The basic theme in Roethke's poetry is his complex response to his own childhood, youth and adolescence. In the preceding chapter I have emphasized the point that the entire Lost Son sequence is not thematically unified. "The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," "The Field of Light," and "The Shape of Fire" were included in the first half of part II of Praise to the End! Praise to the End! sequence continues the thematic concerns of the poet with greater subtlety and lyrical intensity than we noticed in the Greenhouse poems. The first poem of the book, "Where Knock is Open Wide," is an interesting poem since its form and style are not dissimilar to those of a limerick, and so appears to be a difficult poem. The first stanza itself is highly enigmatic.

A Kitten can
Bite with his feet;
Papa and Mamma
Have more teeth.

The clue to unravel the meaning seems to be in "Papa and Mamma." Sexual identity seems to be the genesis of awareness. This inference is reinforced by the cows giving birth to puppies. The dawning of this awareness is terrible. Hence there is a need for "sleep-song." This song is supposed to be sung by the parents. But the song itself, beginning with the line "Once upon a tree," is genetical in terms of the cross reference to "Papa and Mamma," "Papa-seed," and "My father is a fish."

Section 2 seems to deal with the birth of the child, as the following lines suggest:

I know her noise.
Her neck has kittens.
I'll make a hole for her.
In the fire.

Section 3, apart from its images of the dark, "Owl" and the "ghost," suggests the soft touch of the mother that the child receives. Section 4 is a subtle situation in which the father and the son are involved in an act of fishing. But there seems to be a suggestion that "The child, like Adam, has lost paradise because of sin; and here too, as in Genesis, sin seems related to knowledge of sex. The child aware to some extent of his parents' sexual activities, and, according to Freud, inevitably desiring his mother and fearing his father's retribution, assumes the guilt for his father's death." ¹

The preceding comment from Karl Malkoff rightly accounts for the concluding lines of section 4:

Nowhere is out. I saw the cold.
Went to visit the wind. Where the birds die.
How high is have?
I'll be a bite. You be a wink.
Sing the snake to sleep.

(C.P.69)

The final section of the poem refers to the death of the father and at the same time to a simultaneous awareness of the flesh and its desires. This oblique poem in which there are references to "Papa," "Mamma" and "Uncle" and to the child's sexual desires is Roethke's response to a very turbulent and at the same time memorable past. The roots of the self are supposed to be, to adopt a Jungian phrase to the present context, in the "family unconscious."

"I Need, I Need" is a thematic continuation of "Where knock is Open Wide." It dramatizes a growing child's needs. Section 1 emphasizes the point of the child's complete dependence on the mother. Section 2 makes the child think of others, as the following lines suggest:
A one is a two is
I know what you is:
You're not very nice,-
So touch my toes twice.

(C.P. 71)

The brief third section again introduces the father image and emphasizes the point that for the complete growth of the child mother's love alone is not adequate, as the following lines imply.

Love helps the sun.
But not enough

(C.P. 72)

The concluding section suggests the child's preoccupation with the normal instinctual life that humans share with animals. The lines "I know another fire. Has roots" not only amply demonstrate this point but, indirectly, what a growing child needs.
Poems like "Bring the Day!," "Give Way, Ye Gates,"
"Sensibility! O La!," and "O Lull Me, Lull Me" do
establish the child's awakening and its slow progress.
"Give way, Ye Gates" is a memorable reenactment of the
boy's preying desires. The phallic implication of
section 1, the dreamy and fairy-tale atmosphere of
section 2, with its prayer to nature, are generalized in
section 3 in the following lines:

You child with a beast's heart,
Make me a bird or a bear!
I've played with the fishes
Among the unwrinkling ferns
In the wake of a ship of wind;
But now the instant ages,
And my thought hunts another body.
I'm sad with the little owls.

(C.P.76)

The concluding section seems to bear out the
wisdom of water in the sense of the traditional and
collective wisdom of the race. But the earlier stanzas
of the same section, while condemning self abuse, do not suggest that the protagonist did get rid of self abuse, as the following lines suggest:

I hear the clap of an old wind.
The cold knows when to come.
What beats in me
I still bear.

