INTRODUCTION

In "Song of Myself" Whitman says, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself." Most American poets after Whitman, without imitating him, have tried to infuse into their poetry the spirit of Whitman’s lines. S. Musgrove in his _T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman_ has demonstrated with a wealth of scholarship Eliot’s indebtedness to Whitman not only at the level of themes but also at the level of style. Whitman concludes the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d" thus:

Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,

There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim².

The poet’s grief is not just personal. It is fused with the entire nature signified by Lilac and Star. What is to be noticed is the lilac and star are dissimilar objects and remind. The two strands in Whitman’s poetry are the personal elevated to the level
of the universal concrete and the universal concrete transformed into the personal. This may sound a cliche. While Eliot espoused impersonality, Yeats made what is personal into a universal concrete as the concluding lines of his well known poem "Among the School Children" suggest. To say that all modern American poetry stems from the "School of Whitman" is not an exaggeration. Emerson is a towering figure whose theories of poet, nature and imagination have defined the contours of American poetry. As a poet Emerson could not make the later American poets write quasi-romantic lyrics. Even Emily Dickinson broke her romantic heritage and wrote "The Chariot," a poem which reminds us of seventeenth century devotional poetry. But one can also see in the poem the Whitmanesque preoccupation with forms of nature. This eagerness to evolve forms which later become signs of a way of thinking is very characteristic of post-Whitman poetry.

American poetry of the 30s which was contemporaneous with the Auden generation in England
took inspiration from the French Symbolists and their followers in England. William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* and Steven's *Notes towards the Supreme Fiction*, the two longest poems of the 30s and 40s, display a kind of inverted romanticism not favoured by the poets of the 50s and 60s. With the popularization of the psychological studies and the spread of the Freudian and the Jungian theories and with the emergence of the Feminist movement, a hybrid mode of poetry popularly known as the confessional poetry, came into existence. Confessional poetry cannot be given an easy and clear definition. We may not be wrong in saying that it is not an expression of the poet's feelings and problems but a response to the poet's problems, public and private. John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton are the better known poets of this movement. A few critics have included Theodore Roethke also. Sylvia Plath's problems are associated with her Nazi inheritance. The split self in Sylvia Plath's poetry is very well illustrated in "In Plaster." This split self is made more explicit in association with the
ideas about suicide. In the later poems like 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' the preoccupation with suicide is made more explicit. The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" says,

Dying
Is an art like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.3

Although Anne sexton and Berryman committed suicide, Lowell did not go to that extent and satisfied himself with waiting for the skunk hour. The preceding outline of a few strands in the Mid-century American poetry tries to place Roethke in his milieu.

II

The word "influence" in discussing the corpus of any poet's work doesn't always help in making sense of the work. But Roethke himself acknowledged his admiration for Yeats. "Four for Sir John Davies," written during the 50s, are a good example to exemplify Roethke's interaction with Yeats' poetry. The poem "The Dance" seems to be a composite symbol for Yeats' concluding
Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
That made him think the universe could hum?

has an implied answer. But this poem is not just an isolated account of Yeats' aesthetic but a reference to the sixteenth century poem in which the universe is represented as a harmonious dance. Malkoff thinks that "this is the poem in which Roethke wrote those illfated lines - 'I take this cadence from a man named Yeats; I take it, and I give it back again; (W.W.120) which caused the critics from this point on to see Yeats' ghost whenever they turned." In "In Identity" Roethke says that the poem is an immediate response to an experience to a sense of presence as if Yeats himself were in that room. It is in this context he observes, "If the dead can come to our aid in quest for identity, so can the living and I mean all living things including the sub-human." In order to reinforce Yeatsian dance, other historical figures like Davies, Dante, and Raleigh

lines of "Among the School Children." The rhetorical question with which the poem begins,

Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
That made him think the universe could hum?
make their way into the poem. And some of the themes of Roethke like body and soul, eternal and temporal, flesh and spirit are given a refined treatment. The following lines illustrate the point.

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

(C.P.102)

A discussion of John Davies' poems alone should not lead us to the conclusion that Roethke is very consistent in his attitude towards any metaphysical concept. The use of such concepts like dance and the cosmic harmony, and the mystical ideas like being and becoming, being and nothingness, and the ground of all being are the result of response and not of orthodoxy.

London: Faber and Faber, 1985. All subsequent references are to this edition only.
From Roethke's *Selected letters* and *Selected Prose*, we gather that he was well versed in the seventeenth century poetry of Wordsworth, Rilke, Eliot, Yeats, Auden, Whitman, and Stevens.

