p.155) continues the probing
of the dark world in terms of the experiences of the past, of nature,
father and erotic passion. The poem expresses the heroic acceptance
of death by the speaker.

I shall undo all dying, by my death.

The moment of death is the hour of supreme triumph and joy. The
uncertainty about what lies "behind the sun", does not extinguish
the craving for transcendence.

"The Exulting" catches the tone of celebration that rings
through "Byzantium" and there are many images which correspond
to those in Yeats's poems. Yeats projects brilliant images of
"death-in-life" and "life-in-death", of "Hades bobbin-bound in
mummy cloth; Roethke also presents a similar image of his dead
father.

I saw my father shrinking in his skin;
He turned his face; there was another man,
Walking the edge, loquacious, unafraid.

In the same way, the image of the bird quivering in "birdless
air" recalls the image of Yeats's bird:

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow...

More than the resemblance of images, it is the spirit of Yeats's
poems that Roethke renders in his *The Dying Man* sequence.

If the image of the dancer was the central linking symbol
in *Four for Sir John Davies*, the image of the singer is the
organising principle in *The Dying Man*. But the last poem, "They
Sing, They Sing", (CP. p.156), briefly recapitulates the dancer's
world dominated by a woman. She, along with the moon, is looked
upon as the fecundity principle. The speaker for a while recollects
the place of his origin:

A beast cries out as if its flesh were torn,
And that cry takes me back where I was born.

He wonders whether love is but a motion of the mind. If his life
was to be claimed by the parents in the formative years and by
the beloved in youth, what is his real self? This question of
identity vexes him even in old age:
Am I but nothing, leaning towards a thing?

At such moments of crisis, his savior is birds, singing "but still in minor thirds". Here "nature asserts itself as a means of revelation for Roethke, ... The world gives the poet intuitions of the eternal and the finite through its temporal, finite creatures and things". 12 The protagonist has not yet achieved the break-through; he has only felt the possibility of transcendence. The message that he hears comes from over "sweet field far ahead". One notices the movement from the enclosed world of the greenhouses and the womb to the more open world—"sweet field far ahead"—an image that is going to be the central symbol later in North American Sequence. The narrator's prophet is the lark and its message one of transcendence:

What's seen recedes; Forever's what we know!-
Eternity defined, and strewn with straw,
The fury of the slug beneath the stone.

But the lark's way is going to be his future course: the way of a solitary singer. The poem works out the movement suggested in the line: "What's done is yet to come". The world of sensual dance is a part of the world of "What's done" and the "lark's word" is a "world to come". The apprehension that imagination may not be the ultimate salvation lurks in The Dying Man but at the moment the only mode of affirmation against death can be through imagination. As the speaker declares:

...: he dares to live
Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings
Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things.

The choice that "the dying man" makes is the poet's way of dying,
the way Yeats celebrated in his Byzantium poems. The ending of Roethke's poem evokes the images with which Yeats ends his poems. With Yeats and Roethke, one feels, the prospect of death becomes a major issue and is closely linked with the problem of the persistence of the self in time.

III

Roethke attempted to match his art with Yeats's in two of his important cycles of poems. He more than once acknowledged Yeats as the shaping spirit of his poetry, and the reason why he was drawn to Yeats was the latter's passionate and heroic struggle to achieve the identity of the self in terms of the poet and no other. Roethke, like Yeats, had lost his faith. Yeats declared about his age:

> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

Both struggled to achieve the wholeness of the spirit and their poetry is a record of the struggle. It is the later Yeats that Roethke claims as his literary ancestor, the poet who was then concerned with the crisis of the self.

This crisis of the self in the modern world and passionate yearning for the unity of being expressed in Yeats's later poetry impelled Roethke to seek his "other" in Yeats. Roethke's problem, too, was that of marrying the contraries — the physical and the spiritual, the personal and the cosmic, the particular and the universal, and Yeats's distinction lay in the way he fought his way through to make "up the whole, ... Out of his bitter soul."
For Roethke Yeats's later poetry dramatically embodied this tragic impasse and Yeats was to teach him to embody his personal crisis in dramatic terms. In short, like Yeats, he was trying to work out the tension and the resolution between the contraries: sensual experience and spiritual longing as a man and the poet's personality and his projected persona. This was because the formal lyric, in Roethke's hands, was always something strained and he was anxious to avoid being autobiographical in the way Wordsworth or Shelley could be.

It is as if the formal lyric was a necessary prelude to discovering his true poetic voice and Roethke came in his own in The Lost Son. The verse assumed the tenor and flexibility of the spoken word. He remarked that "I" of The Lost Son and Praise to End was a dramatic speaker but this "I" in Roethke's sequence never quite achieves the impersonality of dramatic portraits like Prufrock and Gerontion. If, however, Eliot's ideal of "impersonality" was beyond his reach, he nevertheless constantly strove to transcend the self in his poetry. An appropriate way was perhaps to speak through a persona of another contemporary poet. There is, one suspects, an admission of failure to project the "I" convincingly in the early sequences in which he used Yeats as his poetic mask. It was, as Louis Hartz comments, "to escape from the incoherence of the new poems that appeared in Praise to the End!, to include a large measure of intellectual content, and to achieve a broader symbolic dimension." 13 This may be construed to mean that Roethke went to Yeats to give shape to his experience which was as intense and violent as Yeats's. But his claim that Yeatsian influence added "the intellectual content" to Roethke's poetry is
Perhaps more pertinent is Richard Wilbur's remark: "... much to Roethke's purpose, Yeats offered a physical mysticism of the dancing body and of the marriage-bed". 14 Wilbur's remark points to an area which was common to Yeats, Roethke, and Whitman. It is the "physical mysticism of the dancing body" and "of the marriage-bed" that Roethke discerned in Yeats and found valuable for emerging out of his tragic impasse. For Roethke, the way to Whitman lay through Yeats. In Yeats, there was a conflict between the contraries, the body and the spirit, and a constant struggle to fuse the two. But there was also the implication in Yeats that the right way was not to reject the physical but to work out a harmony between the contraries. Whitman is very different in this respect for he could claim the unity of the self with the cosmic, the sensual and the spiritual without any such burden of tragic conflict. The Whitmanesque ideal of cosmic harmony and of unity of being was difficult for Yeats and Roethke, born as they were in times when

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.

However, Whitman was like a beckoning star, and the secret of transcendence, which Whitman possessed as a matter of birth-right, came to Roethke through Yeats.

Wilbur has also made the point that Yeats offered "a ruggedly vatic style in which... one could get away with talking of visions... of that beatitude called 'unity of being'". 15 There is in this an important pointer to the direction in which Roethke was moving: his poetry was beginning to assume a vatic dimension. The image of the
bird, for instance, in *The Dying Man* and that of the beloved as a spiritual saviour in *Four for Sir John Davies* represent the symbolic dimensions which Roethke's poetry was moving towards in his later phase. Wilbur seems to be referring also to the stark simplicity and austerity of Yeats's later poetic style and to the presence of rhetoric declaration in it. The vatic tone is heard throughout *Four for Sir John Davies* and particularly in the last poem of *The Dying Man*. This Yeatsian mode achieved "impersonality" not only as an aesthetic technique but also as a transcendent vision.

Wilbur's view that the Yeatsian influence on Roethke contributed to the release of Roethke's powers as a poet and as a man is questioned by Stephen Spender. He remarks that Roethke is a singular example of the man of letters in our age in being "the egotistic-sublime", "nobly confessional" and "always sincerely self-absorbed". Spender's charge is that Roethke burdens the reader with his private problems. Compared with Yeats, Roethke was more "self-absorbed" and "confessional" — indeed he was a representative of all of us by being so—but his struggle for that very reason was more heroic. However, the trouble with Roethke's Yeatsian poems seems to lie elsewhere. The trouble is the voice: he has to strain too much to catch Yeats's voice. One begins to think more and more of Yeats and his poems, and less and less of Roethke while reading these poems. One suspects that Roethke focused his poetic talent more on Yeatsian rhythms and end-stops than on his own vision. Even the striking image of a bird beating "his wings/Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things" is a fling at the master. The rhythmical accents of
Yeats, energetic, dramatic, oratorical and colloquial, fascinated Roethke more than the Yeatsian vatic mode.

This vatic mode of Yeats and Roethke includes some of the important traits of meditative tradition as defined by Martz: "an acute self-consciousness that shows itself in minute self-analysis of moods and motives, a conversational tone and accent, expressed in language that is as a rule simple and pure" 17 and the element of prayer and spiritual combat leading to self-knowledge. The three poems, "Sailing to Byzantium", "Byzantium" and "The Tower" which are used here to understand Roethke's poetic affiliations with Yeats, have these distinctive characteristics of "the meditative tradition". Introspection and self-analysis being the corner-stones of the discipline of meditation, Yeats begins with these: the loss of youth, the spectre of death and the meaning of existence in view of the final end of life. There is a prayer to the holy sages for purification and redemption and a vision of Byzantium, which in the Yeatsian system is a symbol of Heaven. To Roethke, Yeats was his sage and "the singing master" of his soul. There is also in his cycle of poems the same degree of introspection and self-analysis: the haunting presence of "the mire, the sodden wood", the ghost of the father. But "they", in Roethke's sequence, are not the "holy sages" but "the birds". Yeats sought redemption in the world of ancient arts; Roethke, in the world of nature. Roethke and Yeats practised the meditative mode, but the mediators differed.
Perhaps a helpful way to approach *Meditations of an Old Woman* (CP. p.157) is through Roethke's own statement in his letter to Ralph J. Mills, Jr. that explains his poetic intent:

"In both cases, I was animated in considerable part by arrogance: I thought I can take this god damned high style of W.B. Yeats or this Whitmanesque meditative thing of T.S. Eliot and use it for other ends, use it as well or better. Sure, a tough assignment. But while Yeats's historical lyrics seem beyond me at the moment, I'm damned if I have not outdone him in the more personal or love lyric. ... As for the old lady poems, I wanted to create a character for whom such rhythms are indigenous; that she is a dramatic character, not just me. ... So what in the looser line may seem in the first old lady poem 'First Meditation' to be close to Eliot may actually be out of Whitman, who influenced Eliot plenty technically... — and Eliot, as far as I know, has never acknowledged this". \(^\text{18}\)

The quotation reflects the motives of Roethke's poetic alliances, chiefly with Eliot and Yeats, who acted as catalytic agents to his poetic growth. He pointed to the original source of his inspiration for *Meditations of an Old Woman* — Whitman. His engagement with other poets was characterized by a combative spirit. He remarked in the same letter to Ralph J. Mills, Jr. that he had studied more carefully the seventeenth century "metaphysical" poets whom Eliot and his followers exalted as great poetic masters and he was more indebted directly to them rather than to Yeats and Eliot. The poetic virtue of these poets is the organic link between the style and the vision, but equally important was their racy language. It was this raciness of language, the naturalness of poetic style which drew Roethke to them, and to the Pound-Eliot...
tradition. He was drawn to the poetic style which would discard the artificialities of poetic language and would attain the naturalness of prose. Pound and Eliot were committed to this "prose" ideal of poetic expression and they had in Walt Whitman a distinguished ancestor in their native soil. This truth was the message he read in S. Musgrove's book, *T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman* which Roethke described as "not the whole truth but a sensible book". How far Musgrove's thesis can be wholly accepted need not concern us here, and if Roethke had really accepted Musgrove's thesis, he would not have raged against Eliot as he did in his *Selected Letters*. The important point is his discovery and realisation of the importance of the indigenous style developed by Whitman.

That "the old lady" poems owed a great deal to Whitman was acknowledged by Roethke. In tone and use of poetic language the sequence is marked off as distinct from the companion poem, *The Dying Man*. Though the theme of both the cycles of poems is the protagonists' "shaping spirit" before the final end, and though they are "meditative poems" in an unconventional sense, the contrast between the two is more pronounced than the resemblance. This is particularly reflected in the rhetoric of *The Dying Man*, in which the use of the language is Yeatsian, declamatory and oratorical, in the non-pejorative sense. It is employed as a theatrical gesture. The distinction may be expressed by saying that the language in *The Dying Man* is manipulated with a conscious eye on the audience rather in the manner of a playwright, whereas in *Meditations of an Old Woman*, the speaker uses speech with an eye more on herself. In *The Dying Man*, the gesture of an old man
facing death is that one of heroic defiance; in "the old lady" poems, the gesture of the old woman is that of a devout seeker who has an occasional mystical insight.

The "First Meditation" (CP. p.157) of the old woman, like "His Words" of The Dying Man, depicts the speaker reckoning her situation, a technique adopted by the narrators of his major poetic sequences. The structural pattern and the movement of "the old lady" sequence come close to those of The Lost Son. The theme of both these sequences is related to each other by the central image of a "lost" protagonist; the earlier sequence dealing with a child-protagonist's "lostness" before the vast panorama of nature and his own experiences of growing-up, and the later sequence dealing with an old woman struggling to give shape and unity to her experiences. She feels lost and her mind is filled with images of disintegration and depression:

And a tree tilts from its roots
Toppling down an embankment.

Her dilemma is how to reconcile herself to the inevitable fate of everything that she reads in nature. Her grievance is the slow movement of her spirit and the strange transformation of her physical shape:

How can I rest in the days of my slowness?
I've become a strange piece of flesh,
Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,
With a cheek soft as a hound's ear.

The irony here, as in Yeats, is directed to the protagonist herself,
and she reminds the reader of Yeats’s portraiture of an old man as a "scarecrow" or "a tattered coat upon a stick". Her bitter need is now not "knowing" which she yearned as a young woman, but "an old crone's knowing". What meaning does life hold for a woman who has lost her youth?

The initial situation in Yeats’s "Sailing to Byzantium", "The Tower" and in Roethke’s "the old lady" poems is the same — the old person exploring the meaning of life. Even the technique of rendering the psychological states through the images is similar. Roethke’s "Old" woman relates herself to nature as she regards herself as a part of cosmic nature; Yeats's protagonist is at home in the world of art and history. One also marks a change in the movement of the verse here. The stanzaic patterns in The Dying Man are more formally and regularly worked out, its poetic style is more compressed and economical whereas the Meditations of an Old Woman is remarkable for its freedom from the demands of formal and regular verse patterns. It is this freedom of movement that distinguishes this sequence from Roethke’s Yeatsian poems.

The "Old lady" has articulated the conflict in her life in more specific terms: "But the rind, often, hates the life within". It is the conflict between the flesh and the spirit born out of her perception that "the shale slides an inch in the talus,/The bleak wind eats at the weak plateau", the perception which fills her with the same desire for growth. She follows the characteristic Roethkean principle of regressive journey leading to the path of progression. She recreates her past in terms of two important images, of journey and of bird. She says:
All journeys, I think, are the same:
The movement is forward, after a few wavers.

The spiritual journey follows the same ups and downs as the bus or boat ride:

Journey within a journey;
The ticket mislaid or lost, the gate
Inaccessible, the boat always pulling out
From the rickety wooden dock,
The children waving;

What is remarkable here is not so much the symbolic implication of the image of journey and bird as the minute realistic details. Roethke never forsakes the real in favour of the merely symbolical. The song of "two sparrows" revives the memories of the greenhouses. One sparrow, "within a greenhouse", represents encaged existence; the other bird, "outside, in the brightday" suggests the world of light and freedom.

The mode of the journey of the "Old lady" and the reference to the greenhouses point to a distinction between Roethke and Yeats. The journey in Yeats moves in a progressive line which, of course, does not imply a linear movement. But it is without "wavers". Roethke thought of progress as an organic movement which assimilates its past and moves towards the future. In fact, Harry Williams goes to the extent of interpreting Meditations of an Old Woman as if it were another The Lost Son and observes:

"My contention is that the woman is speaking from inside the greenhouse, thus extending in her own way the greenhouse voice, of the lost son from the earlier poem; it defines her desire to leave the greenhouse, as well, to extend herself beyond, to imaginatively grasp a world beyond, which is the field." 20 The greenhouse in Roethke's poems acts as a kind of destiny for the protagonists of
his poems and every one is "speaking from inside the greenhouse". But the voice of the "old lady" is the voice of mature experience; the "lost son" pined for "the old rages, the lash of primordial milk" (CP. p.56). What is striking is that Roethke makes an old woman the speaker of his sequence. The sense of crisis is common to both the speakers of The Lost Son and Meditations of an Old Woman, but the crisis of the protagonist of the earlier sequence is deepened by the unsavoury presence of the parents and their death, whereas the "Old lady's" crisis is not aggravated by external human factors.

The "Old lady" communicates the bitterness of her spirit's struggle in its progress by the instances of the crab and the salmon. The spiritual journey is an uphill task, and the epic similes in this section illustrate this. These analogies affirm the power of the human spirit against all obstacles. The crab's retreat suggests escape from a spiritual blind alley, and this image of withdrawal suggests "going back" that leads to "another life, another way and place in which to continue". The salmon's struggle against the current connotes more than its persistence. As Richard A. Blessing comments: "The old woman seems to think of the spirit as journeying back towards its origin, and that it maintains its life by a thrusting back against time that is equal to or greater than the thrust of the current that would carry it down". One may add that the images of the crab and the salmon represent the twin aspects of the movement of the self in Roethke—the regressive movement that is accompanied by the progressive thrust of the self. The crab, "tentative, grotesque, awkward,
"looking blankly at things before its eyes, and "the salmon, tired, moving up a shallow stream" illustrate the course of the journey of the spirit. It must fight against frustrations to achieve some progression.

The "old lady" remembers the experiences of the wasteland in her life but now:

There are no pursuing forms, faces on walls:
Only the motes of dust in the immaculate hallways,
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
The vines graying to a fine powder.
There is no riven tree, or lamb dropped by an eagle.

She sets apart her past from the present and looks towards "What's beyond". In her past, there were many "pursuing forms", memories of her father and the greenhouses; in her advanced age, everything is shrunk and the images of disintégration haunt her — the images of "the vines graying to a fine powder", "the warnings from lint and spinders" all reminding her that death is the law of nature. However, she feels a sense of communion with nature when she hears the singing of birds. Her spirit is rejuvenated and feels happy, though "lacking a god".

The "old lady's" first meditation is an endeavour of the protagonist to make a full assessment of her present condition: of advancing age and the impending death. She evokes principally four images, the image of journey as a central symbol of the progressive evolution of the spirit despite heavy odds; the image of the wasteland signifying her sense of desolation in old age; the image of the birds singing as a symbol of hope and joy in old age; and the image of the rose as a symbol of "What's beyond", the ideal of transcendence. She begins her meditation on a sad
note but ends with the realisation that all is not lost, though she has of course lost her youth. In the present poem The joy the "old" woman experiences in the presence of nature is more of a rapture of the senses, which distinguishes her from Yeats's old protagonist in "Byzantium". The flame, "intense" and "visible", the old lady sees playing "over the dry pods" is not, like the flames in Yeats, a flame "begotten of flame", though the ending of the poem has a Yeatsian quality of image and rhythm.

In second meditation of the "old lady", "I'm Here" (CP. p.161) we have the protagonist's assertion of her readiness to meet her final end:

If the wind means me,
I'm here!
Here.

But a large part of the poem is her recapitulation of her youth, of her life when she "was queen of the vale" and her "body, delighting in thresholds, /Rocks in and out of itself". The whole section serves as a sharp contrast to the foregoing poem which was concerned with her memories of embittered love. It is tempting to regard this section as an echo of one of the earlier poems, "Sensibility O La!" or "Lull Me, Lull Me". However, there is the important difference of perspective. The old woman can see what was wrong with the earlier stages of her life.

