CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

This study began with the recognition of the problem which the reader of Roethke's poetry has to face in coming to terms with it. This for him, as well as for the poet himself, was the problem of exploring and finding his poetic affiliations. The way Roethke goes about it, the quest of the poet becomes that of his reader too. The reader finds that he has been accepted as a companion by the poet, and the act of reading the poetry invites him to participate in the act of the mind to discover what will suffice. A striking characteristic of Roethke, it may be noted, is that he has to discover the premises of his poetic birth and growth. They are there, but they have not been given to him. In the case of W.B. Yeats, the loss of his inherited faith destroyed by the science of Huxley and Tindale, and the aesthetic cult of the "decadents" were the premises of his poetic beginnings and growth; for T.S. Eliot, the wasteland of the post World War I acted as a catalytic agent for poetic beginnings. Roethke's early poetry (comprising the first volume Open House (1941) and "the glass-house" poems) undertakes the reckonings and appraisals of his roots. There is an "open-house" quality, a tentative way of approaching things, that emerges as the characteristic of his quest.
The nature of the quest and its principal terms are embodied in a Bergsonian image of a "resurrection of dry sticks" that "wrestle... to a new life" (CP. p. 37). This fierce strife for "a new life", a rejuvenation of the self, represents one axis of the quest that may be described as the poet's stretching towards heaven. Another equally important axis is "this ancient feud" so that

..... The spirit starves
Until the dead have been subdued.

(CP. p. 4).

The terms of the dialectics of the quest have been defined by him: the past as an image of controlling destiny and a "resurrection of dry sticks" as an image of the spirit's urge for ascent. The burden of the past, and not "the anxiety of influence", "rages like the dog-star." 1 The crucial question is raised by Harold Bloom: "In becoming a poet, is one joining oneself to a company of others or truly becoming a solitary and single one?" 2 Roethke seems to have explored this in his poetry, and it is the form of his poems — "the echoing voices" of many poets, dead and living — that is a testimony to his engagement with his literary past. Naturally enough, he began with well-made lyrics that embodied his personal emotions and remind one of "crisis lyrics". Perhaps he was doomed to "becoming a solitary-and single one", but his prayer had always been for deliverance "from all/Activity centripetal" (CP. p. 24).

So, the twin aspects of the search for the roots of his identity, the biological and literary, are two sides of the same concern.
As Jenijoy La Belle points out, "Roethke's roses come from many 'floral establishments' besides that of his father: there are also Dante, Blake, and Yeats." \(^3\) The list of his indebtedness to other poets is indeed long. He imitated the distinctive practices of poets because, in all probability, he was uncertain of his moorings. This might also explain why there is a certain tentativeness in Roethke's approach to life.

In his formative years, he came to think that he was a lost son, and the journey out of the self became one of the compulsions of his poetic occupation. There is in the early poems a painful awareness of being alienated from the biological and poetic roots. This sense of double alienation is often expressed with stoic endurance:

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Compression cannot break
A centre so congealed;
The tool can chip no flake:
The core lies sealed.

( CP. p.9 ).
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If these lines express Roethke's struggle to discover his true identity, they also embody his wrestling with the poetic tradition he was working in. There are clearly two quests - one, an answer to the question "who or what am I?" - and the other, the search for his poetic lineage. And he has a conviction the two are one and the same. Before he looked to Dante, Blake and Yeats, he naturally wrote in the poetic vogue that was prevalent then, characterised by the poetic practice of the Imagists, and of the school of Eliot.
The nature of Roethke's quest becomes clear to him with The Lost Son, where his effort was to seek a mode of transcendence, to experience a sense of oneness with his surroundings. He had already felt and conveyed his uneasiness in the brief, compact lyrics that he could write with remarkable success, but a sense of release could be attained, he felt, in a poetic sequence or a series of short lyrics in a setting of psychological drama. Thematically, The Lost Son deals with Roethke's anguish born out of his sense of being deprived of security and safety in the mother's womb, of his close physical and psychological union with his mother. If birth is a terrible experience of alienation and isolation, growth, both as individual and as poet, was a quest for home, a resting place. In The Lost Son sequence, he explored his childhood world of glasshouses evoking the Jungian memories and the pantheistic bond with nature.