(C.P.76)

The poems we have just analyzed are the constraints associated with birth, childhood and growth as the title of the collection borrowed from Wordsworth's The Prelude Book I, suggests. Let us quote the relevant passage from Wordsworth's The Prelude Book I to suppose the reason for Roethke giving the title to his collection.

Praise to the end!
Thanks likewise for the means! But I believe
That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame
A favoured being, from his earliest dawn
Of infancy doth open out the clouds,
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentlest visitation; not the less,
Though haply aiming at the self-same end,
Does it delight her sometimes to employ
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable, and so she dealt with me.²

As a true romantic, Wordsworth insists on the
exalted end and equally honourable means. Sometimes
nature employs very severe means to shape her ends. In
the case of Wordsworth it is nature's ministry that is
important, not nature by itself. In Roethke's poetry it
is not nature that is significant or its ministry but
the family geneology, its genetical character, and, above
all, the constraints that it imposes on the growth of the
self. In this chapter, "The Lyrical Interlude," we are
analyzing the poems which are tough because of strange
allusions and the anatomical imagery suggesting to a
great extent the significance of the flesh and a longing
to convert and transform bodily urges to a spiritual
awakening. Hence we may conclude by saying that the
means of transformation emerges not from nature as in
the case of Wordsworth but the strong memory of the poet himself. It is memory that also is the root of the dialectical ways in which the poet seems to evolve from birth to awareness of parental sexuality to one's own erotic needs which are the basis of an intense introspection leading to knowledge of the self and its significance.

II

"Praise to the End!" thematically and symbolically looks back to "The Lost Son." References to the father here are the signs of the son's growing awakening. But the very beginning of the poem "It's dark in this wood, soft mocker" (C.P.81) is reminiscent of the Dantesque predicament. The Dantesque predicament in the case of Roethke is not a descent into hell but a slowly gathering upward thrust. We also notice in this poem a comic tone and deliberate pedantry. For example as in the following lines:
It's a great day for the mice.
Prickle-me, tickle-me, close stems.
Bumpkin, he can dance alone.
Ooh, ooh, I'm a duke of eels.

(C.P.81)

"Pickle-me, tickle-me, close stems" appears to be slightly pedantic although "Pickle-me" suggests Roethke's later association with pickles and pickle factory. The boy is still aware of his erotic self-abuse when he says "Father, forgive my hands " (C.P.81).

The entire section 2 is slightly confusing and a fairy tale reminiscence of the parental acts corresponding with the adolescent's retrospective survey of their acts. This is amply demonstrated in the following lines.

I romped, lithe as a child, down the summery streets of my veins,
Strict as a seed, nippy and twiggy.
Now the water's low. The weeds exceed me.
It's necessary, among the flies and bananas,
to keep a constant vigil,
For the attacks of false humility take
sudden turns for the worse.

(C.P.82)

The verb "romped," "the summerystreets of my veins,"
and the images of "flies" and "bananas" do convey not a
clarity of vision but a kaleidoscopic changes in the
boy's mind.

Section 3 suggests that the boy dreamer is not
out of the wounds. The attaining of the thirteenth year
may not be a significant event in one's life. But in
the case of the speaker it seems to herald a new phase,
as the following lines suggest:

The sun came out;
The lake turned green;
Romped upon the godly grass,
Aged thirteen

(C.P.83)
The following stanza with its reference to Jesus is a sign of acquiring a new reverence.

I dreamt I was all bones;
The dead slept in my sleeve;
Sweet Jesus tossed me back:
I wore the sun with ease.

(C.P.83)

The last section is a poetic statement of newly acquired belief. When the speaker says, "I'm awake all over," we are likely to be sceptical to take it at its face value. Yet when he says, "I bask in the bower of change" (C.P.84), we feel that the change is made noticeable and this impression is reinforced by a later statement: "I have been somewhere else; I remember the sea-faced uncle" (C.P. 84) The significance of the title "Praise to the End!" and the result of basking "in the bower of change" are unambiguously suggested in the following lines:

Wherefore, 0 birds and small fish, surround me
Lave me, ultimate waters.

