EARLY POETRY

One of the most significant contrasts between the early and later part of Roethke's poetry is the emphasis on what is seen in terms of content and what is seen in terms of structure. In other words, visual image dominates the early poetry. For example let us consider the title poem of Open House:

My secrets cry aloud.
I have no need for tongue.
My heart keeps open house,
My doors are widely swung.
An epic of the eyes
My love, with no disguise.

My truths are all foreknown,
This anguish self-revealed.
I'm naked to the bone,
With nakedness my shield.
Myself is what I wear:
I keep the spirit spare.

(CP 3)
The significance of the lyric consists in mapping the terrain over which the self presides. By extending the argument it is possible to say that not only the poem, but the title of the collection Open House and the entire Roethke's canon symbolically articulate the specificities of the self. While the controlling metaphor of Roethke's poetry is an epic of the eyes, the last four lines of the passage under review demonstrate the ramifications of the knowledge acquired through a strong awareness of not what the self ought to be but what the self is. Although diagnostic, the next poem in the collection, "Feud," lucidly brings to a central focus the possible enemies of the self. There is nothing more disastrous to the self than the "menace of the ancestral eyes." Granting that there is a veiled reference to the devil and the fall, what emerges from reading the poem is that myths are suggestive and conditional, not rigid and fatalistic. Whether man's quest for knowledge and identity is possible at all is affirmatively answered: "The spirit starves/Until the dead have been subdued." In terms of "Open House," the subjugation of the dead is to keep one's heart in an open house. Notwithstanding the cogent observations of Roy Harvey Pearce\(^1\) on Open House that the poems in the collection are more rhetorical
than poetical, they do not show the transformation that one notices in the later poetry of Roethke. Antinomies and complexities are not transformed into a higher level of comprehension; instead, they are simple and simplicitic. One may safely assert that they contain in an embryonic form Roethke's essential themes and persistent images. Consider for example the following poem, "Prayer Before Study":

Constricted by my tortured thought,
I am too centred on this spot.

So caged and cadged, so close within
A coat of unessential skin,

I would put off myself and flee
My inaccessibility.

A fool can play at being solemn
Revolving on his spinal column.

Deliver me, O Lord, from all
Activity centripetal.

(CP 23)

The poem under consideration reminds us of the seventeenth century poetry. The tone is jocular, and
in terms of its metaphoricity, is not less serious than the other poems in the collection. Deprived of intellectual stimulation and play, the self is diffident of itself largely because of the inelasticity of the centre. Hence the concluding prayer, "Deliver me, O Lord, from all / Activity centripetal."

The suggestion seems to be that the self is an open house and permits impulses, feelings, emotions, and fragments of experience to move out of it. The poem "Prayer" seems to throw light on the poem" Prayer Before Study." The speaker tells us that if he were to lose all his senses, he would pray to the Lord to permit him to choose one of the five "Before oblivion clouds the brain" (CP 8). He opts to retain the eye although some say that the eye is the instrument of lechery and is more secretive than hand. But the speaker feels that it is not true. Extolling the significance of the eye in the physical scheme of things, he says,

Its rape is gentle, never more
Violent than a metaphor.
In truth, the Eye's the abettor of
The holiest platonic love:
Lip, Breast and Thigh cannot possess
So singular a blessedness.

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!

(CP 8)

In terms of the self and the centre discussed in the preceding lines of the passage under review, we may infer that the eye is a variation on the centre and it engages the self not in self-scrutiny but in joyous participation in all activities of nature and life. The last line of the passage specifies the point. The eye alone can behold light and light is a spiritual medium through which the self looks. In Roethke's poetry light is always equated with awakening, awareness, joy, and a host of other blessed things. The preceding observations may appear too holy to appear valid, but what is involved is not the specificity of meaning of the passage under review but its suggestivity which may show us the development of Roethke's poetic thought. Roethke himself was not happy with the poem "Prayer." He wrote to Dorothy Gordon,
"That blasphemous little piece about the eye has never been submitted anywhere. I'll leave it to your own judgement." In the same letter he sends the poem "This Various Light," requesting her to get it published.

This light is the very flush of spring; it is innocent and warm;
It is gentle as celestial rain; it is mellow as gold;
Its pure effulgence may unbind the form
Of a blossoming tree; it may quicken the fallow mould.

This light is various and strange; its luminous hue
May transmute the bleakest dust to silver snow;
Its radiance may be caught within a pool, a bead of dew;
It may contract to the sheerest point; it may arch to a bow.