The protagonist of The Lost Son sequence, the "I" of the poem, represents for Roethke "the objective-correlative" for the human situation, "the hunted and harried" man. The sequence poem as a literary form and the use of persona gained in popularity after Pound and Eliot, and Roethke used them as a response to the poetic modes of his times. The terse lyrics expressed his sense of self-imprisonment; the poetic sequence which was a cluster of "greater lyrics" (M.H.Abrams) afforded a larger canvas for presenting, almost in dramatic terms, the conflict of his self between "me and not-me". Eliot's practice of this form in The Waste Land provided a
valuable model to Roethke. The Lost Son, in fact, may be looked upon as Roethke's The Waste Land, for there are a number of rhythmic echoes and correspondences of images from Eliot's poem. Whatever may have been the nature of his engagement with the Eliot tradition — and this was undoubtedly a long and sustained one — The Lost Son revealed that "his metaphysical mode of that time was superimposed upon a deeper allegiance." In his poem, "The Adamant" (CP. p. 9) he had complained that the "tool can chip no flake", which is like a vivid image of the inadequacy of the metaphysical mode for his purposes. He would move to "loose and open rhythms" to see whether they could generate any sense of release and expansion for his self. Roethke had observed that "in this kind of poem, the poet should not 'comment', or use many judgment words: instead he should render the experience, however condensed or elliptical that experience may be." In his view, his sequence is more dramatic than Eliot's. From the very beginning, Roethke's poetic relationship with Eliot is, to use Harold Bloom's word, "antithetical", deliberately combative. Eliot's poetic practice serves as a source of dialectics to him, representing for him the "Not-me". Eliot's poem, to adapt some words from Wallace Stevens, "has not always had to find: the scene was set; it repeated what/ was in the script... Its past was a souvenir./ It has... to learn the speech of the place. It has to face the men of the time and to meet/ The women of the time." Roethke's "The Lost Son" is not in a happier situation, but the protagonist catches a few glimpses of light.
To quote, once again, the lines from "The Shape of Fire" (CP. p.67):

To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing,
As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quiet pouring,
Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,
Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.

Roethke's protagonist, during the course of his quest, learns that "going is knowing" (CP. p.99).

Stevens' comment "the scene was set; it repeated what/was in the script... Its past was a souvenir" describes quite fairly Eliot's method in The Waste Land, particularly his allusive technique and the use of the past in the poem. Of course, Eliot wanted to convey an ironic contrast between a splendid past and a sordid present by his technique. But Roethke's use of the past is different. Eliot, in The Waste Land, looks towards the past as if it were some kind of a lost heaven; his interest in it is chiefly historical. This is why he went to anthropology. What we miss in Eliot's poem is the exploration of the past and the personal involvement of the protagonist in this past as we have it in Roethke's sequence. In The Lost Son, it is not merely "a souvenir". Secondly, The Waste Land opens with a presentation of the cycles of decay and rejuvenation in nature but they do not form an essential part in the awakening of moral or religious experience. Instead, Eliot turns to the Buddhist and Christian scriptures. "Roethke's metaphors continue to be based upon natural occurrences, rather than on the mystical transcendence of the natural", remarks Jenijoy La Belle. At this point,
the ways of Eliot and Roethke part. His book of Revelation is nature. In The Lost Son he initiated a dialogue with one of the great modernist masters. The light that comes to save his protagonist comes from underground and returns there:

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

(CP. p.58).

He learned to mould his structure of verse such that it could articulate and embody the characteristics of the primordial experience, "collective" subterranean consciousness. He was bold enough, "in the context of modernist verse, ... to dare the heresy of the pathetic fallacy and that of imitative form." 8 The distinction between these two poems is the distinction in two types of poetic sensibility: one (Eliot's) is self-limiting, while the other (Roethke's) is self-creating.

Roethke did not find the "mythic mode" of Eliot in The Waste Land congenial to his genius and was gradually moving towards "the Adamic mode." Eliot's mode might convey the impression of man not as the creator of his world but as its creature. In the quest of "deeper allegiance" between the self and reality, Roethke realised that his relation to Eliot marked "an impasse, or crossroads in the continuity of American poetry." 9 The crisis was both personal and poetic: on the personal level, he had to seek and discover ways of making peace with his past, his parents and the world of glasshouses;
as poet, he had to search for a mode that aligned him with the continuity of the American poetic tradition. In *The Lost Son*, he presented nature as a living spirit exercising invisible influence on the human spirit, and the quest of the self would be in terms of its relationship with nature. He looked to such poets as Wordsworth, Blake and Whitman for the secret of this oneness with nature. His spiritual kinship with them or his reaching out toward them is indicated even in the titles of some of his poems: e.g. "Praise to the End," "Bring the day," "I need, I need," and "I cry, love! Love!"