III

Roethke doesn’t have a theory of poetry. From his prose writings we can formulate an outline of his poetic theory. As Ralph J. Mills, Jr. observes, "for him the making of a poem by an individual, a student, the honesty, the tenacity and the labour of craftsmanship it demanded in addition to the gifts donated by imagination comprise a unique and worthy human act." In "Open Letter" Roethke writes about a collection of poems in which a few poems from *The Lost Son and Other Poems* are included. "Each of these poems presented its own series of problems. The earliest piece of all (in terms of the age of the protagonist) is written entirely from the point of view of a very small child. All interior; no comment; no interpretation." This suggests, apart from
the light it throws on 'The Lost Son," that the interior drama without comment and without interpretation is not a new genre but a child's response, often incoherent, to serious problems. The later sections of The Collected Poems deal not with a child, an adolescent, or a boy's problems but with the problems of an adult protagonist which seem to arise during childhood and continue into old age. Sometimes they appear like a spiritual autobiography. In these longer poems a tension is generated by a dialectic in which the thesis is the self, the anti-thesis is the ego, and the synthesis is a tentative harmony which is conducive to the strength of the self. In the longer poems Roethke uses Whitmanesque catalogues which give them the form they have Writing on Whitman, Quentin Anderson has pointed out, "it is mere grammatical pedantry to think of his catalogues as having the end of inclusion: at their brilliant best they are successful effort to melt things together to make the sum of things ring with one note." And son's observation may not be entirely applicable to Roethke but the presence of a catalogue in Roethke's poetry
serves the purpose of enlarging the vision. From his various comments on rhythm we understand that his rhythms are drawn largely from pre-Shakespearean dramatists like George Pele and moderns like Yeats. Even in the longer poems one-word or two-word lines frequently occur and adjust the slow and fast rhythms.

From the foregoing observations, a few points emerge. Roethke from the start to finish tried to make poems which are rhythmically sound because he was responding to innumerable problems which are largely psychological. His response seems to have taken the form of euphonious meditation. It is this characteristic of his poetry that may be called, for the convenience of interpretation, poetics of response. Critics who considered Roethke as a romantic or a quasi-romantic think that his poetry can be subsumed under the expressive theory of art. But in most of his non-poetical writings, Roethke always turns our attention not to expression but to rhythm. Moreover, he often refers to his Michigan landscape and milieu and equates
that milieu with American landscape. In "The Rose" he says,

What do they tell us, sound and silence?
Think of American sounds in this silence:

(C.P.198)

Having seen humanity in diverse forms, Roethke did not develop any sort of ironic attitude but a straightforward attitude to art and craft in poetry and a sympathy for humanity at large. This attitude made him write poems which a casual reader may call confessional. The Greenhouse poems are not confessional as the term is used with reference to Lowell and Berryman. They are not a comment on nor an interpretation of his experience but are a response to experience as experience. The Lost Son and Other Poems and Praise to the End! illustrate this point.

The above observations are not in anyway associated with or stem from the reader-response theory developed by Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. A literary
text or any text for that matter comes alive only by an act of reading in which there are various stages. But poetics of response refers to the poet's way of thinking and feeling not about others but about himself. Roethke's Greenhouse poems reach us via memory and reminiscence. But the child's cogitations are not always conscious. Hence a reader who goes to the poems for the first time gets puzzled by the vocabulary itself. Reference to a number of flowers, insects, to creatures like snail, and to animals like dog and fish recur in these poems. As it happens in a boy's dream, a rat, a mouse, and a cat often appear, making it sound like a fable or a fairy tale. Just as children experiment with language, Roethke too employs a single word twice in one line, as, for example, in 'Fear was my father, Father Fear" (C.P.53), and also expressions like "Pipe-knock" (C.P.54). To sum up, his preoccupation with the various living forms in nature including insects, and his making them part of the fable, fairy-tale, meditation, and monologue reinforce the point that his creative quest is processed by response and we have
been told that Roethke always responded with strong likes and dislikes to everything.