Behind the child's archness
Lurks the bad animal.

And the period of adolescence is "an ill-defined dying". One notes the distance she has travelled from the raw kind of existence to a ripe understanding of life. As an old woman her vision has changed. How can one avert death when everything in nature is
subject to it?

My geranium is dying, for all I can do,
Still leaning toward the last place the sun was.
I've tried I don't know how many times to replant it.

In the section "Her Becoming" (CP. p.165) the old lady would desperately struggle to find a way out of the "cold fleshless kiss of contraries," but before this could be attained, she would do something to purge herself of the past. The posture she adopts is that of a meditating figure, and the first scene is in a way a scene of temptation. She contemplates the sensual appeal of her body: In her meditation she sees "maimed gods", hears "a muffled voice", and "a spirit plays" before her "like a child". Throughout the section, the language is charged with the associations of the Christian discipline of meditation and of the anxiety of a perturbed spirit. Her restlessness for transcendence manifests itself in a series of rhetorical images: she asks

... Who knows
  The way out of a rose?
  Is it the sea we wish? The sleep of the changeless?

Here the "rose" in the second line may refer to the flower; it may also be, in the context of the images, the symbol of sensual appeal, and lastly, the symbol of eternal life. The "sea" may stand for the mundane existence or the cosmic expansiveness of the self. One remembers the world of the dead referred to in The Lost Son when we hear "the sleep of the changeless" from the mouth of the "old lady". The sleep of the changeless may also refer to death. The second section of "Her Becoming" represents the old woman's dark night of the soul:
In my left ear I hear the loud
sound of a minor collapse.
Last night I dreamt of a jaunty
principle of order;
Today I eat my usual diet of shadows.

These are all "blood-begotten spirits" and "complexities of fury"
that danced before the old lady, and her mood is most aptly
described in Yeats's poem:

My temptation is quiet.
Here at life's end
Neither loose imagination,
Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone,
Can make the truth known.
Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call.

( W.B. Yeats, p.183 ).

The "old lady" is beating hard on the wall to discover the truth.
Roethke's and Yeats's protagonists pass through the struggle for
transcendence, the fire of purgation. The old woman can no longer
revert to her past way of life. No longer is it also possible
for her to identify herself with material objects: she is over­
whelmed with doubts:

Is there a wisdom in objects:
For objects praise the Lord,
... ... ... ... ... ...
I know the cold fleshless kiss of contraries.

These images of "constriction of surfaces" which embody the climax
of her frustration and anguish in personal life extend to include
human life in a mechanical age:

Machines, machines, loveless, temporal;
Mutilated souls in cold morgues of obligation.
However, the old woman is not denied the moment of revelation, and the images in the third and fourth sections represent an upward movement of her spirit. She wavers between two modes of mystical union, of the body and of the sacramental rites. Her language is once again richly ambiguous embracing both the physical and spiritual aspects of the experience. She answers her own question, "who knows/The way out of a rose?" in these sections. The epiphany she has is not specifically Christian; it communicates the pagan joy of oneness with nature. She recollects the period of her prime, "a raw tumultuous girl", when she received her baptism. It was a mystical experience reached through her body, and the contraries were, she felt, reconciled:

The moon, a pure Islamic shape, looked down.
The light air showed; It was not night or day.
All natural shapes became symbolical.
The only thing alive in heaven's eye,
I shed my clothes to slow my daemon down.

But now that she is old, the transport through body is not available. She craves for another mode of transcendence, transcendence through the holy fire.

Who can believe the moon?
I have seen! I have seen! —
The line! The holy line!

This is the direction in which she would like to move. At the moment she feels emancipated, and the image of a bird flying in the open air conveys the freedom she has attained.

The "Fourth Meditation" (CP. p.168) rehearses the practice of the protagonists of the early sequences: the mood of elation, jubilation and insight is undercut by a movement which marks a
retreat, depression and doubts. The poem is a more sustained self-analysis with reflections on the destiny and purpose of a woman's existence. Inspite of her "raw tumultuous" youth, she has always been reflective, unlike thousands of women for whom procreation is the highest end of life. Her way has so far been that of a solitary seeker, "seeking in my own way, eternal purpose". She always contemplated in open nature,

Standing silent, on sandy beaches or walking along green embankments;
Knowing the sinuousness of small waters:

Her mode of worship is not the traditional Christian. What she reflects on is the place of a woman in life. Is she born to play a passive role in nature? Even in the prime of her life she longed for spiritual equality:

In the white Kingdom, I was light as a seed,
Drifting with the blossoms,
A pensive petal.

She resented playing a submissive role, especially resented her body being used as a means to an end. She decides she would be master of herself:

The soul stands, lonely in its choice,
Waiting, itself a slow thing,
In the changing body.

The old lady has been yearning for the freedom of soul; her soul is in purgatory. Her voice is charged with vehemence and she is more passionately aggressive because she thinks modern women are not true to themselves. She thinks they have betrayed their souls. The old lady is for a while playing the role of an evangelist anxious to save the souls of the women who have become
"ritualists of the mirror". In this role of evangelist, she showers benedictions on them:

May they sleep in robes of green,
among the ancient ferns,
May their eyes gleam with the first dawn;
May the sun gild them a worm;
May they be taken by the true burning;
May they flame into being —

In fact, these pronouncements, one feels, are true to Whitman's spirit. The "old lady" holds the animal as sacred and prefers it to the human. She is seized with a declamatory passion and describes her vision of life's origin. It is a cryptic summary of the vision of the evolutionary process of life we find in the greenhouse poems:

A prince of small beginnings, enduring the slow stretches of change,
Who spoke first in the coarse short-hand of the subliminal depths,
Made from his terror and dismay a grave philosophical language.

This view reflects, of course, as remarked in the earlier chapters, Roethke's scientific temper. The evolutionary vision of life leads the old woman to think of her present condition. She is a struggling soul, not yet an enlightened one. There is a promise of dawn which she carries with her.

On a dark day I walk straight towards the rain.
Who else sweats light from a stone?
By singing we defend;
The husk lives on, ardent as a seed;
My back creaks with the dawn.

Despite her hope she is filled with diffidence. She is troubled by a gnawing doubt:
Before the moon draws back,
Dare I blaze like a tree?

Her aspiration has been to "blaze like a tree", to be an enlightened one. She recapitulates the course of her journey which is marked by a tardy movement and several setbacks. Her soul has been, like that of the other protagonists of Roethke's sequences, "stirring sluggishly": its presence and power are not strongly felt. The appearances of life oppress her mind and her craving for "absolutes" takes away her peace of mind.

The final poem, "What can I tell my bones?" (CP. p.171) is a dramatic representation of the dance of the contraries:

Fury of wind, and no apparent wind,
A gust blowing the leaves suddenly upward,
A vine lashing in dry fury,
A man chasing a cat,
With a broken umbrella,
Crying softly.

The image of the man with the broken umbrella is as striking and witty as Eliot's comparison of Prufrock with "a patient etherised upon a table". The reality is as elusive as a cat, and what is her own equipment? A broken umbrella. The images of the first section cumulatively create an image of a lost soul, "the swan's dread of the darkening shore", the soul at the threshold of death.

The images of the constricted self still dominate the second section of the poem: self complacency leads to self destruction.

My desire's a wind trapped in a cave.

The old lady makes a thorough search of her heart:

The cause of God in me — has it gone?
Do these bones live? Can I live with these bones?
Once again this is the moment of the darkest hour of the soul. "She comes to realise the paradox...of her condition", remarks Harry Williams, "which is to understand it." 22 This is reflected in:

To try to become like God  
Is far from becoming God  
O, but I seek and care.

The struggle for realising God through meditation need not end in identification with God. Whether it is possible for man to achieve Godhead or not, God could not have been God without manifesting Himself in man. She proclaims her faith in the organic unity of the cosmos, Man and God, "the dead and the unborn". If it is not possible for man to become God, he can enter into a relationship with the Absolute. As the old woman insists: "God has need of me." Malkoff reminds us that Roethke was familiar with Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism. He quoted "The homeward journey of man's spirit, then, may be thought of as due to the push of a divine life within answering to the pull of a divine life without... God needs man", says Eckhart. 23 The quest of the old woman for the absolute received inspiration from this faith, leading her to the "pure moment". The last section of the poem marks a moment of revelation for her, though her revelation does not conform to Christianity. She is aware of her deviation from the traditional seekers:

Instead of a devil with horns, I prefer  
serpent with scales;  
In temptation, I rarely seek counsel;  
A prisoner of smells, I would rather eat than pray  
I'm released from the dreary dance of opposites.

She is nearer to the animistic identification with her natural
surroundings; her consciousness expands into awareness of the cosmos and the distinction between "I and Thou" vanishes. She is filled with a sense of universal harmony:

I live in light's extreme: I stretch in all directions;
Sometimes I think I'm several.

This illumination whether generated from herself or a divine source was "unprayed-for/And final", spontaneous and absolute, whose validity was in the personal experience itself.

Meditations of an Old Woman represents a breakthrough in Roethke's poetic career—in his quest of the self and in his development as a poet. As his protagonist puts it:

In the long fields, I leave my father's eye:
And shake the secrets from my deepest bones.

The sequence points towards a direction in which the self will now principally move — the far field, Roethke's symbol of Eden or Elysium, the symbol which is going to be the title of his next poetic sequence. Malkoff justly remarks that "the struggle for life is followed by the struggle for meaning." 24 The suspicion that the self in Roethke's poetry is always brooding without any progressive movement is certainly unfair. The whole sequence is a veritable song of becoming. The "old lady" has moved from an experience of disintegrating self to the experience of the composed self. The woman's observation that "a time comes when the life of the mouth no longer suffices" is a basic premise of the self in Roethke's poems. The self attains a few glimpses of insight in Meditations of an Old Woman.

What could be the reason that Roethke assigned his The Dying
Man to Yeats's influence and Meditations of an Old Woman to Whitman's? How does a man's vision of death differ from that of a woman? That Roethke was ambitious of competing with the great contemporary poets is no longer a matter of surmise. Yeats was in many respects a challenging modern who was within the limits of traditionally established verse forms still an innovator. Roethke knew very well that Yeats strove to write austere and spare verse in his later career, representing speech rhythms in his five-beat lines. As Ellmann points out, Yeats wanted to represent only "cold" emotions in his poem and to chill his emotions he found it convenient to make them mysterious, to set them in formal patterns, to couch them in a 'symbolic language' with many links to traditions, transforming an individual mood into one which generations of men had experienced. Roethke's problem, as a poet, was like Yeats's, one of the embodying personal emotions in their universal aspects. He went to school to Yeats because the latter knew the secret of impersonality of art, of "anti-self", of self-dramatisation, of creating "persona". As a necessary step, "clarification, acceleration and renewed disinfection of diction" became the highest virtues for Roethke as for Yeats. In The Dying Man Roethke adopts the persona of the dying Yeats imitating the language and voice of a man on death-bed. What is striking here is the utter simplicity of the language. Most of the words have hardly more than two syllables; the word-order is that of conversational speech. Roethke also imitates successfully the three beats of the Yeatsian line. The remarkable thing is his adaptation of Yeats's passionate speech mixed with a conversational tone and rhythm. Like Yeats, he was anxious to write pentameter
lines which could embody the drama of the self. For instance, the following lines create the situation with dramatic vividness:

Was it a god his suffering renewed?
I saw my father shrinking in his skin;
He turned his face; there was another man,
Walking the edge, loquacious, unafraid.
He quivered like a bird in birdless air,
Yet dared to fix his vision anywhere.

( CP. p.155 )

This is using verse as if it were meant for the theatre. Roethke's verse achieves dramatic dimension under the influence of Yeats who had remarked that "all his life he had tried to get rid of modern subjectivity by insisting on construction and contemporary words and syntax." 27

Yeats's poems dealing with old age and death embody an attitude of heroic defiance of death; Roethke's sequence represents such heroic attitude where it is implied that man has yet to relate life and death to the cosmic processes he rages himself. Yeats's vision of death has something of tragic depth in it. Inspite of a Whitmanesque glimpse of "eternity defined, and strewn with straw," The Dying Man, strikes something of a tragic note. But it also indicates that this was not going to be the final end. Lines such as "Eternity is Now" and "What's seen recedes; Forever's what we know" suggest that Roethke would be moving in a Blakean or Whitmanesque direction, the mystic's way of looking at life.

For the first time Roethke had made woman the protagonist
of his major long poetic sequence. If he wrote *The Dying Man* as a tribute to Yeats, it is probable, he had Eliot also in mind, a voice to react against by using some of Eliot's devices. But why, one may wonder, did Roethke project his "old lady" as a counterpart to *Gerontion*, nay, even to his own "dying man"? It is possible woman for him represents the principle of life that is closer to its mysteries than man. She is an embodiment of the creative urge of life which is more in harmony with the cosmic processes. It is the woman who is most easily invoked as a mediator between the self and the other; she is also the more bestial, the more intuitive and hence a repository of her mate's recuperative powers. Because she is nearer than man to the earth, more instinctual and intuitive, she is closer to the mystery of death. The "dying man" is without the mystical insight of the "old lady." In the "old" woman sequence, the resolution is worked out of the tragic impasse.

V

Roethke himself has invited the comparison of his *Meditations of an Old Woman* with *Gerontion*. In a letter to Ralph J. Mills, Jr. he stated emphatically that his "old lady" was more dynamically alive than Eliot's old man. His old lady, he objected, was tough, brave and aware of life, and "She would take a congeries of eels over a hassel of bishops any day." He ridiculed Eliot's monkish nature and his kind of mysticism in his later poetry. *Gerontion* embodies death-in-life, representing the sterility of contemporary cultural life. The crisis of *Gerontion* is primarily rooted in the spiritual situation of the age whereas the crisis of the "old lady"
is more private and personal. Her crisis assumes universal significance as she explores the fate of the human soul under the threat of extinction. She complains of tension between the surface and the inner reality of her life. She says:

But the rind, often, hates the life within.

( CP. p.157 )

Despite the strange metamorphosis of her figure in old age, she evinces an abundance of zest for life. Eliot's Gerontion, on the other hand, confesses that his heart has been without passion and he has no regrets for the loss!

I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it Since what is kept must be adulterated

( T.S.Eliot, p.31 )

Roethke's "old lady" provides a contrast to Eliot's old man, the first being a character who is in "her becoming", the latter a character who is already spiritually exhausted. Gerontion is a damned soul; Roethke's "old lady" has redeemed herself.

The differences between these two characters spring from the differences in the universes which they inhabit. Eliot's character seeks redemption from the sources which are part of the Christian religious inheritance; his dilemma is how to establish personal contact with the symbols of Christian faith. How far do they hold the secret of rejuvenation for him? Gerontion moans:

The word within a word, unable to speak word. Swaddled with darkness.

His problem has been one of religious communion: he has drifted far away from it as a consequence of the "cunning passages, contrived corridors" of history. His personal predicament has been a part of a broad historical movement. Eliot's character therefore has a historical perspective which Roethke's old woman lacks. Eliot's old man struggles with the question of loss of belief which has assumed the magnitude of an endemic disease. He says:

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

( Eliot, p.30 )

Senility has affected even his passion for religion. Roethke's "old woman" expresses her dilemma in a way that it reminds one of Gerontion. In "What can I tell my bones?" she says:

I listen to the weeds' vesperal whine,
Longing for absolutes that never come.

( CP. p.171 )

She, too, feels lost but only for some time, not for ever as Gerontion does. She can claim that she has experienced oneness with the universe. Nor are her absolutes derived from Christian theology:

Who took the darkness from the air?
I'm wet with another life.
Yea, I have gone and stayed.

( CP. p.173 )

This is the experience of personal insight which Gerontion could
never achieve. She has a living contact with nature which is a "word within a word" for her. She is free from religious inhibitions, and her form of worship of nature and body singles her out as the most un-Eliotian character. Roy Harvey Pearce's observation that, "here (in Gerontion) most clearly, the Adamic principle of nineteenth century American poetry is foresworn," seems right because Eliot's vision is circumscribed by historical and cultural antecedents which do not bind Roethke's imagination.

Eliot's Ash-Wednesday will also bear out this distinction between his mythic mode, centred in the historical and cultural consciousness, and Roethke's Adamic mode, which regards the individual's consciousness as a matter of unceasing process and its own maker. For a mythic poet like Eliot, "man's private world was so narrow and constrained that it had to be transcended", whereas "the private world of the Adamic poet was a closed circle, too; but it was said to include within itself all possible worlds".

The need for transcendence of the personal self is the theme of Roethke's Meditations of an old woman and of Eliot's Ash-Wednesday. As its title implies, Eliot's poem deals with purgation, with the mortification of the senses and submission of individual will to the divine. It is a passionate prayer of the tortured soul for grace.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

The speaker is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt. Its expiation
by penitence and prayer forms a part of the theme of the poem. But, as Helen Gardner remarks, there is, "the double theme: of Christian penitence and resolve, and of personal disaster..." The "personal disaster" that she seems to refer to is the fear of damnation after death. Now Roethke's old lady faces the same crisis—the fate of herself after death—which Eliot's narrator is battling against desperately.

Apart from this anxiety for the fate of the self after death, Eliot's and Roethke's poems move in altogether different worlds. Roethke's woman is an alien to the world of Christian emotions and is untroubled by any sense of guilt or sin. The idea of atonement would have been beyond her. One might say, the worlds of Ash-Wednesday and Meditations of an Old Woman represent the bipolarities of the two modes of perception: one which envisions reality as given by the Christian tradition and the other as created by the personal self. Eliot's poem has something of a ritualistic chant in a cathedral; Roethke's poem registers transcendent experience, strictly in terms of the world of private experience.

Though their poetic visions differ, Roethke and Eliot use certain common poetic devices. They render their emotional worlds through the analogies of nature, the inner reality being reflected in the objects of nature. This is certainly a time-honoured poetic device but after the "imagist" movement it became an article of faith with some of the poets of the first half of the twentieth century. This is how Gerontion introduces himself:
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh,
    hearing a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.

(Eliot, op. cit., p. 29)

The lines give all the physical details connected with a military assault; what they convey is neither the scene on the battlefield nor the old man's regret for having missed military experience but what it stood for, the life of heroic glory and sacrifice. In a way such language is used as a symbolic gesture of heroic glory and sacrifice. In a way such language is used as a symbolic gesture of heroic ideal sharply exposing the drabness of protagonist's life. When Eliot's persona declares,

My house is a decayed house,

he projects an analogy of his own life. Details like the couching goat, the woman keeping the kitchen and making tea furnish a realistic framework to the situation but the image of "a decayed house" assumes the symbolic value of a ruined civilization.

Roethke's way of rendering his woman's inner reality is to employ analogies from nature. She conveys the disintegration of her life through analogies from nature:

On love's worst ugly day,
The weeds hiss at the edge of the field.
The small winds make their chilly indictments,
Elsewhere, in houses, even pails can be sad;

These details are registered for the same purpose as in Eliot's Gerontion to relate to the inner life of the persona. Such is
the old lady's bus ride in Roethke's poem, a ride rendered with
great richness of naturalistic detail. Eliot and Roethke embody
emotional and spiritual states of their protagonists in appro-
priate "objective-correlatives".