The sequence *Praise to the End* (CP. p.71) projects the growth of the poet's mind, which is the subject of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. And even though "Once more, the round" (CP. p.251) is a homage to Blake, the dance of cosmic unity and harmony it celebrates in the presence of nature makes him one of the visionary company of Wordsworth, Blake and Whitman. He sings:

Now I adore my life,
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the Fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for love's sake.

This is alien to the spirit of Eliot and is not merely an instance of pathetic fallacy. It expresses Roethke's sense of reverence for all forms of life and his full participation in the ecstasy of the cosmic dance. "The imitative form", the heresy of Roethke referred to by Harvey Pearce in his remark, is not merely a question of the formal structure of a poem: it is, in the words of Whitman, an attempt "to speak in
literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the 
movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the senti-
ment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside." 10
Whitman, of course, is paraphrasing Coleridge who had said:
"Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in divers 
powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms; — each exterior 
is the physiognomy of the being within — its true image 
reflected and thrown out from the concave mirror; — and even 
such is the appropriate excellence of her chosen poet." 10A
The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a 
pre-determined form. Whitman began not with a preconceived 
rhythmical and linguistic pattern but with an indefinite 
striving to discover a form in the process of expressing 
himself. In the view of nature we have in The Lost Son, 
Meditations of an old Woman, and North American Sequence, 
Roethke adopted Whitman's Adamic mode. What seems at first, 
in his poetry, an exploration of nature is actually a process 
in which the known world comes into being.

Like Whitman, Roethke came to regard nature not only 
as an emblem of spiritual reality but also as an embodiment 
of the feminine principle in the universe. She represents the 
creative urge of the life-spirit, and this is one of the 
reasons for the sexual images frequently found in his descrip-
tions of nature. In the lovely lyric "The Visitant" (CP.p.100), 
we have:
Slow, slow as a fish she came,  
Slow as a fish coming forward,  
Swaying in a long wave;  
Her skirts not touching a leaf,  
Her white arms reaching towards me.

The image here might be said to represent the feminine principle of nature (embodied in the figure of a woman) inviting the self for creative union. "The woman," he says in another poem, "wakes the ends of life." (CP. p.125).

This representation of nature as an erotic principle is explored by Roethke in *Four for Sir John Davies* and *Love Poems*. In the former group she is presented as a herald of nature initiating the speaker into cosmic harmony through physical union. The protagonist wonders whether his partner in dance was a "sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore," and declares: "she was the wind when wind was in my way" (CP. p.107). It was only when she "did something else" to him that they could undo "chaos to a curious sound." Roethke has worked in nature as a symbol of eros in his sequence, and it is she who initiates him into the mystery of creation through sex.

Besides a "female" partner, Roethke had accepted another partner in his dance: W.B. Yeats. The struggle for maturity in life finds its corresponding manifestation in his struggle for achieving maturity in poetic technique. His poetic kinship with Yeats was more than a literary bond that transcended stylistic similarities. Yeats, for the period during which Roethke was writing this sequence, was the symbol of Dionysian ecstasy, "this animal remembering to be gay." (CP. p.105). It
was again Yeats who had celebrated initiation into the divine mystery through sexual union. Above everything else, it was Yeats who helped him achieve a breakthrough in a period of poetic silence. As he noted in one of his essays, he was haunted by the invisible presence of Yeats when he was writing "The Dance." The relation between him and Yeats certainly went deeper than the technical resemblances. The Yeatsian rhetoric was a challenge and a catalysing agent to his poetic growth. In Roethke's poetic affiliations, there had always been an irresistible urge to "compete with papa". This is evident in the tone of his reference to Yeats in "The Dance."