IV

Generalization's about literature are always risky. But it may be safely asserted that most modern literature including American literature is dedicated to the idea of the self and selfhood. Faith apart, the self is the solid base on which humanity conceives its vision and evaluates reality. The theme of the self has a complex role in Roethke. The two poems "The Pure Fury" and "The Renewal" are the very best of Roethke's poems about the self and nothingness. Section 1 of the poem is more explicit than the other sections. "Knowledge lacking inwardness" (C.P.128) is stupor. The speaker would like to know from the learned man which text will give him the right clue. The fearful night and darkness of the soul made every meaning meaningless. But all this changes remarkably in the morning. It may be construed as the second birth as if
all things die and rise again. Even inanimate objects seem to become animate. Section 2 introduces four great philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Permenides and Boehme. We also notice the presence of the speaker's ladylove. The lady appears to be the evaluating point. Permenides' principle of nothingness, or being or non-being, is refuted by the lady. At times she illustrates the value of the eternal archetype. Aristotle's golden mean still appears to be the norm of evaluating life and the spirit. The uncertainty about what is being and what is non-being, as the speaker thinks, is rooted in Boehme. Section 3 doesn't show the oneness of life hinted at in section 1. The necessity of solitude arises because man's appetite for life is so ravenous that he is like "a beast prowling in his own house". The conflict in man's mind seems to infect the outer world, as the following lines suggest:

When the pure fury first raged in his head
And trees come closer with a denser shade.

(C.P.128)
Section 4 is neither an affirmation nor a denial because the speaker says, "I live near the abyss." The fury is the fury inside man and its death is a kind of renewal. The poem "Renewal" cannot be called a companion piece to "The Pure Fury." But it is about the self and its renewal which are denied in "The Pure Fury." The speaker of the poem feels that his imagination can catch the romp and song of the centaur and the sibyl. But he reminds himself that "such affirmations are perpetual" (C.P. 130); and he would like to "endure the shift of things" (C.P. 130). Still he continues to feel the anxiety of the influence and says, "Does my father live?" (C.P. 130). Life appears to be mentally and physically burdened but a new awareness seems to emerge and that is love. The speaker experiences a sudden renewal of the self but its source is not known. The uncertainty about the sources is still there. The recovery of the lost self the speaker expects does not come off immediately. But he seems to find the renewal in his loving heart. He finds that sort of love which makes him realize that he is
everywhere. As Malkoff observes, "the mysticism of 'The Renewal', if it is mysticism is presented in terms of psychological experience rather than simply the broad philosophical significance of that experience."\(^9\) It is here that we see Roethke's response to experience that counts more in the lyric structure than in his interpretation or evaluation of that experience.

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Roethke's unsympathetic critics have expressed the feeling that Roethke makes no attempt to ensure that his intensely personal investigations into an unconscious self would be expressed in terms of universal predicaments. After saying this Rosemary Sullivan adds,

This is to underestimate his deep sense of poetic tradition and the fund of conventional imagery from which he drew in the creation of his poems. From a close reading of the poems, particularly of the "Praise to the End!" sequence, it becomes apparent how continuously he refers the
reader to a heritage of poetry - to Blake, to Wordsworth, to Sir John Davies, to Eliot - which at once defines the cultural or emotional ambience in which the works must be understood and moves the poem beyond the opaque and gratuitous to the realm of general concern. The poetic ancestors seemed to have been an immediate aspect of his experience. In fact, it is remarkable how little sense of pastness is involved in his idea of literary tradition. The ancestors were part of a living present tradition which could be called upon for assistance in his attempts to clarify private themes.  

But this tradition which Roethke created for himself like Eliot's tradition is not tradition in the sense of the old but the great classics placed in simultaneous order. To illustrate the point let us analyze the poem "The Sensualists," which is in the metaphysical mode. In Section 1 of the poem the lady says, "There is no place to turn, she said, 'You have me
pinned so close;" (C.P.131) and cries for freedom.

Section 2 of the poem elaborates the picture:

And she was right, for there beside
The gin and cigarettes,
The woman stood, pure as a bride,
Affrighted from her wits,
And breathing hard, as that man rode
Between those lovely tits.

(C.P.131)

That sensuality is beastly is suggested by the line "Each is an animal" in section 3. Section 4, the last section of the poem makes us realize that the poem is witty in the seventeenth century sense and invites the reader to see for himself the feeling associated with sex and participation in it. Poems like 'The Exorcism,' "Slug," and "The Siskins" are variations on love versus sensuality theme. But this doesn't limit the thematic complex of Roethke's poetry. In "The Dying
"Man" the speaker makes the dying man say,

A man sees, as he dies,
Death's possibilities;
My heart sways with the world.
I am the final thing,
A man learning to sing,

(C.P.147)

These lines signify that the poet sings not only death's possibilities but the possibilities of life. Moreover the poet's way of knowing is different from that of ordinary men. But Yeats in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" opts for the possibilities of life.