With all these resemblances between the poetic techniques
of Eliot, it is unlikely Roethke wanted to make his poetry as
impersonal as Eliot. Eliot's Gerontion is a dramatic character;
it is doubtful if Roethke's "old lady" is such a dramatically
realised portrait as Eliot's Gerontion is. In what way is her
persona different from that of "The Lost Son"? While of course
there is no question of confusing Roethke with his "old woman"
his inner life does reflect the life of her creator. For
Roethke's protagonist her private emotional world determines
everything. Even when the concrete details are given, it is her
private world that is her focus. The long similes of the crab
and the salmon in Section III of "First Meditation" (CP. p.159)
for example, illustrate the movement of her spirit — "grotesque,
awkward" and "tentative" — but her chief interest is in "the
slow growth" of her spirit. "The Salmon tired, moving up a small
stream is an analogy of her spirit. Gerontion, on the other hand,
exists apart from the character and personality of Eliot; in
Roethke's sequence, "it seems an extravagence to call attention to
a distinction so thin that it can hardly be said to exist." Could we say that Roethke's persona is a part of the poem and the
poet exists outside it?

The title of Gerontion implies the tone of the speaker; it
is difficult to think of this poem without its ironic tone. If
Gerontion has lost his passion, the language he uses is no less
cold and dry. Roethke's poetic style could not attain such cold clarity and dryness. One may note the following:

Did my will die? Did I?
I said farewell to sighs,
Once to the toad,
And once to my flowing thighs.

(CP. P.167)

Another important difference between Eliot and Roethke is the mode of each of apprehending and projecting reality. Even when Eliot's early poetry was concerned with the ironic representation of the cultural ethos, he embodied it through the techniques he had learned from the French Symbolists, the Metaphysical Poets and the Jacobean play-wrights. When he came to write Ash-Wednesday, he depended heavily on the ritualistic technique. The style of the poem imitates the mode of a ritual which explains the incantatory voice, and the suppliant tone of the speaker. Eliot depends upon the church for his understanding and vision of the ultimate truth, as also for his poetic manner. Roethke runs to nature, to the far field which is a source of revelation for him. The voice of the "old lady" is full of exaltation but it is not incantatory. And Roethke retains speech rhythms in Meditations of an Old Woman which we do not find in Ash-Wednesday.

What is the position of the "I" in Eliot's earlier poems like Prufrock, Gerontion and Ash-Wednesday and Roethke's "I", in his poems? The "I" of the earlier poems of Eliot remains very largely unimplicated in the action of the poems. Prufrock is more of a passive onlooker of his world; in Gerontion, the
I, who is a narrator of the poem, is the very centre of the poem and this "I" in "Ash-Wednesday", is the self naked in the presence—or, the absence—of God. This implies that the aesthetic (or dramatic) distance that existed between the poet and the "I" of the earlier poems of Eliot is not felt in Ash-Wednesday. The "I" in Roethke's Meditations of an Old Woman is a persona but the dramatic distance between the poet and his persona is not of much critical significance.

Is there, then, a distinction between Eliot's poetic mode and Roethke's poetic manner in this respect? That there is such a distinction can be seen from the way in which the "I" contemplates the absolutes in Eliot's and Roethke's poems. Eliot contemplates the absolute as taught by Christianity. In Ash-Wednesday, the technique is, through the use of the repetitions inherent in disciplined meditation, to eliminate the contingent and the substantial. The penitent meditates:

The Lady is withdrawn
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.
Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness.
There is no life in them. As I am forgotten And would be forgotten, so I would forget
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose.

The speaker's appeal is to withdraw and forget the contingent reality and his prayer is a medium; for Eliot's speaker, time is to be redeemed and is conceived of in distinct phases, past, present and future.

Roethke's "old lady" is deeply attached to the "contingent and substantial". She declares that she would "rather eat than pray"
Hers is a Dionysian form of worship which encourages the self's opening out to all manifestations of life: "the barest speech of light among the stones", as she proclaims. (CP. p.173). Eliot's suppliant seeks God as the highest need of his soul whereas Roethke's "old lady" thinks that God needs her as well and as much as she needs God. Her vision is essentially man-centred.

It is this strong foothold of Roethke in the contingent and substantial, his man-centred vision that conceives of God as immanent in this physical world, his conception of time as a circular movement emphasizing the eternal — now, his faith that the self is the creator, — all these point towards his true heritage which he was trying to reclaim through Whitman.

VI

In Meditations of an Old Woman, Roethke has brought together the poetic style of his contemporary Eliot, and that of Whitman. Eliot provided him with impressive models of objective projections of the inner conflicts of personalities, while Whitman provided a direction by taking which he could transcend his self. "Ultimately", writes Frederick J. Hoffman, "Roethke seems to have come back to a peculiarly American 'stance', the Emersonian confidence in seeing the spirit in matter, also, in a sense, in creating matter (or forming it) through the power of the transcending will". It is this 'stance' or the orientation of the self in Roethke's poetry, the stance which looks upon the self as a creative force operating on matter and transcending it, the stance which insists upon the organic unity of matter and spirit, that distinguishes it from Eliot's poetry. At the same time it is also Roethke's realisation
and practice of the breath unit, the language that is natural to the immediate thing that aligns him with Whitman.

There are many poems of Whitman that deal with the same concern as are treated of in Roethke's sequences here. One can think of, for instance, *Songs of Parting*, *As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, and *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. *As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life* depicts the speaker as torn between his suffering 'actual' self and his conception of what he should be, "the mystical identity" or ideal self, here called "the real Me." He feels wretched because, even though "the ocean of Life" is ebbing in him, he has no true understanding of his real self. He moans,

Aware now that amid all that blab whose
  echo recoil upon me I have not once had
  the least idea who or what I am,

But that before all my arrogant poems
  the real Me stands yet untouch'd
  untold, altogether unreached

(Whitman, p.204).

Roethke's and Whitman's poems spring from the same anguish: their personae have no insight into the nature of their selves. Roethke's "old lady" declares:

In my left ear I hear the loud sound
  of a minor collapse,
Last night I dreamt of a jauntier principle of order.

Roethke's "Old lady" describes her journey at length speaking of it as "a journey within a journey." Whitman's speaker also makes a journey to the "fish-shaped island"; it is more a journey in time than in space. What may be noted is the fidelity to physical
details of the landscapes: their descriptions without dwindling into mere allegorical journeys. However, these descriptions act as the locale of "I" with symbolical implications. The island of Paumanok, with its "slender windrows, chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds,..., scales from shining rocks" and the sea nearby evoke a comic background against which the movements of "I" are represented.

The introspective tendency of the "I" in Whitman's poem and Roethke's sequences, the images of nature and journey serving as analogies of interior landscapes, the actual self contrasted with the possibilities of the ideal self and the basic pattern of speech rhythm, link *The Dying Man* and *Meditations of an Old Woman*, with Whitman's poetic practice. Of course, Whitman's dramatic "I" operates without a persona that we have in Roethke's sequences. Still, the genesis of Whitman's poem and Roethke's sequences is the same — the thwarted journey of the self in its ascent towards its ideal nature.

If Whitman's poem, *As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, embodies the dark night of the soul, Roethke's sequences under consideration here also embody such a spiritual experience in the journey of the self. *The Dying Man* represents a darker phase of the soul's journey with more emphasis than *Meditations* which promises dawn after darkness. Roethke dwells more often and more insistently on the darker phase of the spiritual journey but his vision is not finally tragic. Whitman's poetry is not without the dark moments but he is a singer as he proclaims in *Songs of Parting*, of wonder and joy:
O amazement of things—even the least particle!
O spirituality of things!

I too carol the sun, usher'd or at noon,
for as now, setting,
I too throb to the brain and beauty of the
earth and of all the growth of the earth,
I too have felt the resistless call of myself.

(Whitman, p. 385).

Like Roethke's sequences Songs of Parting are Whitman's summation
of his poetic career. His legacy, he proclaims, is:

Of joy. Sweet joy, through many a year, in them,
(For them, for them have I lived, in them
may work is done,)
Of many an aspiration fond, of many a dream
and plan;
Through space and time fused in a chant, and
the flowing . eternal identity,
To Nature encompassing these, encompassing
God, to the joyous electric all,
To the sense of Death, and accepting exulting
in Death in its turn the same as life,
The entrance of man to sing;

To put rapport the mountains and rocks and streams,
And the winds of the north, and the forests of
Oak and pine,

(Whitman, p. 388)

This is the heart of Whitman's vision, his legacy of "Sweet joy",
"the flowing eternal identity" encompassed by Nature and God, the
acceptance of Death as much as of life, and the rapport of the
soul with "the mountains and rocks and streams". It is this
legacy of Whitman that Roethke reclaims in the last section of the
"old lady"

Whitman, it is true, lived in an age when he could confidently
assert, "O soul, we have positively appeared — that is enough",
(Whitman, p. 379). Roethke, on the other hand, wrote in a period,
when men and women submerged "themselves deliberately in trivia".
Whitman's vision absorbed more promptly and avidly the reality of an emerging New World which was confined not only to America but embraced the whole world. As the speaker declares:

How America illustrates birth, muscular youth, the promise, the sure fulfilment, the absolute success, despite the people—illustrates evil as well as good, the vehement struggle so fierce, for unity in one's self.

(Whitman, p.382)

The self in Whitman's poem is as expansive as the nation's frontiers, extending itself to include all the communities of the world:

Are all nations communing? Is there going to be but one heart of the globe?

(Whitman, p.380)

The expansive movement of the self, encompassing the national and even cosmic consciousness, is the natural rhythm of Whitman's poetry. Roethke, it may be admitted, was not in harmony with the social ethos of his times: his was the era which witnessed the disintegration of human life, as a result of the Second World War, of the works of Freud and the industrial expansion. The self in Roethke for these reasons is more "self-involved": it is, in its way, "the ritualist of the mirror", lacking force to advance "with irresistible power on the world's stage". The pressure of the social reality operates in a subterranean way in Roethke: the world of the greenhouses, the figures of the parents and three women workers, the world of "Dolor"—"endless duplication of lives and objects"—embody his awareness of the social reality. Whitman, on the other hand, was in his own way the creator of his social milieu while
Roethke was like a cast-away (in a psychological sense) or an outsider. Inspite of the centripetal movement of the self in Roethke, its struggle is to move out of itself, to achieve the destination of the self in Whitman. The ideal of the self, in Whitman, is expressed in the following:

I announce, adhesiveness, I say it shall be limitless, unloosen'd
I say you shall yet find the friend you were looking for.
... ... ... ... ... ... ...
I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature,
Chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully arm'd.

(Whitman, p.390).

The self in Roethke's poems does strive to reach this ideal of "adhesiveness", to be "fluid as Nature", to be "copious, vehement, spiritual and bold". The "old lady" in Meditations of an Old Woman is "released from the dreary dance of opposites", is stretched "in all directions", and feels sometimes that she is "several". This self which is empathetic and expansive in Roethke establishes his affiliations with Whitman. At the same time the note of joy as a principle permeating the whole universe finds its expression both in Whitman and Roethke. One reads in the "old lady" poems:

The Sun! The Sun! And all we can become!
And the time ripe for running to the moon!

( CP. p.173)

Whitman already pointed the way:
I say Nature continues, glory continues,
I praise with electric voice,
For I do not see one imperfection in the universe,
And I do not see one cause or result lamentable
at last in the universe.
O setting Sun! though the time has came,
I still warble under you, if none else does,
Unmitigated adoration.

(Whitman, p. 385)

This final note of "unmitigated adoration" in the "old lady's"
meditation is Whitman's legacy to Roethke. "It was in Whitman",
as Jenijoy La Belle remarks, "that Roethke discovered a voice both
aged and energetic. ... Significantly, it is a tradition in
American verse, thus containing within itself an oxymoronic
construct where past, present, and future all merge." 35


4. Ibid., p. 213.


7. Ibid., p. 201.


10. Ibid., p. 181.


12. Ibid., p. 39.


15. Ibid., p. 280.


24. Ibid., p. 170.


26. Ibid., p. 132.


30. Ibid., p. 309.


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CHAPTER 7

TOWARDS THE FINAL PERSPECTIVE: NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE AND SEQUENCE, SOMETIMES METAPHYSICAL.

I

With the North American Sequence Roethke for the first time names his sequence after a place. How should one interpret this change in his practice? The persistent theme of his sequences, from The Lost Son to Meditations of an Old Woman, has been, one may say, the sense of self-exile and the self's struggle to find its true haven. The self in his poems pines for and seeks what is outside itself, but the moment it moves outside itself either for shelter or for fulfilment, it must encounter forces that threaten to destroy it. The self will not achieve wholeness, unity of being, without identification with others. This has been its realisation and its need in Roethke but, "to be lured out of the confines of the self is to court death, the absolute loss of the self. ... To be aware of anything is to be aware of the limits that define the self in time and space, that remind the self from moment to moment and from place to place that it had better look to itself and shore up its own limits against the threats from without." 1 This observation goes to the heart of the problem which the self in Roethke's sequences strives to overcome -- to maintain its own identity even in its own identification and reconciliation with the outside world. To be born is to accept the limits of time and place for the self. At the same time, the self will not attain its full freedom unless it transcends
these limits of time and space.

This is the reason why the "journey of the self" is a recurring motif in Roethke's poetic sequences. "The greenhouse" poems and The Lost Son enact the journey which was hemmed in by the parental world; Four for Sir John Davies and The Dying Man enact the journey by reaching out to more kindred poetic spirits, while Meditations of an Old Woman, with its conflict between the pulls of the self and the spirit depicts the journey out of the self in search of God. The 'journey' is, of course, only a literary framework and in North American Sequence, this metaphor which implies perpetual motion gives way to the metaphor of place and landscape. This is so, inspite of a long poem, "Journey to the Interior" (CP. p.193), included in the sequence. As McMichael shrewdly comments: "... What it says, once again, is that the metaphor of the journey out of the self is incomplete. It says that the health of the soul is predicated upon another metaphor, the metaphor of the landscape." 2 Even in the "old lady" sequence, the protagonist thinks of herself as riding while she is, in fact, sitting "quietly". In "Journey to the Interior" too, the journey is mentioned in a more generalised way. In the earlier sequences, the metaphor of journey is used as an image of the experiencing self; while in North American Sequence, it is "a shell forming, but not informing". 3

As a result, one notices that naturalistic details in these sequences cease to be shadowy presences as they were when occasionally evoked in the earlier sequence as in "The Pit", 
for instance, of The Lost Son. The details are no longer asked to shed their emblematic nuance; on the contrary, their material solidity is more strongly conveyed and felt. What distinguishes the metaphor of the landscape from that of the journey is that it hardly obtrudes upon our attention. It has been there from the very beginning. It has been growing throughout and claims, in the North American Sequence, our attention in its own right. The metaphor of the journey is merely reiterated, whereas the metaphor of the landscape grows in the sequences; and this metaphor, the symbol of homecoming — was to be merged with that of the journey — the symbol of the quest of the self. The North American Sequence, one might say, marks Roethke's spiritual and poetic homecoming.

II

Despite this shift in the major term of the metaphor, Roethke's central concern has remained unchanged. The persona, in the "old lady" sequence declared:

I was always one for being alone,
Seeking, in my own way, eternal purpose;

( CP. p.168 )

and questioned herself:

The cause of God in me — has it gone?
Do these bones live? Can I live with the bones?

( CP. p.172 )

It is the same concern — "the cause of God" and the same anxiety — the future of the soul after death — with which
Roethke is occupied also in the North American Sequence. Moreover, the fundamental nature of his self has always been so far, except in Four For Sir John Davies, to seek the "eternal purpose" in its own way all alone. The trouble about this self (the self in Roethke's poetry) has been its chequered, tardy movement; its ascent is not swift and straight. And the North American Sequence begins with a regressive movement. "The Longing" (CP, p.187) expresses, reminding the reader of Eliot's The Waste Land, the bitter anguish of the human spirit and its struggle to "transcend this sensual emptiness." The first section of "The Longing" was perhaps inspired by Eliot's description of London and the Thames in The Waste Land. This section expresses, in the words of Ralph J. Mills, Jr., that "the spirit as essence of the organic self seeks finally to go beyond that self's circumference." 4 Transcendence has been its "dream too long"; the danger is the exhaustion of the "spirit" if it continues to be a dreamer only. How could one relate the "sensual emptiness" of the speaker here to the "old woman's" delight in her nakedness, "busy at a young body" and her later experience of the liberated self? The protagonists of The Lost Son, Four for Sir John Davies, "Love Poems" and Meditations of an Old Woman exhibit an awareness of their bodies which can be described only as "sensual" in a way other than that explained by Ralph Mills. Roethke's "old woman" succeeds in attaining the glimpses of a cosmic soul, leaving behind her obsession with her naked body. In the North American Sequence, eros has no place.
The first section of "The Longing" embodies a total vision of death in the world of physical nature, human potentialities, and spiritual well-being. The protagonist, for all practical purposes, is the poet himself, but one no longer young, and he is concerned with the ultimate questions of death and the nature of the soul. It is a finely wrought lyric remarkable for its terse, pithy style, and the images that evoke the contemporary hell which is our life in an industrialised society. As is customary with Roethke, the regressive movement of the spirit initiates the sequence. Though the images here do convey an inner landscape of the poet's mind, it is the decomposition of physical nature, a picture of hell, that is more striking. In a poetic sequence that deals with the quest for salvation, it is only appropriate that place should be evoked; this, in fact, is the recognised procedure in the meditative tradition. When the theme of the sequence is the redemption of the spirit, the "Fall" must be suffered in all its horror.

The second poem (CP. p.188) marks a stasis in the movement of the spirit. The regressive movement is checked and it promises a progressive motion of the soul. Before the spirit could make a new beginning, it must discard the pride of its "wretchedness". The "wretchedness" has an educative value to the human spirit which teaches that new creations spring out of "nothings". This may sound like a paradox, but it is confirmed by the experience of the mystics. Spiritual awakening is preceded by a phase of the soul experiencing a darkness which gradually and finally leads to spiritual light. The "agony of
crucifixion on barstools being intolerable to the spirit, the spirit must dream of a dark dream, the dream embodied by a rose. The poet seeks a union of flesh and spirit, body with the motion of a soul, and the way to bring these two together is by means of the rose, which exceeds us all. To Roethke, the rose is a symbol of mystery for it is a living lesson to man of transcendence reached through and beyond the roots. This is the transcendence his spirit longs for, a kind of spiritual impregnation of the physical basis of existence. It is possible, this is Roethke's way of expressing his craving for a more full-blooded experience of the senses, for the Dionysian ideal. Both the lyrics, which, in their rhythmical movement and their use of everyday speech, have affinity with Eliot's manner, are poems of the first voice as defined by Eliot: the speaker here principally speaks to himself without any specific audience in mind. This taut lyric is, however, an expression of the fundamental conflict between the self and the spirit in Roethke. "The term, 'Self', explains Ralph J. Mills, "appears to embrace and unite both the physical and spiritual components of the individual into whole of a particular identity. The spirit is perhaps the bloom, the last and highest glory of the self and so becomes the guiding and motivating principle in its experience, its ascent on the scale of being." This "comprehensive felicity" is what Roethke aspires for in this section. Nature furnishes many pointers to the human spirit for such an ascent; for instance, the rose, a great flame rising from "the sunless sea", and "the moon". At this stage of the sequence, the spirit is "longing": 
I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon,
Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm.