This light is heaven's transcendent boon, a beam
Of infinite calm; it will never cease;
It will illuminate forever the aether - stream;
This light will lead me to eventual peace.
Running as a single parataxis, the poem appears to be not satisfactory at all either intellectually or emotionally; but sometimes it may happen that what is written without emotional charge conveys an undeniable truth. "Light" is one of the significant images in Roethke. The last two lines of the passage under consideration demonstrate Roethke's firm faith not in God or an institution but in the self, which is the source of light. Don Bogen argues that "the vision of self developed in Open House through the title poem and ... through the selection of poems for the volume and their arrangement in sections, represents a kind of response to the problems at this point in Roethke's life." Notwithstanding the significance of the arrangement of poems suggested by John Holmes and Karl Malkoff, the language of "Open House" suggests that it is the work of a youngman at the threshold of creative process. The poet's personal and creative problems are perhaps overtly conveyed in a poem like "Death Piece":

Invention sleeps within a skull
No longer quick with light,
The hive that hummed in every cell
Is now sealed honey-tight.
His thought is tied, the curving prow
Of motion moored to rock;
And minutes burst upon a brow
Insentient to shock.

(CP 4)

The image of the hive in the above passage is ironically constricted so as to make the reader aware of the speaker's predicament - "insentient to shock." This breakdown and the obliteration of all senses is not a permanent feature of the speaker's life. It is in this context that the poem "Prayer" is more meaningful than what Roethke felt. Psychic hurdles placed in the probable working of man's psycho-somatic structure suggested in "Death Piece" is reorchestrated as a thematic variation in "The Adamant":

Thought does not crush to stone.
The great sledge drops in vain.
Truth never is undone;
Its shafts remain.

The teeth of knitted gears
Turn slowly through the night,
But the true substance bears
The hammer's weight.
Compression cannot break
A center so congealed;
The tool can chip no flake:
The core lies sealed.

(CP 9)

The word "sealed" occurs in both poems. The humming hive is sealed by frozen honey. In "The Adamant," a congealed centre and the sealed core perhaps convey the same intense freeze of the operation of senses. The sort of frozen self we notice in "Death Piece" and 'The Adamant' seems to thaw and melt at the touch of light. "Long live the Weeds," "Genesis," "Reply to Censure," and "The Auction" convey the creative possibilities that can remove the psychic hurdles. The poem "Genesis" unmistakably demonstrates the point:

This elemental force
Was wrested from the sun;
A river's leaping source
Is locked in narrow bone.

This wisdom floods the mind,
Invades quiescent blood;
A seed that swells the rind
To burst the fruit of good.

A pearl within the brain,
Secretion of the sense;
Around a central grain
New meaning grows immense.

(CP 17)

The graphicity with which Roethke structurated his later poems is very much in evidence in the vocabulary of the poem. For example, "wrested," "leaping," "invades," "Swells," "burst," and "immense" suggest how awareness dawns on man whether he is modern or primitive. As the speaker of "Genesis" says, "Around a central grain / New meaning grows immense." The awareness of the self that discovery of meaning is not a philosophical but a heuristic activity is one of the basic assumptions of Roethke's creative quest.

Apart from the poems I have just discussed, there are a few poems which are interesting because they show the craftsmanship of the poet which reaches its maturity in the meditative poems; and poems like "Verse with Allusions," "The Bat," "The Heron," "Slow Season,"
and "In Praise of Prairie" are not central to the metaphorlic suggestion of the poem "Open House." Let us consider "The Bat":

By day the bat is cousin to the mouse.  
He likes the attic of an aging house.  

His fingers make a hat about his head.  
His pulse beat is slow we think him dead.  

He loops in crazy figures half the night  
Among the trees that face the corner light.

(CP 15)

The first three couplets of the poem are a fair description of the bat's behaviour which is compared to a mouse. The last two couplets are a comment on the bat's behaviour. When the bat loops in crazy figures half the night, it is not a matter of great concern:

But when he brushes up against a screen,  
We are afraid of what our eyes have seen:

For something is amiss or out of place  
When mice with wings can wear a human face.