My self says, A living man is blind and drinks his drop.
What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?
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.11

W.H. Auden in "In Memory of Yeats" tells us that Yeats' aristocratic milieu and politics have made him a path finder, a man who sang of human unsuccess but as the concluding lines of the poem suggest, he taught free men "how to praise."12 From the above citations and comments it appears that Roethke's attitude to life and death can be summed up in Yeats' phrase "death-in-life" and "life-in-death." In "Meditation of an Old Woman" Roethke makes the old woman

...prefer the still joy:
The wasp drinking at the edge of my cup;
A snake lifting its head;
A snail's music.

(C.P. 157)

This implies that life doesn't mean a man's or woman's life but in its inclusive sense. It is this
inclusive sense of life that Roethke so well dramatized in the Greenhouse poems, "The Lost Son" "Praise to the End!" and later metaphysical sequences like "North American sequence", that constitute a memorable chunk in his poetry.

VI

From his Selected Prose we gather that he places high value on the poet's craftsmanship. Any kind of response can be preserved only in words and sounds which constitute language. In "Devices for Heightening Intensity" he mentions six devices. They are "(1) use of symbolism. Intense feeling is important, but it is not enough. 2) Use of simplicity, bald statements Monosyllables: movement and rush. 3) Repetition 4) Use of constant anti-thesis, words against word, Phrase against Phrase 5) Paradox; sense of transfer 6) Deliberate use of ambiguity (pun)." Roethke doesn't say where and when these have to be used. In the following pages I have tried to show their deployment and significance.
The father, the mother, the uncle and other family portraits are associated with the activities of a florist and in the case of his father with his specific habits like smoking a pipe. The stuffiness of the inside of a greenhouse is presented in terms of roots, compost, humidity and water pipes. The child's response to the parental sexuality and the child's own awareness of sex is obliquely suggested by images like toads, softening chalk, snail, bird, worm, fish and womb which are often repeated. In his longer lyrics which invariably introduce the mystical method of either going up or coming into darkness, he uses psychological terms coined by Jung, like progression and regression. He also employs a fairy tale language which is akin to Freudian dream language conveying the sense of womb. Imagery drawn from vegetation and the world of creatures dominate the Love lyrics. But there are two clear images that Roethke unambiguously uses. They are light and darkness and day and night. From this it follows that any response to experience cannot be a photographic process. Responses can be of two types: the conscious
and the unconscious. In conscious response there is a chance to see the experience of an image as it is in itself. But unconscious response is intuitive. Both kinds of responses are noticed in Roethke's poetry. A line like "The light becomes me" (C.P.847) is a conscious response. The unconscious response often takes the form of a riddle which runs as follows:

Dogs of the groin  
Barked and howled,  
The sun was against me,  
The moon would not have me.

(C.P.52)

VII

In one of his letters Roethke says, "I do 'know' a good bit about English poetry: I know it often by heart. It is part of my life. But there is much in philosophy and history and science which I wish to find out, - as a teacher and as a human being. In poetry, I have exploited the personal myth as far as I wish to at the
present time. I want to make a greater use of the past."14

In most modern poetry personal myths are used to scaffold to unify a corpus of poetry. This implies that most of the poems of a poet are an individual response to the problems of the self, and Roethke is no exception. It is in this perspective that one has to negotiate with the meditative poems of Roethke. As Arnold stein observes

What contemplation was to some philosophers, composition was to Roethke. But the philosopher and the mystic began by divesting themselves of merely human concerns in the effort to recover essential being at the source. Roethke had to piece himself together, plunging again and again into old experiences, confronting the human concerns, trying to make sense of them, to sort them out, never able to reject them as alien to himself but needing to assimilate them before he
could transform them. He succeeded, less by purgation than by transformation. In the greatest moments of the late poems he achieves a kind of personal clarity that approaches, from a different direction, the contemplative ideal.\(^{15}\)

As in the case of Wordsworth whose poetry has echoes in Roethke, Roethke's poetic mind grew "fostered alike by beauty and by fear."\(^{16}\) It appears that the poet had a wounded self. He tries to transform this wounded self with an intuitive knowledge into a struggling self with the help of language. We notice the struggle of Roethke to come out of the slime. The significance of his struggle, and how he emerges out with a wound, both psychological and metaphorical, is the substance of this study.