This is more in the nature of self-motivation and self-discipline.

The third poem (CP. p.188) communicates the expanding freedom of the spirit inspired by the longing for transcendence expressed in the first two lyrics. Roethke, like Blake, valued desire as the motivating energy of the soul. What would be the spirit's heaven? What would be the end of the spirit's transcendence? Hugh Staples remarks: "... in its deepest meaning.

North American Sequence is a search for form, and for its implications at all levels of human experience, individual and collective". For Roethke, transcendence does not mean mortification of the flesh as it does for some mystics, a complete withdrawl from the physical world. The meaning of form, for him, lies in the full embrace of the total reality, the purifying of himself of all the traces of the earlier self, "the distortions of malice and hatred" and "unlearning the lingo of exasperation", which is precisely the idiom we come across in the traditional religious poetry. But in Roethke it is mixed with a language "delighting in the redolent disorder of this mortal life" which is signified by the images of "the mad lemmings", "the children dancing", "the flowers widening" and "shadow changing into flame".

By such a passionate sensuous participation in the physical life of the universe Roethke aligns himself with Whitman. The form of the lyric and the feel of reality expressed in it are the surest testimony to his kinship with Whitman. This was not Eliot's way of transcendence, and even Yeats lamented that the
world of "the blackening salmon, and the mad lemmings" could not be his in old age. Roethke's "Byzantium" was a full abandonment to and empathy with the sensuous life. The boon of such life is "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form", the equipoise of the spirit. Roethke's memorable phrase may seem reminiscent of the Buddha's ideal of "Nirvan" or the Bhagavadgita's ideal of "the serenity of the soul". Roethke is a mystic in the sense that "the mystic... is unpossessive wishing to gather things together not to gain dominion over them, but to find a pattern in them". Roethke, for this reason, understood why Whitman resorted to long catalogues of details in his poetry. It was the same instinct, "to find a pattern", in the multitude of things, that urged artists like Whitman, Joyce and Roethke, to make use of catalogues in their writings.

This whole movement, it may be noted, is the poet's "longing". His predicament has been like that of Jonah who passed through many tribulations for fleeing from God. Jonah's voyage is the archetypal image of the hazards the spirit has to face before it accepts God's ways. The poet seems to be referring to his Scylla and Charybids situation; he is not yet out of danger. The image conveys to us the impenetrable mystery of birth, death and time and how vulnerable each one of us is to the flux of life. "The Longing" is a prologue to the sequence in that it introduces the drama of the regeneration of the human spirit, providing us with the key images of rose, light, and water, which affirm life, and the negative images of dead animals, stinks and sighs, and the slagheaps. It also evokes
the spirit of the place. The poet merely feels a possibility of "a tentative acceptance of both the actual and ideal." The structure of the sequence rests upon the musical movements of point and counterpoint.

"Meditation at Oyster River" (CP. p.190) is a vivid rendering of the landscape. The presiding deity of this section is not Roethke retiring to "a rock higher up on the cliff-side" and shifting "on my rock," but "the low, barnacled, elephant-coloured rocks," "the tide-ripples," "the shy beasts" like the deer and the doe, "the humming bird" and "the Tittle-bawasse, in the time between winter and spring." And it is the poet himself who assigns this prime position to place, and his meditation takes a second place before the minute details, "tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child's show riding a log," "the rows of dead clam shells," "young crabs climbing in and out of the water," "the young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting for its fly." Before merging with the cosmic order, the self must feel the vastness of the place where it is. The poem is an attempt at the union of place and spirit and registers only in a minor way the triumph of the spirit.

The first poem of "Meditation at Oyster River" (CP. p.190) depicts, as in the meditative tradition, the setting which is essential for a meditation. The landscape evokes a rocky region overlooking the sea, sending "the first tide-ripples, moving almost without sound," toward the poet. The atmosphere breathes serenity: even the gulls "on the far rocks" have ceased "their catmewing" and "child-whimpering," "the wind slackens, light as
a moth fanning a stone; A twilight wind, light as a child's breath. The hypnotic, gentle rhythms create an idyllic situation. The lines expand and contract as they project the corresponding movements of Roethke's self. Such an idyllic setting would have been most congenial to the progress of the spirit, but

The self persists like a dying star,
In sleep, afraid.

This is the peculiar dilemma of Roethke's self. It fears a loss of identity in its journey out of the self but then the potentialities of the soul cannot be realised without identification with "others", the country and the place in the North American Sequence. The self here differs from the self in religious poets like Herbert and Vaughan, which rejoices in a surrender to the higher self or what Emerson called "Over-soul". This note in Roethke lends a modern flavour to his poetry and distinguishes it from Eliot's. If this self has to ascend higher, to move out of itself, it would be with "the shy beasts", "the humming bird" and "with water". In the first section, the details that induce the meditative state have been mentioned: even the presence of "a fish raven" must spur the self to the contemplation of God as it is a reminder of impending death, but Roethke rejects the supernatural. His mode of salvation was through the Whitmanesque empathy with all creation. For him, the Oyster River is the baptiser of the spirit and the flowing water of the river releases his spirit from its momentary regressive mood "by a process of sympathetic magic". This suggests the affiliation of the self in Roethke's
poem: it is moving towards the Whitmanesque position. The self wishes to be gathered up in the arms of nature, to be one with the animals that have no consciousness of their separation, to merge with the creeping waters.

The third section of the poem (CP. p.191) imitates "the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April" or "the Tittlebawassee which grows into the "wrist-thick cascade tumbling from a cleft rock". The stanza renders gradual expanse of a rivulet into a mighty river, and is expressive of the potentiality of the spirit. It is also in the nature of an epic simile which illustrates the basic theme of the stanza. It would seem that Roethke's spirit expands only when he recollects his childhood. Even though the whole section functions as a Homeric simile, the idea is subsumed to the two principal images or rather one image reinforced by the second. The change in the spirit's movement is conveyed in the line:

And I long for the blast of dynamite.

The spirit is charged with the dynamic energy of nature which it (spirit) must emulate. When "water's my will, and my way", i.e. when, the spirit is revived by the dynamism of a flowing river, the spirit begins to rock "with the motion of morning". However, this is just a small beginning for the spirit. As the closing lines of Section 4 (CP. p.192) have it:

In the first of the moon,
All's a scattering,
A shining.
Place has liberated the spirit, even though it is evoked in the memory of the speaker.

"Journey to the Interior" (CP. p.193) is likely to be taken as an allegorical journey of the spirit in its ascent to a higher reality, but it is specifically viewed as a detour. Once again, the landscape with "washed-out interrupted raw places, the arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten butters, the canyons, the darkening thickets, and the ravines ugly" is at the centre of this section — the landscape rather than the human figure. The narrator is, in fact, swallowed up in the manifold details of the landscape for he complains:

I am not moving but they are:

These details evoke the spirit of the parched land but they also exist in their own right and create an overwhelming sense of the solid, material world the self has to contend with. The descriptions of the journey in the first two parts conjure up the image of a person who is out to conquer new places; this is symbolic of the "American Dream". The old "American Dream" has gone sour in the twentieth century, and has become as frustrating as a detour. If water had acted as a baptising agent in the earlier poem, land now acts as a constricting force to the spirit. It is when the narrator reaches "the flower of all water, above and below me the never receding" that he comes to know "the heart of the sun, —/ In the dark and light of a dry place", the promise of mystical experience. The spirit feels rejuvenated but what this change portends is fraught with fear:
As a blind man, lifting a curtain, 
knows it is morning, 
I know this change: 
On one side of silence there is no smile.

What the "Journey to the Interior" has accomplished for the protagonist is only a blind man's vision of the morning. There is no full illumination of the self and the other side has only darkness to offer. At this stage the self sees no promise of heaven or life after death. Roethke's vision here fails to transcend the limits of time and place. However, the spirit can experience unity with birds, reviving the memories of childhood. When oneness with birds is established, the spirit is transformed.

But when I breathe with the birds, 
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing.

Early strife and discord are forgotten and the spirit achieves harmony and joy. As Karl Malkoff remarks, "Roethke here rejects neither the temporal nor the eternal; he rather laments the lack of connection between them." 11

"Journey to the Interior" rehearses the counter movement to the "Meditation at Oyster River". The image of the "journey out of the self" creates considerable expectations for the spirit when the wheels of the car "whined beyond eighty", but this journey ends with a whimper. The metaphor of journey turns out to be more of an image of stasis. It seems Roethke's use of the metaphor of journey — the time honoured symbol of spiritual ascent — is ironical.
It is likely that this ironical use of the journey as a spiritual leitmotif makes Jenijoy La Belle suggest that Roethke's "Journey to the Interior" is filled with echoes of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'. Eliot's poem renders the journey of the Magi as an exploration of the memories of the past; the experience was (you may say) satisfactory. What is common to Roethke and Eliot is the ironical tone of the protagonists. The experience of the journey has failed to bring ideal fulfilment to either protagonist. Roethke's narrator reports it as "A slight song, /After the mid-night cries." The quest in both is committed to the pursuit of the Absolute, to identification and union with the cosmic self. The speaker in Eliot's poem, as a result of his bitter sojourn, gained "evidence" of the Incarnation, understood a new meaning of birth and death, but could not break away from his past. He is "absorbed in the negation of his former existence, but not yet physically liberated from it. ... The speaker has reached the end of one world but despite his acceptance of the revelation as valid, he cannot gaze into a world beyond his own." "Journey of the Magi" is also a detour. Thematically and experientially, these poems come very close to each other. To add to this resemblance, the description of the landscape in Roethke's poem evokes the memory of a similar landscape in Eliot's. Just as Eliot describes the hard struggle of the camels, "galled, sore-footed, refractory, /Lying down in the melting snow", Roethke speaks of "the shale sliding dangerously/And the back wheels hang almost over the edge/At the
sudden veering, the moment of turning". (CP. p.193). The journey is an ordeal both to the traveller and the vehicle he uses. A minor point of difference is that Roethke's landscape is steeped in modern scientific civilization while Eliot succeeds in creating the "antic" air. Nevertheless, the experience of thwarted fulfilment is common to both.

The most important link between the two poems, besides their kinship of theme, experience and the landscape, is the technique: the use of a monologue, the conversational tone and the colloquial idiom. "Like Eliot, Roethke varies the line length to make the long lines seem even longer and slower and to make the short ones seem shorter and more pointed." Miss La Belle seems to be thinking of such lines when she suggested a likeness between Eliot's and Roethke's poems.

An old bridge below with a buckled iron, railing, broken by some idiot plunger, Underneath, the sluggish water running between weeds, broken wheels, tires, stones. And all flows past —

( CP. p.194 )

or

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning, I know the change.

( CP. p.195 )

Roethke's long lines tend in the poem to occur when he wishes to communicate the sense of topographical richness of his
landscape, to express what he called "an epic of the eyes". They all enumerate the details, and register the stillness of the land. The brief lines coming after the longer ones have the effect of violent suspension which is immediately relieved by the next long line. These rhythmical variations demonstrated Roethke's skill as a metrical stylist but I feel Eliot has managed the middle pauses more skillfully:

And I would do it again, but set down, 
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had
seen birth and death
But had thought they were different;
this birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death
our death.

Roethke's long line has a bardic sweep while Eliot's remains dramatic to the end.

The similarities between "Journey of the Magi" and "Journey to the Interior" reveals Roethke's awareness of the poetic climate of his time. What is characteristic of him, this awareness of the major poetic style of his period becomes a part of his own poetic manner. Eliot's presence in Roethke's poem is unmistakable, but we miss the heart of these poems if we overlook the equally significant differences between them. The most important difference relates to the function of the metaphor of the journey. In the "Journey of the Magi", it is at the centre of the poem and carries poem's meaning. In "Journey to the Interior", it is the metaphor of the landscape that is important. The place is like a living spirit in Roethke's poem while in "Journey of the Magi" it exists as
a shadowy background. The first two stanzas of Roethke's poem convey the impression that the speaker has achieved the ideal of impersonality by surrendering himself to "God's plenty" on earth. Then again, the Magi's understanding of the meaning of birth and death depends upon the evidence of the Incarnation — it is a mediated vision of the Absolute. Roethke's is direct and personal. Also Eliot's poem is more meditative and incantatory in its rhythms while Roethke's poem is more expansive, rhythmically as well as emotionally.

"Journey to the Interior" ends with an expansive movement of the spirit attained after great travail, the spirit having experienced a kind of conversion in its unity with the birds. The movement suggests a transition from "the spirit of wrath" to "the spirit of blessing" — the kind of movement one finds in Milton's "On His Blindness" and in "Lycidas."

However, this movement was not a full embrace of life. The spirit could not yet absorb the land. It has yet to merge the metaphor of journey and the metaphor of landscape. So, the next movement appropriately begins with the narrator coming to terms with the situation. The first lyric of "The Long Waters" (CP, p. 196) brings the immediate and remote past together and relates it to the present. The retrospective perspective sharpens the edge of self-exploration in the way it has always guarded Roethke against sentimentality. The prime motivation of the self in North American Sequence is the transcendence of "sensual emptiness". The speaker confesses
his lack of interest in the world of men. He has always
longed "for the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling
mists", the world of vast and lonely nature. He has also
been foolish with God, who has been his obsession, at least
in old age. So, the world of the remote past is recalled:
"the unsinging fields where no lungs breathe, where light
is stone". The past is here resurrected because it now
no longer meets with the speaker's approval:

Therefore I reject the world of the dog
Though he hear a note higher than C
And the thrush stopped in the middle of his song.

The world of the minimals is rejected and the poet "seeks
a solution that allows man to stand outside his subjective
self without destroying that self, without denying the
knowledge of concrete reality that defines it". 16 He moves
away from the path of isolation, and the chasm between long­
ing and performance makes him restless in this part of the
poem. Significantly, he returns "where fresh and salt waters
meet,.../.../ A country of bays and inlets, and small streams,
flowing seaward." It is a symbolic representation of the
merger of the small with the great, of the point of inter­
section between the temporal (flowing streams) and the time­less.

The second section of "The Long Waters" ( CP. p.196 )
opens with an invocation of "Mnetha, Mother of Har" to
protect the narrator from the flux, "the dubious sea-change,
the slow sinking of the island peninsula". Mnetha suggests
wisdom based on memory, and in Blake's Tiriel is a nurse in
close touch with nature. "He (Roethke) is calling upon memory, personal and racial — tentacled, sea-cousins are in his mind — to ascertain his identity, he is calling upon nature to teach him to accept the natural processes." 17 However much he might yearn to free himself from the world of flux, he "still" delights "in his last fall". He is too deeply immersed in the world of nature to succeed in separating himself from it. It is this sense of reality which links Roethke with Whitman. The second part projects two worlds of flux: one associated with the geological changes, the world of terrestrial changes which the poet-seeker would like to escape from; the other, the world of nature, which magnifies the morning with her eyes and is the "spirit of blessing" for him.

The third section of "The Long Waters" (CP. p.197) views the world of decay and flux against the background of rejuvenation and permanence, demarcating the "world of the pine, whole with its roots", from that of "the lily's piercing white". Roethke, it seems, wished to project the image of the lily as a symbol of eternity. Its place in the verse-paragraph is thrust into prominence by the brevity of the line and the images of change which precede and follow it. The same image will reappear as a "rose in the sea-wind" in the later part of this sequence (CP. p.203). The narrator notes the landscape of "a land-locked bay, where the salt water is freshened" and, as he described in the earlier
poem, "the spirit of wrath" gives place to the "spirit of blessing." It is here that the metaphor of the landscape and the metaphor of journey come to be fused:

I have come here without courting silence,
Blessed by the lips of a low wind.

This whole experience is like a benediction pronounced by "the lips of a low wind".

The fourth lyric (CP, p.197) adopts the technique of counterpoint. If the earlier poem embodied the image of the eternal as a focal interest, this section emphasizes the image of stone, as a symbol of fixity. The contrast between the lily as a symbol of transcending change and the stone as a symbol of fixity resisting change seems to be the heart of this section. Once again, the land operates as a symbol of constriction, and water as one of liberation. "A single wave", coming "in like the neck of a great swan", lies "flat, its crown half-broken". The image of a stone "breaking the eddying current" embodies frustration and obstruction. In brief, both these images represent the hazards of the journey out of the self, "the wave and the eddying current" standing for the aspirations of the spirit.

The final lyric of the poem (CP, p.198) is a very tender expression of the "intimations of immortality" recollected from early childhood and links Roethke with Wordsworth and Blake. For Louis Martz, it illustrates Roethke's "belief that in the depths of the self lies a core of power, a soucre of light,"
a redemptive memory. It is through this redemptive effect of the memories of childhood that the narrator has an experience of harmony with the cosmos. He can respond to the natural world as a living presence and can establish his relationship with it on an "I — Thou" basis. The redemptive memory is awakened by the sea-wind that may be taken as symbol of the cosmic spirit:

So the sea-wind wakes desire.
My body shimmers with a light flame.

The experience embodied here does not express the moment of full spiritual enlightenment, but it is an image of transformation taking place in the poet-seeker. The redeemer is not the Christ child, as in Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"; it is "neither voice nor vision". The supernatural has no place in Roethke. There is certainly a sense of widening vision and rebirth but it is more an expression of empathy with the environment than spiritual revelation. This lyric is remarkable for its images, and the music of the lines induces us for a moment to forget the poet's message or his progress in his journey out of the self. Roethke has something of Tennyson's mastery in creating the most melodious effects by an interplay of assonance and consonance, as in

As light reflects from a lake, in late evening,
When bats fly, close to slightly tilting brownish water,

The longer lines carry with them the expansive movement of the spirit but the shorter ones express a truth which is telling for the narrator as also for the reader. The short
line "neither voice nor vision" suggests that the traditional religious media of mystic illumination have no validity here. This negative emphasis is more effective and lingers longer in the mind than the long similes at the beginning of this section. "I embrace the world" brings the movement to a close, marking the point to which all other parts of the verse — paragraph were moving. Losing and finding himself in these waters, the narrator embraces the world.

The fifth movement in the sequence, "The Far Field" (CP. p.199) attempts to consolidate the gains of the spirit in its journey out of the self. Before the sequence reaches its finale, the earlier strands of the poems of the sequence must be recapitulated to strike a note of harmony in the midst of discord and confusion. Its purpose is to gauge one's achievement and the degree of self-education. There are a few lines in the section which express the point the spirit has reached in its journey out of the self. The "far field", in Roethke's poems, is an image of promise of revelation, an image that unites the near and the distant (CP. p.166 and p.173). It signifies the edge of transcendence. The seeker sums up his education so far: freedom from the fear of death (which is a kind of journey out of the self). He can now welcome death with more equipoise. He declares:

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow.

One marks a change here, the note of reconciliation with the final fate that awaits human beings, the note that was not
heard in The Lost Son. The spirit has gradually achieved equilibrium, its distractions have been calmed down. The narrator is, as he can see very clearly, "an old man with his feet before the fire, in robes of green, in garments of adieu". There is an acceptance of death, with the spirit moving "like monumental wind, that gentles on a sunny blue plateau".