(CP 15)
In the above citation the implication seems to be that time and dust make life (screen) somewhat opaque. But when by accident the dust is removed or scattered, we are made to see what it is, but at the same time we are afraid of what our eyes see. The last couplet is an extention of the distortions in life which are a consequence of the scattering of dust that gathers on reality. The speaker seems to say that we do have the penetrating vision that slits the screen behind which the truths and distortions of life are present. It is in this sense that Open House is a collection of poems not with a unified theme but with a unified response to the possibilities of life and the possibilities of realizing its freshness and vividness. A critic of Roethke's who tried to isolate major patterns in his work argues, "Like Persuasion, Roethke had a numerous personal serpents to slay. But the art of Open House seems to have failed as a reflector; the classical notion of mimesis is less therapeutic than the Romantic poetics of expression." Although Lawrence has said that "One sheds one's sicknesses in books--repeats and presents again one's emotions to be master of them," history has demonstrated that such imaginative constructs as Lawrence recommends have become too personal to acquire the status of a concrete universal.
By and large the poems I have touched upon in the preceding paragraphs seem to suggest that they are the products of the poet's workship; specimens of the craftsmanship of a poet who is under the stress and strain of psychic and intense personal problems and a poet who believes that his response to a deep-rooted problem is a spur to the creative act. To reinforce the point let me quote the concluding lines of "Ballad of the Clairvoyant Widow":

"Clairvoyant Widow Lady, with an eye like a telescope,
Do you see any sign or semblance of that thing called 'Hope'?

"I see the river harbor, alive with men and ships,
a surgeon guides a scalpel with thumb and finger-tips.
I see grandpa surviving a series of seven strokes,
The unemployed are telling stale unemployment jokes.
The gulls ride on the water, the gulls have come and gone,
The men on rail and roadway keep moving on and on.
The salmon climb the rivers, the rivers nudge the sea,
The green comes up forever in the fields of our country."

(CP 25-26)
Roethke's *Selected Prose* and *Selected Letters* reveal to us that he is a man of very strong personality, with outspoken likes and dislikes. In "Open House" and in his poems written during the 40s and the 50s he seems to have evolved a technique which may be for the convenience of the argument called "poetry of response." In "Theodore Roethke" the poet says:

All such details and others like them, seem particularly trivial and vulgar in my case because I have tried to put them down in poems, as barely and honestly as possible symbolically, what few nuggets of observation and let us hope, spiritual wisdom I have managed to seize upon on the course of a conventional albeit sometimes disordered existence. I have tried to transmute and purify my "Life", the sense of being defiled by it, in both small and formal and somewhat blunt short poems, and latterly, in longer poems which try in their rhythms to catch the very movement of the mind itself, to trace the spiritual history of a protagonist (no "I", personally), of all haunted and harried men; to make in this series (now probably finished) a true and not arbitrary order which will permit many ranges of feeling, including humor.  


The above citation unmistakably reinforces the point that Roethke's poems are a response to his own experience as man. The poems in a way symbolically suggest the spiritual history of the protagonist. But what is more significant is that the poems try in their rhythms to catch the very movement of the mind itself. The movement of the mind may be construed not as a recorded graph of something mechanical but a lively and energetic response to one's experience in responding to his own experiences. The poet is also very much aware that he is indebted to various poets and critics and learned from them his craft but "these people may be without realizing, spoke with absolute candor, and often with great insight; they often kept going down blind alleys or wasting what time I had for writing better... I write down because it is a matter of rarely mentioned. I owe much less, I believe, the work of contemporaries than to their qualities as men and women" (emphasis added).

The preceding citation emphasizes not modelling or influence but response as suggested by the word "qualities."

The Lost Son and Other Poems succeeds Open House in The Collected Poems. The Lost Son and Other Poems includes the greenhouse poems. Most critics of Roethke
agree that *The Lost Son and Other Poems* established Roethke's elevated status among modern American poets. Moreover most of his critics also think that *The Lost Son* reveals Roethke's new techniques. Without disputing the critical climate of opinion on Roethke's poetry, a reader coming to the poems for the first time may safely assert that the poet's ways of responding to a given problem or situation have changed. Stanley Kunitz has said that "Roethke's imagination in these poems is predominantly tactile and auditory." But as Malkoff, after referring to Kunitz, comments, "... visual and olfactory qualities rank close in importance, nor is taste completely excluded. Life is apprehended as a whole, rather than dissected." From the preceding citations a simple inference can be drawn. Touching, hearing, seeing, smelling, and tasting constitute the organic nature of the body. It is only with this organic structure that the self tries to apprehend life as a whole. As a young man pestered with the problems of the body and the psyche, Roethke's response is more sensuous and intuitive than rhetorical and intellectual.