88
The dark showed me a face.
My ghosts are all gay.
The light becomes me.

(C.P. 84)

The pangs of birds, infancy and childhood and the unpleasant experiences associated with adolescence, leave. The ghosts that disturb the child's sleep are now gay in the sense that they no longer loom in darkness, but the most significant point to be noticed is that Roethke doesn't write that darkness is dispelled with the appearance of light, bringing clarity of vision. On the other hand he says, "The Light becomes me" in the sense that the light and the protagonist merge into a single identity. "Light," as we have often observed, is a recurring word and motif in the entire corpus of Roethke's poetry. It's a sign for all that is to be desired and to be earned by the self.

For the sake of the clarity of the argument, I have discussed "The Lost Son" first and the lyrics included in the second part of "Praise to the End!"
later. I have explained to myself some of the ways in which early poems of Roethke helped him develop a new verbal authority which is largely dictated by his birth, childhood and adolescence. At the age of thirteen as "Praise to the End!" suggests, he seems to have been solving some of his problems largely associated with the flesh. If we read the poems that succeed "The Lost Son" from this vantage point, we can specify the verbal structure and the quality and intensity of Roethke's response to life and art. "The long Alley," "The Field of Light," and 'The shape of the Fore" amply illustrate the few critical observations I made earlier.

Section I of "The Long Alley" is a variation of the theme of father, sex and guilt. But there is certain uncertainty which the speaker is not in a position to clarify. The "sulphorous water," the industrial "filth" and pollution, and a much more devastating element in life, the flesh, are all unleashed making the speaker confess that "My gates are all caves." The second short section is full of hieratic
language consisting of "Lord," "fiend," "soul," "the quick," "luminous," and "the bosom of God." We may doubt whether the vocabulary itself is a sign of progression. But the tone of the passage suggests that the speaker is regretting the past when he says, "The fiend's far away. Lord, what do you require?" Unlike "The Lost Son," the tone of section 3 is mildly confessional. The craving flesh is too tormenting to bear. Hence the speaker says, "Have mercy, gristle:/ It's my last Waltz with an old itch" (C.P.57). This impression is reinforced by the following image:

If we detach
The head of a match
What do we do
To the cat's wish?
Do we rout the fish?
Will the goat's mouth
Have the last laugh?

(C.P.57)
The act of detaching the head of a match and the goat's presence indicate the futility of going the whole hog with the flesh. Section 4 as some of the critics say, doesn't imply a positive illumination or revelation. The expected harmony with nature seems to be a wish. Hence there is certain uncertainty. From this point of view, that is, evolution from regression to progression which determines the dialectical structure of the poems, "A Field of Light" has a positive tone and an illuminating point. In section I the speaker says, "I was there along. In a watery drowse." (C.P. 59) From this "drowse" he seems to wake up and asks the angel within him if he ever cursed the sun? This abrupt interrogation seems to herald a new phase and the speaker dances in the sand. The mood seems to continue in section 3 and makes the speaker say, "And I walked, I walked, through the light air/I moved with the morning." (C.P.60)

But the preceding passage in which the speaker says, "I could watch!/I could watch!/I saw the seperateness of all things!" (C.P.60) seems to be the
core of Roethke's later mystical poetry. Although the speaker is aware of the separatedness of all things, he doesn't deny the unity of nature. The vision seems to consist in suggesting the master idea that the universe is built on the principle of unity and diversity. No wonder that Roethke's mature poetry is a response to the university-diversity principle in man and nature.

The last lyric, "The shape of the Fire" is a dialectical variation on the themes we have been analyzing. Section 1 of the poem without harping on the father figure, is evocative of the dangers that the speaker has to face. In terms of womb, birth and growth, the first two stanzas, section 1 are an oblique reference to womb, receding waters, "an old scow," and "a cracked pod" are signs of the womb, and stanza 3 is a plea for a smooth exit from the womb:

Mother me out of here. What more will the bones allow?
Will the sea give the wind suck? A toad folds into a stone.
These flowers are all fangs. Comfort me, fury.

Wake me, witch, we'll do the dance of rotten sticks

(C.P.61)

The citation seems to signify that the wish to be born is a moment of first release. But this moment of release is not without its sting, as the following lines suggest:

In the hour of ripeness the tree is barren. The she-bear mopes under the hill. Mother, mother, stir from your cave of sorrow.

(C.P.61)

Section 2 of the poem orchestrates the experience of the protagonist's birth alone but his grasping the significance of senses also. But this possession of senses bogs him down, as the following lines suggest:
Who, careless, slips
In coiling ooze
Is trapped to the lips,
Leaves more than shoes;
Must pull off clothes
To firk like a frog
On belly and nose
From the sucking bog.