This is how the spirit would encounter death in spite of the fact that "the murmur of the absolute, the why of being born falls on his naked ears". Roethke, or his protagonist, has not fathomed the mystery of the absolute. Nor is such a claim made anywhere in the sequence. What is realised is:

I have come to a still, but not a deep centre,
A point outside the glittering current;

This is the second lesson which the spirit has imbibed. Perhaps the final mystery of the absolute will remain something beyond reach. Its nature and the purpose of creation tease "us out of thought", as Keats said. The experience of "The imperishable quiet at the heart of form", "of a still,... centre" has been a very transforming experience to the self which has now moved beyond the flux of time and the world of appearance. The point is that the self has acquired the serenity of the spirit inseparable from the body. In "Meditation at Oyster River" (CF. p.190), it was said the "flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit". The spirit has learnt to remain calm in the world of chaos and change, and has something of mystic's sense of things, having found "a pattern in them".
"The Far Field" is a series of the spirit's reckoning of patterns in things leading to the ultimate perception that "all finite things reveal infinitude", which insight is the core of the Whitman tradition. This explains the secret of the serenity of the spirit, the secret of the Transcendent vision. The world of phenomena, the spirit comes to learn, is a reflection of the Transcendental Reality. This lesson of the eternal was learnt

At the field's end, in the corner missed by mower, Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert, Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse, Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump, Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery.

The verse-paragraph imitates the organic poetic style, enacting the emergence of a transcendental insight, signifying a pattern among things. It does not evoke a paradisal setting; far from it. In fact, it seems to make a parody (by implication) of traditional poetic attempts which connect the idyllic setting with a spiritual vision. The suggestion is that the eternal resides in temporal. The insight and the technique these lines embody indicate Roethke's affiliations with Whitman. And like Whitman, he proclaims man as "the end of things, the final man". This is a clear indication that Roethke aligns himself with the American poetic tradition of the "Central Man", whose prophets were Emerson and Whitman, and whose voice, in our time, is Wallace Stevens. As Harold Bloom observes: "Whatever the dangers of the Emersonian vision of the centres, we have no choice but to seek the light of that vision, for it is the major example yet given us in
America of what Stevens might have called the human making choice of a human self.  As much as Stevens, Roethke was a living example of "the human making choice of a human self". The recognition and celebration of the human self as a central mystery is most germane to the basic native American poetic tradition.

The vision of the "central man" is achieved by a person of empathic and expansive consciousness, by the self that is intoxicated with the vision of its "own immensity". One feels that Roethke at this point is embodying the Emersonian ideal of a poet as a liberating god whose consciousness embraces the cosmic consciousness:

> A man faced with his own immensity
> Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.

The spirit has not learnt these lessons from outside but through "the pure serene of memory in one man." The memory that is redeemed has revealed this human truth. Roethke's poetry re-establishes man at the centre of the cosmos. The "lost self" is liberated when it turns toward "the sea", the image of the cosmic self.

"The Far Field" works out in its poetic structure the way "the lost son" makes his return home. Even though the poem opens with the narrator's confession of the habit of mind that dreams of "journeys repeatedly", it may be recalled that "country is half-land, half-water", and the whole experience of the self is described as "a ripple widening from a single stone/Winding around the waters of the soul".
Water here functions as an emancipating agent. For Hugh Staples the poem moves from a position of meaningless motion, through a condition of meditative appraisal, towards an epiphany that is understood rather than felt. So The Far Field closes out the central poetic structure of North American Sequence on a note of harmonious serenity contrasting sharply with the opening discords of the overture.

The experience communicated in The Far Field could not have been complete without the protagonist having made some peace with the past, especially his father and the world of the greenhouses. The redemptive memory — the pure serene of memory in one man — would have done only half its work but for the identification of the protagonist with his total past. The Rose in this context furnishes the residual element of totality adding depth to a still centre. The earlier section reiterated the protagonist's insight, (which was also acquired by the old woman in Meditations of an Old Woman,) that the temporal and eternal lie together; but this was articulated in a rather impersonal way.

The Rose (CP. p. 202) concentrates on the experience of the intersection of the temporal and the eternal through the symbol of the rose, which reminds one of the same symbol in Eliot's Ash Wednesday and East Coker. Roethke seeks the eternal which for him in this section is embodied in the symbol of the rose in the sea-wind. It resolves the tension of the contraries, releasing him from spiritual despair; inducing the sense of peace and harmony with the self, and the
"others." "Unity of Being" is achieved here.

The first poem of the movement begins with a statement of the supreme importance of place —

There are those to whom place is unimportant, But this place, where sea and fresh water meet, Is important —

The emphatic way this opens comes as a surprise to the reader who is used to Roethke's tentative openings. It states what is going to be the focus here and by implication undertakes to justify itself. The end of the section must reveal the importance of the place, of the metaphor of the landscape to the journey out of the self. As if the reason that here "Sea and fresh water meet" were not strong enough, the narrator begins to overwhelm us with the opulence of the landscape. The technique adopted here is that of Whitman's "catalogues", enumeration of details, of the birds, and the activities on the sea-shore. The description evokes the landscape which the American Adam saw — nature in its most primitive aspects. It is hardly populated by any human beings. There are "the hawks" swaying "out into the wind", "the eagles" sailing low over the fir trees, and such sights and sounds of the virgin land. These sounds are "American" because they are heard in Michigan and the Dakotas. "More significantly, they are recaptured memories of an American poet striving to identify his own individual experience with that of culture".22 The
only way for Roethke to identify himself with American culture was by identification with its "sounds" and its landscape. The first poem in this section establishes the Adamic mode of existence:

I sway outside myself
Into the darkening currents,
Into the small spillage of driftwood,
The waters swirling past the tiny headlands.

The lines convey to us that the poet is able to go out of himself and can be at one with the surroundings — "small spillage of driftwood" and "the waters past the tiny headlands." He also suggests his identification with the representative of the aborigines of the land:

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

The image also creates a figure of shaman with a "crown of birds" entering "into the darkening currents" to seek the final mystery.

The second part of the poem (CP. p.203) is more personal in its perception and interpretation of landscape. From a historical point of view, the first stanza could be taken as a description of the "May Flower" with the Pilgrim Fathers sailing out in search of the New World. But from the personal point of view, it projects the quest of the spirit for the ultimate mystery. It reveals itself in the
form of "this rose, this rose in the sea-wind." It is a symbol of steadfastness and permanence in the midst of flux, the concrete embodiment of the inter-section of the temporal and the eternal.

But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind
Stays
Stays in its true place,
Flowering out of the dark,
Widening at high noon, face upward,

The presence of the rose comes as a revelation during the ship's "rolling slightly sideways". The lines project the emergence of this symbol of permanence as a result of the experience of the flux and the temporal. It is "in the sea-wind", deeply rooted in the world of the flux, transcending the dark. This "rose in the sea-wind" unites the past and the present as the significance of his childhood experience revealed to the protagonist:

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

The speaker's redemptive memory unites the two kinds of roses, "the rose in the sea-wind" and the roses of his childhood. The adult world and the world of child are fused here, and this experience gratifies the longing for heaven in the speaker. "We are reminded that it is through the exploration of childhood, and of the racial past, that we have come to this
perception of the eternal while still within time." The ending of the poem reinforces the opening statement by a rhetorical question:

What need for heaven, then,
With that man, and those roses?

The narrator has come to realise that he has not to "face upward" in search of heaven, but that he possesses one in the symbols of his world of childhood. The discord and disharmony that had earlier characterized the self's relationship with these is now transformed into an experience of beatitude.

The third poem in the section, "What do they tell us?" (CP, p. 204), is a hymn to the glory of American sounds and silence. The earlier section conveyed the narrator's discovery of his private heaven; but the heaven of greenhouses must embrace the landscape of the continent. The vision of the American continent that Roethke renders here is an extended projection of his greenhouses. However, there is an epic poet's delight in the physical details of the continent, which cannot but remind us of Whitman. Roethke combines "the epic of eyes" with the "epic of ears". The poem is a symphony of American sounds and its musicians are the American birds. The American continent lives in Roethke's poem as much as in that of any other poet of America but it is the virgin land as the American Adam saw it. The personal myth of the heaven of "that man, and those roses" is assimilated into the national myth which also envisions the
archetypal myth of Eden. The metaphor of the "journey out of the self" is integrated with the metaphor of the landscape.

It is not only in his vision of heaven, and his grasp of reality that Roethke recovers for himself the native American poetic mode, but stylistically and rhythmically too, he has moved nearer to the Whitmanesque mode. Didn't he make a plea, in one of his prose pieces, that Whitman's "catalogues" must be revived? The poem under consideration is a long catalogue of America's infinite riches, sounds and sights. Like Whitman in all that he sees and hears, Roethke hears the note of the eternal. It is through place that one transcends the self. The line "Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire" could have come only from the poet who has discovered his roots in the Whitmanesque mode. Again like Whitman, Roethke succeeds in fusing the central images of the journey out of the self and the metaphor of landscape. Roethke and Whitman undertake the journey out of the self with a similar purpose. The poet--voyager in "Passage to India" addresses his soul in words which are echoed in the spiritual yearnings of Roethke:

O Soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me,
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
Again with the fair creation.

(Whitman, p.326).
Both Whitman and Roethke emphasize the mind's return,
"... back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,/
Again with fair creation". This is the most eloquent expression
of the Adamic mode. Roethke recapitulates the exhortations of
Whitman to the soul and reaches the destination signalled by
Whitman. He also adopts the same poetic technique of composing
his lines "by the breath unit".

In the last poem of the sequence (CP. p.205), "I live
with the rocks, their weeds", Roethke has reached his
"Byzantium". In these lines he seems to echo Yeats:

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

This image also recalls his image of the bird in The Dying Man
(CP. p.156). But the bird in Yeats's poem has abstracted
itself from flux and temporality, whereas Roethke's bird is
a living bird of "flesh and feathers". Unlike Yeats and
Eliot, he accepts the world of the temporal and the flux and
finds the eternal there. The poem seeks to convey the profound
experience of the serenity of the spirit in the midst of the
phenomenal world where flux is the only reality. The experience
is not a new realisation for the poet; it was already mentioned
in "The Far Field" (CP. p.201). Here, the dimension of "depth"
is added. And it would not have conveyed the full meaning of
North American Sequence if it had ended with "American sounds
in silence." The symbol of "the rose in the sea-wind" must be
focused again as a confirmation of the pattern and meaning in
the changing world of phenomena. The narrator has achieved "the true ease of" the self in his life, complete harmony with the other, and steadfastness in the world of mutability. There is "a break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or may be even to Thee." So, the journey out of the self comes to full circle in the last poem. There is an experience of the re-birth of the self — not in the sense of the birth after death, but a complete transformation of the older self. With the testimony of the "rose in the sea-wind", he could say:

And I rejoiced in being what I was.

III

Roethke's *North American Sequence* remains his major poetic achievement in that it remarkably succeeds in integrating the genius of the American poet with that of his continent. Emerson and Whitman had asserted that America was the greatest poem, that the poets of America had to create a new country as they would create a literary artifact. Very few American poets since Whitman have projected this image of America as a living poem in the way we find it done in the *North American Sequence*. Here Roethke recreates his self by recreating his land as a living presence.

The sequence brings together some of Roethke's most important images: the self "as a slug, an eyeless starer", as in *The Lost Son*; the journey out of the self that has been a recurring symbol with him; the "rose" which occurs in *The Lost Son* as:
Rising slowly out of its bed,
Still as a child in its first loneliness;

( CP. p.67 ).

becoming "this rose, this rose in the sea-wind" (CP. p.203);
the bird singing its song against emptiness in The Dying Man
and in "The Rose" section of North American Sequence; and
perhaps most importantly the images of the greenhouses and
the child. These images which have been gathering their
symbolical implications all along the way, come to their full
fruition in the North American Sequence. For instance,
"the rose", of "The Shape of the Fire" ( CP. p.67 ). The same
rose signifies transcendence in the midst of flux. The bird
has almost always signified the freedom of soul in Roethke.
It occurs most conspicuously in this sense in The Dying Man
cycle of poems. The image of the "place where sea and fresh
water meet" ( CP. p.202 ) is no less important in North American
Sequence, as it does signify the intersection of the temporal and
eternal.

James E. Miller, Jr., called Whitman's Leaves of Grass an
epic of America, and significantly enough, the North American
Sequence too achieves what Hugh Staples calls "a dimension
curiously suggestive of the epic." 25 In the sense that in an
epic the image of the land becomes the image of the poet,
Roethke's poem comes very near to this claim, at least in its
intentions; though in terms of form, it does not have all the
characteristics of the epic. The theme of the sequence, as the
narrator expresses it in "The Longing", is a noble theme. On
the personal level, it is transcendence of "sensual emptiness",

...
the search for "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form"; On the national plane, it is a search for identification with the American Adam. The theme of the sequence has a historical appeal in that it creates the landscape of the wilderness of the virgin continent as the early settlers found it. The sequence also seeks to explore the philosophical concern of the inter-action of the eternal and the temporal. Both aspects coalesce in the sequence. Such in the **North American Sequence** is the consciousness of the country as a land that one sometimes feels it should have preceded **Leaves of Grass**, though it lacks the political and national awareness that **Leaves of Grass** has. The poem has, besides, numerous extended similies which give it an epic air. For instance:

As when a ship sails with a light wind——
The waves less than the ripples made by rising fish,
The lace like wrinkles of the wake, widening, thinning out,
Sliding away from the traveler's eye,
The prow pitching easily up and down,
The whole ship rolling slightly sideways,
The stern high, dipping like a child's boat in a pond ——
Our motion continues.

( *CP.* p.203 )

The first section of "Journey to the Interior" (*CP.* p.293), one may say, could be regarded as an instance of Homeric comparison, without the use of comparative connectives.

But **North American Sequence**, inspite of its affinities with the epic, is more appropriately considered as a "meditative" poem, the kind of poem which is concerned with
the quest of the soul for the Divine Absolute, proposing to itself complete identification with and merger into the Ultimate Reality. For this quest the "meditative" poet follows the technique and stages laid down in the treatises on the art of "meditation". What a meditative act was to a seeker; the poetic act is to the "meditative" poet. There is a struggle on the part of the meditative poet to re-make or reconstitute his self and achieve some kind of transcendence by contact with the Higher Self. The mind concentrates on some of the relics or tokens or symbols or even anecdotes which assist it in realising the Higher Reality. "Contemplation is the mystic's medium. It is an extreme form of that withdrawal of attention from the external world and total dedication of the mind which also, in various degrees and ways, conditions the creative activity of musician, painter and poet." 26 The creative artist, by the very nature of his undertaking, practises a "meditative" act but, when the ends which the spiritual seeker pursues and the creative artist wishes to achieve become identical, one gets "meditative" poetry. There are two ways of contemplative communion between the self and the Absolute: "the usually uncontrollable, definitely outgoing, ecstatic experience; the attainment of Pure Being, or Flight to God"; the other "the more controllable ingoing experience; the breaking down of the barrier between the surface — Self and those deeper levels of personality where God is met and known in our nothingness, and a mysterious fusion of divine and human life take place." 27 The first way is, in Christian terms, "the going forth to the Father"; the second, "the marriage with the Son".
This quest of Roethke, as a poet, is of great significance to him as he struggles to discover his poetic identity as an inheritor of two poetic traditions, the American and the British. The dialectic of diverse poetic currents in his poetry is of absorbing interest to any reader of his poems. The "multiplicity" and "chaos" of human life, in the contemporary milieu, was not as formidable a challenge as the multiplicity of poetic styles. The perception of order and unity is linked with the perception of "the nature of God himself". The meditator's "longing for God is one of Roethke's inner compulsions, a personal commitment to be realised through his poetry. His quest is, then, multidimensional: "psychological, poetic and religious." 28 *North American Sequence* is his concentrated poetic search to fuse the three dimensions of his quest and attain the experience of "unitive life". It is possible to see some of the stages of "the mystic way" in the sequence, which, however, does not mean that the sequence is that of a religious mystic, though the yearnings and inclinations that this sequence embodies are certainly those of a mystic. The poem's structure works out (not, of course as a set exercise) the stages of a "mystic way" like "the awakening of the self", "the purification of the self", "the illumination of the soul", "Recollection and Quiet" and the "Unitive Life". 29

The first poem, "The Longing" (CP. p.187), proposes the theme of exploration of the self sunk in a world of ignorance. The self must pull itself out of this death-in-life. The craving here is for some pattern and meaning in "the multiplicity,
the chaos of modern life" and "to transcend this sensual emptiness". The terms in which the motivation for the exploration is provided do have a religious flavour; the guest, in fact, is a religious quest. The purpose of the second poem is to move "beyond the moon", to exceed as "the rose exceeds us all". After the sense of emptiness and the realisation that it could be a beginning for a renewal of the self, there is an outburst of the heart for the objects of its longing. The quest of the self will be for "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form" which will enable the seeker to unlearn the language of exasperation.

In a word, the quest is for more expansive consciousness, for liberation from its "slug-like" existence. The first poem, then, makes a poetic statement of the major key terms to be employed in the quest, which is not directed towards God. What is valued is identification with nature and the primitive mode of existence, suggested by "Iroquois" in the poem. It is a non-theological quest, seeking unity with the primordial manifestations of life. Roethke is not "the metaphysical mystic, for whom the Absolute is impersonal and transcendent, (who) describes his final attainment of that Absolute as deification, or the utter transmutation of the self in God." 30 His insatiable passion for the physical concretes lends a distinct colour to the quest. His is not a "reductive" quest; it is an all inclusive one. The symbols that he would contemplate are "the mad lemmings, the blackening salmon, the dancing children, and the widening flowers."
Reality is apprehended by Roethke by way of participation, not by way of willed and concentrated attention on some religious symbol. It is a way which is "an active, outgoing self-donation, which is the self's response" 31 to the Infinite. Evelyn Underhills's remark about "the music-loving soul of Richard Rolle" is quite appropriate for Roethke: "(He) always found his closest parallels with Reality, not in the concepts of intimate union or of self-loss in the Divine Abyss, but in the idea of the soul's participation in a supernal harmony—that sweet ministrelsy of God in which 'thought into song is turned'." 32

"Meditation at Oyster River" (CP. p.190) marks the initial advance of the spirit which is "intermittent". The obdurate self finds the ascent to the Higher Reality arduous. As in a meditative poem, the place or setting is evoked. The objects of contemplation again are not from Christian theology but from nature. The landscape and the posture of the speaker closely correspond to those of the meditative mode. But once again, the longing of the speaker takes him to the "humming bird, the deer and the doe", "the tongues of water"—emblems of his contemplation. It is nature which is at the centre of his quest and the direction of his mystic consciousness is personal, immanent, indwelling. Thus the initiation of the narrator has taken place in this movement, and is the stage of purification of the self. The structure of the poem also has features of regression and of the gradually regenerative movement.
The "Journey to the Interior" (CP. p.193) may be considered as an extended movement of the "purification of the self". It addresses itself to the regressive withdrawal of the self as representing the obstacles to the ascent of the spirit. Paradoxically, the analogy of journey is employed to convey the stasis of the spirit. "The Water" and "the birds" 'infuse' "the spirit of blessing" in the narrator. "The Long Waters" (CP. p.196) carries the movement of the self to the moment of "the illumination of the self." The narrator reiterates the purpose of his journey out of the self which is his "foolishness with God;" but his "God" lives in "the peaks," "the black ravines" and "the rolling mists." For the first time the narrator speaks of the transformation of the self:

I, who came back from the depths
laughing too loudly,
Become another thing;

... ... ... ... ... ... ...
I lose and find myself in the long waters
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world.