I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;
I take it, and I give it back again:

He was learning to write and master the five-foot line from Yeats. In fact, he wanted to learn from him the secret of "the passionate syntax" 11 and "speaking in my own person and dramatise myself." 12 He was deeply obsessed with his personal feelings, especially those of sexual awakening in adolescence which he wanted to embody in Four for Sir John Davies. One may say that Yeats seems to be expressing the burden of Roethke's poetic concerns in the following lines:

Myself: A living man is blind and drinks his drop.

Endure that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;

( W.B. Yeats: p.144 ).
These lines from "A Dialogue of self and soul" also explain the basis of the Yeatsian persona in Roethke's *Four for Sir Davies* and *The Dying Man*. The problem was one of uniting intense private emotion with dramatic representation of this emotion that at the same time ensured aesthetic distance. Eliot's way of speaking through a persona was one kind of dramatic mode; Yeats's was another. In *The Lost Son* he adopted the persona of "the lost son" but it was not an attempt to enter into the feelings of another individual, as we find it done in *The Waste Land*. It was the private self projected as an archetypal image. Even his dramatic mode would not be in conformity with Eliot's practice.

"In the composition of Yeats's poems", remarks Thomas Parkinson, "the linear structures controlled the movement of the language in a flexible, ordered pattern that worked on principles that disciplined his passionate syntax and permitted free variations in accord with the vocalic emergencies of his speech." Yeats's triumph was to have been able to achieve a poetic line "in a flexible, ordered pattern" expressive of the compulsive urge of dramatic articulation. His line did not do away with the demands of formal discipline but he exercised great freedom in his stress patterns. What was aimed at was the authenticity of the spoken word. The concluding four lines of "Among School Children" furnish an instance of "the passionate syntax" and "the vocalic emergencies of speech."

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

The lines are remarkable for the dramatic expression of the speaker's personal feelings. The rhetorical questions the speaker addresses to the tree articulate the dramatic "emergency" of the poem. This is what Roethke aspired to imitate in his *Four for Sir John Davies*, the passionate syntax expressive of dramatic articulation, a spoken word with lyric intensity. It is a bit of the typical Yeatsian rhetoric Roethke is imitating, and one may add that he learned it well enough from Yeats to give it back again as in

> What shape leaped forward at the sensual cry?  
> Sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore?  
> Did space shake off an angel with a sigh?  
> We rose to meet the moon, and saw no more,

which seem an echo of the following lines from "The Statues":

> When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,  
> What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,  
> What calculation, number, measurement, replied?  


Roethke acknowledged his indebtedness to Yeats in *The Dying Man* by calling it a tribute to Yeats. But he had noted how his use of the Yeatsian line was different from the master's. He had more end-stopped lines, but it was "part of an effort, however clumsy, to bring the language back to bare, hard, even terrible statement." 14 The poetic line in *Four for Sir John Davies* came near to this "bare, hard statement." This was, of course, part of an effort to unite song and drama. He tried to imitate Yeats's technique of writing songs in his two poems: "His words" and "What Now" in *The Dying Man*. In his more
meditative poems, Yeats's sense of the line was determined by syllabic measure. In his songs, it was guided by the stress. This can be seen in the way Roethke has managed his rhythms; for instance, in "His Words". He has maintained the pattern of three stresses in each line in all the stanzas of this section of his sequence but the number of syllables varies:

What's done is yet to come;
The flesh deserts the bone,
But a kiss widens the rose;
I know, as the dying know,
Eternity is Now.

Each line (except the first and the last) has three stresses but Roethke adds an extra syllable in the third and fourth lines to convey a sense of expanding consciousness of the dying man. He resorts to the syllabic measure in the more meditative poems of the same sequence, "The Wall" and "The Exulting" (CP. p.154-55).

Roethke's poetic kinship with Yeats was deeper than his affinity with Eliot. It embraced both the rhetorical and visionary aspects of Yeats's poetic nature. If Yeats was a great poet of love in his earlier period, he developed into an equally great poet of old age and death in his later phase. It was to this later Yeats that Roethke went to learn the heroic defiance of death.