The Greenhouse poems show the sensuous poetic enunciation and its various verbal ramifications that
Roethke developed during the years 41 and 47. That there is a close correspondence between the greenhouse and a house is assumed as one of the sub-themes of the collection. That the greenhouse is the result of labour, cleverness, dexterity, and sometimes imagination is conveyed in the poem "Old Florist." Although the poem is the first reference to the poet's father in the entire collection, it may be considered in terms of the dynamics of creativity. To demonstrate the characteristics of Roethke's poetics of response, let us quote the poem in full:

That hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums
Or pinching-back asters, or planting azaleas,
Tamping and stamping dirt into pots,—
How he could flick and pick
Rotten leaves or yellowy petals,
Or scoop out a weed close to flourishing roots,
Or make the dust buzz with a light spray,
Or drown a bug in one spit of tobacco juice,
Or fan life into wilted sweet-peas with his hat,
Or stand all night watering roses, his feet blue
in rubber boots.

(CP 40)
The poem is compressed into one long sentence. The series of participles "bunching," "pinching," "planting," "Tamping," "stamping," "flourishing," and "watering." conveys the brisk activity of the florist. That the activity is incessant, purposive and at the same time creative enough is suggested by verbs like "flick," "pick," "scope," "make," "buzz," "drown," "fan," and "stand." In addition to these, there are minute details like the spit of tobacco juice and blue rubber boots which do not create a personality or a character in any sense of the word but a graphic, tactile and auditory image of the florist. One may risk the comment by saying that this is the poet's childhood response to his father's active life and his activity is almost godlike, in the sense he is the creator of the greenhouse. While "Old Florist" is the speaker's response to the father image, "The Child on Top of the Greenhouse" is an image of the virtual terror and triumph associated with the liberation from the greenhouse.

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,
Up through the streaked glass, flashing with sunlight,
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!

(CP 41)

What seems to be a wilful act of childhood, that is, the speaker climbing to the top of the greenhouse creates alarm with "everyone pointing up and shouting." But it is transformed into an act of liberation and at the same time the terrors associated with liberty and identity. The response comes as "the half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers." It is between the response dramitized in "Old Florist" and the ambition and terror presented in "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" that the imagery and thematic patterns of the Greenhouse poems evolve. Most of the poems of section I are delicate, imaginative constructs which thematize the fecundity of life inside the greenhouse envisioned and responded to by the speaker. "Root Cellar," "Forcing House," "Weed Puller," and "Transplanting " amply demonstrate the point. Let us consider, for example, "Root Cellar" :
Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.
And what a congress of stinks!—
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.
Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

(CP 36)

The difference between 'Old Florist' and "Root Cellar" is that while "Old Florist" exploits the grammar of language to produce a cumulative image, in "Root Cellar" the poet exploits the metaphoricity of language. The cellar is dank as a ditch. But moisture and darkness do not make anything inactive. Shoots doll obscenely from mildew crates. They also appear like tropical snakes. They are "a congress of stinks,"
an inviolable image in itself. Moreover roots ripe as old bait. In addition to making metaphor a legitimate principle of apprehending reality, the poet not only in this poem but also in other poems uses the vocabulary of vegetation and farming. "Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks" exemplify the point. The poem as a whole articulates the ongoing fecundity of life within the cellar unambiguously stated in the first and the last two lines of the poem. "Forcing House" makes us see how vegetation, both as metaphor and reality, evolves under man-made circumstances. The creative process man evolves to promote vegetation is hyperbolically suggested in the last lines of the poem:

Swelling the roots with steam and stench,
Shooting up lime and dung and ground bones,—
Fifty summers in motion at once,
As the live heat billows from pipes and pots.

(CP 36)

"Weed Puller" is an interesting lyric from the point of view of the poetics of response I have been discussing:

Under the concrete benches,
Hacking at black hairy roots,—
Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes,—
Digging into the soft rubble underneath,
Webs and weeds,
Grubs and snails and sharp sticks,
Or yanking tough fern-shapes,
Coiled green and thick, like dripping smilax,
Tugging all day at perverse life:
The indignity of it!—
With everything blooming above me,
Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,
Whole fields lovely and inviolate,—
Me down in that fetor of weeds,
Crawling on all fours,
Alive, in a slippery grave.

(CP 37)

The poem has two aspects: inside the greenhouse and outside the greenhouse. As have pointed out in the discussion of "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," the phrase outside the greenhouse suggests liberation from the constraints imposed on the self. But this liberation cannot be achieved and sustained without facing the terrors of life. In the poem under review, inside the greenhouse, life is fecund and active but appears to be purposeless. This is suggested by everything tagging "all day at perverse life:"
The indignity of it." But above the speaker, who is inside a slippery grave, everything appears brilliant and scintillating. Unlike "Root Cellar" and "Forcing House," "Weed Puller" has personal and emotional overtones. The last three lines of the poem suggest the poet's personal struggle. Maybe a liberation from the familial constraints, maybe from emotional constraints that oppress the self, and from hurdles that have to be removed to launch himself as a poet.