(C.P.62)

Section 3 is not only the most significant section of the poem, but also a dialectical compression of the thematic complex of Roethke's poetry, which is as follows:

The Wasp waits.

The edge cannot eat the center.
The grape glistens.

The path tells little to the serpent.
An eye comes out of the wave.

The journey from flesh is longest
A rose sways least.
The redeemer comes a dark way.

(C.P.63)

On first reading, the above passage appears as a string of proverbs and aphorisms. But on second reading, a few meanings suggest themselves. The wasp, especially the female, is notorious for its sting. Hence the wasp is a sign of the fears and desires of the flesh. "The edge cannot eat the center" may be construed as body and the soul. Flesh should never be allowed to destroy the soul. "The grape glistens" may mean the child or the birth of a child. The serpent not knowing the path seems to be significatory of the blindness involved in the act of procreation. Perhaps it is one of the ways in which creation perpetuates itself without any explicit meaning. "An eye comes out of the wave" signifies peace, calmness, poise, and steadiness of the self emerging from what is turbulent. "The journey from flesh is longest" has the obvious meaning of the difficulty in knowing what the spirit is and the distinction between the flesh and the spirit. From the
mystic tradition we gather that rose is symbolic of the unity of being and out of darkness light emerges.

Sections 4 and 5 are an amplification of the meanings compressed in section 3. Any kind of awareness of the self begins with one realizing that in spite of her diversity and destructive power nature is unified and helpful. The next stage in graphing the awareness of the self is

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

(C.P.64)

The poems I have just analysed are Roethke’s response via memory, dream, and fairy-tale to various aspects of his childhood and adolescence. Although we
often use the word "experience," it is very difficult to make it graphic. A number of words are employed often to map out the area of spiritual experience, but to concretise it is not an easy matter. The immediacy of a child's sexual urges are as difficult to verbalise as the mental movement of an idiot. But Roethke does it by employing images like "a match without a head," a "cat," and a "goat," as examplified in the following lines:

If we detach
The head of a match
What do we do
To the cat's wish?
Do we rout the fish?
Will the goat's mouth
Have the last laugh?

(C.P.57)

He does concretise what is ineffable and its response to it by using a felicitous image, as in the following lines:
To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing
As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick pouring,
Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,
Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.

(C.P. 64)

III

"The Waking," for example, is an interesting collection. The lyrics are Roethke's response to his own problems associated with growing involvement with the contemporary culture. It appears to take the shape of movement and stillness enshrined in the unfolding experience. For example, in "A Light Breather" the speaker says,

The spirit moves,
Yet stays:
Stirs as a blossom stirs
Still wet from its bud-sheath

(C.P.97)

At times the speaker of "Old Lady's Winter Words" tells us, "I fall, more and more, / Into my own silences" (C.P.100). This trend continues in Words for the Wind. Although the poems included in Words for the Wind are divided into five sections, Roethke's preoccupations with what is purely temporal continues. In "Words for the Wind" the speaker asserts:

What time's my heart? I care.
I cherish what I have
Had of the temporal:
I am no longer young
But the winds and waters are;
What falls away will fall;
All things bring me to love.

(C.P.120)
This deep insight into the nature of temporality leads to an inference.

And I dance round and round,
A fond and foolish man,
And see and suffer myself
In another being, at last.

(C.P.121)

These insights into the nature of human relationships and how they are affected by time are associated with the poet's growing interest in the unity of being.