There was, however, another way of meeting death which he represented in Meditations of an Old Woman (CP. p.157). The sequence explores an alternative to the Yeatsian heroic
defiance of death and has echoes from Eliot and Whitman. The theme of the poem is an old woman's struggle to prepare herself for her ultimate destiny by understanding her past. She is oppressed by a terrible burden of her futile existence and impending death. As it happens in many of Roethke's poems, she slips back in order to move forward. She has learned "to sit still" as the poet-speaker in Eliot's Ash-Wednesday would like to do, but theological promises carried no conviction. She declares:

The soul knows not what to believe,
In its small folds, stirring sluggishly,
In the least place of its life,
A pulse beyond nothingness,
A fearful ignorance.

(CP. p.171)

Her way could not have been that of the penitent as in Eliot's Ash-Wednesday and Four Quartets. Roethke's sequence is a kind of reply to Eliot's poems. But he has at the same time learnt a great deal from Eliot: his poetic line acquired a wide range in rhythmic flexibility, colloquial use of the idiom, and dramatic tonality. The third poem sequence, "Her Becoming" (CP. p.165) is remarkable for the technical advance he had achieved so far. One cannot help noticing the stanzaic variety, the colloquial idiom, and dramatic tone in such lines as

Where was I going? Where?
What was I running from?
To these I cried my life—
The loved fox, and the wren.
Is it the sea we wish? The sleep of the changeless?
In my left ear I hear the loud sound of a minor collapse.
Last night I dreamt of a jauntier principle of order;
Today I eat my usual diet of shadows.

(CP. p.166).

Roethke had learned many things from Yeats and Eliot.
He had learned, first of all, to eschew "romantic" profuseness and vagueness, to use poetic language not as a form of mechanical incantation but to keep it close to a bare, passionate statement, and the difficult art of expressing personal emotions in dramatic terms. However, for all the valuable things he learnt from these poets, his "deeper allegiance" was not to them. In the January 1946 issue of Poetry he noted the evil that was caused by the obsession with poetic technique. He complained: "The trouble probably lies in the age itself, in the unwillingness of poets to face their ultimate inner responsibilities, in their willingness to seek refuge in words rather than transcending them. The language dictates; they are the used. The cohabitation of their images is, as it were, a mere fornication of residues." 

Roethke's indignation here is not against Eliot and Yeats but against some of the Eliot tribe. As a practising poet he had realised the value of poetic craftsmanship but he rejected the idea that words, arranged by the poet as craftsman, make poems. His plea was for poetry that was "above all, rooted deeply in life"; the poetry that was "highly conscious, subtle and aware, yet not laboriously referential." In short, he was deploring some part of the "modernist" poetic technique: viz. obscurity,
ambiguity, learned allusions and the "minority appeal" of "modernist" poetry.

He, like Crane, Williams and Stevens, looked upon Eliot as a poetic force that shaped the destiny of many twentieth century poets in England and America. But Eliot could not be to Roethke what Virgil was to Dante. It is Roethke's sense of the self's relation with nature, its union with the feminine principle of nature as an image of eros, its way of accepting death as a part of cosmic process and his sense of transcendence here and now, that pronounce his affinity with Whitman. It must be stated once again that Roethke himself did not claim kinship with Whitman from the beginning nor was it professed as an article of faith. However, one marks the presence of Whitman in his poetry from the very beginning of his career. The movement of Roethke's verse is towards the Whitmanesque vision and poetics. Whitman's poetry is the celebration of man's union with all of life; "man knows his own identity within the circle of the cosmos. The sense of divinity is found in creation, in the germinal sun of each beginning." In North American Sequence Roethke emerged fully as the Whitmanesque poet who had truly and finally grasped the secret of Whitman's cataloguing and "spontaneous Me", his cosmic consciousness. Whitman's "Adamic" mode is reached through the dialectics of "me-Not me" and that of the poetic traditions represented by Pound and Eliot, on one hand, and Whitman, on the other. Roethke once recorded in his note-book that to love objects is to love life and said, in Whitmanesque imagery and diction:
I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the whole world.

( CP. p.198 ).

With Whitman as his Virgil, Roethke could cross his Brooklyn Ferry.

2. Ibid., p. 168.


12. Ibid., p. 79 (Vol. I).

14. Mills, Ralph J. Jr., On the Poet and his Craft: 
   Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke (Seattle &
   p. 70.

15. Quoted by Hyatt H. Waggoner, in American Poets:
   From the Puritans to the Present (New York: 

16. Ibid., p. 607.

17. James E. Miller, Jr. Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote,
   Start with the Sun: Studies in the Whitman Tradition 