Apart from the poems discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, there are other poems which deal with the terrors associated with what is outside the greenhouse. "Moss Gathering," for example, brings to the force a sense of guilt. The first half of the poem describes what moss gathering is. The rest of the poem is a response to the act itself. The last two lines of the poem,

By pulling off flesh from the living planet;

As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration (C.P.38)

convey a personal and emotional ambiguity
Since the poet is not orthodox in any sense of the word, to foist religious or psychological meaning on the lines may not be a widely acceptable interpretation. All that can be said is that the lines are the response of a mature man to his adolescent experience which is reminiscential. And, in the process of reminiscing, he tries to apprehend the experience. In this sense they do convey the feeling that nature is ancient and its rhythms are of vast importance, and even an apparently insignificant act like digging loose the carpets of green is a violation of the scheme of life. This implies that from the start the poet is too sensitive to behold or withstand any kind of human activity that desecrates nature and life. But like all created things, a greenhouse also suffers from dangers that the elemental forces may bring. This is envisioned in "wind." But that even in vegetation one observes the on-going life one can infer from a poem like "Transplanting." Kenneth Burke has said that Roethke's lyrics conform to the formula of "a minimum of 'ideas'; and a maximum of 'intuitions.'" Although this concept of Roethkean aesthetic is admitted by Karl Malkoff as a regrettable necessity, it may be said that the poet's linguistic resources are rooted more in intuition than in ideas.
The second section of *The Lost Son* contains a few lyrics in which the lyrical quality doesn't attain any specificity. On the other hand, they appear as statements and sometimes make us feel as if the poet is too analytical and discursive in his approach.

"My Papa's Waltz" brings out the rusticity and occasional tenderness of the father. Here the image is not as graphic as it is in "Old Florist." Apart from this familial reminiscence, other poems like "Pickle Belt" and "Dolar" have an implicit social criticism which we do not often come across in Roethke's poetry. "Pickle Belt" is certainly a reference to the days when Roethke worked in a pickle factory. But the poem "Dolar" is more explicit about the "endless duplication of lives and objects" (CP 44). The first part of the poem is a fairly vivid description of the purposelessness and monotony of the routine life associated with private and public offices. The last five lines of the poem are a penetrating observation on the tedium associated with institutionalized life:

... I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,
Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons
of tedium,
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

(CP 44)

From the routine and drab life presented as a theme in "Dolar," "Double Feature," and "The Return,* we also notice that the speaker of these poems is looking forward to something that it not there. The concluding lines of "Double Feature" unmistakably convey the point:

A wave of Time hangs motionless on this particular shore.
I notice a tree, arsenical grey in the light, or the slow Wheel of the stars, the Great Bear glittering colder than snow,
And remember there was something else I was hoping for.

(CP 45)

But the poem "Judge Not" deals with the theme of death. It is an extension of the thematic complex of
the poems we are discussing. Haunted by the images of devitalized existence, the speaker implores, "May the blessings of life, O Lord, descend on the living" (CP 46). In the following stanza the speaker assumes a negative attitude and says, "On all these, Death, with gentleness, come down" (CP 46). But later Roethke seems to have changed his view expressed in the preceding citation. Having gained more awareness and self-maturity, he seems to have overcome his fears. He tries to demonstrate that death is not the ultimate end.

The third section of "The Lost Son" is a fair example of Roethke's experience and knowledge of the archetypal system associated with Jung and other psychologists. But we need not impose a strictly psychological interpretation on the poems. Let us consider, for example, "Night Crow":

When I saw that clumsy crow
Flap from a wasted tree,
A shape in the mind rose up:
Over the gulfs of dream,
Flew a tremendous bird
Further and further away
Into a moonless black,
Deep in the brain, far back.