IV

A study of The Collected Poems suggests that Roethke's poetry took a new turn in terms of its thematic complex and the related enunciating modalities with the publication of Praise to the End! (1951). Sometimes visionary and at times meditative and mystical, the poems included under the captions 'Words...
for the Wind and Far Feid exemplify his mature method and his meditative and mystical concerns. The sequence "Meditations of an Old Woman" shows that he mastered the form available in the devotional poetry of the seventeenth century and in the poetry of moderns like Eliot and Yeats. Roethke seems to have his mother in mind when he structured "Meditations of an Old Woman." Although Roethke mentions a Bible, Jane Austen, and Dostoevski as the favourite reading of the lady, we feel that his mother, Helen Roethke, who hadn’t had any formal education and who had spent her whole life in domestic activity, was really the model or the inspirer of the Old Woman. The Old Woman may be viewed as a literary personae who is articulate, has enough common sense, and at the same time is endowed with an awareness of the self, life, and death. Roethke wrote to Ralph J. Mills, Jr. that "what in the looser line may seem in the first old lady poem (First Meditation) to be close to Eliot may actually be out of Whitman, who influenced Eliot plenty (Roethke’s emphasis), technically... and Eliot, as far as I know, has never acknowledged this— Oh
no, he's always chi-chi as hell: only Dante, the French, the Jacobean, etc." 3 In the same letter he also writes that he had recently read S. Musgrove's T.S.Eliot and Walt Whitman, which helped him evolve his own enunciative modalities when he began writing the Old Lady sequence. The stylistic aspects of "Meditations" and its formal excellence are the result of Roethke's creative and critical power which fuse Whitman's and Eliot's devices with his own creative concerns. The preceding argument is advanced by Jenijoy La Balle in The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke.4 On the other hand, Louis L. Martz argues that apart from the meditative mode we have in the seventeenth century poetry, we have the form in Eliot's Quartets and concludes by saying that Roethke "absorbed the meditative method of the Quartets".5 The preceding observations suggest that notwithstanding Roethke's own statements, a study of his poems in terms of influences may lead to vagueness and indeterminacy of meaning. As I have discussed the other poems in the preceding chapters I would like to
focus my attention on reading "Meditations" in terms of Roethke's earlier poems.

A close reading of "Meditations of an Old Woman" shows that the old woman voices not her problems associated with age and decay but with problems of life and death. In these monologues/meditations the traditional metaphors of meditative poetry often recur. The most significant are "journey," "drift," "float," "rock," and "garments." Apart from these traditional metaphors of meditative poetry, we have moments of movement and stillness which sometimes fuse and sometimes co-exist. The thematic complex of the entire sequence is located in the lines.

To try to become like God
Is far from becoming God.
O, but I seek and care!
I rock in my own dark,
Thinking, God has need of me.
The dead love the unborn.

(C.P.166)
"First Meditation" is a fusion of moments of reality and mystical insight, thoroughly non-rational but subtly intuitive. Although the lady is aware of her age and thinks that she is a strange piece of flesh, she is also aware that "the spirit moves, but not always upward." (C.P.151). Winter makes nature appear ugly. But there is life within. In the pervasive darkness, "What’s left is light as a seed " (C.P.151). Saying that she needs "an old crone’s knowing," the lady thinks of a bus ride. Sitting above the back wheels, she suffers the jolts and the bounces. She declares that all journeys are the same, but surprisingly, she appears to go backward in time. The image of two singing sparrows, one from within a greenhouse and the other from outside, suggests that what is within may be a quiet and muffled voice of the self and what is outside, the never changing voice of the visible world. A journey, whether spiritual or allegorical, is not always a movement forward; sometimes the movement is backward. Sometimes it may be a journey within a journey. This backward movement symbolized by a crab makes the lady infer,
So the spirit tries for another life
Another way and place in which to continue
Or a salmon, tired, moving up a shallow stream,
Nudges into a back-eddy, a sandy inlet,
Bumping against sticks and bottom-stones,
then swinging
Around, back into tiny maincurrent, the rush of brownish-white water,
Still swimming forward -
So, I suppose the spirit journeys.

(C.P.153)

This tentative conclusion that the spirit journeys remains tentative till the end of the poem. The concluding section of the poem demonstrates that the blue sky, the song of Phoebe "floating down, Drifting through leaves, oak and maple," the Whippoorwill song, a fume, a cold wind, and a flame suggest moments of bliss and exaltation with which, she says, "In such times, lacking a god, I am still happy " (C.P.154). The closure
of the poem is not a clinching one. But in no way does it make the poem weak. This is borne out by the rest of the sequence. The cyclical imagery of the next poem, "I'm Here," familiarizes the reader with the landscape. The flora and fauna have brought a significant change in her:

My skin whiter in soft weather
My voice softer.

(C.P.156)

Her softer voice seems to mature in the "weedy garden" with a "rose-brier" and the scent of "half opened buds":

The body delighting in thresholds
Rocks in and out of itself
A bird, small as a leaf,
Sings in the first
Sunlight.