The heaven that is felt "on the pulse" is that of a pantheist. The old woman's realisation that Godhood would remain beyond reach is more strongly conveyed in North American Sequence: "Spiritual Marriage" with God or deification is an impossible ideal to attain for Roethke's protagonists. In this Roethke's meditations are different from those of the Seventeenth Century devotional poets. If the distinction is insisted upon at this stage it is because it is essential to an understanding of Roethke's meditations, Eliot's Four Quartets, and Whitman's...
"meditative" poem. However, there are at the same time significant differences which do not allow it to be called a strictly Christian meditation, the most important one being the "finality of man" and the nature of "Reality" it embodies. These differences can be more truly grasped by comparing Roethke's sequence with Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

**IV**

Critics of Eliot's poetry such as Helen Gardner and Cleanth Brooks have emphasized in Eliot's career his integrity as poet and the close link that exists between his early and later poetry. The same kind of poetic integrity and unity of purpose can also be discerned in Roethke's poetic growth. From the beginning, his poetry has concerned itself with the nature of the self, its relation with others and its final fate. This quest is conducted with the aid of mediators most appropriate to the particular phase of the growth of the self. In the early stage, it was the world of the greenhouses; in middle age, woman's love; and in its final phase, the world of nature and of poets. The purpose of *North American Sequence* is a variation on the theme of *Meditations of an Old Woman* viz. the search for pattern and meaning in the world of phenomena when one is nearing the end of life.

Roethke's imagination, when he came to write *Meditations of Old Woman* and *North American Sequence*, was stimulated by Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and he looked upon Eliot's poem as
Passage to India and Song of Myself. As one critic indicates the difference: "meditation is an attentive thought iterated, or voluntarily entertained in the mind, to excite the will to holy affections and resolutions." To Roethke, "holy affections" and "resolutions" do not come easy nor is the practical aspect of meditation of leading a good and devout life quite relevant to him. His meditative vein seeks empathy with things. It is more of an education of affections for the natural objects. His way is, therefore, of affective empathy. The usual kind of "meditative procedure" has little appeal for Roethke.

The "Far Field" (CP, p.199) records the moments of intuitive insights which reveal infinitude among finite things, and man as "the end of things, the final man". Roethke has come to love man and earth more than any promised fruits of heaven. Hence his pointed question in the last section:

What need for heaven, then,
With that man, and those roses?

(CP, p.205).

The point of all foregoing discussion is not to establish North American Sequence as a "meditative poem" of the kind composed by the devotional poets of the Seventeenth century in England. The attempt rather was to suggest that in his earnestness and obsessive passion for the Infinite, Roethke's sequence comes nearer to the "meditative" poem. Its structure also has some of the stages one finds in meditative exercises. Again, in its inspirational drive, the sequence may be considered a
a great challenge to his poetic talent. The last few lines from "East Coker" may, in fact, serve as an epigraph to Roethke's North American Sequence:

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion,
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters,
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my
my end is my beginning.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p.32)

In the first movement of his sequence, Roethke recalls Eliot's line:

Old men should be explorers?
I'll be an Indian.
Ogalala?
Iroquois.

(CP. p.189)

There are other echoes from Eliot's poem. Eliot's image of "the dark cold and the empty desolation" becomes in Roethke "a kingdom of stinks and sighs", and "the great trees no longer shimmer;/Not even the soot dances". (CP. p.187).

The *Four Quartets* provided thematic inspiration to Roethke who, like Eliot, wanted to find an approach to the meaning of the pattern of the past. Further there is the strong resemblance in the structural organization of the two poems. Both are guided in their structural patterning by the analogy from music. Eliot's remarks about the value of the "auditory imagination" are pertinent here: "... I believe that the
properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure. ... I know that a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realise itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring the idea and image; ... The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. 34 As a poet, Eliot was profoundly concerned with creating a rhythmical pattern that would embody his experience. There is an image in the first movement of "Burnt Norton" (Eliot, p.13) which acts as a pointer to the meaning of the whole poem:

Other echoes,
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner.

This is indirectly a hint about the technique of the Four Quartets. It is a kind of whispering gallery of echoes — echoes of the visionary gleam which eluded the poet, and memories of his struggle as a poet. We have to follow the "echoes" in order to experience and share his vision. The musical analogy also implies that the value of the poem lies not in its abstract meditations on time and eternity but in the fluid experience of actual living in the phenomenal world. It also suggests that the value of the sequence is enhanced by the organic unity of its various parts. As in a musical composition, the interrelated parts together convey the final total experience of the poem. This kind of musical
structure underlines the interrelatedness of the different parts of the poem as a whole. As Helen Gardner puts it, "The form is inspired by the Composer's power to explore and defines by continual departures from, and returns to, very simple thematic material. ... We could then say that the whole poem is about the four elements: air, earth, water and fire, whose mysterious union makes life, pointing out in each of the separate poems all four are present." 35 One is constantly reminded of recurring images, with slight variations. The title of Roethke's sequence does evoke an auditory image as Eliot's poem does, but he too has constructed the sequence on the principle of musical analogy, resting principally on the juxtaposition of statement, counter-statement and reconciliation of dissimilar notes. The first movement proposes the theme, the second movement sharpens the first by contrast, and the third movement creates concord by uniting the different notes. What he said about the The Lost Son sequence seems equally true about the North American Sequence. He advised his readers to "listen to them, for they are written to be heard, with the themes often coming alternately, as in music, and usually a partial resolution at the end." 36 He remarked that the poet writing without the support of a formal pattern "can vary his line length, modulate, he can stretch out the lines, he can shorten." 37 This remark and the whole essay from which it comes leaves no room to doubt about Roethke's interest in the "auditory imagination". There are many sections in the North American Sequence which illustrate this principle of varying length of lines and modulations in the basic rhythm. For instance,
In this hour,
In this first heaven of knowing,
The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit.
Acquires, for a time, the sand piper's
insouciance,
The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's
cunning—
I shift on my rock, and I think

( CP. p.191 )

By varying the length of lines Roethke creates the impression
of expanding horizons. When one thinks of the long lines from
North American Sequence, one also recalls the following lines:

And my father standing astride the cement benches,
Lifting me high over the four-foot stems,
the Mrs. Russels, and his own elaborate
hybrids,
And how those flowerheads seemed to flow
toward me, to beckon me, only a child,
out of myself.

( CP. p.203 )

His gift in manipulating the long line with several heavy
stresses reminds one of the Projectivist technique of composing poems by "the open-field" method. If he is adept at
expanding lines, he is equally so in introducing short lines
which control the expanding movements of lines and create a
sense of relief and resolution. After conveying to the
reader the bliss he experienced when he thought of the vast
greenhouses, his father and Mrs. Russels, he exclaims:

What need for heaven, then,
What that man, and those roses?

( CP. p.203 ).
This pithy rhetorical question expresses the deep sense of the narrator’s joy and ends the movement with a sense of finality.

Eliot names the major movements in *Four Quartets* after places that created echoes of the ancestral past in his mind. Roethke’s sequence takes as its theme the whole of the continent; it is his hero, and as has been maintained in this chapter, the journey out of the self would not be complete without its union with the landscape. In the *Four Quartets*, the places have importance not because of their physical or geographical distinctness but because of the experience each poetic movement embodies. Thus one can compare the description of the Tirebawasse in Roethke’s “Meditation of Oyster River” (CP, p.191) and Eliot’s description of the “brown god” in “The Dry Salvages”. (Eliot, p.35). The “brown god” is evoked as a symbol of his private sense of time. It has hardly a physical identity of its own. Roethke’s sequence is more deeply rooted in the corporeal reality of things. The rhetorical question, “What need for heaven, then, / With that man, and those roses?”, is a kind of rubuff to Eliot’s orthodoxy.

There are images which recur throughout the sequence as important notes in a musical composition. One such is of the quest, another is of the land, yet another of the water, and finally there is the image of the rose. These images also occur persistently in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. That Eliot’s poem would be concerned with the quest of the “rose-garden” is conveyed in the first verse-paragraph itself. It is, in fact,
a search for missed opportunities and experience, a quest for the lost vision, and the image of echoes reinforces that of the journey in the rose-garden. In "The Longing" (CP. p.187), Roethke proposes to himself the same kind of quest: it is "a dark dream" of "the rose (that) exceeds, the rose exceeds us all". Both these poetic sequences, then, concern themselves with the quest of the missed paradise. "The growth of the subject", comments Helen Gardner, "throughout the poem (Four Quartets) is a growth in the apprehension of its significance." 38 But there is a distinction between "the rose-garden" of Eliot and Roethke's vision of "roses, roses" in the large-greenhouses. Eliot's "rose-garden" is suffused with Biblical associations; it is difficult "to place it in time" and its value is emblematic. Though Roethke's greenhouses, "with the roses, roses", were his "heaven", he loved those roses not because of their representative power of mystic implications. "The rose-gardens" to Roethke were "a universe, several worlds, which, even as a child, one worried about;" 39 to Eliot, "the rose-garden" was a spiritual symbol.

The use of the journey in Roethke's "Journey to the Interior" (CP. p.193) and Eliot's "East Coker", could be similarly compared. It must be admitted that in the first movement of "East Coker", Eliot was not particularly interested in the creation of concepts, and that its beauty lies in the intimate recollections of the place. It is the movement which
renders the spirit of the place. The landscape of an isolated and sparsely populated village has its distinct particularities:

.... Now the light falls,
Across the open field; leaving the deep land
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
Where you lean against a bank while a van passes,
And the deep lane insists on the direction
Into the village, in the electric heat
Hypnotised.

( ELIOT, p.23 ).

Roethke renders the interior landscape of the region with its minute particularities in the second section of "Journey to the Interior". One remembers "its narrow road", "ditches", "a sharp turn to the left past a barn close to the roadside", and "a scurry of small dogs and a shriek of children." After reading Roethke's descriptions of the interior parts of the American continent, one feels, to borrow Eliot's line, "I can only say, there we have been." Now, Eliot's description of the "houses" rising and falling is delightful, but we know that this description exists to convey the cycle of decay and renewal in life.

Four Quartets and North American Sequence are religious poems but they are not religious poetry in the same sense of the term. Both Eliot and Roethke concerned themselves with "estimating, defining and recreating manifestations of the sacred." 40 They were concerned with creating the poetic symbols that could recreate for themselves "the manifestations of the sacred." The experience which Eliot's poem describes as part of the meaning of the "rose-garden" is sacred because
it is hierophantic. "Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests, shows itself, as something holy other than the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany." It is this hierophantic insight that constitutes the heart of religious experience in these poems.

Roethke's religious sense is of the kind we find in poets like Blake, Wordsworth, Yeats, Lawrence and Whitman whose motive-power is to re-define God's action in the world in such a way as to create a new sense of God and of man's relation with him. The second is that which runs through Smart, Hopkins, Eliot, the later Auden, and the earlier Robert Lowell, and of which the motive-power is, generally, to recreate God's action in the world in such a way as to reinforce a sense of its presence and urgency." The discipline of meditation aids the religious seeker in his path, though the modalities may sometimes differ. Eliot, as well as Roethke, is concerned with the question of temporal and eternal. As Eliot puts it,

... But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought: and action.
The hint half-guessed, the gift understood,
is Incarnation.

( Eliot p.44' )
This apprehension of "the timeless with time" is a preoccupation with both Eliot and Roethke. But where Eliot would reinforce his sense of God's "presence and urgency by prayer, observance, etc., discipline, thought and action," Roethke's "religious apprehensions are inseparable from poetry, or perhaps more accurately, for him religious apprehension, ... is implicit in the very poetic act. It is in those terms that he participates in the world and in language... he is not using poetry as a means of forming a personal religion of nature, but that he is, rather, extending and completing in language a contact with the world which is religious in its nature." 43 Now, it would not be true to say that for Eliot, despite his poetic integrity, the religious apprehension could not be attained except through the poetic act. The poetic act to him was not necessarily a mode of complete religious apprehension. So, he is obliged to urge the life of "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action". He depends on Incarnation, the manifestation of the greatest mystery.

Roethke's religious sense "re-defines God's action in the world in such a way as to create a quite new sense of God and of man's relation with him". The truth of this observation can be testified by section III of "The Longing" (CP. p.188):

I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the made lemmings,

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...

And the dark be forgotten.
One witnesses in such lines the very act of the creation of this world; one participates in it. God is not to be viewed as Divine Father governing and judging human beings; God invites man to participate in the act of creation. It may not be true to say that God created the world; the truth is that the world is being created every moment. Roethke's lines are born out of this different orientation towards creation, and his sense of the final mystery makes him a different kind of poet from Eliot. And it is Whitman who stands behind such poetry. As Buckley rightly comments:
"... it is precisely the hierophantic quality of things which Roethkey is trying to define by this method."  
Roethke's "rose" is a symbol of the hierophantic nature of the creation. He is a poet of the immanent God. A religious poet, Helen Gardner remarks, joyfully accepts his religious commitments and obligations of his revealed religion; his religion is given to him. Roethke is not a religious poet; in this sense; Eliot is. But Roethke would trust self-revelation and exclaim with Whitman:

What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine
and ours O Soul?

What dreams of the ideal? What plans of
purity, perfection, strength?

What cheerful willingness for other's
sake to give up all?

For other's sake to suffer all?

(Walt Whitman, p.327).

V

Distinguished critics like Louis L. Martz and Roy Harvey Pearce have noted that Four Quartets acted as a
"fertilising example" for Roethke while he was writing North American Sequence. This, however, is only a part of the truth. To see Eliot alone as a "fertilising" agent to Roethke in what is probably his most distinct and major poetic achievement is to refuse to see the whole truth. North American Sequence provides, in fact, an excellent example of how one poet, who recognises the contemporary poetic idiom of his period, "misreads" (in Harold Bloom's sense) another important contemporary poet. One might say, Roethke's sequence furnishes "the map of misreading" of Eliot's Four Quartets, and the way to do so seems to have been provided by Whitman.

The distinctiveness of North American Sequence, as was observed, lies in Roethke's success in merging the metaphors of the journey out of the self and that of the landscape. In Four Quartets, he found that both these metaphors operated, but the landscape that mattered more for the journey out of the self in Eliot was that of institutionalised Christianity. Roethke's landscape was to be the landscape of his birth-place and the adopted home on the Pacific coast. This journey from his home state of Michigan to the State of Washington was his "passage to India".

Roethke's sequence, like Whitman's Passage to India, is born out of the poet's passionate longing for the life of spirit and his profound discontent with "sensual emptiness."
The urge that impels Whitman to give a clarion call to his soul to set forth on a "Passage to more than India" is the same as Roethke's listlessness:

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like mere brutes?

(Whitman p.328)

Just as Whitman's "blood burns in" his veins to find an answer to "that said incessant refrain, wherefore unsatisfied soul? and whither O mocking life?" (Whitman, p.324), Roethke has suffered the fate of Adam and Eve who "appear wondering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations;/ With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts" (Whitman, p.324). Whitman's description of mankind's parents after the "Fall" assumes the archetypal image of the quest of the human soul and it sums up the compulsions of Roethke's quest as well. It is also Whitman, who to a large extent, provides the framework of the quest. The poet-voyager in "Passage to India" asks:

Who speak the secret of impassive earth?
Who bind it to us? What is this separate Nature so unnatural?
What is this earth to our affections(unloving) earth, without a throb to answer ours,

(Old earth, the place of graves).

(Whitman, p.324)

This is the sense of the earth as "the place of graves" which Roethke conveys when he says:
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castroeum of mink or weasels.

( CP. p.187 )

The destination the human spirit seeks is, in the words of Whitman, "primal thought,/Not lands and seas alone/, ...Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,/..."

( Whitman, p.326 ).

The metaphor of the "circumnavigation of the world" indicates the circular course of the "Passage to India" suggesting indirectly that there would be no separation between the sea and the land. The meeting between the two is very crucial for these poets. One may remember at this point that in Passage to India Whitman's heroes are Columbus and Vasco de Gama who return to land after "the knowledge gain'd, ...Lands found and nations born", (Whitman, p.323). Roethke's narrator also returns "where the fresh and salt waters meet,/
And the sea-winds move through the pine trees,/A country of boys and inlets, and small streams flowing sea-ward." (CP. p.196).

To Whitman and Roethke, the journey is not complete unless the two ends of horizons meet. The poet, perhaps more than the "captains, voyagers, explores, engineers and architects", will unite the separations and as a result of his efforts, "Nature and man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more". (Whitman, p.324). The fusion of the opposites or the merger of contraries, of land and sea, of nature and man, of the self and others, is what inspired both Whitman and Roethke.
In *Passage to India*, Whitman works through the juxtaposition of opposites. The new marvels of science are viewed in conjunction with the primitive fables of the old world, the physical world is contemplated in spiritual terms, the self is thought of in its cosmic potentialities, the engineer is placed by the side of the poet. It is through some kind of dialogue or dialectic that the harmony between the self and others is to be reached. Whitman undertakes and accomplishes this task by uniting the two planes, the physical and the spiritual, with considerable ease. He projects the poet as a more secure and enduring architect than the scientist. If scientists could conquer space and time, would the poet lag behind?

> How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how speak, if, out of myself, I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

(Whitman, p.327).

The goal proposed by the poet in *Passage to India* is a mystic union with God. Nonetheless one feels a sense of a certain strain in *Passage to India*, which is not there in *Song of Myself*. Despite his exhortation to his soul "to steer for the deep waters only" and his readiness to "risk the ship, ourselves and all", his voice seems to have lost the ring of confidence we hear in his early poem. It is a willed compulsion born out of the faith in the poet's destiny as "the true son of God" to reveal and interpret "the hidden prophetic intuitions". The glory of the soul is sung; its
marriage with God is not celebrated in *Passage to India*. The poet is a supplicant for it:

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Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee.
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(Whitman, p.327).

E. Fred Carlisle, pointing out "the radical difference" between *Song of Myself* and *Passage to India*, remarks: "Whitman does not identify personally with another in *Passage to India*. ... nor does he dramatize any personal, concrete experience other than his own imagined union with God (and even that is very abstract.)" Human relationship remained at the centre which inspires *Song of Myself; Passage to India* that celebrates "the marriage of continents, climates and oceans", is more of a private poem than *Song of Myself*. It is the soul's union with God that forms the prime concern of the poet in *Passage to India*. The new inventions of science are more like transcendental chains of communication rather than specific and concrete feats of technology.

Roethke's *North American Sequence* has a similar value and goal: a mystic union with God. But the two poems convey the impression that the ideal of spiritual marriage with God, of cosmic union, is a hard one to achieve. *Passage to India* is a quest for it, not a statement of mystic union. Roethke's poem also speaks of "the self (that) persists like a dying star" and many detours in the "long journey out of the self". Whitman's poem is more of a longing for mystic union with God, and the attributes of God mentioned make Him more of a Universal Presence,
acceptable to Christians and to non-Christian alike though He is spoken of as Elder Brother, instead of as Heavenly Father. Whitman's God is "transcendent, nameless, the mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving, the moral and spiritual fountain." The impression of God that emerges is that He is transcendent and boundless. Roethke's poem presents God more as an imminent presence than as a transcendent, nameless one. He is projected more as a personally felt presence in nature.

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,

( CP. p.205 ).