VIII

Roethke's lyrics, especially "Love Poems" included in *The Far Field*, have a lyric intensity which one rarely
finds in the poetry of 50s and 60s. Let us consider 'Song':

From whence cometh song?
From the tear, far away,
From the hound giving tongue
From the quarry's weak cry.

From whence, love?
From the dirt in the street,
From the bolt, stuck in its grove,
From the cur at my feet.

Whence, death?
From dire hell's mouth,
From the ghost without breath,
The wind shifting south.

(C.P.228)

The short lyric assumes that lyricism is associated with sadness. The song might come from the tear, from the hound giving tongue and from quarry's weak "cry." Not perhaps from sources of joy. Nor love
emerged from a happy source. The dirt in the street, the bolt in its grove and the cur at the speaker's feet are the sources of love. Death seems to emerge from hell's mouth, the ghost without breadth, the wind shifting south. This appears like a riddle. But there is a subtle link between song, love and death. Love and death are immemorial themes of Love Poetry. The speaker seems to be certain about death but uncertain about love. The song itself registers the combined effect of love and death. "Song" illustrates Roethke's method of composing poems. In one of his letters, Roethke talks about two statements of Jung that a student noted in his note-book. They are "1. Being essentially the instrument for his work he (the artist) is subordinate to it, and we have no reason to expect him to interpret it for us. 2. The truth is that poets are human beings, and that what a poet has to say about his work is often far from being the most illuminating word on the subject."17

On the above citations Roethke comments, "Both
these things are truisms, of course; but, as I say, I put them in front of the letter to keep me from being silly. You realize that poems like those long ones are particularly hard to comment on; and it is only a personal regard, I assure you, that forces me, at long last into saying something."\textsuperscript{18}

Roethke's comments seem to assert that even for a poet it is not easy to squeeze the meaning of the poem that the poet himself/herself wrote. Sometimes he feels that a serious poetic preoccupation with supreme or complex theme may not yield the expected result. In his letter to James Wright, a poet and his former student, Roethke writes, "Been reading Graves and Stevens lately, and damned if I don't think both are over-rated. I get so tired of Stevens' doodling with a subject-matter the same subject-matter. And Graves, while at least he's specific, is usually thin, I think."\textsuperscript{19}

This kind of insightful and meaningful criticism, critics as critics cannot write. Only a poet who has a variety of themes at his disposal can do it. The point
that emerges is that Roethke from start to finish confronts and struggles with problems that invoked his immediate response. We should not construe this as the response of Keats to a nightingale or Eliot to the evils of modernism. Now they remain as valuable artifacts which we read and analyze for the insights of life they give. But poets like Roethke give us immediacy and atmosphere. The atmosphere is what we breath everyday. And we are a part of the ongoing struggle of the self with the destructive element. Eventhough Roethke’s *The Collected Poems* is a small volume, on reading, it expands just as meanings expand. From *The Lost Son* to "Previously uncollected poems" the poets mind and the self grow. We may call the entire corpus of Roethke’s poetry the growth of the self. Moreover, Roethke imbibed the spirit of his ancestors in the history of poetry. As William. J. Martz observes "to suggest that Roethke’s achievement can be justly described in these various honorific terms is to suggest that like any good poet he has many poets in one."20 In his poems we find a fusion of psychological strength,
intellectual depth, complexity and stylistic originality. The Michigan landscape is the atmospheric milieu which gives the stalk reality in which the self has to struggle for its own identity.

In the following chapters I have tried to read Roethke in terms of the poetics of response. Otherwise the entire corpus appears to be an unknowable world. In reading poets like Lawrence, Yeats and Roethke, a little biographical information would be of great help in clarifying the meaning of the poetry. This doesn't mean that we are trying to allegorize poetry. Since the time of Coleridge we have been taught that poetry that depends on metaphor and symbol is superior to poetry that depends on allegory. Hence I have taken enough care in evolving a poetics of response. To clarify the extended meaning of Roethke's imagery wherever it is necessary, further clarifications are given on the poetics of response. This, I submit, is not a well established theory but a tentative formulation to make sense of Roethke's poems.
REFERENCES

6. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., introduction, Selected prose by Theodore Roethke XIII.
7. Theodore Roethke, Selected Prose 41


17. Theodore Roethke, *Selected Letters* 139