(C.P.157)

As has been pointed out, the recurrence of the
verb "rock' and its analogues is a special feature of Roethke’s poetry. The self is not still, it is rocked. But the self can’t exist by itself without a body, hence the body, "delighting in the threshold, rocks in and out of self." The body’s delight seems to impinge on the self. Even while the speaker is sick, the whole place rocks itself. Before her closed eyes floats the image of a "congress of tree-shrews and rats." The creatures seem very happy. The creatures’ happiness seems to provide a recourse to ancestral memory ("grandmother’s inner eye") and a suppressed identification with a bird that always sings. But this is not a moment of joy; this is a moment of seriousness. As it happens in Roethke’s poems, we find an unobtrusive transition from material to mystical levels of articulation and comprehension. The concluding section of the poem, though it begins with a tone of sadness, seems to forge out of that sadness an existential stability. While the geranium is dying and doesn’t respond to a number of replantations, the roses seem to hold their sway. The senses symbolized by the eye
rejoice at the sight of the far trees at the end of the garden. The self, induced by the body, seems to say, "I prefer the still joy." In Roethke's poems movement seems to collide with stillness and stillness with movement. As the symbolists and their critics often feel, visual images are not static. Neither are they erratic. Neither on the material plane nor on the mystical plane can there be a neat and clear-cut separation of movement and stillness in life. Hence the woman meditates,

What's weather to me? Even carp die in this river.
I need a pond with small eels. And a windy orchard.
I'm no midge of that and this. The dirt glitters like salt.

Birds are around. I've all the singing I would.

I'm not far from a stream
It's not my first dying.
I can hold this valley,
Loose in my lap,
In my arms
If the wind means me,
I'm here!
Here.

(C.P.158)

In the sequence under review, we notice the ubiquitous presence of the old woman not withstanding her physical weakness, in the sense that it is through her that we feel about the sun, the wind, trees and hedges, and birds and their song. In short, the entire spectrum of animate nature. When we read a passage like "I was queen of the vale" which is supported by the participles "living," "running," "brushing," "leaving," "bracing," and "Making," it is not the old lady alone that is experiencing the summer; the reader also seems to experience the movement of the spirit. A declarative sentence followed by participial phrases doesn't lead to a cumulative effect. Perhaps it is a fragmentation of the body which the spirit tries to reconstitute and animate. From the letter from which I have quoted in the preceding paragraphs, we learn that Roethke is not
interested in the sort of mysticism associated with Eliot. It is something that Roethke himself has cultivated over the years and in which moments of exaltation and animation of the spirit are fused with the organicism of the body. In this mystic state, all the senses are supposed to function in a healthy fashion so as to sustain the body and the mind that enshrine the mystic experience. To reinforce the point let me quote Roethke: "As for the old lady poems, I wanted (1) to create a character for whom such rhythms are indigenous; that she be a dramatic character, not just me. Christ, Eliot in the quartets is tired, spiritually tired, old man. Rythm, Tiresome Tom. Is my old lady tired? The hell she is: She's tough, she's brave, she's aware of life and the she would take a congeries of eels over a hassle of bishops any day. (2) Not only is Eliot tired, he's a (...) fraud as a mystical his moments in the rose-garden and the wind up his ass in the draughty smoke-fall church yard. Ach, how vulgar I become-perhaps."6
It is not Roethke’s severe criticism of Eliot that is significant from the point of the present writer. What is significant is his remark about the old lady as a dramatic character. "Her Becoming" illustrates the point that "There are times when reality comes closer." When "reality" comes closer, the self tries to negotiate with its rough edges so as to behold it as it is in itself. Like most of Roethke’s poems, "Her Becoming" begins with a declarative sentence, "I have learned to sit quietly," amplified by running participles like "Watching," "Chirping," "Taking," "slackening," "running," and 'rolling." This suggests the incessant movement in nature which the self has made a still point for itself, sitting quietly (stillness) watching everything move. But imagination is not chained; it works. Immediately, in the next stanza, the speaker sees a shape. The petal and stone images suggest activation which amplifies to singing not from the activated vocal cords but from the folds of the skin. The still ari and the animating ground are in tune with the theme of stillness and movement, while the facts of
the earth's movement around itself are transformed into a
tune. Perhaps this much laboured explication serves the
point of asserting that essence and existence, being and
becoming, are not antinomies but complements. This sort
of vision in which everything appears complementary to
one another doesn't lead to an assertive and static
vision. But this should not make us come to the
conclusion that a vision is fragmentary. On the other
hand, the vision that the meditative old woman tries to
communicate in the sequence and especially in "Her
Becoming" is a fusion of two levels of reality which may
be termed, for the sake of convenience in the argument,
"the lower" and "the higher."