The experience here is of a deep personal communion with the cosmic spirit, more particularly with nature. Nowhere does he mention God as Whitman does in Passage to India. Roethke's experience of God may perhaps be indicated as the serenity of soul, "beyond becoming and perishing". John Wain remarks:

"Beatitude, in the Roethkean scheme, consists of nothing so tangible as a message; ... It means, rather a sense of union with a presence." 47 What Roethke seems to be doing is to bring down God into this world.

Yes, there are differences between North American Sequence and Passage to India. Roethke's sequence has an epical dimension whereas Whitman's Passage to India is more like an
ode. The self, in Roethke's poem, strives for transcendence, "to go beyond the moon" but the transcendence achieved is not only a movement away from but also a movement back to the point whence one starts. The rose, in North American Sequence, stands in the sun-parched grove, the self attains "true ease" in the midst of dead-trees. Passage to India is concerned with "the transcendent" God. Inspite of some dissimilarities between these two poems, a common theme links them: how to transcend the barriers of the self and attain harmony with the cosmic spirit. The main images employed by Whitman and Roethke are also very similar: both poems use the metaphor of voyage as a mode of existence, a process as a mode of reaching reality. The image of the continent in both poems embodies the final destination—a kind of heaven. And their God is not any particular Christian or other deity. What the two poems depict is the world of becoming. If in Passage to India Whitman explores "myths and fables of old", the dark unfathom'd retrospect as the past gives birth to the present, Roethke explores the past, but the retrospect brought forward in his sequence has over and above only a historical import, a private mythical character. When Whitman visualises the past, he notes "the streams of the Indus and the Ganges", the legends about Alexander, the wars of Tamerlane and of Aurungzebe. In his poem the historical sense exists even in its temporal dimension. In Roethke's poem on the other hand, the past is replete with Jungian memories:

Once I was something like this, mindless,
Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;
Or to sink down to the hips in a many quagmire,
Or with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log.

( CP. p.200).
In its most Whitmanesque passage, Roethke registers the American sounds and sights without mentioning any important national event. It is "the personal" in history that is of great significance to him.

I see in the advancing and retreating waters
The shape that came from my sleep, weeping
The eternal one, the child, the swaying vine branch,
The numinous ring around the opening flower,
The friend that runs before me on the windy headlands.

Whitman and Roethke dwell upon the immensity of the self. Roethke puts this epigrammatically.

A man faced with his own immensity
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.

( CP. p.201 ).

Whitman conveys this through the rhythm of his lines:

Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins.
Away O Soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
Out the hawser—hawl out—shake out every sail!

(Whitman, p.328)

It is this faith in the immensity of the self, the power to merge and identify with everything in the universe, the conviction that all finite things reveal infinitude, the metaphors of journey and the landscape, the expansive movements of the spirit, the sense of oneness with the transcendent and immanent spirit of the universe, the emphasis on the eternal-now, and the rhythmical movements controlled by the "breath unit" — all
these that Roethke shared with Whitman point to one central truth about his poetry, viz. that it continually looks towards Whitman, despite its echoes of Yeats and Eliot. The final perspective towards which he moves in *North American Sequence* is more like Whitman's, than Eliot's.