(CP 47)
The first two lines are simply factual. The rest of the lines evoke an image of the past from which the self cannot easily dissociate itself. Whereas a poet like Hopkins was able to see in "The Windhover" the futility of pride and the utility of humility, Roethke's imagination transforms the clumsy crow into a tremendous bird that flies into a moonless black. Although the poem is suggestive of the deep roots the self has in the collective unconscious of Jung, it may also be added that the self has its roots not in itself but in the entire past associated with one's memory. "River Incident" and "The Cycle" are poems which seem to dwell on "a moonless black / Deep in the brain, far back" (CP 47). But the short poem "The Minimal" placed between "River Incident" and "The Cycle" underscores the theme which is very significant in the later poetry of Roethke, that his apprehension of life goes in terms of what life is. The poem seems to convey the idea that life is not one dimensional but multi-dimensional and life in nature contains invisible areas. The poem "The Waking" seems to be a contrast to the other four lyrics in the section. In this poem the speaker notices that through memory one can attain the joy of awakening, the self opening up itself. As Karl Malkoff says, "it is indeed a poem of renewal." The speaker's lyrical plunge into the past leads to the celebration of a moment in which
... all the waters
Of all the streams
Sang in my veins
That summer day.

(CP 49)

There are certain textual difficulties in discussing "The Lost Son" and the poems that succeed it in The Collected Poems. These poems were the second part of Praise to the End, published in 1951. Karl Malkoff thinks that "it will be more convenient to consider them in their context... than in their order of composition." Noting certain similarities between Jung's concept of collective unconscious, Malkoff argues for a Jungian interpretation of The Lost Son and Other Poems. He quotes Roethke himself in support of his argument. In an introduction written for John Ciardi's anthology, Mid-Century American Poets, 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 slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more .... The method is cyclic. I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound
to be a succession of experiences, similar yet
dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back than
going forward; but there is some 'progress'. In the
preceding citation, we not only notice Roethke
inclining towards a psychological or Jungian method of
poetic enunciation but also implicitly endorsing a
sort of mystical apprehension of reality.
Notwithstanding the difficulties outlined in the
previous lines, we have Roethke's exposition of "Lost
Son" in his "Open Letter." After giving a short
exposition of the poem, Roethke comments on the various
aspects of his poetry which has its roots in Michigan
with its prominent symbols - the marsh, the mire, and
the void. In that context he says something specific
about "The Lost Son": "The earliest piece of all (in
terms of the age of the protagonist) is written entirely
from the viewpoint of a very small child: all interior
drama; no comment; no interpretation. To keep the
rhythms, the language 'Write' i.e., consistent with
what a child would say or at least to create as if 'of
the child's world, was very difficult technically."
Commenting on the technical effects peculiar to the
poem, Roethke says," much of the action is implied or
particularly in the case of erotic experience, rendered
obliquely. The revelation of the identity of the
speaker may itself be a part of the drama; or in some instances in a dream sequence, his identity may merge with someone else's or be deliberately blurred. This struggle for spiritual identity is, of course, one of the perpetual recurrences. (This is not the same as the fight of adolescent personality for recognition in the 'real world'). Dissociation often precedes a new state of clarity. From the preceding comments one can assess the interpretive problems associated with The Lost Son and Other Poems. Instead of considering them either in the chronological order or as arranged by Roethke in Praise to the End (1951), it is better to consider them in terms of their thematic evolution and identity. "The Lost Son" and the poems that come after it in The Collected Poems have as their theme the birth of the self, the tortuous development, and the problems of history and psyche involved in reaching an identity.

"The Lost Son" has a narrative base and is divided into five sections, each section bearing a title. The first section, "The Flight," is both literal and metaphorical. With Woodlawn as the setting, the protagonist / child hero / speaker hears the cry of the dead, perhaps suggesting the void out of which something is to be born. The cry of the dead may also suggest...
that the ancestral memory may lead to the birth of the senses and the animal urge to go forward to seek a home. But all this is characterized as "my hard time" (CP 50). As suggested by Malkoff, the "old wound" in the lines

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

(CP 50)

may be a reference to the wounds in "The Minimal." All these may be construed as a reference to the protagonist's previous attempts at becoming what he vaguely aspires to be. "Empty house" and "Voice" seem to connote the promptings of a self in its dormant stage. Although it may not be clearly stated, the following lines do suggest an urge to clarify to the self, however dormant its condition may be, the ways and means of reaching the end:

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

(CP 51)
This may also be taken as the experience of a Dantesque journey which starts at the foot of the wood. Whereas the "kingdom of bang and blab" (CP 51) suggests a void, or the wood, or something dormant, the three elms and the river do suggest life in its embryonic form, or an awareness of the self not knowing its goal. It is in this context that "hunting" gathers an allegorical meaning. It has both animal and spiritual meaning. Animals hunt their prey just for existence. Man also is in quest of something that would satisfy his spiritual hunger. But the reference to "rat," "mouse," "cat," and "otter" suggests a child's image of the shape of the self. Although the images appear somewhat vague, there emerges a clarity as we reach the end of "The Flight." In terms of what has been said earlier, we may now say that "The Flight" is personal, reminiscential, and metaphorical. Personal in the sense that the child would wish to be born again, perhaps breaking through the shell of father-fixation. Reminiscential in the sense that it points out to a certain pathological compulsion associated with child and sexuality. Metaphorical in the sense that all journeys which are allegorical may be progressive and regressive. "The Lost Son" seems to be regressive to a great extent.
Regression leads to a review of the pathological associations involving an infantile celebration in "The Pit." The questions "Where do the roots go? / .../ Who put the moss there? / .../ Who stunned the dirt into noise?" do not have a straightforward and clear answer. Roots, moss, and the stones, however, make the child protagonist feel the slime of a wet nest. But this feeling seems to enhance the genesis of a progressive movement and an awareness of the prevailing destructive element signified by "Mother Mildew" (CP 52).

The destructive element is more active than the generative element. A wet nest normally indicates something that is destructive, While "The Pit" in a regressive way brings to the fore the soul-crushing humidity of the greenhouse, "The Gibber" leaves everything in a state of chaos. The first three stanzas of "The Gibber" are clear enough in the sense that they convey the anxiety, maybe the tension, of the child protagonist. The wood and the cave are associated with the Dantesque theology and platonic philosophy. But from a child's point of view, whereas the wood implies something in which there is no direction towards any goal, the cave implies something dark and bottomless. The barking and howling dogs of
the groin suggest the developing consciousness of one's biological instincts. The sun and moon stand for the father and mother who reject the son. What is vicious in nature, signified by weeds, snakes and briars, has no message for him except death. It is in the long-lined middle passage that we can locate the central theme of "The Lost Son":


Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice. Only the snow's here.

I'm cold. I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and mother.

Fear was my father, Father Fear.
His look drained the stones.

(CP 53)

The reference to Job 38. 28, "Hath the rain a father?" has a positive meaning, that the status of the father and the status of the son cannot be denied. But what the father demands is not just obedience but surrender. Would it be possible for the child protagonist to surrender the self at the behest of a tyrannical father? "Father Fear," a very complex kind
of locution, seems to withhold the calm associated with "song," "clouds," and "water." The next three short-lined stanzas take us back to the world of dream. The gliding shape backoning through the halls falls, substances flow from the mouth of the jugs, and the tongue kisses the lips awake. But this apparent calm is followed by a storm which makes the protagonist say, "I have married my hands to perpetual agitation, / I run, I run to the whistle of money" (CP 53). But the sort of running he now practises is another kind of focussing attention on the worlds of business and sex, and also a running away from a sense of guilt. Frantic and active, the protagonist doesn't attain any sense of direction, a purposive will, or a sense of identity. But he is aware that he lacks all these when he says, "I'm falling through a dark swirl" (CP 54).

"The Return" is a continuation of the protagonist's search for roots of escape from "Father Fear." The entire atmosphere of the greenhouse seems to be electrified the moment they hear of his arrival orchestrated by "Ordnung: ordnung" (CP 54). But the Germanic rigour, order, and discipline seem to have no devastating effect on the garden and the flowers. "The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light"
(CP 54) are indirectly suggestive in the sense that the flowers are looking forward to a bright sunshine just as the protagonist is waiting for the moment of release.

"It was Beginning Winter" doesn't employ the idiom and imagery of the earlier sections. In this section we notice the rudiments of meditative form and style running in slow rhythms. There are innumerable references to "light" in this section. Because the section begins, "It was beginning winter, / And inbetween time" (CP 55), one is reminded of Shelley's great line in "The Ode to the West Wind;""If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" The change is indicated by the repeated use of the word "light." The oft recurring word in Roethke's poetry earns a specificity of meaning conveying the idea that "light" is everything that is good for acquiring a knowledge of the self. It makes us know what we truly mean by knowledge.

The Lost Son and Other Poems has received more critical attention than the other poems of Roethke. Karl Malkoff was the first to outline a Jungian and mythical approach to unravel the meaning of the Greenhouse poems and "The Lost Son." Jay Parini, in
An American Romantic argues that *The Lost Son and Other Poems* exemplifies the use of what Joseph Campbell has called a "monomyth". The monomyth is a formal construction in which a hero lives. The hero is lured by powers unknown, battles with them into an area of darkness, and with the help of magical powers obtained from the other group, succeeds and returns with an elixir or some resurrective power to help the humanity.