In sections 3 and 4 of the poem, the process of
coming closer to reality initiates also the process of
seeing the self as it is in itself. Images like "a new-
shod horse," "a raw tumultuous girl," "a little wood," "a
beast," and "a pure Islamic shape" reinforce the
assertion that all natural shapes become symbolic. It
may mean that consciousness makes natural shapes not
purely objective but symbolic, in the sense that they become part of the transparent mind and of the conscious self. But this doesn’t mean that the self is devoid of any sense of identity. The muted affirmation of the concluding stanza of section 3 demonstrates not a loss but a gain. All these are part of a universe of love and in that universe the self has an identity ("A rapt thing with a name"). Section 4 in a way celebrates this insight. Unlike Wordsworthian pantheism, which imposes a unified shape on the fragmentary character of the natural world, Roethke’s old woman tries to transform her consciousness of the fragmentary character of the natural world and the self into a higher unity in which the self achieves a sense of identity with air, light, stones, and the wind. The verbs "steadies," "live," "caress," "rises," and "become" of some the subtle verbal stitching that makes the experience concrete enough to drive home the sense of unity that is achieved between the self and the outer world which itself is a moment of mystical joy. In this context I am reminded of a memorable observation made by John Wain on Roethke’s
poetry: "Roethke's poetry contains one element which, throughout most of this essay, I have neglected. That element is thanksgiving. No poet of our time, not even Dylan Thomas, has so aptly celebrated the divinity of life itself. One thinks especially of Roethke's continual, spontaneous overflowings of thankfulness for the gift of light. So many of his poems, at their crucial moments, turn and give thanks for light. When this poet says, 'I hear the flowers drinking in their light,' or 'She stayed in light as leaves live in the wind' it is with a note of joyous authority derived from the scores of passages in his work which deal with this benediction of light."

The preceding citation focusses attention on the way in which Roethke celebrated the divinity of life and the tremendous joy of living in light. From the foregoing discussion of "Meditations of an Old Woman," it seems not very relevant to club the name of Roethke with Saint Theresa, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart and other classical mystics, notwithstanding the fact that Roethke had been reading them since as early as
1942. Roethke is not an orthodox mystic. Nor was he in search of the ground of ultimate being. I shall elaborate this point in my discussion of the "North American Sequence." The last two poems, "Fourth Meditation" and "What Can I Tell My Bones?", seem to be the best effort of Roethke's in this direction (meditative verse). In section 1 of the poem "Fourth Meditation" the tone is steady and in section 2 it is somewhat bitter. The usual distinction between body and soul is brought in. But the significant point is that

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

(C.P.162)

The next section associates the changing body with the body of a woman. The serious question "What is it to be a Woman?" which begins section 2 doesn't receive a clear answer. The images 'vessel,' "a window to a door," "Pool and river," "meal of meat," and "fixed eyes of a spaniel" seem to convey the feeling of the soul's authentic hunger. But even here it is not very clear
what the old woman is trying to drive home. "The minions of benzedrine and paraldehyde/And those who submerge themselves of benzedrine and paraldehyde/And those who submerge themselves deliberately in trivia" are perhaps the builders of the lower kind of reality. What do they need? They need a sense of being and sense of eternal purpose, the pure moment. Stanza 3 of Section 2 is a prayer, a benediction, the burden of which is "May they lean light and live." (C.P.163).

Although "Meditations of an Old Woman" may be analyzed as individual poems, their significance in Roethke's canon becomes obvious the moment we view them as a total vision. As has been observed in the preceding paragraphs, the thematic core of the entire sequence is encapsulated in the following lines:

To try to become like God
Is far from becoming God.
O, but I seek and Care!
I rock in my own dark,  
Thinking, God has need of me  
The dead love the unborn.  