VI

In one of the important poems of *Mixed Sequence* (CP. p.219) Roethke invokes at the moment of crisis, Whitman as his poetic and spiritual light. He himself provides a cryptic poetic statement of his struggles in poems like "The Manifestation" (CP. p.235) and the "Tranced" (CP. p.237) that for the most part reiterate old concerns without adding anything new in technique or perspective. There are many analogies in "The Manifestation", which have appeared in one form or another in his earlier sequences, indicating the central drive of his self; For example.

```
the tree becoming
Green; a bird tipping the top most bough
A seed pushing itself beyond itself,
The mole making its way through darkest ground,
The worm, intrepid scholar of the soil —
Do these analogies perplex? ...
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This is a vision of the transcendent urge that Roethke observes as the very law of the self and nature. Here, in the words of Stanley Kunitz, is an important piece of news of the root, and it recalls Whitman's famous lines:
Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.

(Whitman, p.25).

The Protean self is represented by tree, bird, seed, mole and the worm. What is perhaps more interesting is that the vision of the evolutionary urge we find in "The Manifestation" is a re-statement of the central insight of Roethke in poems like "Cuttings (later)" and "River Incident." There is one important difference, however, the self's education has been complete and the experience of the exploration is assimilated. This wisdom which the self has acquired is the same as what Whitman proclaims:

What does what it should do needs nothing more.
The body moves, though slowly, toward desire.
We come to something without knowing why.

(CP. p.235)

These lines express the poet's faith in sheer being and in the order of things as they are. As Karl Malkoff explains, "Whatever takes its place in the natural order fulfils its being." This is an utterance of peace which "passeth understanding". Whitman also said in Section 50 of Song of Myself:

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

(Whitman, p.74).

"The Tranced" (CP. p.237) is another attempt at a resume of the poet's journey out of the self. His prime obsession is mentioned:
The edge of heaven was sharper than a sword;
Divinity itself malign, absurd;
Yet love-longing of a kind
Rose up within the mind
Rose up and fell like an erratic wind.

He has been a seeker after God: in "The Long Waters" (CP. p.196) he acknowledges his "foolishness with God" and "the old lady" of his sequence also pursues God. Again, the hunger for transcendence, — ascent on the scale of existence — is the overpowering aspiration. But to Roethke faith in God, what he called "the leap beyond", was an agonising experience. Though the experience of "divinity itself" was "absurd", the self was seized with another longing; "love-longing" for God, or may be, for a woman. The self did experience transcendence, reality was transformed for the time being:

Our eyes fixed on a point of light so fine
Subject and object sang and danced as one;
Slowly we moved between
The unseen and the seen,
Our bodies light, and lighted by the moon.

Since it was difficult for the self to achieve transcendence and establish harmony with "divinity", it mediated through a woman's body and experienced itself to be part of eternity. In "The Manifestation", nature acts as inspiration for transcendence to the self; in "The Tranced" it is the woman. For some reason, Roethke seems to have believed that woman who, for him, is an embodiment of the feminine principle, is closer to the mystery of nature and creation than man. Whitman in Section V of "Children of Adam", expresses a similar view of woman's function and place:
As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible
completeness, sanity, beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast,
the Female I see.

(Whitman, p.81).

If "The Manifestation" recapitulates the self's exploration
for transcendence in "The Greenhouse", "The Tranced" may be
said to be a recapitulation of Four for Sir John Davies.

The most striking poem in Mixed Sequence, however, is
"The Abyss" (CP. p.219), which is in violent contrast to
the final impression of "The Rose". Once again, the self's
obsession with "divinity" is seen here. It rehearses what
the self struggled to achieve in the earlier sequence and
expresses what it has accomplished so far. The self which
was more dramatically rendered in the earlier sequences is
in that more analytically presented. It deals with a crisis
situation — the self in the pit. This is "the dark night of
the soul" before the moment of final enlightenment. The first
section of the poem depicts the plight of the self in dramatic
terms:

Is the stair there?
Where is the stair?
"The stair's right there,
But it goes no where."

(CP. p.219).

The image of the "Stair", with its insistent repetition,
conveys the obsession of the self with ascent on the scale of
being, and the uncertainty it feels in its struggle for trans-
cendence. It renders the worst of subjective hell — a mode of
suspended existence with no promise of future and constant dread of the abyss just "a step down the stair". The situation is a familiar one in Roethke's poetry. It is a situation of "the lost son." The regressive movement of the self — one of Roethke's conspicuous characteristics — receives emphasis from the image that gives title to the poem. The quartrains of the two-beat lines seem to gather into themselves the dread of blankness below the stair and even beyond it.

In Section II the images of a caterpillar, a mole, a night fishing otter are pulled together; they remind us of the self's retreats in the earlier sequences, while the section presents the grimmest situation the self is exposed to:

I have taken, too often, the dangerous path,
The vague, and,
Neither in nor out of this life.

( CP. p.220 )

The condition of the self, as projected in these lines, is death-in-life and it is in the darkest moment of the self's plight that Roethke invokes the memory of Whitman.

Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues.

( CP. p.220 )

The trouble with the self is, it hankers after the objects of the world, even when it aspires and struggles for transcendence. Roethke fully understood the unique greatness of Whitman who could hold in balance the world of material objects and that of spiritual vision. It is this grace of Whitman he prays for. Whitman's catalogues are proof of his
immersion in the world of objects and Roethke is no less immersed in it than Whitman.

The first two sections of "The Abyss" present the dilemma of the self which is one of making a choice. The two ways open to it are of Christ, a way that negates the material world to reach God and of Whitman who accepts the world of God and of material objects with equal ease. The self in Roethke's poem finds the choice too difficult to make. Eliot could declare his faith and loyalty as in Ash-Wednesday. Though Roethke is not one of those who have declared themselves against "the dove", Eliot's way is not congenial to his temperament. He reacts to Eliot's religious way by alluding to one of the lines in "Burnt Norton".

... : human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

"Reality" in Eliot's poem alludes to the spiritual revelation in the rose-garden and Roethke, in his poem, seems to accept it. Man will be discontented with spirituality alone; he must come back to earth. For Roethke, the material world is as essential to his self as the world of the spirit. At the same time Whitman's way which is characterized as the way of "too close immediacy" is also too strenuous for him. This, then, is the crisis of choice between the Christian purgatorial and Whitman's way of afflatus and empathy. The purgatorial ascent is a dreadful experience but if the self could endure the ordeal,
The fire subsides into rings of water,
A sunlit silence.

( CP. p.221 ).

The experience embodied in these two is the one shared by the mystics: it is the moment of spiritual enlightenment followed by a profound serenity.

Section III is a more general statement of the purgatorial ascent and spiritual illumination. That it could not be Roethke's mode becomes apparent in Section IV. He could not dream of transcendence "beyond this life". In fact, his dilemma has been:

Can I outleap the sea --
The edge of all the land, the final sea?

( CP. p.221 )

His way would rather be the way of "the tendrils, their eyeless seeking". He is more irresistibly driven to the material and the natural world and the contraries are reconciled by not "knowing" but by "not-knowing". As Roethke puts it,

In this, my half-rest,
knowing slows for a moment,
And not-knowing enters, silent,
Bearing being itself,
And the fire dances
To the stream's
Flowing.

( CP. p.222 )

The "not-knowing" that gives poise to the "being" is the Whitmanesque mode of absorbing the reality.
Reckoning ahead O, Soul, when thou,  
the time achiev'd
The seas all cross'd, weather'd, the  
capes the voyage done,
Surrounded, copest, frontest God,  
Yieldest, the aim attain'd
As fill'd with friendship, love complete,  
the Elder Brother found,
The younger meets in foundness in his arm.  

( Whitman, p.327 ).

Whitman uses more familiar and personal terms like "the  
Elder Brother" and "the younger" for God and the soul;  
Roethke's language comes closer to the traditional expressions  
of mystic love but eventually it is Whitman's message of  
adoring life in all its manifestations and complete identi­  
fication with them that leads Roethke to make the final  
affirmation:

Being, not doing, is my first joy.

VII

In Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical ( CP. p. 239 )
Roethke has attempted to make a reckoning of his aims and  
struggles as poet and to impart a sense of design and unity  
to his work. Neither the themes nor poetic devices are new;  
we find the same old compulsions and pressures of his  
poetic inspiration. "I waited" ( CP. p.247 ) relates  
succinctly the stages of his poetic growth viz. the earlier  
period of incipience, and his nervousness and diffidence in  
getting out of the situation. As he puts it:
I waited for the wind to move the dust;  
But no wind came.  
I seemed to eat the air;  
The meadow insects made a level noise  
I rose, a heavy bulk, above the field.

The images of "the field", "hay", "pond" and "long ripples" recall the universe of the self in *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End* and the very idiom and rhythms of these lines remind us of his early poems as in the following lines which recapture the tone of *Praise to the End*.

I saw all things through water, magnified,  
The shimmering. The sun burned through a haze,  
And I became all that I looked upon.  
I dazzled in the dazzle of a stone.

( CP. p. 247 )

This was the phase when the self was struggling to establish contact with the external world. How to relate the self to reality? What happens to this self when one dies? — These are Roethke's habitual concerns. The uncertainty of the early phase gives way in old age to a different problem of death, which is expressed in the figures of the jackass and the lizard:

And then a jackass brayed. A lizard leaped my foot.  
Slowly I came back to the dusty road;  
And when I walked, my feet seemed deep in sand.

The second half of the poem again recalls the struggle of the self with death in *The Dying Man* and *Meditations of an Old Woman*. Roethke remembers:

I moved like some heat-weary animal  
I went, not looking back, I was afraid.
The fear of death drives him listlessly like an animal plagued by intolerable heat. Roethke's use of animal images to suggest death is also one of his recurring practices. In "The Abyss", he had pointed to a "caterpillar" crawling "down a string", "a mole winding through earth" and "a night fishing otter" as his symbols. The dread of death was dispelled when the self journeyed to a small plateau. A sense of security, freedom and place dawned on the self near "the bright sea", when "all the winds came towards me". The sea and wind act as liberating symbols.

"I waited" is a typical Roethkean poem which recapitulates the two basic movements of the self and the images embodying the movements in the earlier sections. In the first phase the incipience of the self was a problem; in the later stage, death was a threat to the self. These are the two central concerns of Roethke's poetry and the principal images of the "wind, the field, the sun, the sea" dominate the poems of the two phases. What is most relevant to our purpose is that each phase ends with echoes from Whitman. The lines "I became all that I looked upon" echoes Whitman's line from his "There was a child went forth". One may say Roethke reaches the point of affirmation through the Whitmanesque mode. "I waited" concludes with an image of "Below, the bright sea was, the level waves, /And all the winds came toward me. I was glad", which conjures up the situation in Whitman's Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. Whitman's memory brings peace and joy to Roethke and his aim has been to attain something of Whitman's spontaneity and
Roethke's title also suggests his attitude of expectancy, much in the way a meditator waits for the grace of God. That grace too is defined by Roethke in lines which echo Whitman. "The Motion" (CP. p.243) is about another important concern of the self: its preoccupation with "love". Opening with a statement of the difference between the soul and the body Roethke establishes in the poem the contrast between the "stretchings of the spirit" and the lust that keeps "the mind alive". Even physical passion, despite its torment, is welcome to him for it is a manifestation of energy, an anchor to face the world. As Roethke puts it,

I watch a river wind itself away;
To meet the world, I rise up in my mind.

Love gives courage and strength to the self to encounter reality. Physical love is the very basis of existence and also the path to a higher mode of life. It is a journey, "a faring-forth", leading to the understanding of the mystery of change and growth in life and of participation of "all creatures" in life: it is "this act of love/In which all creatures share, and thereby live". Roethke's love poems render the experience of love as a mode of full participation in the act of living and empathy with all forms of life.

Roethke's idea of love is a part of what Whitman conveys in his "Children of Adam." His poem implies what Whitman's poem states overtly that "The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred", and "she is in her place and moves
with perfect balance. Both the poems look upon love as universal instinct for procreation. Whitman declares that his poem signs "the song of procreation". What is common between these two poems is the faith that physical passion is the source of life, that woman knows and holds the secret of creation, that love alters the mode of existence. It enhances the vitality of soul.

That Roethke linked the motion of the soul with the fire of desire becomes more apparent in "The Sequel" (CP. p.241) which probes the outcome of "all wild longings of the insatiate blood", concerning "eternal things". The question that teases the self is: is it possible for the self to be both moth and flame? The explorations of the self have been full of contrary experiences, and the poem deals with the vulnerability of the self to the call of "eternal things". It can be regarded as a sequel to The Lost Son and Praise to the End sequences. The first stanza defines the quest of the self as a yearning of the moth for the flame.

Pure aimlessness pursued and yet pursued
And all wild longings of the insatiate blood
Brought me down to my knees. O who can be
Both moth and flame? The weak moth
blundering by.

The lines render accurately the pressures of the self and its tribulations depicted earlier in The Lost Son. There is a struggle for transmutation of the self which suffers many humiliating setbacks. The self strove to make a journey out towards union with "the others" but the anguish was mortifying.
The second stanza recalls the experience of the self described in "Sensibility! O La!" and in "O Lull Me! Lull me" of Praise to the End! The image which dominates here is that of the dance:

We danced, we danced, under a dancing moon,
And on the coming of the outrageous dawn,
We danced together, we danced on and on.

The experience refers to the awakening of sexual passion and the identification of the self with the "other". The lines, in particular, recall the central image of lovers dancing ecstatically in Four for Sir John Davies. The "She" referred may stand for "Nature"; it may also be the image of the beloved. Ralph J. Mills Jr. remarks: "This is a figure of more than one meaning: first, his guide, his Beatrice who appears frequently in the love poems and other earlier lyrics; second, the anima or soul, which is a female principle in the male." 49

The poem, however, is one of self-questioning. Its truth is not the ecstasy of dance but sober realisation:

I am a man, a man at intervals
Facing a room, a room with dead-white walls;

( CP. p.242 )

Decay and death await the self in this world of flux.

This relentless heart-searching we find in Roethke's "The Sequel" is not a recurring feature of Whitman's poetic self, not that doubts and afflictions did not trouble his soul. The most powerful expression of heart-searching in Whitman is "As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life".
Roethke wonders whether he deceived himself when he wrote eloquently about eternal things, so did Whitman. As he (i.e. Whitman) declares,

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open mouth.

(Whitman, p.204).

Roethke's "brought me down to my knees" recalls Whitman's "bent to the very earth". The mood of despair is the genesis of these two poems. Whitman seems to expand Roethke's "glib about eternal things" in

Aware now that amid all that blab whose echo recoil upon me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
But that before all my arrogant poems the real stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd.

Besides, Roethke's poem has images which reverberate with the echoes of Whitman's poem. Roethke's poem does describe a phase of the self when it could experience unity with all things around, expressed in the image of the dance. Whitman's poem too speaks of the time that stirred "the old thought of likenesses".

However, the self now presents a different panorama to Whitman and Roethke, Whitman laments,

As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me closer and closer,
I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift,

(Whitman, p.204)
The self perceived as "a trail of drift and debris", fills him with a sense of futility. Similarly in "The Sequel", Roethke conveys his sense of flux and vulnerability to the destruction of the self.

All waters waver, and all fires fail.
Leaves, leaves, lean forth and tell me what I am.

Change and destruction, and disintegration are the hard facts of existence which Whitman and Roethke insist the self must confront.

This confrontation with death and the anguish for transcendence are embodied in two of Roethke's more important poems of the last sequence, "In a Dark Time" (CP. p.239) and "Infirmity" (CP. p.244). While the self has realised that mortality is a part of temporal existence, it is not the end which it can easily accept.

I stare and stare into a deepening pool
And tell myself my image cannot die.
I love myself: that's my one constancy.
Oh, to be something else, yet still to be.

(CP. p.244).

"Infirmity" which has remained critically unnoticed explores the same mysteries as "In a Dark Time", the fate of the self and the nature of ultimate reality or God. It states Roethke's predicament and also indirectly the direction in which he was seeking its remedy. The malady that afflicts the self is the Narcissistic attachment to itself and its restlessness "to be something else". This is the centre of the conflict in
Roethke — "to be something else, yet still to be." The question is whether identification with the others destroys the identity of the self. The threat of the destruction acts as a fury in his poetry and this is one of his two major sources of poetic fire, another being his hunger for the eternal. In "The Marrow" (CP. p. 246) he has expressed this hunger for God — return to the Father in words that translate Christ's agony on the Cross:

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

Roethke invokes the memory of Christ who united in his life the mystery of mortality and its transcendence. Man is born to be crucified as Christ was, though the mode of crucifixion differs with the ages. Indirectly making a reference to his ailment, he says:

Today they drained the fluid from a knee, And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone, Thus I conform to my divinity By dying inward, like an aging tree.

(CP. p. 244).

Karl Malkoff observes: "He partakes in being and therefore possesses divinity; but at the same time, he is subject to decay and dissolution. This is precisely the mystery of the incarnation: the mortal Son and immortal father are one and the same person. And so, Roethke himself can be thought of as both father and son." 50 Christ suggests to him the paradox that submission to one's mortality is a way of affirming one's divinity and the secret of dying 'inward' to one's self, "like an aging tree". Christ's incarnation explains to him the mystery of
being "Son and father" of his only death. There is an implication that the human self partakes of God and yet being human, is subject to death. Man begets his death. Roethke's language here is filled with Christian echoes but a similar idea was expressed earlier in the lines:

I bare a wound, and dare myself to bleed.

... ...

By dying daily, I have come to be
and "I shall undo all dying by my death."

(CP. p. 155)

The lesson of dying inwards like an ageing tree opens his "deep eyes"; consequently,

Light on its rounds, a pure extreme of light
Breaks on me as my meager flesh breaks down-
The soul delights in that extremity.

As he indicates, the self has moved from "dark to light". Throughout the poem, the image of the Christian seeker is presented in a language that has also Biblical reverberations, and the poem becomes a seeker's meditation. But what does the revelation of the meditator reveal to him? One of Roethke's firm convictions seems to be that the eternal expresses itself in man. As he says, "The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal." (CP. p. 214). Roethke's vision places man at the centre of life. The saints whose carols fill his heart with joy are the birds:

Deep in the greens of summer sing the lives
I've come to love. ...

(CP. p. 244)
The revelation has also solved his dilemma of maintaining his own identity and yet merging it with God.

My soul is still my soul, and still the son,
And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

He came to see that the surrender of the self was not necessary to seek identification with God. "The mystic experience... is now used as a means of understanding the final death of the self, the last merging of one with God", observes Malkoff.51

"Infirmit" is a carefully worked out poem that has close affinity with the tradition of metaphysical poetry. Its theme is the transcendence of the self and its merger with God. It explores the real nature of "I". Moreover, the use of paradox as a structural principle sharpens the edge of the conflict between the "eternal" and the "temporal". The image of "an aging tree" as a symbol of "inward dying" which "conforms to divinity" illustrates the point that the paradox is used not only as part of the poetic technique but also as a way of envisioning the ultimate reality. The most precious gift to be acquired through meditation is "teaching eyes to hear", "ears to see". This is not merely an act of synesthesia; the aesthetic and mystic perceptions fuse into one. Another conceit that strikes a note of modernity is blood transfusion which is, by implication, a form of sacramental communion modern men participate in:

Today they drained the fluid from a knee
And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone.
The poem is in many ways a modernist poem, working out the tension between opposites in terms of paradox as a way of vision and a structural principle. The tension is presented in images which bring to mind the later Yeats. The conflict, in Yeats's "Among School Children", as in Roethke's poem, is between the eternal and the temporal. Yeats is examining the emergence of reality in a multiplicity of processes, the poem being the instrument of a spiritual quest.52 This remark of Parkinson about Yeats's poem goes to the heart of Roethke's poem because it also explores "a ghostly paradigm of things." Yeats calls in question "the bleary-eyed wisdom" of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras; Roethke remarks that "a mind too active is no mind at all." Both poets present the tree as a symbol of eternal and temporal. Yeats poses the questions whereas Roethke makes more emphatic affirmations. Yeats's questions, however, carry the implications that the eternal cannot exist apart from the temporal, affirming the organic unity of life. In fact Roethke's way of reaching the final spiritual revelation and Yeats's way are not different. Both value intuitive insight as a mode of spiritual knowledge. Like Yeats, Roethke could come to affirmation after terrible mental anguish; their natures exposed them to the pulls of contraries of life. But Roethke is less fascinated by the abstract and the metaphysical than Yeats. He affirms the physical as Yeats did.

In the final affirmation, however, he reaches out through Yeats once again to Whitman. The concluding stanza of "Infirmitv" works out the resolution of the conflict in Whitmanesque terms, stating the conflict in Yeatsian language:
Things without hands take hands:
there is no choice,—
Eternity's not easily come by.
When opposities come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
How body from spirit slowly does unwind
Until we are pure spirit at the end.

The second line, "Eternity's not easily come by", expresses the plight of the self in both Yeats and Roethke. The call of the eternal is irresistible to both and the struggle to reach it is equally acute. It is Whitman that beckons Roethke when he says:

When opposites come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see.

Yeats also refers to "two natures blent... into the yolk and white of the one shell." Through Yeats, Roethke learns to affirm the organic unity of the temporal and the eternal and looks towards the finality of Whitman's vision.

Deep in the greens of summer sing the line
I've come to love. A vireo whets its bill.
The great day balances upon the leaves;
My ears still hear the bird when all is still;

Roethke captures in these lines the very spirit of Whitman's vision: the perception of "ease" of things leading to the "ease of the self"; the marriage of heaven and earth. The dialectic of the self disappears and the felicity and spontaneity of soul we find in Whitman is attained.

"In a Dark Time" (CP. p.239), which opens the Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical, is, as John Crowe Ransom remarks, "a recapitulation of the old compulsion upon the poet's mind to exceed its finite bounds," a reckoning of the self with
God. Roethke himself stated the theme and nature of the poem when he remarked that "it is part of a hunt, a drive toward God, and effort to break through the barrier of rational experience." In "The Marrow" (CP. p.246), he utters the same anguished cry: "Godhead above my God, are you still there?" This "foolishness with God" is perhaps his greatest obsession and he has his way of defining obsession:

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance?

This form of madeness which manifests the magnanimity and magnificence of the human spirit is "the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality." By implication, then madness of some sort is necessary for the full realisation of soul's potentialities. "Madness", as noted by R.D. Laing, "need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough" Madness can be a desperate disguise for transcendental experience. This nobility of soul which would "exceed its finite bounds", is the keynote of Roethke's poetry, more particularly his later poetry.

"In a Dark Time" records the memory of fierce struggle for such mental breakthrough to reach an understanding of the self. The question "Which I is I?" is the central dilemma that Roethke explores in this lyric which adumbrates "the sense of a hovering double" from the very first line.
This concern with the self becomes for him the well-spring of his creative identity as man and "the very selfhood of the imagination" seems to hold for him the secret of his real identity. He enacts the drama of "hovering Double", of his poetic identity and spiritual identity in this powerful poem. The three aspects of identity, psychological, poetic and spiritual, are explored simultaneously with remarkable poetic control and harmony, and "if these fiercely won controls were to break down at any time, the whole poem would collapse in a cry, a tremendous outpouring of wordless agitation." 58

The opening line establishes the dialectic of the twofold structure of the poem: the verbal and experiential. "In a dark time, the eye begins to see". The oracular statement presents the situation of the self in oxymoronic terms: the moment of despair is a moment of initiation into insight. The language is as cryptic and sharp-pointed as the experience is mystical, and the multiple echoes begin to reverberate. The moment of breakdown — of the disintegration of the self — marks the beginning of healing. It is only the "lost son" who returns to his "Father". For him, as for Jung and St. John of the Cross, one must immerse oneself in the depths to attain the heights. In Chapter IV of The Ascent to Mount Carmel by St. John of the Cross, we read: "On this spiritual road, where the soul has entered into darkness and has become blind in all its natural lights, it will learn to see supernaturally," 59 and the outcome of this dark night of the soul is this spiritual
awakening. "Sometimes the soul is filled with light in the midst of all this darkness and then truly the light shines in the darkness" 60 Roethke at once places his personal quest in the context of the spiritual and poetic tradition, by indirectly aligning himself to St. John of the Cross who was a great poet himself in addition to being a mystic. But "the dark time", in his poem evokes many associations. It recalls the period of mental breakdown he had suffered, the fear of death overwhelming him in his old age, and the spiritual night he passed through in his struggle for enlightenment. Using a pun on "the eye" and "I" he conveys the position of the self which is yet torn between two extremes and the strife is not yet over. As Roethke explains, "I vacillate between identities." 61 He is torn between the life of a "heron" and that of a "wren", the existence marked by "purity, wisdom, and toughness" and weakness and meekness of a wren. The irony is wielded with superb tact; the vision "the eye sees" is one of the abyss, not of liberation. The stanza represents the 'crisis' situation of the self in the manner of "the dark night of the soul", raising expectations of hope, faith and light but presenting more of darkness. The self has suffered diminution; instead of being a master of nature, it cries to a tree, as a beaten, unhappy child cries to the mother for succour. The image of tree is significantly used. In "Infirmity" (CP. p.244) the image of "an aging tree" is employed to signify "inward dying"; here also the self weeps to a tree. The tree here as in "Infirmity", is a symbol of "inward dying", life that nourishes death in itself. At the same time it is a symbol of persistence of life in the midst of disintegration. Perhaps, for double
significance, the tree is a recurring symbol in his poetry. "Shadow", "Shade", "Wood", "tree", "heron", "wren", "hill", "den" create a cluster of images conveying the Adamic situation of the self lost in a night wood.

The first stanza for its tautness, rhetorical dialectic and rhythmic beat reminds one of Yeats but there are other echoes also. The "dark night of the soul" has driven Roethke to adopt the attitude enjoined by Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle in that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Roethke's stanza opening with echoes of St. John of the cross, moves into a direction that can hardly be described as Christian.

The second stanza is a variation on the theme of the precarious situation of the self whose ontological foundations are shaken. The rage against the threat of destruction is "the nobility of soul." Once again, the language vibrates with memories of religious quest and images from contemporary poets. The self has faced the worst of times and experienced "the purity of purest despair." Images like "the day's one fire", "shadow pinned against a sweating wall" fill one's mind with pictures traditionally associated with Hell. Roethke imagines the self condemned to the flames of Hell and it is here that the self has experienced the "purity of despair", Dante's image of the condemned souls also comes to mind. Roethke tells us that in this particular stanza he was calling
Yeats to his aid. Perhaps the image from "Byzantium" is alluded to in his stanza.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;

The latter part of the stanza presents the purgatorial situation. It is the border line existence of the self that is worse than hell.

That place among the rocks—is it a cave
Or winding path? The edge is what I have

"cave" and "winding path" are traditional images of the pit of hell and the winding staircase of the purgatory. "The edge is what I have" and "my shadow is pinned against a sweating wall", points to another important figure behind images, that of Eliot's Prufrock.

Roethke claimed that the poem was "dictated" to him, "something given, scarcely mine at all. For about three days before its writing I felt disembodied, out of time; then the poem virtually wrote itself, on a day in summer 1958". 62

We may not question the authenticity of this report but one feels that the "oracular abstractions" in the second stanza militate against the images in the first stanza and even in the second. The statements weaken the impact of the tension he has built up in the poem so far and read like explicatory aids to the crisis he wished to represent. The opening statement of the first stanza and the images that enclose it have
worked up the tension through the ironic framework. The reader has come to feel and realise the self's position on the edge in the first stanza itself. The first line of the second stanza, inspite of its epigrammatic thrust, strikes as an oratorical gesture, a rhetorical indulgence.

The third stanza introduces us to the world of correspondences. This is not a new world to the poet for the images of "shadow", the "deepening shade", and the "echoing wood" of the first stanza have already evoked the suggestions of corresponding reality. The problem the self at this stage faces, is that of distinguishing the real from the false. "A steady storm of correspondences" is in all probability a reference to the famous line of Yeats:

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.

Dante and Plato come together in the following image that embodies the theme of purgation.

All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

The self has to pass through purgatory in order to penetrate through the world of "correspondences." Roethke's line has several echoes from Plato's image of the shadows in the caves, Dante's 'purgatory' fires, Baudelaire's correspondences and even Whitman's "eidolons." However, the context of the stanza emphasises the 'purgatory' fires of the dark night of the soul. One notices again that the image of the purgatorial process in "All natural shapes blazing unnatural light" evokes an
ambivalent response. The moment of revelation is filled with dread. The abstract statements and the images occur alternately in the stanza and at one place, the theme of the poem is overtly stated: "A man goes far to find out what he is" — "Death of the self".

After the ritualistic fires of purgatory, Roethke still continues to liken his soul to "some heat-maddened summer fly, buzzing at the sill". The image communicates the hysterically agitated self, which is yet uncertain of its true identity, and carries the hint that the soul is not completely purified. The question persists: "Which I is I?" So, the poet, summoning his courage, climbs the purgatorial staircase. He, however, finds that "dark, dark his light is, and darker" his desire. Malkoff's comment is helpful here: "The 'light' is dark because it exceeds the intellect; desire is dark because the soul feels unworthy and impure. These are the two senses of St. John's 'dark night of the soul'." 63 While the first three stanzas explore the plight of the self "in a dark time", the last stanza depicts the self in action. It reaches out for the "winding path" and climbs the purgatorial staircase "out of my fear". "A fallen man, I climb out of my fear", is ambiguous. Throughout the earlier stanzas, the self has been spoken of in images of the animal world, "the heron and the wren", "the beasts of the hill" and "serpents of the den". This is the self in its "fallen" state, even from its evolutionary stage. The world "fallen" can be construed in its theological sense, meaning the self that has lost divine grace. Similarly, "out of my fear" has also a two-fold implication. The self is between
the Scylla and Charybids — a cave beneath and a winding staircase. It is this dread of condemnation that forces the self to climb higher, or there is probably an insight the self has gained and cast off its fear that it climbs "the winding path" fearlessly. In "The Abyss" (CP. p.221), Roethke says:

Yet if we wait, unafraid, beyond the fearful instant,  
The burning lake turns into a forest pool,

The moment is one where fear is conquered and the ascent undertaken by the self. The discovery the ascent brings to the self, is the joy of infused contemplation — God penetrates the mind which is absorbed in intense meditation. The self experiences cosmic union and liberation even in the midst of all "the slings and arrows of the outrageous fortune"; it comes to realise "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form."

Is mystic experience or union, one may ask, with God the ultimate and highest end in itself to Roethke? In his comments on the poem, he explains: "In the Platonic sense, the one becomes the many, in this moment. But also — and this is what terrified me — the one not merely makes his peace with God. He — if we read one as the Godhead theologically placed above God — transcends God: he becomes the Godhead itself, not only the veritable creator of the universe but the creator of the revealed God. This is no jump for the timid, no flick from the occult, no moment in the rose-garden. Instead it is a cry from the mire, and may be the devil's own." Roethke's remark stresses two points, the highest transformation of
the self as a result of mystic union, but it is "the rose in the sea-wind" implying that the ecstasy of divine union was won in the strife-torn world itself. Indirectly, it asserts that "now it is he who has found God, he who has redeemed Him, and made manifest His freedom in that tearing wind." The union with God, to Roethke, is a negation of the self; it is a transmutation of the self in the world itself. His experience clothed in the language of traditional mysticism is "no flick from the occult." What he perhaps implied was that the material reality itself was transformed by the mystical experience and what was "rent" is made into a whole. There is a whole hearted affirmation of cosmic harmony reached through the transcendent self.

"In a Dark Time" represents the drama of the "dark night of the soul." The major part of the poem depicts the self in its tragic predicament -- "the edge is what I have" -- and ends with a note of affirmation of oneness of the selfhood with Godhead. The Yeatsian rhythmical cadence, end-stopped lines, antithetically balanced pithy statements, the almost monosyllabic vocabulary expresses the anguish of the tragic conflict in a well-wrought pattern. But Roethke reaches through Yeats the affirmative position of Whitman. The last two lines of the poem:

The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

reverberate with Whitmanesque echoes. It was Whitman who had said, "No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death," (Whitman, p.73) and "Me imperturbe,"
standing at ease in Nature, / Master of all or Mistress of all,
aplomb in the midst of irrational things" (Whitman, p.10).
He did not present the dialectic between the self and "others" as frequently as Roethke but his premises serve as a destination for the later poet. He struggled for the lucidity of the soul that Whitman claimed for his own. In the last lines of "In a Dark Time" Roethke seems to imply what Whitman declared so confidently:

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.
Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

(Whitman, p.26)

Roethke moves towards this vision of Whitman, however difficult it was for him. He indicates his poetic kinship with Whitman in more than one ways but the most important of these is the way in which he came to achieve the integrity of the self and the cosmic soul.

The lyric, "The Restored" (CP. p.249) may be looked upon as a sequel to "In a Dark Time". If "the winding path" and the "cave" were the images of purgatorial ascent in that poem, "the bowl" and "dance" are images of disgrace and cosmic harmony in "The Restored". No one was more aware than Roethke of what ailed his soul. It was like a wounded bird.

'I'm maimed; I can't fly;
I'm like to die',
Cried the soul
From my hand like a bowl.
This is the wound that was represented in *The Lost Son* and his other sequences; his poetry is a quest for divine grace. The cause of the wound is a failure of reason as a result of private suffering. But this collapse is a blessing in disguise. It opens a new direction of knowledge.

When I raged, when I wailed,  
And my reason failed,  
That delicate thing  
Grew back a new wing,  
And danced, at high noon,  
On a hot, dusty stone,  
In the still point of light  
Of my last midnight.

The intuitive insight reveals a vision of cosmic harmony expressed in the image of dance here. Roethke was anxious to break through the barrier of rational experience. In this poem, paradoxically, it is the rational breakdown that restores the soul to "the still point of light." Both Whitman and Roethke share a faith in the redemptive power of intuitive insight, and the poem holds it as a key to spiritual illumination.

This Whitmanesque movement is reiterated in many poems like "The Tree, Tree, The Bird" (CP. p.248) and "Once More, the Round" (CP. p.251). The latter ends on a note that proclaims and affirms Whitman.

And everything comes to One,  
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.

The final vision of mystic transport is expressed in the image of dance. There is a realisation that it was no longer necessary "to probe the mystery". In "Right Thing", Roethke
has attained the Whitmanesque position. It translates the vision without the dialectic we are used to in Roethke's poetry. Whitman declared in Section III of *Song of Myself*:

> I have heard what the talkers were talking, 
> the talk of the beginning and the end, 
> But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

(Whitman, p.25)

The opening stanza of "The Right Thing" embodies the spirit of Whitman's lines:

> Let others probe the mystery if they can. 
> Time-harried prisoners of Shall and Will 
> The right thing happens to the right man.

This sense of the right thing having happened to him and being an heir to the joy of living links Roethke with Whitman.

2. Ibid., p.152.


10. Ibid., p.197.


17. Ibid., p.182.
27. Ibid., p.304.
28. The themes mentioned here are listed by Roethke in his essay "On 'Identity'" included in On the Poet and his Craft.
30. Ibid., 415.
31. Ibid., 333.
32. Ibid., 336.
37. Ibid., p.82.


41. Quoted by Vincet Buckley, Ibid., p.13.


43. Ibid., p.18.

44. Ibid., p.51.


51. Ibid., p.214.


54. Ibid., p.749.


56. Ibid., p.110.

57. Ibid., p.112.


59. Ibid., 203.
61. Ibid., p. 50.