A few critics have labelled Roethke a confessional poet and placed him in the company of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, exclusively concentrating their critical attention on Greenhouse poems and "The Lost Son." But to remind oneself in this context that *The Lost Son and Other Poems* is a multi-dimensional text and its meanings cannot be easily exhausted. Apart from the confessional aspects there are other significant aspects like the emergence of the self from the fetters of an illconceived idea of order and obedience. The preceding ideas have been very well summed up by Richard Allen Blessing in *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision*:

Like William Faulker, Roethke does not allow his reader to pin his work to a single and
particular myth, to read the Lost Son Sequence as, say, "Nothing but" the Oedipus myth or Christ's story or the dark way of mysticism or of Jungian psychodrama. Instead Roethke manipulates image and situation so adroitly that we associate his lost son, at various times, with a bewildering variety of shifting identities. He is Christ, Aeneas, Oedipus, Hamlet, Persephone, Narcissus, Adam, Cain, Adonis, Ulysses and Telemachus, the questing knight, the clever son of folklore, and rat and dog and fish and cat. And foetus and phallus. And Ted Roethke, the greenhouse keeper's boy. My list is by no means exhaustive. By confronting his reader with several different but compatible myths at as nearly the same time as possible, Roethke underscores the protean nature of the human experience, our dynamic ability to grow, change, and develop. In the fight to come out of the self, Roethke knew well, it is necessary to take on other selves, to undergo an almost continuous shape-shifting. I do not think that Roethke -- or his lost son -- ever come like Proteus to some final shape, to an identity which is, as Kunitz has it, "found." I think, rather, that it is Roethke's joy
and terror to go on creating selves and, perhaps more important, to go on creating a language out of which each self may prophesy in the imperfect claritas of an identity which is always falling away.\textsuperscript{19}

From the preceding critical observations, it is obvious that no critical methodology is completely correct or completely wrong. That methodology seems to be useful which can make sense of a poem qua poem. Jay Parini, basing his arguments on M.H. Abrams' exposition of the expressive theory of art, characterises Roethke as an American romantic. Before we go further let us have a fresh look at Abrams' exposition of the expressive theory:

In general terms, the central tendency of the expressive theory may be summarized in this way: A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are
the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind. ('Thus the poetry...,' Wordsworth wrote, 'proceeds whence it ought to do, from the soul of Man, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world.') The paramount cause of poetry is not, as in Aristotle, a formal cause, determined primarily by the human actions and qualities imitated; nor, as in neo-classic criticism, a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause -- the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression, or the compulsion of the 'creative' imagination which, like God the creator, has its internal source of motion. The propensity is to grade the arts by the extent to which their media are amenable to the undistorted expression of the feelings or mental powers of the artist, and to classify the species of an art, and evaluate their instances, by the qualities or slates of mind of which they are a sign. Of the elements constituting a poem, the element of diction,
especially figures of speech, becomes primary; and
the burning question is, whether these are the
natural utterance of emotion and imagination or
the deliberate aping of poetic conventions. The
first test any poem must pass is no longer, 'Is it
ture to nature?' or 'Is it appropriate to the
requirements either of the best judges or the
generality of mankind?' but a criterion looking in
a different direction; namely, 'Is it sincere? Is
it genuine? Does it match the intention, the
feeling, and the actual state of mind of the poet
while composing?' The work ceases then to be
regarded as primarily a reflection of nature,
actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature
becomes transparent and yields the reader insights
into the mind and heart of the poet himself. The
exploitation of literature as an index to
personality first manifests itself in the early
nineteenth century; it is the inevitable
consequence of the expressive point of view.

Abrams emphasizes that expression is a creative
process which is the result of the feelings and
operations of the poet's mind. From this point of view
if we read Roethke's poems it appears that Abrams' expressive theory of art is not adequate to encompass the multivalent layers of Roethke's poetry. The inadequacy may not be there if we alter the emphasis and say that Roethke's poetry emerges from his response not to the human condition in general terms but to his own personal and particular problems as a child, an adolescent a man a teacher and above all a poet. It is in this sense that he is comparable to Lawrence, who cannot be brought under tradition in the general sense of the word. In the next chapter I shall elaborate this point by analysing Roethke's post *The Lost son* and *Other Poems* Lyric.
REFERENCES


15. Theodore Roethke *Selected Prose* 63.

16. Theodore Roethke *Selected Prose* 38.