(C.P.166)

The lines become meaningful when we read the first lines of the poem. The soul is a perpetual beginner. But the perpetual beginner lapses back into glassy silence and doubts whether the cause of God in him has gone. To attain godhood for a creature is a question of eternal trial. It is not a devotee that needs God but God needs a devotee, as has been demonstrated in the poems of seventeenth century devotional poets, especially in George Herbert and Henry Vaughan. In George Herbert’s "The Collar" we have the theme of the reciprocity between God and his devotee. The following lines from the poem clarify the point.

But as I rav’d and grew more fierce and wilde at every word,  
Me thought I heard one calling, Child!  
And I reply’d, My Lord.⁸
Consider for example the meditative intensity in the following lines:

In long fields, I leave my father's eye;
And shake the secrets from my deepest bones;
My spirit rises with the rising wind;
I'm thick with leaves and tender as a done,
I take the liberties a short life permits -
I seek my own meekness;
I recover my tenderness by long looking.
By midnight I love everything alive.
Who took the darkness from the air?
I'm wet with another life
Yea, I have gone and stayed.

What came to me vaguely is now clear,
As if released by a spirit,
Or agency outside me.
Unprayed - for,
And final.

(C.P.167)
The affirmative tone of the passage, stressing the liberties that the short life permits, exalts the significance of "meakness," "tenderness," and love. These qualities earn an achieved sense of identity that seems to work as a thematic rhythm throughout the sequence. John Crow Ransom has said that "the old lady is scarcely conscious of her own metaphysics." To evolve a coherent metaphysic, especially for a modernist poet, is seldom easy. Ever since Neitzche proclaimed the death of all gods, there have been a number of isms to fill the vacuum created by god's death. One witnesses a collapse which is succinctly put by Yeats in "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart, the ceter cannot hold." In the light of this metaphysical climate of opinion, one need not embrace despair like the narrator of The Waste Land, "You cannot say, or guess, for you know only A heap of broken images." It is this lack of centre that makes Eliot's poetry a plea for the Dantesque vision of harmony with which Roethke was not happy. Instead, he tried to proceed from a broken heap of images to an image that is tentative, lacking in
doctrinal rigidity and orthodoxy, and celebrating the momentary joy of life’s divinity. Throughout the sequence the recurring image is that of "light". But there is a sense of sadness arising out of some kind of involvement with the fragmentary nature of the natural and the human world. And the old lady often says "I’m released from the dreary dance" (C.P.167).

This reinforces the point that Roethke tries to make the old woman not an image of an achieved sense of being but an image of an achieved sense of awareness and response.

Praise to the End!, The Waking, Words for the Wind, are not anything new in Roethke's canon in terms of themes but they are definitely new in terms of Roethke's verbal innovations. In "On 'identity'" Roethke has written,

"We think by feeling. What is there to know? This, in its essence, is a description of the metaphysical poet who thinks with his body: an idea for him can be as real as the smell of a flower or a blow on the head. And those so lucky as to bring
their whole sensory equipment to bear on the process of thought grow faster, jump more frequently from one plateau to another more often.

And it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine - in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem.10

The preceding citation clearly explains that Roethke’s response to any kind of experience sets in motion the sensory equipment and then proceeds to complete the comprehensive act, "the really good poem." As Richard Allen Blessing observes,

Just as the jump-rope chants allow us to think once again with the body, so the lost son’s primitive verb-hoard forces us to smell and feel ideas. Nothing is inactive for the narrator: "The plants wave me in...The minnows love me....The dark showed me a face...The light becomes me" (C.P.88) Even "Eternity howls in the last crags" (C.P.89).
All things - even the most abstract ideas - draw upon our "Whole sensory equipment." 21

Most of the essays in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose deal with technicalities like rhythm, imitation, and rhetoric. Roethke's rhetoric largely draws on the use of aphorisms; the use of abstract with the concrete; the use of rare proverbs and the biblical allusion. These rhetorical devices were put to most mature use in poems which were posthumously published. Chapters

In the following I shall discuss this point with some textual examples and elaboration.
REFERENCES

1. Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke 76.
3. Theodore Roethke, Selected Prose 230
6. Theodore Roethke, Selected Prose 231.
10. Theodore Roethke, Selected Prose 27.